



HEADING OUT TO WONDERFUL
BY ROBERT GOOLRICK



POCKET KINGS
BY TED HELLER

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FREE!

THE ALGONQUIN READER SPRING 2012



ALL WOMAN AND
SPRINGTIME
BY BRANDON JONES



THE SLEEPY HOLLOW
FAMILY ALMANAC
BY KRIS D'AGOSTINO



THE COLDEST NIGHT
BY ROBERT OLNSTEAD

The Algonquin Reader

Author essays and excerpts from forthcoming fiction by

KRIS D'AGOSTINO • ROBERT GOOLRICK • TED HELLER
BRANDON W. JONES • ROBERT OLMSTEAD

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the inaugural edition of the *Algonquin Reader*, a twice-yearly periodical in which our authors introduce their new work in their own words.

In this issue, **ROBERT GOOLRICK**, author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *A Reliable Wife*, tells how a magnificent true story—one he first heard thirty years ago—became the basis for his suspenseful new novel, *Heading Out to Wonderful*, an erotically charged and unforgettable tale of love gone terribly wrong.

ROBERT OLMSTEAD recounts an exchange between readers at a bookstore appearance for *Coal Black Horse* that inspired his new novel, *The Coldest Night*, a riveting tale of love and war that eloquently portrays the challenges faced by soldiers coming home from Korea to a country with little regard for—and even less knowledge of—what they confronted as warriors.

BRANDON JONES reveals how his compassion for the plight of North Koreans living in an Orwellian nightmare influenced the writing of his spellbinding debut, *All Woman and Springtime*, a novel that draws back North Korea's iron curtain to expose the underworld of human trafficking. Alice Walker calls it “one of the most absorbing, chilling, beautifully written, and important novels I've read in many years.”

Satirist **TED HELLER** admits to his own fascination with online poker as he introduces us to Frank Dixon, the writer/poker player who narrates *Pocket Kings*, a hilarious cautionary tale about a man whose fortunes and romantic liaisons thrive in cyberspace while his real life is tanking.

And according to author **KRIS D'AGOSTINO**, he and his endearing protagonist, Calvin Moretti, spent much of their postcollege years broke and disillusioned. But both kept their sense of humor, as witnessed in the excerpt from his debut novel, *The Sleepy Hollow Family Almanac*, about a young man whose attempts to leave the nest are thwarted by the needs of his loopy but loving family.

We hope you'll enjoy these personal insights into the powerful, entertaining, and thought-provoking novels coming from Algonquin this season.

Thanks for turning our pages,
The Algonquin Staff

Robert Goolrick

{IN HIS WORDS}

THE PASSION OF PLACE, THE PLACE OF PASSION

Thirty years ago, a friend of mine sat down and told me a story, a long story, about something that had happened to him as a child. It took him an hour to tell it, and it was the best story I have ever heard. The story, told over and over through the years, had taken on an element of myth, and in the days that followed, my friend took me to many of the places in which the events of the story had taken place, walked me through the countryside of his personal mythology, the defining moment of his life, which had happened decades before.

In those places, I could see my friend as a child; I could look through his eyes, feel what it must have been like to stand in his shoes and witness events that continued, after all the years, to mystify him, events that still created the boundaries of the country in which he lived and worked.

The town where the story took place is in a foreign country, and the qualities of the landscape and the light are very particular to that place. The particulars of that place are very different from the country in which I spent my own childhood, but in the vivacity of his telling, I knew completely what it was like to be him, at that age in that place.

Over the years, I've told the story many times to many people. They've all agreed that the story is a magnificent one, and I knew that eventually I would have to write it down and tell it to as many people as I could. It is a mysterious story, and it has taken me many years to begin to understand the motives of the people involved, why they did what they did, and how all of these events must have profoundly affected the course of my friend's life.

Heading Out to Wonderful is the result of three decades of meditation on these events, on this one story. It is, in its essential elements, a true story. Of course, as the opening sentence of the novel states, all memory is fiction. We

have to fill in details and make the story real for ourselves in order to bring to it a deeper understanding.

I have set the story not in the foreign country where my friend lives but in Virginia, where I spent my own childhood. It is a story of passion and place, because the place is so dear to me, for one thing, but also because the big things that happen in our lives don't happen in a vacuum. Our memory of them is colored and enhanced by the marriage of event and countryside, event and weather or season.

I wish everybody could have grown up in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia as I did. Southerners are born into and tied forever to two things: time and place. We are our history, for good or ill, the history of our family, the history of our lovely and tragic land. We are born into both beauty and guilt, and we live with a sense of loss that never abates. The ground on which we walk; on which so many died, so many were bound into slavery; on which so much devotion and dereliction have been lavished, give our own little knot in the string of time a beauty and a benediction that we cannot escape.

The passions we feel are inextricably linked to the place in which we feel them, and I hope that this novel conveys the importance of that fact. In *A Reliable Wife*, the setting was austere and bitter cold. In this one, it is lush and effulgent, and the complexities of the story echo that. It is about the homes we build on the ground we are born to, homes we are too often forced to leave too soon. Childhood, for me, is one such home. Love is another. We come and go, events occur, but the land abides. The land endures forever.

And, every now and then, the best story you've ever heard comes along, and you are blessed to live with it, and the people in it, in the country in which it dwells. I hope I have done justice to the story, and I hope, in telling it, that I have made some measure of peace with the land that has nurtured me and torn out my heart for every day of my life.

So, here it is: *Heading Out to Wonderful*. A man arrives in Brownsburg, Virginia, in the summer of 1948. He brings with him two suitcases. In the first are his clothes and a fine set of butcher knives. The second suitcase is filled with money. A lot of money. He sets foot on the ground of Virginia, in the countryside where I live now, and the story that I first heard thirty years ago begins to breathe.

FROM

Heading Out to Wonderful

BY ROBERT GOOLRICK



The thing is, all memory is fiction. You have to remember that. Of course, there are things that actually, certifiably happened, things where you can pinpoint the day, the hour, and the minute. When you think about it, though, those things mostly seem to happen to other people.

This story actually happened, and it happened pretty much the way I'm going to tell it to you. It's a true story, as much as six decades of remembering and telling can allow it to be true. Time changes things, and you don't always get everything right. You might remember a little thing clear as a bell, the weather, say, or the splash of light on the river's ripples as the sun was going down into the black pines, things not even connected to anything in particular, while other things, big things even, come completely disconnected and no longer have any shape or sound. The little things seem more real than some of the big things.

People still ask me about it to this day, about what happened and why I think it happened, as if I know even now after all this time, when everything's been over for decades except the talk and the myth, I don't know what else you'd call it. I'm not young any more, so sometimes I can't tell what things are the things I remember and what things are just things that other people told me. They tell me things I did, and a lot of them I don't remember, but most people around here aren't liars, so I just go on and believe them, until it seems that I actually do remember the things they say.

But I still ask myself sometimes late at night about what happened, how it all turned out, about the life I've led, you know, everything. I ask myself the same questions they ask me, these people who've only heard about it, who

weren't even around when it all took place. What happened and why did it have to happen in the way it did?

Was I damaged by it, they want to know, wounded in some way? And I always say no. I don't think I was hurt by it. But I was changed, changed deeply and forever in ways I realize more and more every day. Anyway, it's too late now to go back, to take that rock out of the river, the one that changed the course of the water's flow.

