We Regret the Error:
A Novel and Exegesis

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SUMMARY

Working from a historical framework that positions newspapers and novels as divergent textual forms under a cultural paradigm of actuality, this series of essays examines journalism as a literary topos in 20th century American fiction. I argue for reading journalism-centered fictions as metanarratives about the formation of public knowledge and its underlying power structures. The first essay examines two novelistic accounts of Louisiana Senator Huey "Kingfish" Long's authoritarian tendencies—Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* and Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*—and their broad conceptions of the role of factuality in public discourse. The second essay argues two historically interested novels, Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* and Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days,* implicate journalistic practice in writing the "first draft of history" and subsequent erasure of alternative cultural histories. Finally, I read E.L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks* as a drama of unreportable truth, in which Doctorow imagines the incapacity of facts to function in a public sphere compromised by private interests. As a whole, these essays reflect American novelists' thoroughgoing skepticism of journalism's devotion to epistemologies of verification.

I take up this tradition with my own novel and its confrontation with the epistemological crises attendant to the United States' War on Terror. Set in a small town in Illinois in 2006, *We Regret the Error* centers on a young reporter named David Sinclair who struggles to find his place as the new editor of the weekly *New Rome News.* To win the favor of the town, Sinclair sets out to write a profile of a local war hero, Tiberius Marks, currently deployed in Afghanistan. But as Sinclair grows closer to Marks's fiancé, Ernestine Burden, reality and reportage diverge. When Ernie reveals that Tie has been missing in action for weeks, Sinclair makes the fateful choice to invent and publish a story of Tie's death, a version of martyrdom the town chooses to adopt as truth.

STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY
AND COTUTELLE AGREEMENT

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

This thesis is being submitted to Macquarie University and in accordance with the Cotutelle agreement with the University of Illinois at Chicago dated 28 March 2017.

DATE: 11 April 2019

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Fit to Print:
Literary Representations of Journalism in 20th Century America

In early January 2017, in midtown Manhattan, President-elect Donald Trump appeared before a group of about 300 reporters, the first time he'd addressed the media since his surprise campaign victory. The Wednesday morning press conference was held at Trump Tower after months of vilification of the "mainstream media," and the national press came ready for battle. Many had prepped questions about relations between Trump's campaign personnel and Russian operatives, but the President-elect launched a preemptive strike. "I want to thank a lot of the news organizations, some of whom have not treated me well over the years," Trump told the reporters. "A couple in particular, and they came out so strongly against that fake news. I have great respect for the news, I have great respect for freedom of the press and all of that" (*New York Times*). With this rhetorical turn, Trump revealed a new tactic in his fight against establishment journalism, by which accusations of fakeness punctured any unfavorable coverage.

At that time, Trump's tactic seemed curious. Until the January press conference, the term "fake news" had been most notably used by Trump's political opponents, who hoped to reframe a slew of faux-articles shared on social media sites that Democrats alleged had fooled American voters into voting against their own interests in the 2016 election.[1] Even though that first definition of "fake news" implied that Trump's voters had been the ones duped, Trump seized the opportunity to turn doubts about the media in his favor. At the Jan. 11 press conference, Trump deployed the fakeness charge against CNN's Jim Acosta to deflect questions about alleged ties to Russia. When Acosta posed a question about the issue, the President-elect telling him, "I'm not going to give you a question. You are fake news." This dismissal signaled a shift in the burden of truth, with the term "fake news" at the core of Trump's anti-press platform.[2]

The Trump administration's political strategy, if indeed it is fair to say one existed in those early stages, seemed to welcome the possibility of a truth-free democracy. After taking office, Trump sent a Tweet that identified the *New York Times* and the major networks as "The FAKE NEWS media" and "the enemy of the American People!" In a television interview not long after, advisor Kellyanne Conway famously offered the explanation that Press Secretary

[1] A pair of economists concluded after the campaign that misleading social media content "imposes private and social costs by making it more difficult for consumers to infer the true state of the world—for example, by making it more difficult for voters to infer which electoral candidate they prefer" (Allcott and Gentzkow 212).
[2] On National Public Radio's *On the Media,* fake news was described as "fabricated for political advantage or profit… [the term was] immediately co-opted by Donald Trump to attack any story or opinion piece in the mainstream media that has the temerity to correct him."

Sean Spicer had offered “alternative facts” about the size of Trump’s inauguration day crowds. Interviewer Chuck Todd fired back: “Alternative facts are not facts. They're falsehoods" (Meet the Press), but the terrain of the debate had already shifted from the facts themselves to the difficulty of defining facts. Trump’s worldview defied the Habermasian ideal of a public sphere girded by critical, rational debate and based on verifiable facts. Rather than being concerned with a unified public good, the media sphere under Trump could be best understood as a conglomeration of competing interests—each with its own competing reality.

This is certainly not the first moment in which the American press has seen its credibility in crisis. But these recent developments might suggest that the standard of objectivity, which the press has relied upon for much of the last century, is insufficient for sustaining rational democratic discourse in postmodernity. The popular press’s standard of verification-as-knowledge, I’ll argue later, has been historically situated as the means by which power explains itself, and so historical-political challenges to power—even that of Trumpism—require a rhetorical strategy that also runs contrary to established fact. I do not wish to join the handwringing of those who bemoan the death of truth in a “post-fact” society. Rather, I want to posit the mutability of fact and fiction as functions of social power.

The myth of objectivity, founded on an epistemology of verifiable fact, is best understood as a cultural development of the 20th century, an era in which journalism historian Thomas Connery has identified the emergence of a “paradigm of actuality” in American culture (6). Connery theorizes this paradigm shift as “defined by a focus on the actual and real, on people, events, and details that are verifiable and based on observation and experience” (14). The appeal of actuality, for a rapidly developing democratic power like the 20th century U.S., was that it promised a detached, objective reality that was discoverable by any citizen but unownable by any one of them. Although actuality offered a theoretical safeguard from individualistic desires, Habermas and subsequent critics have shown a public organized around actuality tends nonetheless to reproduce the economic and political desires of powerful private interests.

