

# **John Shumate**

## **A Tragic Account of One Man's Journey to the Other End**

**I.**

I have a pipe dream. The goal is not a tangible entity. It is not found in the weekly classifieds, or buried at the bottom of a fast food slogan. No—the material realm has little significance, quite truly. My destination, if you can call it that, is a nebulous scar that plagues only a select few. I am not alone, of course. Of course. Of course there are the filthy and shriveled inhabitants of the Basement. The Basement. But we seldom take note of each other, lost as we are in a shaft of despair, so profound that our screams never reach the outside world.

On this particular evening, the Basement is scuttling about with a generous helping of wasted vermin. The

scarred echo of a social worker wanders around the room, opening and closing his split fists. A mother of four and grandmother of two mumbles to herself about the price of french fries, as she nibbles the flesh from her fingers. A boy no older than twenty screams at nobody in particular, and busies himself with punching a brick wall until his hands are mounds of kippered flesh. There is a scent of immediacy in the air that is not unfounded. The Sacramento left a few hours ago, and so the inevitable sweats and shakes and moans replace the somnolent malaise we all love.

A few release their tension with random gratuity. A hectic swarm of humping ensues, with whom and in what position does not matter. The once-woman I fucked last night casually rolls

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over beside me and spreads her legs. I decline. She shrugs and crawls to the next junky in line. This is the way of things. There is no emotion. No sense of loss or commitment. Our flesh is a disease that we pierce and neglect. Our sex is a frivolous absurdity that we pass off or covet, according to our whims.

I enthrone myself within a dark hole, completely dejecting every facet of the blood and semen that drowns my life. I must focus. Tonight is different. When the Sacrament arrives, as it inevitably does, I will begin the end of my journey. My journey. I am no longer afraid. I know what must be done.

The journey I speak of began two years ago, with no small amount of melodramatics—tears and sympathetic faces. Tissue paper. Cliché bouquets. Sealed coffin, of course. After the funeral, I walked home, much to the confused derision of my bland in-laws. The coffee and donuts politesse of a formal wake was in preparation. I refused to take part in such a morbid display. I could imagine the huddled convent of black veiled misers, crying and sobbing and the whole bit, about a woman they seldom called upon or ever truly loved. The food, of course, was the magnetic force that drove the careless to such a charade. Deviled eggs. Pumpkin pie. The inevitable tray of bargain meat and sour mini-pickles. Celery and carrots. Dip of every sort: blue cheese, salsa, French onion, nacho cheese, ranch. And all the while Aunt Maude can barely stand, so wracked with misery, of course. And Grandpa So-And-So sits and wonders about who he is and what the Hell they're all doing there.

And Father Joe of the local parish sips his black coffee and nods politely to this or that relative. He is so sorry for their loss, of course. She is in a better place now, though. Step-Mother hasn't paid him for his eulogy yet. He'll leave quietly when nobody is looking.

I needed time to think. I needed time alone.

I knew something had happened, quite monumental, that would change the course of my life. I was immersed with a sense of global banishment. The pedestrians and consumers that I stumbled past had somehow lost the relevance they once owned. Did I belong to this clan? Were those blank faces, mumbling to themselves and flicking cigarette butts into the gutter, part of my destiny? A casual friend stopped to offer condolences, but I did not heed. I could see the relief in his dim eyes as I side-stepped around him—nobody wants to display remorse if they have none. A bum shook a filthy Styrofoam cup in my face—I didn't even consider fishing for change. Holy Bean loomed around the next corner—the coffee shop I frequented every morning before lectures. I would merrily jingle the change in my predictable tweed jacket, and order the same twenty ounces of steaming sludge. I craved that warm comfort as I passed, but I passed all the same, and continued my walk forward. My vision blurred and all the busy frivolity before my eyes vanished. Molded. Became a slimy cacophony. A taxi, street vendors, prostitutes, cops, students, businessmen, their secretaries, screeches, whistles, clicks, clunks - all meaningless. I felt as though I was in a

tunnel. A sort of wormhole where only the thunderous echo of my footsteps resounded. Asimov would probably claim that I was on my way to an alternate, mechanical universe. Thoreau would claim that through my current state of detachment, I had come closer to God. Huxley might argue that my adrenaline gland was working overtime, and that I was subject to an unprecedented case of transmethylation. Personally, I just wanted to get home.