The story began this way. And it began here, more than sixty years ago.

This was a town where no crime had ever been committed. Disasters had happened, of course, natural disasters had occurred in the course of things, barn fires, floods, house fires, terrible illnesses. So many fine young men from the town who didn't come back from the war, or came back from France and Germany bruised and wounded and shy and scared of sharp bright electric sounds in the dark. And sin. Envy and greed and covetousness and pride, there was terrible pride. But no crime.

CHARLIE BEALE DROVE into town out of nowhere in an old beat-up pickup truck. On the seat beside him there were two suitcases. One was thin cardboard and had seen a lot of wear and in it were all of Charlie Beale's clothes and a set of butcher knives, sharp as razors.

The other one was made of tin and it had a lock because it was filled with money. A lot of money. Charlie wore the key to the lock on a chain around his throat.

He paid Russell Hostetter a dollar a night to let him park his truck out in a field by the river, three miles outside of town, and he slept in the flatbed, sleeping on one old quilt, covered by another, and he bathed in the river in the dark with soap and a towel he bought at the general store. The summer moonlight filtered through the willow branches and made shadows on his pale, glistening back. The black, cool water sparkled as he shook out his wet hair, turned from brown to the black of the water and the starlit night. One thing about Charlie Beale, he was always clean. He dried his wet skin with the rough towel, rubbing until it was red, as though he had been slapped.

Every night, before he slept, before he turned down the kerosene lamp he kept with him and lay back to marvel at the vastness of the sky, he drank a glass of whiskey and smoked a Lucky Strike, and then he wrote in his diary.

Mostly it was just the state of things, the temperature, the amount of rain-fall, little things. Hot today, he would write. Snow, twelve inches. Or, Saw an eagle. He wasn't a poetic man. Thirty-nine years on the planet had beaten the poetry out of him.

As he wrote, he would start to remember what it had been like, growing up where he grew, the people who were his people, and other people he met along the way, and he would note down things, finding as he wrote a kind of simple eloquence, always referring to his friends only by their initials, just so, when he got old, he would have some way of looking back on the days that were passing, the places he'd been. He'd done it since he was a boy, when his fascination with the world was greater than it was when he came to town, and even though the passage of his life didn't interest him nearly as much now that it was happening as it had when it was all just waiting to begin, he still kept at it, out of habit. Sometimes, in reading back, he would come across a set of initials he'd written down and not be able to place the person, the face, or the reference.

Keeping the diaries was his way of judging how far he stood from what he considered to be goodness, as he understood the term, and most nights he would add a little plus or minus next to whatever he'd written, just to gauge the distance, his recorded moral compass. There were eleven of these diaries in a box in the truck, numbered by year. He was working on his twelfth.

Then he knelt by the truck with the singing of the crickets loud in the dark and the murmur of the night moths like a fluttering in the heart, and he said his prayers, even though he knew in his heart he had lost his faith somewhere along the way. He prayed for his family, he prayed the bright hopes of his childhood would return to him. He prayed that things would finally turn out better, and that this would be the place he could feel at home.

He bought a loaf of white bread at the store, and some sliced baloney and peanut butter and jelly and a carton of Cokes, and he ate sandwiches out by the river, keeping the drinks cool in the dark flowing water.

Every day of the first week he walked the streets of the town, seemingly without purpose or direction. He nodded hello to everybody he passed, politely, but he didn't talk to a soul. He just looked with a quiet, even stare at the shops: from the dry goods store down to the barber shop with its striped pole twirling endlessly. He looked closely at every house, at the neat picket

fences and gardens. He looked at the faces of the people of the town, as they in turn looked at him, and he pictured these faces as he lay in the dark out by the river, just thinking about whether or not these were people he would like to know.

Some days, he got in his truck and drove aimlessly around the back roads of the county, his suitcases on the seat beside him. He would stop and look out at the mountains, across the farm fields now gray gold with the end of summer heat and drought, the second-cutting hay all done, the golden stubble sticking straight out of brown dirt. He just watched the land. He looked at the county from every angle.

Everything he did was noticed. What was he looking for? they wondered all over town. What was he looking *at*?

They were waiting. They were waiting for him to do something, and until he made the first move, nobody would hold out a hand to shake, or give anything back to his gentle stare.

He was the scarecrow in the garden.

After one week, Charlie Beale started doing things.

HEADING OUT TO WONDERFUL

by Robert Goolrick

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Robert Olmstead

{ IN HIS WORDS }

E tan, e epi tan. —Plutarch

On a cold, rainy night in a Midwestern bookstore there was a nice turnout for my reading and book signing. A woman expressed admiration for my novel *Coal Black Horse* but suggested, parenthetically, that there are passages inside that are too difficult to read for how graphic they are.

A young man stood up. He also admired *Coal Black Horse*. He paused and then said that he did not mean to give offense, but he was a soldier just back from Iraq where he witnessed war and experienced war, and when he hears someone say they cannot read the passages in question, it makes it hard for him and the others to come home, because these are things they saw and things they did. He then apologized for the things he'd said and sat down.

You could have heard a pin drop.

I asked what other people thought, and what ensued was a discussion about this war and other wars. People talked about who we are supposed to be as a people and what we are supposed to mean to each other. More than one person thanked the young man for his service.

We do this. We gather around books and the stories they tell so we might discuss life that is real, and on this occasion, it was my book that gave us reason, and in a small way I was gratified.

But I never stopped thinking about that exchange, and without knowing it, my thinking was becoming my imperative.

For the longest time I have thought about war and violence and the remedies of love, birth, beauty, and art. I have wondered about what we choose to look at and when we decide to avert our eyes. Surely we cannot blame ourselves for not wanting to look at that which is horrible. It's only natural.

That rainy night, still so persistent in my mind, I began to think about what this new book would be. I began to think of a boy, not yet a man and, like all boys, filled with energy and discontent and the desire to be somebody,

to be a man. His name would become Henry Childs, and he falls in love with a girl named Mercy. This love is not easy and comes with severe challenges. He responds with impetuosity, and suddenly he is on a punishing journey and faced with survival itself. Life can be that way. We plunge ahead, making decisions, doing the best we can, and most of the time this works, but then there are times when we have risked too much, when we have made a bad decision, and it was a long time ago and only now do we realize it.

I wrote these chapters and then I thought, okay, the boy survives, and in surviving he has another chance. It's as if he is born again, but this time his father is war. I thought, so tested, so broken, so lost, what happens next to this young man?

We go away and we are changed irrevocably, and the whole time we are yearning to go home, praying to one day cross the threshold that leads into the foyer, into the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom where we slept safe and sound and dreamt of one day having an adventure, only this one went so wrong and almost killed us.

E tan, e epi tan. According to Plutarch, this was said by Spartan mothers to their sons before they went out to battle and was meant to remind them of their bravery. It translates to "Either it, or on it." It tells them they will return with their shield or on it. They will win the battle or they will die trying. Harsh mothers, those Spartans.

Win, lose, or draw, for all times there have been such homecomings and such young men (and now young women) who are forced to contend with the now unforgiving conditions of their existence. They carry their memories and tend their wounds and wear their scars. They carry inside what they have seen and what they have done and they disappear among us, their desperation silently endured. Back to, they hope, the closed circle that surrounds them: the loving and caring women whose arms they long to enter, whose embrace they long to return to. But they are changed forever and they cannot turn back the hands of time. Every waking moment they remember and they feel their damage. These too have crossed the threshold and entered their home.