Political issues notwithstanding, actuality is a striking cultural paradigm because its rhetoric entails corresponding ontological and epistemological beliefs, namely that an objective truth exists and that it can be known. Journalists and other writers have framed actualistic discourse as the reproduction of reality without biased, individual perceptions. Any number of literary realisms, not to mention schools of journalistic style, seek to overcome subjectivity to represent the actual world. And though critics like Shelley Fisher Fishkin have exhaustively analyzed literary movements developed in tandem with the wider cultural paradigm of actuality, we are yet to fully examine the role of fiction in explaining or interrogating

actualistic society. The real, I'll suggest, is always contoured by the unreal, or, in contemporary parlance, the fake. I contend that literary novelists of the 20th century stage interrogations—via their own fakery—of the epistemological underpinnings of actuality, and that these moments become clearly legible when novelists have taken up journalism as the subjects of their works.

My aim in this study is to analyze journalistic work as a topos of literary novels in the U.S. during the era of actuality—roughly the period in which the "objective" newspaper comes into its own. How and why do American authors repeatedly turn to journalistic work and journalistic forms in their fictions? Why does the figure of the intrepid reporter circulate so persistently? A century of reportorial objectivity has worked to narrow the popular understanding of truth to a matter of verification, but novels, in the long history of the form, have explicitly or implicitly lodged claims for the unverifiable. I will attempt to demonstrate the divergent history of journalistic fact and novelistic abstraction in these journalistic fictions, especially as literary authors seek alternative epistemological models to the paradigm of actuality that dominates mainstream journalistic discourse in America.

Through a close reading of notable American novels and their historical contexts, I highlight a persistent literary project taking place in the 20th century—one in which representations of journalism help explain metanarratives of public knowledge formation. These novels dramatize a cultural logic in which the essentially private desires (and realities) of individuals are translated into journalistic practice and produce an actuality to which the public is beholden. These novels about journalism demonstrate their authors' insights into the ways that ideology and facts cannot be divorced in public discourse, and how a cultural paradigm of actuality is incompatible with our postmodern view of society fragmented by competing ideologies, knowledges and realities. Because public facts also comprise a mainstream understanding of history, these novels tend also to destabilize the "first draft of history" represented by mainstream journalism, potentially intervening in public understanding of historiography and history itself. In sum, journalism fictions tend to focus on what counts as knowledge for reporters, but more importantly, these narratives reframe the power structures by which public knowledge is produced.

I don't mean to say that my analyses will apply to every instance of fictional journalism; there are thousands of novels devoted to depicting the news. Nor do I wish to suggest my focused readings as comprehensive accounts of these canonical works. In some cases, these authors are quite explicitly concerned with journalism, but others are not. Sinclair Lewis, for example, was married to prominent anti-Hitler journalist Dorothy Thompson while writing about a small-town editor fighting authoritarianism, but Robert Penn Warren explicitly

denied that his novel ought to have any "journalistic relevance" (Warren, "Notes" 279). In either case, I aim for a greater understanding of the literary history of these novels by considering them against the backdrop of actualistic public discourse. Although there are nearly innumerable novels that might offer insight into these issues, I have limited my explanation here to a few selected texts.

In the first of these essays, I take up a pair of novels, Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* and Warren's *All the King's Men*, as two opposing accounts of the quasi-authoritarian figure of Huey "Kingfish" Long. Both novels depict fear of totalitarian regimes in the 1930s and the possibility that Long might have become an American dictator benefitting from a confusion of fact and fiction that Hannah Arendt describes in her analysis of totalitarian power. Lewis thinks that the best weapon against the fiction of totalitarian propaganda is his own fiction—what he calls propaganda for America. Warren, on the other hand, sees ideology and factuality as impossible to separate, as his portrait of Governor Willie Stark becomes inseparable from the ex-reporter who narrates the novel. Where Lewis warns against the unscrupulous spread of political fiction, Warren makes the case that facts alone cannot be trusted, either, in the production of public knowledge.

My second essay takes up questions about historiographical exclusion through journalistic representations of racially or economically marginalized groups. The "actual" history of America is a version inseparable from the white, bourgeois journalists responsible for its first draft. Novels like Colston Whitehead's *John Henry Days* and Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* depict how alternatives to mainstream journalistic practice facilitate the circulation and preservation of cultural histories considered mere myth or folklore. Although many historians have tried to prove the actual existence of the steel-driving man of the John Henry legend, Whitehead's novel formally insists on narrative multiplicity as a resistance to commodification and whitewashing. And Proulx gives her readers a milieu in which fanciful storytelling, even in a journalistic context, revives the culture of resettled outport communities. These novels represent a literary trend that goes beyond offering alternative histories and instead, as critic Samuel Cohen has suggested, opens the past to see how history is made.

Finally, I turn to the work of E.L. Doctorow, whose 1994 novel *The Waterworks* stages a disappearance of a public supposedly unified by notions of actualism. The novel is narrated by a 19th-century New York newspaper editor who uncovers a nefarious plot involving scheming capitalists, Boss Tweed and an amoral scientist. The evildoers use public structures to hide children kidnapped from the streets, used in experiments to find the secret of immortality. But the editor, McIlvaine, doesn't report his investigation to the public. Not until thirty years later does he tell the story, by then a work of memoir rather than journalism. It

seems the public could not see the evils of capitalism that were in some ways so visible; McIlvaine could not report a story that the public could not hear. Always concerned with postmodernism's fragmentation and recourse to personal narrative, Doctorow demonstrates the effort to represent fact as both impossible and admirable.

Actuality as an Epistemological and Social Practice

As Karen Roggenkamp writes, a fictional work about journalism "deliberately toys with the lines between fact and fiction by depicting the life and work of reporters… at its self-conscious core is an examination of the profession and practice of journalism itself" (128). These fictions also address wider cultural logics of the consumption and recirculation of that journalism, and much of my analysis rests on the way such fictions appear in the context of an actualistic paradigm fundamental to 20th century American intellectual and civic discourse. Actuality can be understood as a prominent feature of modernity in the expansion of popular media, the incorporation of scientific study into public institutions, and literary movements alike—functionally organizing social agreement about reality. Even in contemporary political discourse, we are quite familiar with the rhetorical insistence that a point of argument is *actually* true (global warming is *actually* getting worse, the economy has *actually* never recovered, and so on), the distinction being that any point in opposition to the actual is produced merely by the speaker's desire and not verifiable by the "real" world. The actual reigns supreme. Quantitative data collected by Google suggests that the popularity of the term "actual" coincides with the historical rise of the daily newspaper; "actually" surpasses the word "truly" in printed materials in 1874 and reaches its peak around the 1950s (Google Ngram). The truth, one might say, gives way to the *actual* truth.