The world I formerly adhered to and respected became a phantom. A lifetime of humble labor and scrutiny sped unchecked in my brain. The college degree I was so proud of, ensconced above my mantle under the veil of an expensive frame, seemed like nothing more than a sheet of paper beneath glass. The moderate yet respectable figure that rested in my checking account (which I would soon alleviate) was the pretentious scribbling of a jaded math professor. And the strange



variety of mechanical beasts and plastic idols in which I once found solace were the disgusting heaps that cluttered my conscience: television, washer, dryer, indoor plumbing, silver cutlery, plastic milk cartons, Teflon frying pans, rubber bands, paper clips, computers, processed meat, chemically saturated TV dinners, telephones, refrigerators, ice cubes, candy bars, cars, stereos, compact discs, videotapes, that artificial scent spewing forth from the air conditioner, individually wrapped servings of sugar and cream, credit cards, ATM cards, identification cards, phone cards, playing cards, chess boards, night stands, shower

curtains, toxic bleach cleaning supplies, rubber gloves, knife sets, spice racks, book shelves, books, condensed soup, kool-aid, lemonade, iced-tea (long-island), Jim Beam, Jack Daniels, Jack Russels, Basset Hounds, Scottish Terriers, German Shepards, bills, accounts, checks, money orders, pillows, blankets, vaporizers, humidifiers, dehumidifiers, furnaces, lapels, ties, penny-loafers, elbow pads, black socks, horn-rimmed spectacles, electronic shavers, shaving cream, hemorrhoid cream, sex cream, ice cream, whipped cream, cream of wheat, creamed corn, popsicles, swings, desks, book bags, doors (open and closed), windows (unbroken and gleaming clean), fresh air, stale air, clean air, smoky air, air, oxygen.

What did it all mean? As I sit here in my Hole, I still don't know. Doubt I ever will. Doubt I ever cared. Or did I? Perhaps. I will know soon enough.

I was an alien. The monsters that crowded around me were a species I could not identify. For the first time in my life, I had lost the reigns. I had no sense of myself, at least, the self I had nurtured and fought to maintain for so many years. I recalled the swarm of stale dinners and cocktail parties I frequented for the sake of professionalism. I would mill about, Carta Blanca in hand, all the while nodding and smiling to this or that professor or department head. Yes, yes that is quite true. The current student body does have a general lack of enthusiasm about that particular era. Perhaps adding the class would renew interest? Oh, yes, yes I do agree, my good

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man. Certainly one might speculate. . . oh, you're such a card, Grumbo, really. . . yes of course. . . I'll see you at squash this Saturday, then? Good show!

And on and on. Never ending. My world was the sum of clinking china and social politics. A sham. And now that She was gone, I could find no reason to continue. I'm sure my absence was noted as early as that first weekend, when I failed to appear at the charity banquet the Dean of Student Affairs had arranged. The invitation was mailed to me a month in advance, wrapped in a flower-embroidered envelope and smelling of musk and cigar smoke. I tacked it onto my bulletin board—it was on the top of my priority list, of course. I could imagine the astounded jibes that my colleagues would direct toward my absence. The little card with my name calligraphically inscribed by the aching hands of a grad student. The shiny cutlery placed in perfect order, waiting for my use. The silly jazz band hired for the occasion. The giggles and laughs. The lipstick and cologne and satin gloves and bow ties and dainty desserts.

There was a sick freedom to the new identity I acquired. I knew not how to behave; in fact, I questioned every conceivable notion I once took for granted. Mundane entrapments such as appearing for work and bathing and brushing my teeth lost all meaning. I gained an experimental temperament that was more atrocious by the day, but liberated as I was, I never stopped to reflect upon my actions.

For two consecutive weeks, a casual observer might have seen me naked on my front porch, idly counting the blades

in a handful of grass. I stumbled home at all hours of the dark morning—hand in hand with the disreputable men and women that freely molested my body. The cold shrapnel of sexual promiscuity provided me with a certain amount of masochistic relief. I walked everywhere, especially into the ill-lit corners of the world that mothers warn their children about. The Other End. The place that my kind love to ignore. But no longer. I had no affiliation. No sense of brotherhood. No sense of belonging. Not that I wanted all that, in fact I avoided it emphatically. The occasional crack head would strike up a conversation after sex, but I averted all that nonsense with a sturdy gaze and a handful of dollar bills. Sleep was a commodity I dreaded. My dreams were cached with the beasts of my tortured conscience. I complained about this malady to anyone who might listen, and one evening a fat whore from thirty-second street offered me a small bag of shiny chemical shards.