The Coldest Night is such a story and one inspired by that rainy night. What's it like to come home when so changed? Who will give shelter? What sanctuary will be waiting? These questions are what kept me writing.

FROM

The Coldest Night

BY ROBERT OLMSTEAD



When Henry came to, he was wrapped in woolen blankets and drifting across a vast plane of moonlit whiteness. The moon was so bright it stole the spangling starlight and made the heavens blue as skin. He charted its mountains and dry rivers and its deeply shadowed canyons.

Then there was sound: the muffled scree of runners sliding over ice. He was on a wooden sled and Lew was drawing him east across the frozen lake.

The pace was slow and timeless. Lew walked ahead, as effortlessly as a wolf. He did not know how far they traveled. He went in and out of sleep as he was conveyed on the ice under darkness. A troop of companionate dogs had picked them up and trotted alongside, flanking the fashioned sled.

He remembered as a little boy riding a horse-drawn sleigh into the forest to cut down the Christmas tree, the chuff of the horses' hooves, his grandfather seated beside him. The fine powdery snow found his head and face and wreathed his neck. The snow was deep and the brush outgrew the hanging trail that wrapped the mountain. The first darkness was rising from the depths of the earth. Necks arched and shoulders hunched, the horses trod on through shadow and snow. How enduring and resolute they were. From the wet pines came the sharp note of turpentine. The day's golden time had passed and the full-rayed sun had become a diffusion of reds and violets. Night was coming on. Deer vanished through distant thickets to appear on a more distant ridge. They climbed higher to where the setting sun had shed a bluish twilight over the land and the cloudless sky and it was there they found their Christmas tree.

They came to the edge of the ice and a steep path leading into the craggy rocks, and there came the sound of barking dogs and the dogs traveling with

them sent up a howl. Lew helped him to his feet and he was suddenly cold and cried out and began to shiver. They staggered up the path and entered a cemetery and passed through its perimeter, a line of brush, and came into a small village of shuttered huts with tin roofs. Beside one hut stood an old man bundled in furs, a team of iron-shod bullocks head yoked to a sledge behind him, a goad balanced on his matted shoulder. He bowed from the waist and when he did binoculars dangled from a strap at his neck. With one hand he indicated they continue following the path; with the other hand he invited them into the hut.

The entrance was a wooden door on leather hinges. The old man swung back the door and the entrance became the black mouth of a warm tunnel. The hut's interior seemed to expand in size and depth, the nave the main house and wings to the north and south formed the transept of a cross. To the north was housed a milch cow and penned pheasants and a goat. There were crated chickens, a pig, and guinea fowl tied by a leg.

The hut was built around its chimney and firepit and warmed by the animals' heat. There was the smell of boiling cabbage and stale beer, a teakettle. Layers of old newspapers insulated the walls.

Lew shouldered his rifle and stretched Henry out on a pallet by the fire. He asked if the pain had abated any.

"No," Henry said. "It still hurts fierce, but I don't care anymore."

Lew took off Henry's shoepacs and he felt his toes for the first time in days. He doubted he would ever again be warm, but already the heat was climbing into his body.

"Where are we?" Henry said.

"I don't know."

"My insides are frozen."

Henry knew he had only so much left inside him and when it was gone he did not know if there would be more. He thought how death might be the only way you left this place.

Lew worked on Henry's back, daubing at it with copper sulfate.

"I will see you in the next world," Henry said.

"Which one would that be?" Lew said, moving to the lesser burns on his shoulders.

"The one or the tuther."

“Let’s just not count our chickens before they hatch.”

There came the sound of a baby crying. Lew swept the room with a quick dark glance. He touched at his ears and nose as if to make sure they’d not fallen off. Then he shed his own shoepacs and dragged off his socks. Slowly the fire began to take the forward edge off the chill.

“You stay here and rest.”

“Where are you going?” Henry said.

“I’ll be right beside you.”

From a black iron cauldron the old man ladled bowls of soup with cabbage, potatoes, barley, carrots, and marrow-bones. Lew tipped a bowl to his mouth and drank down the hot broth. With his fingers he fed the rest into his mouth and then he held Henry’s head and helped him drink some of the broth.

The old man produced a carton of Lucky Strike. He tapped out smokes for each. He struck a wooden match and lit the ends. Lew sighed out with his first puff of smoke. He then scrutinized the cigarette at arm’s length as if trying to understand the depth of pleasure it gave him and then took another long drag.

“What was that?” Henry said.

“It was snow coming off the roof and passing by the window.”

“Are you sure?”

“You sleep now.”

Henry tried to sleep and when next he awoke he thought that he might have. Lew held up a syrette and he nodded. Henry felt the pinch and his mind languished as he waited for the morphine to find its way through his blood.

When next he awoke an old woman hovered at a black kettle hung from a swing hook over the open flames, letting slices cut from a dead horse slide into the boiling water. Across the small room was the unsettling sight of Lew aiming his rifle at the floor. The old man knit and reknit his fingers, but Lew would not relent.

Then a trap door opened in the floor and one by one people crawled out the cellar’s stony cavern and into the hut erected on top of it. They were people coughing and hacking, their chests caving each time. There was a woman with a whimpering baby. There was a pregnant woman in the pangs

of labor who needed to be dragged onto the floor and finally a girl with ash rubbed on her face and her head wrapped in bandages. She stepped defiantly to the muzzle of the rifle. She unwrapped the bandages from her head. Her hair had been roughly shorn away.

“You will be safe in this village,” she said, touching her fingers to the rifle’s front sight and pushing it aside.

“How so?” Lew said, his finger inside the trigger guard.

In the air she wrote the letter *T* and then the letter *B*. They were in a colony for tuberculars. She told him they found the woman in labor lost on the ice. She told him the vibrations of the bombardment had brought on her labor.

Lew returned to his side.

“What’s it about?” Henry asked.

“You get some sleep. Get that chill out of your bones and you’ll feel better.”

“Tell me a story.”

“The only story I know is my own,” Lew said.

“Tell me. It must be better than mine.”

“There’s nothing to it.”

“Start at the beginning.”

“Are you sleeping?”

“Yes,” Henry said.

As he slept this time, his mind took refuge in the dream world. When Lew tried to wake him, he fought him. He kicked out with his feet and scratched at the floor for a weapon as if his hands were claws. He was not afraid. He just did not want to leave the dream world where he and Mercy were gathered and whole. His mother was there and in the dream world they were undivided.

As he became conscious and the morphine wore off, the pain became intense.

“You should make it out,” Henry said.

“I know that.”

“There ain’t nothing to discuss.”

“I ain’t leaving you. We’ll get you fixed up and leave together.”

“There’s no remedy for getting killed.”

“You ain’t killed, not yet.”

“I’d like a smoke,” he said, and Lew lit a Lucky Strike for him.

“I thought Thanksgiving was real nice,” Lew said.

“Me too.”

“The girl was educated by American Methodist missionaries,” Lew said, and then told him the old man used to cross the river into Siberia to hunt tigers. He was a schoolteacher and now he was an ice cutter.

“Those are dangerous animals.”

“Not as dangerous as we are.”

“I cannot endure this,” Henry said.

“Yes, you can.”