In turn-of-the-century journalism, notions of actuality produced rapidly professionalizing standards of big-city dailies, especially in familiar terms of objectivity, accuracy and fairness. Most journalism historians see these professional ethics as marking the origin of the modern press, as it emerged from the penny press in the 1830s and flourished in the 1880s, when technological advances reduced the cost of printing and distribution. Major publishers like Hearst and Pulitzer built vast media empires during this period, as the shift from sensationalist Yellow Journalism to the objective reporting standardized the industry. America's media market at the turn of the century offered dual opportunities: turning a profit for publishers, and serving the public's interests to carry on democratic, rational debate. The latter was increasingly thought of in relation to the press's First Amendment protections, but

the former exerted more direct control on journalistic practice. Market forces and actuality often conspired to narrow news coverage to safe and sellable versions. In his 1920 essay, "Liberty and the News," famed journalism commentator Walter Lippmann urged his countrymen to move away from partisan newspapers and stabilize democracy by balancing political opinion with agreed-upon facts, writing "the community must find a way of making the men who publish news accept the responsibility for an honest effort not to misrepresent the facts" (76). Publishers began a formal separation between news reporting, editorial opinion and material sent in by community members. Rather than serving a diversity of ideologies, the press could conceive a singularity—that is, an "objective" and factual one—to facilitate consensus among the widest possible audience and thus maximize profitability. As historian Geraldine Muhlmann puts it, "The cult of 'facts' was beginning to rule supreme, and the journalist-reporter set to work, that is, to observe and to write, on behalf of an ever larger public" (2). The actualistic belief in a singular, objective reality lent itself easily to an emphasis on verifiable fact over controvertible ideological matters. Rising profits in the 1920s were accompanied by journalistic "organizations and codes of conduct [that] indicated an impulse toward standardization and professionalism" (Teel 117), a way of codifying and legitimizing routine practice. Publishers and broadcasters proposed to self-police their newsgathering and to use objectivity, rather than ideological diversity, as their chief criteria. Journalistic objectivity can be understood as a clear expression of actualism's epistemological premise, inasmuch as it implies a fixed, knowable reality that could be reported in the daily paper. Historically considered, journalism's goal of unified objectivity bolstered a functional epistemology of actuality, and the act of reporting became a practice of verification in line with actualistic logic. Verification from sources serves as a professional standard for the reportability of a fact.

Although I do not have the space here to rehearse an exhaustive history of epistemological philosophy, it is worth scrutinizing the ways in which actuality and journalistic verification fit into fundamental questions about what we know and how we can know it. Since Plato and Socrates, Western thinkers have debated knowledge as a system of justified true belief, the foundation for journalistic verification. For a belief about the world to be true—rather than mistaken, false or merely *un*true—we ought to have an account of its truth that justifies our thinking that way. Epistemologists, broadly speaking, have identified a pair of major questions that contour the field of inquiry. First, is there a singular, fixed reality, an ontological truth independent of human thought? And if there is, how can humans reliably conceive of that truth? Twentieth century philosophers proposed various epistemologies of verification in which certain beliefs could be granted as justification for other beliefs. These epistemological models helped give rise to logical positivism, the idea that all possible

knowledge was verifiable by experience and that other beliefs fell into mysticism. Positivists argued that standards of scientific empiricism rendered other epistemological models obsolete, but by the 1970s philosophers had largely abandoned this flawed idea because of its narrow and unsatisfactory explanation of the role of human observation.

Despite these philosophical shifts, mainstream journalism continually relies on verification as a functional standard of truth, with little examination of how its imperfect epistemology shapes public discourse. Journalists are rarely concerned with the epistemological underpinnings of their reportage. The reasons might be obvious: democracy moves relatively quickly, public discourse is rarely self-reflexive, and the average news consumer is quite comfortable with the an actualistic standard of truth. One imagines it would be self-defeating for a news report to question its own truth-value. My goal here is not to undermine journalistic practice or its epistemological stance as such; theorists looking for an alternative to actualism often flatten knowledge into an unsatisfactory relativism or assert a pure nihilism. Rather, I want to focus on how the epistemological model implicit in journalistic discourse works in opposition to other kinds of knowledge-making, namely the knowledge one might glean from reading a novel, and how such distinctions separate private knowledge from public.

After all, the imperfections of verification have consequences for the public sphere. One can easily imagine how verification produces an arbitrary relationship to reality, as one flawed piece of information can be verified by two flawed sources. That standard becomes even more convoluted when dealing with information that is potentially contradictory or difficult to empirically prove, so that a journalistic verification becomes a way of *organizing agreement* rather than representing reality. Say that a reporter writes a story about a rise in crime in her city. She might obtain data from a local university study, analyze police statistics, interview officials and perhaps even get so-called “reaction” quotes from citizens who anecdotally experience a rise in crime. She then writes a story, quite journalistically sound, about the rise in crime. But if none of these single sources can guarantee the truth of her central claim (crime stats are often flawed, studies lack context, officials and the public are overly sensitive to crime), it is only the logic of verification that their *agreement* constitutes a fixed relation to reality. Actualism facilitates this kind of conflation between agreement and truth; the “actual” rise in crime exists as a fixed historical event upon which the reportage can convincingly shine a light. In this example, my point is not that the supposed rise in crime isn’t real, but rather that the dominant standard for producing public knowledge boils down to agreement.

For my purposes, the significance of actuality is not that it fails or succeeds in representing an objective reality through a demonstration of verified fact—rather, what bears scrutiny is how the discursive power of agreement-as-truth marginalizes alternatives. More specifically, the paradigmatic ubiquity of actuality seems to leave little room for the kinds of truth-claims that constitute novels. Those claims, after all, are distinctly of the unverifiable variety; the "facts" of a narrative do not reference an objective reality but rather speak for themselves. The vital question is whether, in an actualistic culture, interpretations of fiction have any bearing on the public sphere or could be justified as a form of knowledge with value beyond the reader's phenomenological experience.