Crystal Meth. Glass. Window. Pane. Tweak. Speed. Whatever the slang sobriquet, I maintained a healthy regimen of the drug in the days that followed. Speed replaced caffeine. Speed replaced my somnolence. Speed replaced me. It was the first of many drugs I would try on my journey through Hell. Shortly thereafter I acquired another addiction: cutting. My arms played the part of a butcher's block. My weapon of choice was the cheap pocket knife, nice and dull, that Father once gave me as a graduation present. There was an inscription on the faux-gold face of the trinket: If a problem



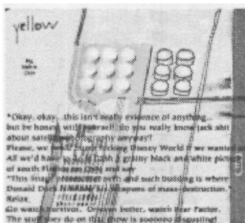
cannot be solved, enlarge it. -Dwight D. Eisenhower.

However, I did have a redeemable lull in my abhorrent behavior. I made it a point, for two tortuous days, to seek an answer in that ink stained ancestral realm I once admired. I paced around the hallowed halls of academia. I explored the nature of faith with Tolstoy, I traveled the depths of Hell with Dante, I joined the League and headed East with Hesse, I hit the road with Kerouac, I committed myself with Kesey, and I ate the Last Supper with King James. But I left in exhaustion on the second day, finding no comfort in the tomes of my collegial past. I felt more confused than ever. To my surprise, the greatest minds humanity ever produced were filled with rubbish. For all their wisdom and insightful perspectives, none of them could explain what had happened to me, or why. I went home defeated, stripped myself of clothing, and committed self-flagellation with the vicious delight of a thousand maniacs.

I lived in my closet, quite literally, for three days. The purpose for such self-mortification is open to translation. I only knew, at the time, that whatever might occur past the plywood portal of my cell was inconsequential. I sat on an indefinable heap of fuzzy remnants—trinkets of a past I no longer understood. I stared into the darkness and warmed my naked flesh within a sweet bubble of impunity. There was something about the Void before me that was irresistible. Something immaculate in the utter intangibility of it all. I spent what I assume was the first evening in a

wasteland of hysterical laughter. I laughed at myself. I laughed at the world. I laughed at the ticking clock that screamed from the World Outside, its persistence a dull clogging on my brain. I laughed at the empty crack sacks that scattered the closet floor. I laughed at the stinging chemicals that rotted and burned my nasal cavity. I laughed at nothing at all. Somewhere outside, a phone rang incessantly and a continuous thumping resounded above my head. I imagine such noise occurred throughout my isolation, but I was oblivious to it the next day, when I forgot about myself.

From that point on, my detachment was so immense that I swam in an ocean of comical surrealism. The meth had run



out hours before, but the effects remained strong, like the steroid-induced Zen of a marathon runner. My eyes were alight with catatonic frenzy, and my jaw constricted with such conviction that my teeth ached. Sweat dribbled in pools that collected near my feet. Time lost meaning. Thought was released from my mind's prison, and projected instead into the blackness before me. My mind manifested itself in swirling, convoluted goo that frolicked around my flesh. So many colors. Sensory deprivation gripped my conscience, which desperately reached out for any tangible evidence of the Outside World. Having none, my mind created its own reality, much more beautiful, like the Land of Oz, or Wonderland, or the Shire. I strolled through a sunlit path that vibrated with alien life. Out on the moors a shadowy legion of bipedal beasts

... One Man's Journey to ...

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made their way to another war. In a garden to the right, an old man dressed in flashing silver told his grandchildren an ancient yarn, of a world with cement towers filled with glass, where four-wheeled carriages took their passengers to Broadway musicals and cheap diners. Two miles down the road was a tavern, established two million years ago, where all the dead intellectuals went to ponder the nature of existence over a cup of steaming latte. Humphrey Osmond was there, arguing over the nature of schizophrenia with Huxley. Tolstoy sat in a booth by himself, twirling his beard around his wrinkled fingers. Plato and Socrates were at the bar, there togas draping loosely over their stools. Van Gogh was there, with easel and palette, of course—he quietly observed the portrait he was working on, as Andy Warhol posed under the burning scrutiny of a halogen lamp. I did not want to leave this place. This place where sunset was a glorious sight, unblemished by industrial fog. Where the only concern for the day was what path to travel. Where death and life coexisted and talked with one another. Where cityscapes and factories did not hinder the sky, which met so beautifully with the earth on every horizon.