“Do you pray?”

“No,” Lew said.

“Will you pray for me?”

“Yes.”

Henry went back to sleep and when he awoke there was a woman nursing an infant in a cotton sling. He thought of Mercy. He remembered the way she walked, her weaving step. He thought of the letter he would write if he could. *To the girl I love . . . I have just awakened . . . If you only knew how long it has been since I have slept . . . You will never know what you have meant to me these many nights . . . I pray that you have moved on with your life and you are happy . . . You will always be inside my lonely heart . . .*

“It sure is quiet,” Henry said.

“We’ve been hit pretty hard,” Lew said.

“Time to get up,” Henry said. He stood and dizzied before Lew could stop him. He collected himself and stretched his spine and felt the pull of his back skin. The pain was so great that tears ran down his face.

In the firelight women and children were asleep on a straw-covered platform. The old man sat cross-legged and with a knife was stripping the insulation from a coil of copper wire.

Henry caught his reflection in a broken mirror-glass and saw his head was shaved and his eyebrows were burned away. He lacked the cup of his ear to its in-curve rim, and missing was a tiny chip in his front tooth and the third finger on his left hand. He tried to remember when he lost it, but he could not.

They took with them stew meat wrapped in waxed paper and a sack of hard-boiled eggs. There was candy the old man had scavenged from the ice and condensed milk and as much ammunition as they could carry.

They passed through the penned and tethered and stalled and caged animals and for the first time he could smell the ammoniacal stench of their waste, the sour of the mangers. They stepped into a pitch black ice-cold night. He looked about the lacquered world seeing nothing before him.

They followed the pathway's dip and rise and ascended to a place where broken-down tractors stood in a yard.

"It's time to turn for home," Henry said.

"Which way do you think?" Lew said.

Henry looked up to the sky. He sought the Polaris star and found it and was warmed and heartened by its constancy.

"Which one do you think is Earth?" Lew said, looking at the stars over his shoulder.

Soon the sky would gunmetal and tarnish like brass and go silver and inflame and be a coppery sky. When that happened, they'd be in the hell of it again.

THE COLDEST NIGHT

by Robert Olmstead

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Brandon Jones

{ IN HIS WORDS }

I began writing *All Woman and Springtime* in early 2009, after a year of listening to a gnawing impulse in the back of my mind saying, “Write! Write! Write!” Like a mantra, it kept chanting, becoming incrementally louder and louder until finally I had no choice but to reply, “Write what? What? What?” It became a call and response, almost a tug-of-war, between my inner drive and my self-doubt: “Write!” “What?” “Write!” “What?” I had been trying to sustain a custom metal art business, making gates and fountains and sculptures of all kinds for a dwindling clientele in the growing tide of the global financial meltdown. Suddenly there was really nothing for me but time and no excuse to continue avoiding the demands of my literary compulsion.

I had been mulling over something that had not been sitting well with me for quite some time, which was the seemingly arbitrary assignation of North Korea to an “Axis of Evil.” For all of my many misgivings about such bald judgments, the statement did have the benefit of highlighting for me an uncomfortable gap in my understanding of the world: I knew almost nothing about North Korea, or the history that created the gash across the thirty-eighth parallel. So I began to read, and watch videos, and comb the Internet to take in as much as I possibly could about the region. The more I learned, the more fascinated I became. North Korea is a living Orwellian nightmare, a stark reality so bizarre that it seemingly defies all logic: How could this be happening?

Most of the available media on North Korea (with a few stellar exceptions)—and, relative to information on other nations, the available media is quite limited and full of conjecture—focuses on political issues such as the nuclear threat, the military standoff at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the chest pounding of Kim Jong-il. Even the ongoing famine is reduced to its political causes and ramifications. The humanity of North Koreans is often lost in the telling of North Korea. So I began my book with a question: How do I find in myself the correct empathy to understand the

people in North Korea—people who are simply human, who fall in and out of love, who yearn and ache and strive and succeed and fail just like everyone else, and yet who do it under unimaginable scrutiny, threat, and control? Then I followed it with another question: How can I deliver that empathy to an audience that is, like I was, mostly unaware of the human details north of the DMZ? How do I bring it home?

That is how I met my protagonist, Gi, an orphan girl who condensed out of my growing concern and compassion for the people living within the “Hermit Kingdom.” Gi, having lost her sense of self while growing up in dire trauma, comes alive most within the context of her friendship with Il-sun, an irrepressible, mischievous girl at the dawn of womanhood. They are, first and foremost, teenagers, simultaneously reaching for and trying to dodge the lessons of maturity that all young women face. This reaching and dodging places them unwittingly in the hands of human traffickers—a very real problem surfacing in North Korea.

Issues of human exploitation and the regularity with which human beings are bought and sold are a cause of great sadness for me. It is easy to think of slavery as an issue we have overcome, one left to decay in our past, but in reality it is still flourishing, even within our own borders. Though we no longer sanction it with our laws, we sanction it with our collective denial. Human trafficking is a global multibillion-dollar industry, a looming shadow of greed and cruelty. I wanted to inspect this problem from all angles—through the eyes of those who are trafficked, the motivations and justifications of those who traffic, and (though less exposed in my novel) the complicity of those who enable it—and shine a light on it in hopes that spreading greater awareness will erode the ability of those who would perpetrate such abuse.

Though my novel deals with very real places, issues, and situations, much of the journey is metaphoric. For instance, physically crossing the DMZ is unlikely (though there are documented cases), but my characters simply must cross that boundary. The real challenge for them is in crossing it psychologically, transcending the veil of propaganda that is the DMZ lodged within themselves. I see it as a hero story, in which our heroine must eventually face and conquer the darkness within, even after her physical oppressors no longer have a hold on her. To survive she must learn to redefine not only herself but her core beliefs about the world in which she lives.

FROM

All Woman and Springtime

BY BRANDON JONES



Finally, a whistle blew and the foreman announced, as if it were against his better judgment, that lunch was being served in the cafeteria. Gyong-ho and Il-sun stood up and, in rigid military fashion, filed out the factory door. Gyong-ho wondered if there really would be lunch, or just the sawdust gruel that was served most days.

The women splintered into small groups as they exited the workroom, and the air filled with chatter. It seemed an odd contrast between the martial atmosphere of the workroom and the casual muddle of the lunchroom, as if they were ants that morphed into women and then back into ants again. Occasional laughter could be heard, and a Party anthem played in the background on tinny speakers. Gyong-ho made a break for the latrine. When she returned, she and Il-sun queued up in the cafeteria, waiting for the day's ration, which turned out to be a small scoop of rice and a slice of boiled cabbage. On the wall behind the service counter was a poster with a drawing of stout *Chosun* citizens handing food across a barbed wire fence to the emaciated and rag-clad *Hanguk*. American soldiers with long noses and fierce, round eyes were holding the *Hanguk* down with their boots, the hands of the *Hanguk* outstretched in desperation. The poster said, simply, Remember Our Comrades to the South. Gyong-ho and Il-sun received their bowls and sat down at a corner table.

"How long do you think we will have to stockpile food for the *Hanguk*?" Il-sun asked, looking despondently at her meager ration.

"Until the Americans stop starving them, I suppose," Gyong-ho answered. It was widely known that the imperialist Americans were harsh overlords to

the oppressed *Hanguk* people, who craved reunification of the Korean peninsula under the Dear Leader. That is why the Dear Leader was stockpiling food for them, asking his own people to sacrifice much of their daily ration to aid the unfortunate people of the South.