Characteristic of the era of actuality are the investigations by both novelists and journalists into the reliability of each other's truth-claims. In November 1889, renowned investigative journalist Nellie Bly set out to circumvent the world in 80 days, a feat previously attempted only in Jules Verne's novel, *Around the World in Eighty Days*. Bly's journey sought an actualistic answer to Verne's central question: had modernity actually rendered the world a smaller place? Bly's real-life journey promised to do what the novel couldn't; she could verify in her experiential journey that which Verne could only imagine as true. Bly would complete the journey with eight days to spare. Joseph Pulitzer published her account, titled *Around the World in Seventy-Two Days,* and on the one hand, Bly's version seems itself to verify Verne's *Eighty Days,* suggesting both the possibility of such a journey and the viability of the novel's claim about modernity. But on the other hand, Fogg's fictional journey, by virtue of being fictional, isn't exactly proved or disproved by its real-life duplication. If Bly had taken, say, 100 days to circumvent the globe, it's not as if Verne's implicit view of modernity would have been proven false as such. Readers might have still justifiably believed in his central proposition. The two events may coincide, but coincidence doesn't ensure truth any more than a contradiction would automatically invalidate either account.

More common than Bly's verification of fiction, in both Bly's day and in American culture since, has been the opposite transaction: novelists adopting, coopting, subverting and scrutinizing journalistic truth-making under the rules of fiction. In the same year as Bly's journey, William Dean Howells published *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, a novel that depicts New York life by focusing on a magazine staff. Each member of the staff represents myriad interests of life in the city: the capitalist-financier Dreyfoos, the socialite Faulkerson, the communist Lindau, the dejected Southerner Colonel Woodburn and the aesthete Basil March. Just as a real-life magazine would have divided city life into discrete sections, Howells's imagined magazine dramatizes the combination of interests in his novel. Howells had already depicted the pitfalls of modern journalism in his earlier novel *A Modern Instance,* and for him,

this approach to novel-writing—making a novel with the structure of magazine or newspaper—was the inevitable future for the form. "The modern novel and the newspaper are beginning to assimilate," Howells wrote, "and are becoming very much alike… The progress of fiction-writing has brought the novelist down to the affairs of everyday life'" (qtd. in Underwood 105). Part of Howells's contention here is in-step with "bringing down" the novelist to the literary naturalism of the street, but implicit in his claim is that novels ought to adapt to actualism or risk their claim to representing reality at all.

The Novel and the Newspaper

Before going further, it is important to clarify that the mainstream, objective journalistic practice I've described in the American 20th century owes its conventions to a wide array of preceding textual forms, as does the novel. Everything from Grub Street tracts to gallows ballads have been categorized as forerunners to contemporary journalism, and critics have proposed equally exhaustive explanations for how we come to label some prose fictions as novels. But in general, societies historically engaged in mass printing developed conventions of both novels and journalism as tools of expansion for larger ideological projects. Elizabeth Eisenstein's work has analyzed the long history of print culture as one in which "communion with the Sunday paper has replaced churchgoing" in earlier European oral cultures, as "sermons had at one time been coupled with news about local and foreign affairs, real estate transactions, and other mundane matters" (95). And as Habermas describes in his work on the formation of the bourgeois public sphere, efforts to shape early capitalist markets across borders encouraged continuous "trafficking in commodities and news" even long before the routinized production of news with which we're familiar (17-18). After the advent of print culture, newspapers and novels both facilitated the spread of information across geography without fluctuations inevitable to interpersonal exchanges. A singular narrative can help minimalize geographical distance. As Eisenstein puts it, "to hear an address delivered, people have to come together; to read a printed report encourages individuals to draw apart" (95). This mix of geographical sprawl and ideological cohesiveness helped to produce the concept of a fixed reality beyond individual experience, the actual world described thoroughly in print, characteristic of the public sphere Habermas describes. In any case, print material entailed new relations between private individuals and expanding publics.

Both the newspaper and the novel encouraged a solitary reading practice, restructuring the intellectual commons. Rather than immediate verbal exchange, individualized consumption of news and novels allowed readers to examine themselves in intimate relation to the text

rather than to other readers—the paradox, of course, being that everyone else in town formed their own such relations. This is why Benedict Anderson calls the novel and the newspaper "two forms of imagining" that "provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" in the 18th century (24-25, italics in original). Anderson's seminal work on nationalism emphasizes the importance of the daily newspaper in cultivating a sense of simultaneity among the people of a nation, allowing, for example, a reader in Chicago to imagine kinship with a reader in New York City despite their very real differences in location, culture and other embodied aspects. The daily newspaper, which Anderson characterizes as a "one-day best-seller" (35) is "an 'extreme form' of the book, a book sold on a colossal scale, but of ephemeral popularity" (34). So, where we might easily recognize how a canonical novel would produce a unifying idea of what it means to be American, newspapers similarly imply what it would mean to be an American *today.* Anderson goes on:

> …if we now turn to the newspaper as cultural product, we will be struck by its profound fictiveness. What is the essential literary convention of the newspaper? If we were to look at a sample front page of, say, *The New York Times*, we might find there stories about Soviet dissidents, famine in Mali, a gruesome murder, a coup in Iraq, the discovery of a rare fossil in Zimbabwe, and a speech by Mitterrand. Why are these events so juxtaposed? What connects them to each other? Not sheer caprice. Yet obviously most of them happen independently, without the actors being aware of each other or of what the others are up to. The arbitrariness of their inclusion and juxtaposition (a later edition will substituted a baseball triumph for Mitterrand) shows the linkage between them is imagined. (33)

This juxtaposition of events, so central to the daily newspaper and of the modern polis that it represents, reproduced techniques of early novelists, whose prose tracked the experiences of characters as they experienced daily time. It was the "meanwhile" function of novelistic plot that readers might also find in the layout of a daily newspaper, allowing them to imagine a world that operated like a novel, with people scattered across space and imagining each other's presence. This "calendrical coincidence" and "steady onward clocking of homogenous, empty time" (Anderson 33), dually enabled by the reading of novels and newspapers, produced not only national identity but also a profound epistemological formation that would come to rule public discourse in 20th century America. The underlying belief in a unified time allows the public to draw other conclusions about the course of historical events, either experienced directly or as represented through journalistic report. Having established the sense of a fixed

timeline and historical simultaneity, news reporting in the era of the modern press could construct actualistic narratives through the implication of cause and effect among events on that timeline.