I left my cell on the third evening. I can't recall how I vacated my closet. Surely, I had locked myself in with the intention of rotting. Had a force intervened? Did the bearded stink known as Maintenance Man free me? Did I pound the door open in a blind rage of some sort? Whatever the case, I fell out all sweaty and broken, like the slimy remains of a back-alley abortion

gone terribly wrong. A larval film of bodily fluid encased my frail form. I was the Moth in a blinding world of Butterflies. Consciousness took hold, and with it, a plethora of presumptions I scarcely remembered acquiring. In all simplicity, the Basement is the inexorable result—a ruin shared by the bastard children of a callous nation.

I left my house that evening, clad only in a pair of soiled slacks. My bare feet kissed the gravel and broken bottles of dim alleys. I stopped to sip a fifth of Mad Dog with a crazy bum. I peered into his toothless grin with the strange ideation that my true home lay somewhere in his maw, on his blistered tongue or further in against his cancerous throat. I was sloshed within an hour, and Bum became my best friend. A friend of friends. He was so very jolly, like a bizzarro Santa Claus he roared with guttural laughter at my nonsensical comments. It didn't take long before we were singing through the chorus of All you need is love. I was part of the sick spectacle I once gazed upon from across the street, in another world, with my briefcase and expensive watch. No matter, I was replaced easily enough. A small audience of business suits and high heels gathered around the mouth of the alley, watching us as we invoked Lennon's soul and made a mockery of it with our terrible singing.

That was when she arrived. A shadow emerged from the guts of the alley, and slowly clanked and cursed its way towards me. I stopped singing and watched her approach. For surely it was a woman, or at least used to be. She had the sickly form of a supermodel, and in her movement, in spite of the trips and

shakes and staggers, was the hint of a previous grace now lost. I knew her purpose as soon as her ghostly thin face appeared in the dim light. She was the Keeper of the Boat. Charon. She would lead the way to my destiny. We made eye contact. Nothing was said. She helped me up, and I followed her into the shadows.

My fellow travelers expunge their diseased sex and lapse into karmic obscurity. They shake their barren bodies — back and forth back and forth to the rhythm of their chemical oppressors. Liberators? In a sense, the Sacrament is both, of course. In the extent of my tenure, I have seen and experienced the duplicity of our chemical pilgrimage.

The ambience of the Basement, I would say, has a greater impact here than the Sacrament itself. The Basement is sentient, and in constant flux. When supplies are low, then so is our temperament. The less verbal interactions, the better — the Basement enjoys silence. No matter—most intentions are easily spoken through the body and the eye. Physical concerns, such as hygiene do not worry the Basement. This fact is evident in the layer of mystery secretion that is smeared over every surface, the stacks of used needles which land wherever they choose after use, the occasional half-eaten dumpster sandwich that rests in a prescribed corner and befouls the vicinity.

My veins ache and growl. I know, as sure as death that I will be comatose within a few hours—curled into a fetal Hell of cold sweats and spasms. The far-

off stony gazes of my cellmates center on the rotting corpse near the front door. They fear, as do I, that they may soon join him. His name was. . . his name is irrelevant, of course. He was just as thin and sick as the rest of us. Nobody special. A few missed him for a day or two, but that passed. Some are almost there, right next to him, rotting and stinking in a corner. There are the brave wanderers and the squeamish beginners and the terrified deniers. We wait for the door to creek open. For the Sacrament to arrive. The Sacrament will show us. The Sacrament will take us. The Sacrament will ease our pain.

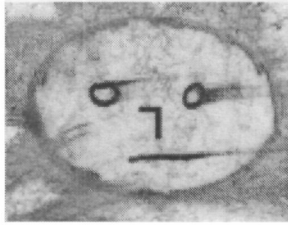
Tonight, I end my journey. Nobody knows this. Nobody ever does. It is my sacred right to withhold this knowledge. My arrival will catch them all off guard, and it will be their problem. This is the way of things. Road kill comes with the territory, of course—a curious teenager, a banished doctor,

dead babies born as addicts. Every crusade has a few sacrifices. The signs are rather obscure, since most of the depraved creatures here have no idea where they're going, only that they'll know when they get there. For those of us that Know, that Feel, well, salvation is only a matter of time. I, for example, know exactly where I'm going. She is waiting for me there. She has already ordered our drinks. She smokes a cigarette to kill the time. I won't be long.