“Yeah, but what I wouldn’t give for a bite of pork,” another woman at the table chimed in, not quite under her breath. The whole table fell into a tense, uncomfortable silence. The cold of the concrete room drilled bone deep. Nobody dared inhale. Such a statement was as good as slapping the Dear Leader—it could leave the stain of treason on anyone who heard it.

“But it is worth it for the benefit of our dear comrades to the South,” she added quickly, forcing a smile at the rice balanced on her chopsticks. “It is by the glory of the Dear Leader that we eat so well.”

Conversation resumed. It was a broom sweeping dust under the corner of a rug. Such talk was dangerous.

Twenty minutes later a whistle blew, signaling the end of the midday break. It ended all too soon for the weary Gyong-ho and Il-sun, who were ants once again, marching back into the workroom. They stood next to their sewing stations, feet apart, hands behind their backs. Not all factory foremen demanded such military strictness of their workers, but Foreman Hwang was decidedly old-guard. The shift began with a song in praise of the country’s founder, then the foreman spoke.

“Comrades, I do not need to tell you that there is no higher purpose than serving our Dear Leader.” His voice was low and gravelly, like stones rolling around in a tin can. “It is an honor that he has bestowed upon you, allowing you to serve him in the People’s garment factory. But sometimes I think you do not fully appreciate this gift. Every day I see complacency and laziness.” His eyes landed on Il-sun, and Gyong-ho tensed. “These must be stamped out!” He punctuated the statement by slamming his fist into the palm of his hand, sending a shock wave down Gyong-ho’s spine. She nearly gasped out loud. “We must be prepared for the day when the imperialist dogs, the American bastards and their flunky allies, attack us. Even though we no longer hear their bombs or feel their bayonets in our hearts, we are still at war. They are afraid of the Dear Leader and the mighty *Chosun* army. They are afraid like cornered animals; and like cornered animals they must eventually

strike at us, even as hopeless as they know it will be to do so. So we must be prepared for that day. Each of you must ask, ‘What can I do for the Dear Leader?’” He let the question hang in the air for a moment to collect drama. “You must do exactly what is asked of you, without question, without complaint.” He paced thoughtfully for a moment.

“We are falling short of our quotas. Each of you must work harder, sew faster, and make no mistakes. Errors have become quite a problem on this floor. Every time you have to restitch an inseam . . .” He paused, looking to the dirty ceiling for words that seemed to be eluding him. “For every stitch you have to redo, a good *Chosun* man or woman pays for it with blood.” He laid heavy emphasis on the word “blood,” probing the room with heartless, accusing eyes.

The room was captivated in breathless, guilty silence. Gyong-ho felt as if she were solely to blame for the imperialist scourge and wondered how she could possibly work any harder to rout it out. She stole a glance toward Il-sun, whose eyes were closed with her head pitching forward. It could have been humble introspection in response to the foreman’s speech, but Gyong-ho saw it for what it was: sleep. She was amazed, offended, and, in spite of herself, impressed by the way her friend could so casually flaunt her disrespect for authority. That she could fall asleep standing up was impressive in its own right. Il-sun was always on the edge of trouble, just skating by without suffering any real consequence for her insubordination. Gyong-ho felt deeply fearful for her safety. For Il-sun, the dangers lurking around every corner and under every rock were impotent, imaginary shadows, for Gyong-ho they were real. Il-sun did not understand what she was risking by being impetuous, rebellious, and unique. *If only she knew what I have been through.*

With that thought, Gyong-ho bumped into an unspoken boundary of her consciousness, treading accidentally into an area where she dared not go. A memory flared in brilliant colors, growing on the dry tinder of her fear, and the factory began to fade around her. Suddenly she was hearing again the footsteps she had been evading. They were catching up with her swiftly from behind: hard soles echoing down a long, bare corridor, muffled voices, rough laughter, the light of a naked bulb, cold, wet feet, an electric shock.

In desperation, to fight off the sensation, she began counting things. Anything.

She counted needles in a pincushion—*forty-eight*.

She counted bare light bulbs—*sixteen*.

She counted buttons on the foreman's shirt—*seven*.

She multiplied light bulbs by buttons, and then divided them by needles—*two point three, recurring*.

Two point three, recurring, multiplied by itself is five point four, recurring.

Five point four, recurring, multiplied by two point three, recurring, is twelve point seven zero three seven zero three, recurring. . .

With each number her mind gained ground, her demon receded, inky black thoughts fell further and further behind. She was once again ahead of the echoing footsteps, could hear them falling back.

The square root of twelve point seven zero three seven zero three, recurring, is three point five six four two—

“Comrade Song!” the foreman barked loudly, shocking her back into the room. He was standing toe to toe with her, bathing her in a cloud of sour kimchee breath. Kimchee was a luxury of his rank that the times did not afford for the likes of Gyong-ho. “Comrade Song Gyong-ho! Is there something you would like to say?” It was more of a threat than a question.

She looked around to see that the other seamstresses were already sitting at their machines, looking fearfully at her. She had been lost in counting and had missed the command to sit. She felt very much like an errant nail in a wooden deck that had worked its way upward, standing out, begging to be struck with a hammer until its head is again flush with the wood. In any moment of uncertainty, she had learned, there is only one safe course of action. As if by reflex she brought her hands together in front of her chest, hoisted a gleaming tear into her eye, and, with a catch in her voice, said, “I am so very grateful, comrade foreman, sir. It is by the grace of the Dear Leader that I am here. I am not worthy to be here. I am lower than mud. Lower than pond silt. Even so, our Dear Leader has had the grace to allow me to work in his garment factory. I am just so grateful.” She bowed her head, but remained standing.

“Very good, comrade Song,” rasped the foreman. “I hope that the others

here will learn from you.” He turned to address the room, seeming to relish the pain shooting up his damaged leg. “You see? Comrade Song knows that she was given a rare second chance. She knows that she is unworthy. This makes her grateful. You may sit, comrade Song. Everyone, get to work!”

Relieved, Gyong-ho sat and began sewing.

ALL WOMAN AND SPRINGTIME

by Brandon Jones

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Hardcover

6" x 9", 384 pages

Ted Heller

{IN HIS WORDS}

P*ocket Kings* is my third published novel but must be something like the thirteenth or fourteenth book that I have written. I lost count a while ago and think that if I knew the exact number of books I've written that haven't been published, my heart would break.

All that trying and only succeeding once in a while (a good hitter in baseball fails two out of three times; my average is not nearly that good) is what brought about *Pocket Kings*, though I don't think I realized it at the time.

After having written two books (*Slab Rat* and *Funnymen*) in a row that actually got published, I thought I was on the roll of a lifetime, that I would publish one novel every three years for the rest of my life, that I could retire from my day job. It didn't work out that way. I kept writing, publishers kept turning me down, I seethed and lost a lot of hair and sleep. My wife read a fantastic book about poker by James McManus called *Positively Fifth Street*, and I, having nothing better to do at the time, read it, too. That book and its occasional references to online poker led me to search out poker sites on the Internet. I knew how to play poker but had not played it in years, had not even thought about it in years. I found a site that I believed to be very beginner-friendly and registered. I played for "fake money" . . . as a matter of fact, although I wound up playing probably thousands of hands, not once did I ever wager a real honest-to-God cent.