But the rise of actualistic thinking, with its emphasis on factuality over fictionality, did not invalidate the novel as a popular cultural form after the 18th century. Instead, the categories of fact and fiction continued a longer historical divergence, leading people to think of novels as works of art (both mimetic of a real world and separate from it) rather than reports on reality. Although I do not have the opportunity here for a full sketch of the history of the novel, theorists of the form have demonstrated the ways in which the novel emerged in distinction to other texts in 18th century England. Michael McKeon, in his *Origins of the English Novel*, suggests that novels' individualistic narratives, with their elements of "romance" combined with "realism," constituted a genre able to "demonstrate that questions of truth and questions of virtue become more tractable when seen as analogous versions of each other" (22). Realistic novels tend to promise an accurate depiction of lived experience while also upholding the social virtues that are less easy to recognize in everyday life, as if the two are mutually constitutive. This "deep and fruitful analogy between questions of truth and questions of virtue" (22) drew on readers' familiarity with the historicity of journalistic and documentary texts even while providing intimate, banal details of a single character's life that would be inaccessible through other generic forms. As Habermas explains, the early novel's emphasis on subjectivity invited readers to substitute novelistic plot for their own experiences and allowed for "privatized individuals coming together to form a public" capable of rational-critical debate about essentially private matters (51) beyond the traditional coffeehouse political chatter or weekly journal.

The public sphere's demand for news dovetailed with its literary tastes, as McKeon suggests that early printed ballads and other quasi-journalistic texts had a significant impact on the reception and formation of the novel as a genre. Both "news" and romances of the 17th century conventionally included an assertion of their own trueness, but the news carried "a double epistemological charge" in its claim of being historically objective in a way that demystified the claim of the romance (McKeon 51). That claim to historicity becomes what we'd call verisimilitude in the early novel, the commitment to mundane detail that defines realist work. "If a narrative observes the proper conventions," as McKeon suggests, "it demonstrates its own veracity" (110). So, where we might understand journalistic claims as *being* real, a novel instead *seems* so real that its truthfulness is difficult to distinguish. By implying this textual authority in representing the fabric of everyday life, it produced a logic for accepting its claims.

But this isn't to say that early reading publics could not understand the difference between the imaginative prose of a novel and the prose of a political broadsheet; rather, the first generations of novel readers scrutinized these texts from a different epistemological orientation than our own. McKeon claims that the "problem the novel was formulated to mediate is, on the most general level of all, not questions of truth and questions of virtue in themselves as much as their division, their separation from each other" (419). That is, even in the earliest stages of the novel, the form was dedicated to an intrinsically ideological task by seeking an alignment of the reader's experience of the world with prevailing suppositions of how that world ought to be. Lennard Davis treats this question at length in *Factual Fictions,* in which he theorizes a "news/novel matrix" in which a variety of early printed materials were considered both "newes" and "trewe." Determined to show how and why certain formal innovations occurred, Davis highlights the power structures—legal, religious, ethical—that motivated a breakdown in the news/novels discourse that initially treated fact and fiction as ambivalent categories. He thus suggests that the novel comes to occupy a paradoxical position as a factual fiction—one that must be both true and false at the same time, while history and journalism, properly understood, take up their own epistemologies. Unable to disentangle this "double discourse," early novels bear an ontological similarity to all ideological formations—simultaneously true and false, taking on both fact and fiction. The novelist becomes a different kind of reporter, Davis suggests: a reporter who gives us "news of the ideology … of that nation" (192).

Novels of Reportage

In the early 20th century, innovations like the *New York World's* "True Stories of the News" sold newspapers with "fictional" narratives based on the real news stories printed beside them, often drawing on the real-life reportage performed by the story's author (Roggenkamp 126). Fictional stories about reporters deeply fascinated an urban American public increasingly dependent on daily newspapers for its way of life, and novels about journalism promised a "behind-the-scenes" look at the booming information industry. [3] Sales were swift, but most of these novels misrepresented the workaday practices of journalists[4] and

[3] A wealth of scholarly work has been done in demonstrating the ways that newspapers served as either "training grounds" or "graveyards" for the careers of literary figures from Twain to Dreiser to Hemingway, and countless others. See Shelley Fisher-Fishkin's *From Fact to Fiction* for an especially cogent discussion of how workaday journalistic practices intervene in the aesthetic developments of these figures.

[4] In *The Newspaper in the American Novel* (1970), Thomas Elliot Berry accords with this assessment, writing: "in creating newspapermen characters, the American novelist has tended to err in the direction of popular misconceptions. He has tended to employ misfits, maladjusted personalities, and moral degenerates rather than

left little room four artfulness by routinely copying the newspapers' model of tightly packed prose.

Stuck between the conventions of early newswriting and literary realism, novels about journalism often failed on both accounts. A prime example is Richard Harding Davis's 1891 *Gallegher: A Newspaper Story*,[5] a short novel that blends turn-of-the-century news ethics with meritocratic zeal. It centers on a young newsboy desperate to find a murderer when his editor can't hold the presses "for a purely hypothetical story" (54) for which Gallegher must find evidence. Verification, the boy's editor implies, is the only standard for truth for a reporter. Gallegher eventually finds the murderer and helps report the story accurately, simultaneously satisfying the journalistic requirement and assuring his place in the world. Despite its flat and hastily written prose, *Gallegher's* commercial success made it a prototype of the thousands of journalism novels to come, many as sensationalized as the Yellow Journalism they portrayed.[6]

The failures of these early journalism narratives, I want to suggest, results from an inability to resolve the epistemological question at the center of the news/novel divergence. If, as the novels themselves seemed to imply, scientific empiricism and journalistic verification shined a light on the actual world, what did the novels themselves offer that journalism couldn't? That is, it is difficult to see how fictional reporters could reliably give their readers *justifiable true belief* about actual reporters in the actual world. Many of these early novels sidestepped epistemological questions and came off as thinly veiled recreations; rarely did they demonstrate their own claim to truth, largely because authors writing about journalism took for granted that verification and actuality as the only basis for reportage.