The Sacrament arrives—sweet powdery rocks, snuggling in cellophane blankets.

I'm the first in line

... the Other End



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I take more than my proper share. By the time they notice, it will be too late. I crawl off to my favorite corner, and I slide into my walking boots.

## II.

Next please! The bearded man in the booth says. His nametag is all plastic and corporate with a big yellow smiley face. It reads: A. Ginsberg.

I step up to the window—just another rotarian with a light wallet and a cheap briefcase full of lies. I squint and look past the fiberglass. He wears a red uniform with imitation brass buttons. A quaint bellhop cap rests squarely on the top of his mop.

Well? Ginsberg asks. He is impatient. I can see that he loathes his job. His breath steams up bull-like against the cheap barrier between us. What? I ask. What? Your ticket? He fumes.

My. My. Oh. I say and notice that a ticket is indeed scrunched into my left hand. I slide it through the little crescent near Al's belly. He snatches it up with a flourish and presses a red button the size of two severed heads. A buzzer screams in frustration and a black door creaks open in response.

Move on now! The bearded prophet says and wags his head toward the door. The portal. The opening. The answer? The problem? I light a stale Lucky Strike, inhale, and walk. I walk. I walk through the door.

A red room with a nine-foot tall mirror. I look at myself. Short.

Anorexic. Baggy eyes. But the suit doesn't fit. I'm dressed like a square. Like some meandering salesman praying for a commission. Cheap blue grey suit with matching hat. I notice the penny loafers and immediately avert my gaze. Haven't worn a suit in ages. Not since the Funeral. A million questions float to the top of my fevered brain, but there is no one to answer them. I know this is a solitary excursion. I raise my chin and look at my reflection with a bit of morbid pride. The road has been long. The mirrored wall whooshes aside with the cold precision of a Meijer's entrance.

A cloud-infested sky explodes onto a vast space. A courtyard. People everywhere. Married couples, of course. Mothers smiling, dads laughing. Hand in hand. They're all content and calm and courteous—I hear the buzz of a million excuse me's and pardon me's. Polka dot dresses and old lady panty hose cover the wives. The men wear the same suit—my suit—and carry the same briefcase. I look down at mine: imitation leather with gold painted steel latch. No combination or keyhole. If there's a meaning behind all this well-choreographed inanity, standing here gawking won't discover it. I walk all zombie-like into their midst.

The courtyard is extravagant. It pulses and breaths with the lost hopes and memories of an entire generation. Faux cement fountains and plastic flowerbeds and shiny trashcans (recyclable and perishable, of course). Through the haze of suits and beehives, I see a row of corporate domiciles flanking me. Coffee, donuts, burgers, baseball cards, magazines, clothing,

music—it's all available here. I read the signs and commercials as I stumble on:

**SUPER SALE SLAM! BE THE FIRST ON YOUR BLOCK and WE MUST BE CRAZY to GIVE YOU SUCH A SOOOPER DEE DOOOPER DEAL!!**

I stop in the center of the huge square. The suits merry-go-around me, never stopping, always grinning. A resonant sound crashes through the sky. Jacked up jet fuel and ponderous machinations, like a B-52 with the volume cranked to eleven. A shadow falls over the scene. The moving suits and briefcases and polka dots stop. We look up—it is a B-52! It hovers ghost-like above us. The hatch opens—whiirrrrrr **CLANK!** And now a flag, monumental in size, scrolls out and dips hundreds of feet down, almost touching the cobbled stone ground. Gargantuan. Amazing. It is the largest photograph of Dwight Eisenhower I have ever seen. **"LIKE IKE!"** A slogan shouts above the ex-president's wrinkled brow. Everybody kneels.

Kneel you fool! They'll raise interest rates on us! Someone hisses behind me. I obviously don't want to cause a stir with these freaks, so I do as I'm told. Silence. Only the thundering of the War Machine. I look up.