As happens in *Pocket Kings*, I began seeing the same people online every day (and every morning and every evening) and began conversing with them online and making "friends," or what passes for friends in such an unreal environment.

As I played more—and I was playing *a lot*—the thought of writing another novel never occurred to me. It was too painful a venture: to spend hours and hours every day for months and years writing a book that I believed was good but that nobody wanted to publish. I wanted no part of that

pain. So I immersed myself in poker. I played at work and before work, and I began jonesing for it when I couldn't play—because I was good at it! My narrator in *Pocket Kings* does the same thing. He is overjoyed that he has finally found something he excels at. And, unlike in writing, the rewards and punishments in poker are swift. A hand may take a minute or two, and you know if you have won or lost right away; a book may take you years to write, and you may never get even one single person to read it.

One day I began writing about online poker. The narrator's name was Ted Heller, he had published two books called *Slab Rat* and *Funnymen*, and he could not get another book published. This Ted Heller guy discovers online poker, plays for *real* money, and gets addicted. While his online life expands, his real world shrinks, nearly disappears. *Pocket Kings* was still, somehow, eighty percent fiction, though. As I forged ahead with the book I realized that the more I wrote it, the less I played poker, and the more I thought about it, the less I thought about poker. There was only one way to quit my new obsession and that was to write about it and get it out of my system.

Once in a while, I still feel a pang for the game and for the conversations I had with the friends I made, people whose lives became important to me. But they are all gone. The site closed down, and it was like a great flood: everybody got washed away. I have no idea where those people are now, people with whom I spent hours every day for months and months, playing and chatting. And I am just as gone to them as they are to me.

Unless, of course, they pick up a copy of *Pocket Kings* and read it.

FROM

Pocket Kings

BY TED HELLER



I had made \$50,000 at online poker in less than six months. It was more than I'd gotten for *Love: A Horror Story*, which took two grueling years to write. And playing poker wasn't work, not even close. It was a game! I remember a ludicrous statement by the much-beloved and vastly overrated sports writer Red Smith about how writing a column was like "sitting down at a typewriter and opening a vein." And how many writers, when they're not griping about their legions of demons, have described a blank page as terrifying? You'll never once hear a housepainter describe an unpainted wall as terrifying. If a blank page is terrifying, then what is it like when someone puts a gun to your head and cocks the trigger or the bank is foreclosing or the doctor tells you your brain tumor is the size of a Titleist golf ball? If rattling off a column about the Dodgers defeating the Giants 5–2 was really like opening a vein, then perhaps Mr. Smith should have sought a different, less terrifying line of work, and preferably not at the Red Cross.

In June I quit my job completely. There was no point in even working half-days.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Diane Warren, my boss, asked me in her office.

"Yes," I said. "Completely sure."

"And how is the book coming?"

She meant the *Trilogy*, of course . . . but I forgot which part of the Triad I'd once told her I was writing: did Diane think I was writing Book I and Wifey think I was writing Book II? Or did Diane think I was writing Book II and Wifey think I was writing Book I?

The truth was, of course, the whole trilogy was already written. Long ago. “It’s coming along.”

She swiveled back to face her computer, but I wasn’t through. A working stiff doesn’t get a chance to do this that often in his life so I wanted to milk it for all it was worth.

“And then there’s the movie, of course . . .”

“Oh yes,” she asked, turning back to me, “how’s that coming?”

I told Diane what I understood to be the truth: Pacer Burton was going to direct *Plague: The Movie*; the script had been written and was making the rounds with actors’ agents. I sprinkled in a dash of untruth: the budget was \$150 million, stars were foaming at the mouth to be a part of it. Tom Cruise, Jake Gyllenhaal, Cate Blanchett, Cameron Diaz, and Judi Dench would drop whatever they were doing if the project got the green light.

She turned to her computer again, where an Excel spreadsheet awaited her perusal.

Diane was a little too anxious to see me go, and it bothered me. But she had no idea (until she reads this) that I was playing poker on company time.

I HAD NOW ESCAPED the clutches of Writer Diablo Numero Uno. I was free! Free as a bird, like Marty Amis and the Jonathans and Davids and Chabons and Shteyngarts and Jay Easton McEllisses. No more real work, no more offices, no more bosses. Free at last!

But it was poker, not literature, that had unchained me. That wasn’t the plan.

The week I quit I vowed to myself: *Now that I’m free, I’ll start writing again. Sure, I’ll sneak in a hand of Texas Hold’em every now and then, maybe win a few thousand here and there, but I’ll write a book. I lied to my boss and my wife about writing one, so that will compel me to actually do it!* I was like a bride-to-be buying a wedding gown three sizes too small, hoping that in two months I’d lose the weight and be able to squeeze into it.

The prospect of buckling down and writing again was bracing and exciting. I couldn’t wait to get started.

On my last day there was no going-away party; a manila envelope did not travel desk to desk and no present was bought for me. I had no exit interview with Human Resources and thus could not complain about the thousand

imagined injustices inflicted upon me by all my coworkers. I simply tossed my company key-card into the trash and left.

After much deliberation—okay, not that much deliberation—I decided to wait before telling Wifey about this gigantic move of mine. I would simply lay low.

THE DAY AFTER THE *Saucier* publication party, I sent an e-mail to my agent, Clint Reno. It was one thing for him to ignore me, but what he was doing was systematically nullifying my existence.

CR:

Last night I was struck by a Drakes Cake truck.

I suffered a broken tibia, a bruised vistula, a fractured fibula, a partially separated tiber, two broken metatarsals, several 2nd degree lacerations on the skull, 3rd degree abrasions on both knees. I've lost 2 important teeth. My right tympanic membrane is just about shot and it's going to be a while before I hear anything out of that ear again. I have a temporary patch over one eye now and my leg is in a cast.

I'm e-mailing from the hospital now. But I'll be okay. As for the man in the next bed, he wasn't so lucky. Last night he suffered his third aneurism in as many days, reeled over to my bed and died on top of me, not before soiling most of my blanket. It took 7 hours before a nurse showed up to remove the deceased and his excrement from my person.

Clint, have you heard anything from anybody about *Dead on Arrival*? Could you please tell me who's read it?

You know, I ran into Bev Martin at a book party and all she did was rave about how "fantastic and coruscating" *DOA* is. "It's really your masterpiece, Frank," she said, "your chef d'oeuvre." And Jill Conway, whose novel (ironically about chefs and hors d'oeuvres!) was being feted, told me she was and I quote, "slobbering in anticipation of reading it." *Plague Boy* is her favorite book of all time, did you know that, Clint?

So please let me know what's up.

FD

Surely even Hardhearted Callous Clint would reply to that!
He didn't.

I had weekdays completely free now, so one Monday morning I went to the corner of Spring and Lafayette Streets, where the Reno Brothers Literary Agency is located. There was a Dunkin' Donuts across the street and I sat on a stool near the window. It was 8 a.m. I waited from 8 to 10 o'clock, drank four coffees and ate a box of Munchkins, and stared out, keeping my gaze fixed on the building entrance and looking for any sign of my agent. He'd be hard to miss: six foot four and slender, a full mane of carrot-colored hair always kept in a ponytail, clad always in unwrinkled bespoke Savile Row suits. I saw his three partners go in, at 8:43, 9:18, and 9:48. But there was no sign of Clint Reno.