The novels I analyze in the following essays, however, turn *toward* epistemological questions rather than away from them. I should point out here a distinction between a novel that discusses epistemology in its content and one that formally asserts or invites an epistemological model necessary for the reading and interpretation of the text. The former is almost always present in narrative about journalism—reporters are, after all, continuously looking for truths—but the latter tends to implicate epistemological assertions in the reader's ability to glean the author's intended meaning. *Gallegher* and *The Shipping News* are both in a sense "about" journalism and knowing; the difference is that Annie Proulx's novel requires its

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wholesome, well-rounded people. Hence he has aided essentially in strengthening these popular conclucions [sic]" (160). He asserts that "the great American newspaper novel still remains to be written" (161).

[5] *Gallegher* proved the journalism novel's appeal by selling more than 50,000 copies (Good 6).

[6] In his survey of journalism novels before 1930, Howard Good suggests that the subject matter, combined with the proximity of authors to their careers as journalists, produced a slew of forgettable work: "Awash in sentimentality when not dripping with cynicism, newspaper fiction routinely fails as art. The genre seems almost cursed. First-rate writers who tried their hands at it turned out second- and third-rate work" (7).

reader to account for what knowledge *is*, thinking about both knowledge in the text and about the text.

For many philosophers, whether a reader can gain real-world knowledge from a fictional novel remains an open question. Taken from the point-of-view of actualism, there is little or nothing to gain from fiction because imagined scenarios are of no use in justifying beliefs about the actual world. But in the face of such empiricist logic, literary authors have developed a number alternative representative modes that we identify with movements Romanticism, Transcendentalism, Postmodernism and such. The claim made most often by literary theorists is not that literature gives us justifiable belief about the actual world, but rather that there are equally important ways of knowing the world outside of actuality. In Bernard Harrison's *What is Fiction For?*, he argues that literary discourse "dispenses with both reference and assertion because its business is not with fact, but with meaning" (xix), and "the reality of the lived experience founded in the complex practices whose traces resonate in whatever words a particular work tests and explores" (xix). Some philosophers have theorized that art and fiction grant us experiences or insight into general principles that can then be verified or tested against reality to help justify knowledge. But such a claim requires that the knowledge gained by art alone be legitimized by some alternative epistemological model—actuality will never verify knowledge gleaned by fiction. As Harrison puts it:

> Literature indeed offers its readers potential cognitive gains, but that it does so not by providing them with more "true statements about the world," but rather by offering them, among other things, reasons for doubting the adequacy of some of the humanly devised conceptual schemes employed in formulating the possibilities of understanding that we, at times mistakenly, regard as exclusive and exhaustive. (xvii)

Obviously, novels tend to adopt historical facts of time and place as the settings for their narratives, and the facts of the actual world are often translated into the verisimilitude of literary realism. J. Hillis Miller has pointed out that realism "must use words already there in the language, it redirects those words to unheard-of meanings. It makes something happen in the 'real world' which would not otherwise have happened" (74). In Miller's deconstructionist account, the act of reading fiction invokes an ethical imperative that bridges the world of the reader with that of moral law, and that any confrontation with law as such "must be cast as a little fictional narrative" (28). He calls narrative a peculiar requirement of law, an "impurity" of any discourse about morality or ethics (23), and suggests that the critical reading of narratives, even fictional ones, "makes something happen in the interpersonal, social, and

political realms" (120). That is to say, a deconstruction of the reading act would include the effects of a reader's interpretation on her subsequent acts in the "real" world.

Even so, knowledges or interpretation produced by the reading of novels does not validate or invalidate a fact per se, but instead brings "the operations and functioning of the human world" to the reader's "critical consciousness" (Harrison 93) in a way that the fact itself does not. We know that novels reference the real world in ways that are sometimes difficult to distinguish from that of a news article. Philosopher Manuel Garcia-Carpintero identifies a "patchwork problem" in which some parts of a novel seem to say something "real" about the "real world" and other parts don't; this problem "is especially acute in the case of literary fictions, given their aesthetic aspiration to cohesive integration" with what the reading public knows about the real world (128). Alternative epistemological models are necessary for understanding such a patchwork. As other critics have pointed out, novels imply "knowing" the world in a different sense than the actual, allowing us to "know" a fictional character in a way that we can never know an actual person (Kafalenos 256-257). Garcia-Carpintero makes the point that, for example, the word 'Napoleon' in *War and Peace* "does not rigidly refer to Napoleon in the way it does when it occurs in straightforward assertion" but instead is an example of how "we use knowledge about the actual entities associated with names such as 'Napoleon'" so that "fictional worlds are as much as possible in accordance with the actual world" (132). In order for fiction to work as fiction, the logic goes, the narrative has to be *imaginable* in conjunction with the other knowledges a reader holds. Knowledge is possible when the reader can interpret the narrative, and for Garcia-Carpintero, fictions work as "invitations to form beliefs" (134-35) that may constitute knowledge.

Actuality, Power and Reading Fictions

Literary novelists often concede a novelistic version of truth is much less tidy than an actualistic one. Edna Ferber begins her 1930 novel about frontier journalism, *Cimarron,* with this admission: "Only the more fantastic and improbable events contained in this book are true…In many cases material entirely true was so melodramatic, so absurd as to be too strange for the realm of fiction" (ix). Opening the question of fictional or narrative truth invites questions about our other suppositions of truth. For example, historiographic theorists have long been attentive to the foundational role that narrative thinking plays in the construction of all sorts of histories, whether they be academic studies of the ancient world or the newspaper's daily account. Hayden White asserts that narrativity is a requirement of histories as we think of them today, writing that "the very distinction between real and imaginary events that is basic to

modern discussions of both history and fiction presupposes a notion of reality in which 'the true' is identified with 'the real' only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity" (6). The supposition of reality is, in my terms, a belief in the actual, and White's larger argument is that historical narratives fall into a patterning by which past evets aren't so much made true or untrue as they are made meaningful. That is to say, if we consider fictions as true because of their imaginability, we almost certainly would say the same thing about history.