What are you doing?! Lower your damn head! Says a voice beside me. I slowly turn my gaze, and from the depths of a dime store hat, I see my father's face. He is kneeling beside me. They are kneeling around me.

Lower it now, you disrespectful nothing! Dad shouts and slaps me on the back of the head. I look to my right. Behind me. How could I have not noticed that my father surrounds me, with mom sprinkled throughout? A twisted legion of dads.

You're such a disgrace!

But. . .

You're such a disgrace!

I had it together Dad, honestly! Degree and job and house and car and all. But then. . .

You're such a disgrace!

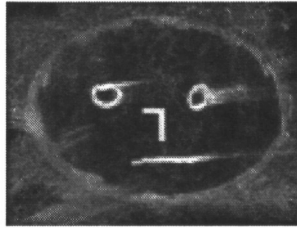
You were proud of me once.

Disgrace!

I look away to hide my tears. Bastard. Bastards, I should say. Of all the filthy corners of the subconscious, I have to pick the one that houses a legion of cloned parents. The stone beneath my hands is freezing. Numbing. It reminds of a place far away, in the glossy pages of some other when—a cold slab in an empty morgue, awaiting my return.

I inspect my briefcase. Click. Click. It creaks open. The fake leather furrows. Inside. Inside. Inside is a letter I wrote Her long ago. I remember the words without reading them. I know them by heart. This will come in hand when I get there. I wad up the stationary (pink with purple flowers, of course) and shove it into a random pocket. I cower forward and touch my sweating brow to the ground. I feel sick.

I lose myself in a deluge of vertigo and nausea. Kind of car sick with a touch of colitis. I fall into the first opening I



**A Tragic Account of . . .**



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see. Take breaths. Slow breaths. Keep breathing. But why? I just roll with it.

Hi there! A uniformed stooge chirps. He is sincerely glad to see me—almost exploding with anticipation. What does he peddle? What product does he endorse? Doesn't matter. They're all the same to me. I can focus now. I straighten up and smile and say hello.

Why, it's not a uniform at all. I say. Uniform? What are you blathering?

You know. Your outfit.

No I don't know you stupid prick! Snap out of it!

It isn't a uniform. It isn't anything. It's father. Father.

PHOOSH! Ice water. At least two gallons of it smacks my face. Are you fuckin' here now? Jesus! A girl shouts from somewhere far away. Somewhere in front of me or maybe beside me. She is beside me. She is bald. Nose pierced. Lip pierced. A studded leather collar around her neck. She has the parched slate complexion of a methamphetamine casualty. She is the once-woman I sleep with. One of many, of course, here in the Basement.

Fuck. I says. I'd say. Get your shit together, man! She spits back. No. Going for it this time. Can't see you, anyways. No light.

There never is here. Only candles and matches. You know that. What did you fucking do to yourself? I told you to ease up for a few weeks. Then you pull this shit on me. I swear to God if you shut down again. . . . She is whimpering. Sniffing. Does she hate me? Did she love me? Impossible. More faces surround my view. Dark. Skeletal.

Empty. Of course, only candles and matches. Light is a curse here in the Basement. It sings our eyes and invites the cops. The only light we ever need is the intravenous holy vision we embrace. We embrace. We embrace whenever we can.

Ugh. Yeah. Whatever. What. I feel moisture all around us. So cold. This place is a dungeon. A dungeon, I mutter in an attempt to prove my point, whatever point that is.

Don't you fuckin' pass out on. . . .

The void eats me again, harder this time. I'm hungry. If only I could find a hot dog in this place.

Here you are—nice and crispy, just the way you like it, yes? She clinks a small plate in front of me. It's a Ballpark. My mouth waters. We're sitting in the cheap cabin we rented for our honeymoon. In the middle of a tourist community filled with all the commodities that make camping a national irony. Fully flushable outhouses, gas powered campfires, mechanized hearth, electric lanterns, bug zappers. Small. Dark. Only the fireplace to light the dinner table. Cozy here. I never want to leave.