Am I really stalking someone? I asked myself. *Yes, you are,* I answered.

I waited another hour, drank more coffee, ate another box of Munchkins. Nothing.

After returning home, playing some poker, and eavesdropping on an unbearably torrid session between History Babe and some seventeen-year-old named Royal Flash 89 ("I'm licking your warm cum off my hard nipples," she purred), I e-mailed my would-be agent Ross F. Carpenter:

Hey, Ross. Just wondering if you've gotten a chance to read *Dead on Arrival*. If so, hope you like it. Pls let me know if you can.

Ross wrote me back within ten minutes:

Not yet, Frank. Did you get that list from the Reno Bros. yet? Was at the *Saucier* party last night. (Jill is one of my authors.) As I understand it, so were you. Too bad hour [sic] paths didn't cross.

The e-mail blurred to a steamy highway mirage, then came back to me.

At least Ross, unlike Clint, had responded to my e-mail. That was a positive sign.

I went back to the Dunkin' Donuts and stalked Clint every morning of the second week of my new full-time freedom. By Friday the women working there knew I wanted a box of Munchkins . . . I didn't even have to ask for it; they just saw me and started loading them up.

I never saw Clint or his ponytail.

That Friday I called up the Reno Brothers. It was now six-plus months

since I'd handed over the *DOA* manuscript. A half a year of waiting and virtual silence.

"Hi, I'd like to speak to Clint please?" I, voice cracking nervously, said to Courtney.

"Clint is in California now," she said. "May I put you through to his voicemail?"

Fifteen boxes of Munchkins, about forty cups of coffee, a few low-fat muffins here and there . . . and Clint had been three thousand miles away the entire time.

"You . . . you have voicemail now?"

"Is this Frank Dixon?"

"Yes, it's me," I stammered. I was being reduced to jelly by a grad student (probably) who answered phones and filed paperwork and mailed back unsolicited, unread manuscripts and got coffee. The lowest entity on the publishing food chain was causing me to stammer, perspire, and tremble.

Make that the *second* lowest entity on the food chain.

"Clint wanted me to relay something to you," she began. "He said that when the movie of your book gets made and if the book was ever re-issued. . . ?"

"Yes?"

"He wanted to ask if his name could be removed from the acknowledgments page . . ."

POCKET KINGS

by Ted Heller

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Trade Paper Original

5½" x 8¼", 368 pages

Kris D'Agostino

{ IN HIS WORDS }

When people want to know if my novel is autobiographical, I always feel like saying, “What work of fiction isn’t?” It’s all based on something, even when it’s not.

The wackiest and thereby most vexing period of my life (so far) was my midtwenties. I found that handful of years, roughly from twenty-three to twenty-six, and the extended period of postcollege floundering that went with them, to be stranger and far more coming-of-age than high school and my teen years (encapsulated for me by a white, suburban upper-middle-class bubble) ever were. I knew I wanted to try and express the emotions, the anxiety, the excitement, the antsy-ness, the wonder—and the lurking, unspecified dread—that informed that period.

My father really does have multiple myeloma. My family really did lose their house. I really did work at a preschool for autistic kids. My grandmother really did mistake a picture of Osama bin Laden for God. My brother really did think he was reverse discriminated against by a Metro-North train conductor. But almost everything else in the book is exaggeration, or complete invention. I do not have a sister. I rarely smoke weed. I don’t know any live-action role players. My father did not carry a gun around in his bathrobe, although it might have been interesting if he had.

I graduated from college in May 2000. And much like Calvin Moretti, when it was over, I had no idea what to do with myself. I knew one thing: I didn’t want a job. Furthermore, I had no idea how to get one. Nor did I know what people actually *did* at “real” jobs. So I decided to go back to school. Get a master’s. Two more years of partying, I thought. I started a film MFA at Boston University. I was twenty-one. Long story short, I dropped out after a year and wound up living back home after being on my own for five years. My youngest brother, Tom, was still in high school. Almost immediately, I retrograded back to my high school self—both in how I viewed life and how

I dealt with my parents and the people around me. I was jobless, broke, and largely without motivation. The next eight months became, without a doubt, the strangest and most surreal and intensely formative period of my entire life. I was completely adrift in the world without any direction in which to steer myself. No one was forcing me to grow up. It didn't seem like I had to. I'm a huge fan of coming-of-age stories. But I felt like I hadn't read any books (or watched any films) that took on this idea of my generation's grossly delayed plunge into adulthood. When I did come across some piece of art that attempted to tackle the subject, there was often a romance component as the fulcrum. Or the thing would be bogged down by pointless pop-culture reference. Or, worst of all, it would fall back on grossly inaccurate and contrived dialogue to attempt to convey how young people talk to each other. A sort of "look how cool and hip and funny they are" mentality. I wanted to consciously avoid those trappings. I didn't want love to be a motivator for Calvin. I didn't want friends or "good times" or anything like that. What I wanted to do was put on the page a snippet of someone's life at a crossroads.

I was also really interested in the generational divide I saw between my parents and me. My father was a homeowner, had a career, and had his first child (me) all before he turned thirty. I'm about to turn thirty-three and have done none of those things. This strikes me as noteworthy, or at least of some interest. Before starting to write *Sleepy Hollow*, I looked back at novels and films I liked that I thought fit the bill. Art about people who were too old to be experiencing the feelings they were experiencing. At twenty-three, I should have been moving past any coming-of-age experiences. But there I was, trying to puzzle out in which direction I wanted my life to go. And *where* I wanted it to go.

Why does anyone write anything? There are more answers to that question than there are books in the world, and none of them really get at the amorphous motivations that drive people to make art. Or at least I don't think they do. The truth is I wrote *The Sleepy Hollow Family Almanac* because I couldn't write anything else. When I sat down in front of my computer and started typing, these were the characters I could conjure, this was the story that I knew how to tell, because these were the things that were happening around me. These were the people who populated my life, for better or for worse.

FROM

The Sleepy Hollow Family Almanac

BY KRIS D'AGOSTINO



She opens the door. Her blouse comes down just far enough in the front so I don't have to try very hard to imagine what her breasts look like. We step into the apartment. Her name is Pam Kittredge and she immediately tells me about other rentals she has access to. I tell her I wish to see them all.

"What do you do for a living?" she asks as I follow her to the kitchen, which is separated by an island counter from the living room.

"I'm a teacher." It's only half a lie, and it doesn't matter anyway, because my financially crippling student loans and barely existent salary prevent me from having anywhere near the sum needed to sign the lease, which would require me to pay the broker's fee, security deposit, and first month's rent up front.

"That's great," she says. "The landlord is definitely looking for someone responsible."

"I'm that person," I say.

"And what do your parents do?"

"Well, my father is sort of out of work at the moment," I tell her.

"He was laid off?"

"More like disability."

"I see," Pam says. She sees nothing.

I sum up my mother's existence with a vague "She makes sure the bills get paid."

The place is cavernous. Exactly what I had in mind. Giant raw space with exposed piping overhead and colossal paneled windows looking out on an industrial park across the street.

“These lofts are getting popular,” Pam tells me. “Like a blank canvas. You can do whatever you want in here.”

The previous tenant constructed a corner bedroom with drywall, the sides of which don't quite reach the ceiling.