Novels allow us to see a narrative structure in total, of which we are rarely or never afforded a satisfactory equivalent in the actual world. When has a news story finally run its course, if ever such a thing can be said? The public inevitably finds itself "in the middle" of historical narrative that might change direction at any point. Literary theorist Frank Kermode writes of a persistent desire "to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle" (8). Where we cannot know the future, we must substitute belief, and the timeline in which we find ourselves must also conform to that imagined future. Novels offer us a reprieve from the "middle" of historical narratives by virtue of their fictionality; the entire structure is framed as separate from reality and thus readable on its own terms. It would be nothing new to suggest that all histories are a kind of fiction, but as Kermode points out, these histories (and journalism as a type of history) are narratives without a completed structure. Fiction appeals to us with its "artificial beginning and end, a duration minute but human in which all, between those points, is ordered, and so in a fiction challenges and negates the pure being of the world" (Kermode 150). But journalism, like fiction, also seeks ways to mitigate the "pure being" of the world, and yet its basis in verification offers no true safeguard against our reshaping and distortions.

As such, modern journalism has largely been directed toward limiting possibilities of interpretation in favor of an agreeable, unified narrative that serves extant political and economic interests. In 2019, we encounter a world characterized by both a declining readership of novels and a distaste for fictionality as expressed in the "fake news" debates of recent years. But rather than denigrating fictionality in any form, we might come to understand the ways in which truth and fiction are inherently bound up in one another, even while structures of sociopolitical power impose distinctions between the two. Foucault writes extensively about the ways in which a politics of truth coalesces around such positions of power:

> …truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power… Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as

> true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (72-73)

Although Foucault doesn't write specifically about American journalism, it's clear that in representing the discourse of politicians and other stakeholders they cover, journalists perpetuate the standards of truth that sustain the industry. The ubiquity of verification satisfies a "demand for truth, as much for economic production as political power" while ensuring truth is "produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses" including the media (Foucault 73). The mainstream media of the American 20th century could be accurately described as what Foucault describes as a "regime of truth" linked to "systems of power which produce and sustain it" (73). As always, we must be careful not to think of Foucault's version of power as necessarily sinister; actualistic has achieved and will likely continue to achieve some admirable social and political aims. But we must see this version of truth as "already power" (73) that reproduces itself and persistently disempowers other truths.

My concern here is the viability of knowledge that we gain from novels, and more specifically, how some novelists might deconstruct some forms of knowledge in order to open space for others. Though Foucault writes that "the problem is not changing people's consciousnesses—or what's in their heads—but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth" (74), it would seem part of any change calls for us to rethink the definition of truth in relation to the institutions we task with its production. The American press, as guaranteed in the Constitution, seems to be an inevitable feature of life for as long as the nation survives. Americans will continue to look toward journalists for truth, even with changes in technology and procedures that perpetually renegotiate the terms of journalistic practice. What we might take care to consider, on the other hand, is the textual and discursive world that operates beyond the category of actualistic journalism. Any better world we can imagine begins as just that: imaginary. We might still look for those worlds in the pages of our novels.

Reporting on the "Kingfish":
Huey Long in *It Can't Happen Here* and *All the King's Men*

Senator Huey P. Long lives on as a contradictory figure in the American imagination, remembered both as a martyred hero of the people and as a threat to democracy. Long was commended, at times, by both the American Fascists and the American Communists as he ascended to the national stage in 1932. The one-term governor of Louisiana projected the image of an incorrigible champion of the "little guy" while simultaneously acting as a stalwart to power brokers at every level. These complications of Long's legacy are, in many respects, bound up in his contentious relationship with the popular news press. He championed a redistribution program called "Share Our Wealth" but used his populist platform to solidify his own political network. Reporting on his constant expansion of political power often meant journalists had to comply with Long's political vision or risk expulsion from his burgeoning sphere of influence.

The same might be said for the fictional accounts that survive Long's precipitous career. Just as the Democratic figurehead elicited a range of characterizations from news writers, so too did his rise capture the attention of novelists, namely Sinclair Lewis—who was past the prime of his career when Long entered the national stage—and later, Robert Penn Warren, who taught at the same Louisiana State University that Long had funded as a symbol of his political strength. Both novelists took up the Kingfish's larger-than-life persona as the subject for their novels, which also focused on journalistic practice as a vehicle for examining the construction of Long's public career. In Lewis's 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, Long is recast as the demagogue Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip, opposed by a small-town editor named Doremus Jessup. Much of the novel is focused on Jessup's battling the Corpo State through the influence of his newspapers, and later, rebel propaganda. On the other hand, the narrator of Warren's *All the King's Men* is also an ex-reporter, but Jack Burden has joined with an authoritarian figurehead as a member of Governor Willie Stark's inner circle. Pitting journalists against politicians, these narratives ask readers to explicitly distinguish between knowing the public facts about a politician and knowing the politician himself.

Part of Long's power came from making a calculated management of his persona—what was true of the Kingfish depended on who was asking. Lewis and Warren were both aware of Long's tendency to frame truth as relative, which aligned him with perilous European dictatorships of the 1930s. Lewis publicly affirmed having Long in mind when writing *It Can't Happen Here* as a warning against American fascism (Meyer ix). But Warren repeatedly and

firmly denied the Kingfish as an inspiration for Willie Stark, [7] which led some of his contemporaries to label Warren as a Long apologist. Warren would later relax his denial by arguing that his novel was dedicated to the ideas of Long-ism and the society that sustained it, an important distinction in that he believed fiction—unlike a journalistic account—offered the staging of ideas beyond the public sphere that Long worked so hard to control. In any case, both Warren and Lewis proffered depictions of Long that the press, with its standards of accuracy and verification, could not quite summon.