She sits across the doilies and discount cutlery and she smiles. So lovely. So beautiful. Her eyes are green and her hair is brunette. She wears a typically conservative dress, fresh from the bridal shower. She is the perfect homemaker. She is the perfect lover. Dad is so proud. Married with a corporate job! What else is there? But She is pale, with only a bit of color. She has the chapped and blue lips of a fresh corpse. Her eyes drown in their sockets. Blood crawls out of her left nostril and she licks it up. She is only



one crushed chest away from looking exactly the way she did two years ago, when they scraped her steaming remains off the pavement. When I went to the morgue to identify her, they would only show her face, but I pushed Mr. Coroner aside and pulled the sheet off. Amazing how a single impact can mangle a body so thoroughly. A generous slice of windshield had split her bosom in twain.

How was work today, honey? She asks. Just fine, thanks, I say. You know how it is. Damn crack whores on every corner, trying to steal our game. Yeah, I know. Really is a shame. And when is the last time we had some fresh needles in this house? The Clinic run out or what?

She stops sipping her processed tin can coffee and stares into my soul with her radiant eyes. I used to swim in that x-ray gaze. She was my lifeblood. My greedy arteries devoured Her beatific energies, and pumped pure bliss into my heart.

I choke down a half-chewed chunk of frankenfurter and look away like a scolded child. I'm sorry. I'm sorry the Needle replaced you. It's not as though I had a son to latch onto—you were still pregnant with him, remember?

I'm sucked out the door and through a Hoover hose—into a pit of dust and neglected pennies, where the white picket fences of American Dreams sleep.

Thunk. I hear more than feel my body slam onto cold cement. Footsteps. Guttural orders. A gurney. Administer two cee cees of such and such. Off in the distance I hear squealing tires and police

sirens. I know that I am close. Close to the very bottom of the Other End. I have been unceremoniously dumped. Dumped. Dumped like so much garbage on the Emergency Room's doorstep. I doubt they'll find a vein that hasn't dried up. If Dad could only see me now. Cheers, Pops.

Hey!

Hm?

Hey! What. . . why am I handcuffed to the bed?

Big orderly in white fatigues. Muscles. Scars. An ex-con struggling through community college. He stares at me. No—he stares through me with the time honored indifference of the medical profession.

You see the gentleman out there? Mr. Orderly asks. The one all decked out in blue? He's here in case you get healthy enough to go to jail, see? You straight now? Not looking too good, man. Damn, I don't get paid enough to see this shit.

I smile. He cringes. I know my teeth are rotten—a side effect from too much junk.

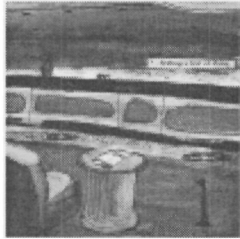
Don't worry. I says. I'm sure they'll bill me.

Doctor!

Darkness.

Light.

Later, the orderly will tell a reporter that my last words were "gotta piss." But I don't remember saying that at all. I thought I said something like "Fuck this nickel and dime shit! Where's my Twinkie?" I know not exactly Tolstoy,



# J Shumate

but much more interesting than "gotta piss." But they're welcome to print up whatever lard they choose. Nobody will read my obituary anyway—the people that might are too far down in the Basement to consider resurfacing for an editorial memento.

I float away, into an eternally cheap lounge, filled with has-beens and wannabees and straight cracked out losers like me. I shouldn't be surprised that the scum of the Earth are shipped to a Vegas lounge when they die. Could there be a worse torture? But I don't care. I get up on stage—I paid the owner for the privilege. I reach into my pocket. The stationary is still there. She sits close to the stage. A table for two with a corny red candle burning in the center and our happy-hour brews off to the side. She wears the dress I bought her for prom. I wink and I smile. She is already crying before I say the first word:

We leave our bodies behind. We burst through the plywood and insulation and we kiss the Sun. We feel the bewildering power of that Star as it warms our incorporeal flesh. The Sun loves us. The Stars and the Clouds and the Galaxies look upon us and They see the triumphant product of the only grace humanity has. Saturn sees us, from so far away we illuminate His face. He smiles at us, and a ten-gun salute of meteors fires off in recognition of our union. We, together, answer Their cries and pleas to produce a single redemption for the human race. Our hands and hearts dissolve and spill into the true mold of Prosperity. As the world crumbles around us, we know we are safe. We are safe. We are safe because we leave

our bodies behind. Up here, the physical world below us is cosmically hilarious. We goof and laugh at the waste and futility of it all. We are able to laugh because we have each other. Reality is a torture I have spent years avoiding—and now that I have found you, I know I will never return.