“The building is full of artists and musicians,” Pam says. “All sorts of creative people.”

“Sounds like my kind of crowd,” I say. Yes. Creativity. Artistry. These are the things missing from my life, keeping me from achieving wholeness and contentment. These are the kind of people I want to associate with. The kind of people I know I can ingratiate myself with if only given the chance. They will surely give me the push out of postadolescence I apparently refuse to give myself. They will show me something other than the America-as-high-school I have come to inhabit.

EASTER IS TWO WEEKS AWAY, but my mother is in the living room, delicately lining the mantel with her treasured collection of elaborately painted ceramic eggs. I see two giant boxes of decorations at her feet. I start to open my mouth to ask if and why Pam Kittredge took her to look at houses, but think better of it. My mother gets extremely agitated when I bring up the subject of my moving out. She thinks I want her to lend me money.

“Little early, isn't it?” I say to all the ornaments.

“You never know who'll be stopping by to judge,” she says. “Helene Miller's had her decorations out for weeks.”

“Ah, yes.”

“I'm starting dinner,” my mother says, but I'm halfway up the stairs. I pass Inez, our maid, on the landing. We exchange greetings. She has a duster in hand, no doubt on her way to the TV room to embark on her weekly cleaning of the entertainment center while my father lies supine, himself a piece of furniture in need of dusting.

I find two envelopes on the mattress in my room. The first, a monthly statement from Sallie Mae. I try to pretend it isn't there. The second is a letter from my father, who's fond of leaving notes instead of initiating direct contact. Messages from the next room.

I lie on the floor, listening to old country records. I have always held the

slide guitar in high esteem. It sounds to me like wild animals crying atop windswept plateaus. A nameless city where there is no language, only intense glances and stares. A place where nods and gestures convey all human emotion.

This is what the letter says:

Calvin,

I always wondered why old people read the obituaries. Perhaps we are hoping to see other people's ages when they bite it. I'm not afraid to die. I'm actually getting prepared. I'll be fifty-five next year and all of this is tiring. I have a theory that as human beings get older, chemicals are released into the brain to prepare us for the end. Sort of like how the nurse lubes your ass up before the anus-cam. It makes the whole thing a lot easier to swallow. Easier, not enjoyable. We don't remember birth. I don't think we will remember our own death. Dying. What petrifies me about dying is the aloneness of it. I have always thought about dying in some hotel room, a million miles away from home. Utterly alone. I have spent more time in hotel rooms than I have at home. I need you to promise me, just you and I. Promise me that you will be with me, maybe holding my hand, when I go. I don't care when or where, just get there and see me off. Don't let me go alone. I promise I will try to wait for you. Find me. You're the one that understands me.

Dad

I roll onto my back, look up at the ceiling fan.

Our house makes noises. It always has. The walls creak and settle. Wood splinters without warning. There are footsteps at odd hours of the night. Pipes sound symphonies from behind the drywall.

Sallie Mae has informed me my loan payment is due in two weeks. I am someone who does not like to delay pain gratification, so I write out a check immediately. It's startling how much of my salary is sucked up by this debt. Four years in the undergraduate incubator plus the four-month failed social experiment I like to call "grad school" plus off-campus housing plus many, many burritos equals over \$45,000 to repay. At my current income, I'm looking at full financial independence at around age sixty-seven. Between music (I try to buy only vinyl records these days) and weed and pharmaceutical

drugs and movie tickets and cell phone bills and credit card bills and video rentals and trying to have a normal social life, I struggle to save a few measly dollars a month.

I navigate the computer's Internet browser to my online bank statement and assay my current finances. I shuffle fifty bucks from checking to savings, bringing the total up to a whopping \$567.88. I consider moving another fifty but quickly remember the list of albums I want to purchase over the weekend at the record fair at SUNY Purchase and how happy this will make me. How it will help to (briefly) make me forget just exactly where I've wound up living once again. I need to maintain some level of quality of life in the present, in addition to saving for the future. I vow to buy all the records on my list ASAP. Mental health is crucial. Not just for the children. This is something we are told at John W. Manley School staff meetings all the time.

I delete a few out-of-date porn bookmarks from the toolbar and play online Scrabble for ten minutes before quitting in disgust at a string of extremely low-scoring word combinations.

I resume lying on the floor. I listen to records. I listen to *Jailbreak*. I listen to *Peace Sells . . . But Who's Buying?* I listen to *Shake Some Action*. I grab the Moleskine notebook from its place under my pillow and flip it open. The first ten pages are dedicated to the ever-growing list of movies I've watched. Since college, I've recorded, in high OCD fashion, the date and name of every film that passes before my eyes. I flip past this part. I flip past the section of notes concerning my father, all the bizarre things he's done in the past eight months:

1. Watering the flowers in front of our house at three in the morning.
2. Crying during telephone commercials depicting long-distance romances.
3. Twenty-one-hour-a-day sleep cycles.
4. Sitting at the kitchen table staring at old flight logs for hours.
5. Unfurling massive Jeppesen aeronautical charts across the living room floor and following navigation lines with his fingers in delicate, precise increments.
6. Constant proclamations of "I'm dying" and "God help us."

7. His encounter with one of the immigrants working for our landscaping company: “If they have to put me on dialysis, I’m going to shoot myself with this gun.” “Sí, señor.”

I flip past these passages. Past the section listing, verbatim, every forehead-slap-inducing thing my brother has recently said in my presence, along with estimated dates.

Some highlights:

- “Don’t worry, the woman I marry won’t be allowed to work.” —9.25.04
- “What do you think about these cowboy boots?”—3.29.05
- “How much would I have to pay some faggy artist to do a portrait of me dressed like a samurai?” —8.10.05
- “Calvin is such a liberal.” —10.14.04, 11.2.04, 12.23.04, 12.24.04, 12.25.04, 2.13.05, 7.16.05, 11.01.05
- “I need to hit the gym double-time from now till Halloween so I look authentic in my Spartan costume.” —9.08.05
- “I know my sneakers are a size too small. It’s because I don’t want my feet to get any bigger.” —6.18.04

My mother knows a sage, this truly bizarre woman who goes by the name Brigitte DeMeyer. Since the illness started, she comes over a few times a week for “wellness sessions” with my father. At her request, they’ve begun to tape pieces of paper, marked with elaborate drawings of the letter *S*, all over the house. *S*’s on the washer-dryer, *S*’s under paintings, on the toilet. *S*’s above every light switch. Fancy red *S* cards dangle on the chandelier in the dining room, float above the dashboard GPS system in the SUV, stare out from ornate mirrors.

“When you see an *S*, it means smile,” Brigitte has told us. “It means you can feel *safe*. *Secure*. These are words to embrace, to live with,” she says. “*Shelter*,” she says.

My dad walks around the house forcing his mouth to react to these little scraps of paper. I’ll find him in front of the flat-screen in the family room watching reruns of *Law & Order*.

“Real murder trials are just like this,” he’ll tell me.

“Don’t forget to smile,” I’ll say, pointing to the large purple *S* hanging from the television.

He’ll turn his head, look at me for a moment, and do this weird thing where he smiles, then frowns in rapid succession, his mustache twitching above his lips. Then he’ll usually fall asleep at the commercial break.

THE SLEEPY HOLLOW FAMILY ALMANAC

by Kris D’Agostino

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