Long's relationship with the press, like his relationships with other arenas of power, was often a matter of expediency and leverage. Before he was the Kingfish, Long's primary political identity was that of a common man and an enemy to vested corporate interests—among them, the established press that regularly turned newspaper coverage against any candidate representing anti-business policies. Long confronted a status quo in Louisiana that married editorial coverage with pro-business candidates, and Long knew his populist support meant he had no chance of fair reporting from the dailies. So en route to becoming governor of Louisiana, Long coined the term "lyingnewspapers" as a clear reminder to his base that "all whom the newspapers support are enemies of the people" (Key 59). The battles would grow only more heated after his first electoral victory. He passed a special tax on advertising for the urban newspapers that opposed him—he called it "a tax on lying 2 cents per lie" (qtd. in Hair 279)—while also establishing a State Printing Board that brought smaller papers into line with his administration (Hair 301). The core of Long's political understanding was that newspapers were expressions of power, and power needed to be consolidated for the greater good.

The same Long who propagated a distrust for mass media is also remembered as a pioneer in its political uses (or, one might say, its manipulation). Two years into his gubernatorial term, Long brought on John D. Klorer of the *Times-Picayune* to run his own newspaper, the *Louisiana Progressive.* The paper served not only the purpose of distributing pro-Long articles, but also of giving businesses a way to "buy in" to Long's regime by purchasing advertising. One biographer calls the newspaper "an insult processor" printed out-of-state to make libel lawsuits more difficult (Hair 197). Long spent state money to ensure that his messages would reach the people, bragging at one point: "a document prepared by me in the evening could be printed and placed on the porch of practically every home in the State of Louisiana during the morning of the following day" (qtd in Key 59). After his election to the Senate, Long's efforts in mass media only increased; he started a nationwide version of the

[7] Warren biographer Charles Bohner seems oddly satisfied to take Warren's claim at face value. "Willie Stark was not Huey Long. Willie was only himself, whatever that self turned out to be, a shadowy wraith or a blundering human being," Warren told Bohner (86). He goes on: "suggestion does not mean identity, and even if I had wanted to make Stark a projection of Long, I should not have known how to go about it'" (87).

Progressive and bought airtime on NBC to reach every U.S. radio market, becoming "the first politician to attempt to reach a national audience" (Williams 629). Because negative coverage still persisted, Long attempted to set the record straight by writing a 1933 autobiography, *Every Man a King*.[8]

Long's record of manipulating the press—through demonizing reporters, applying financial pressure to publishers and flooding the news market with his own media—certainly resembles that of a totalitarian dictator. No doubt his politics skewed toward totality; negotiation was in Long's view a corruption of his good intentions. Some critics were apt to call Long a dictator in the making, John Kingston Fineran describing Long as a "teapot Napoleon":

> He was and is undeniably an unusual and exceptional person. Seldom is anyone so avid of money or power or so ruthless in obtaining them. No one is more free of any sort of morality; no one has less of what people of more orthodox moral ideas call character. Never, not in all the history of the world, has there ever been his equal for mendacity. No one has ever told more obvious lies with more shameless ease. No one has more readily and frequently practiced what is colloquially known as a double-cross. Treason is as intrinsic a part of his nature as theft. (41-42)

But such criticisms only seemed to entrench Long's image of a persecuted populist leader; he already identified the mainstream press as an enemy of the common man. And if he was guilty of the "double-cross" or other mendacity, Long argued, he did so only to level the playing field for his populist supporters. To the Kingfish, his methods were not "the tricks of a demagogue" but "in his mind legitimate devices" (Williams 418). By insisting that his overt dishonesty might be preferable to the more insidious corruption masked by the establishment powers, Long could effectively claim the impossibility of honesty in the American politics. All politicians were liars, he implied, but some of them could be honest about it. And, as this logic goes, once this paradox of honesty takes root, truth itself becomes a much more relative matter.

The relativity of truth, while an unsettling political matter, makes possible the realm of literary fiction, and for Lewis and Warren, the question of Long's totalitarianism presented an opportunity to examine the relationship between different forms of truth. Fictions about the Kingfish could be a kind of reportage in themselves—to take up Lennard Davis's suggestion, these novels might be considered reports of the ideology of the United States in those years.

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[8] Long begins his story with the dubious claim that he can't get fair treatment from others: "If newspapers, magazines and some biographers of this country and other nations find the public so interested in me that they should continue to write and publish garbled accounts of my career, then perhaps I should write one myself" (1).

My aim in this essay is not to adjudicate these two treatments of Long—I'm not particularly interested in whether Long, as a historical figure, gets a "fair shake" from either of these authors[9]—but rather to examine how the fictionalizations the Kingfish in these novels elucidate or intervene in the public epistemological crisis of totalitarianism. That is, if a mark of totalitarian politics is the usurping and manipulation of mass media, how might the public properly evaluate the truths offered by the press, especially when staged in the pretext of fiction? I will argue here that Lewis attempts to frame totalitarian ideology as propagandistic fiction, implying that Long's promises of a utopia are as contrafactual as the dystopia Lewis creates in *It Can't Happen Here.* Even the title of Lewis's novel is propositional in nature. Warren, on the other hand, takes up the dichotomy of ideal and fact—what his narrator Burden calls the "terrible division" of his age (657)—as mutually constitutive. For Warren, understanding Long is not a matter of separating the facts of Huey Long from his political ideology but refusing to see them as separable.

Totalitarian movements of the 1930s reoriented ideological formations of "factual" public discourse, and authors like Lewis and Warren were sensitive to the potential for fictions to both serve or resist authoritarian impulses. Truly totalizing political ideologies typically produce explanations for all circumstances of the world, rendering even "factual" public discourse susceptible to an authoritarian desire. The appeal of these messages is that they remove the cognitive dissonance between an imagined reality and facts to the contrary. Taking the European dictators of the 1930s as her primary subjects of study, Hannah Arendt explains totalitarian messaging this way:

> The effectiveness of this kind of propaganda demonstrates one of the chief characteristics of modern masses. They do not believe in anything visible in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part. (351)

Arendt's analysis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* pits the "experience" of everyday people against the "consistency" of the totalitarian movement's ideological base. But such an analysis, in my view, too easily dichotomizes reality and imagination; it is not entirely clear that any experience of the world does not invoke a simultaneous process of ideologization or

[9] For those interested in such an account, see Keith Ronald Perry's 1997 study, *The Kingfish in Fiction,* in which Perry delineates six different fictional versions of Long. He suggests that while Warren's Willie Stark is the most well-known figuration, it's also the least accurate compared to scholarly consensus on the historical figure. This is, I want to say, a result of Warren's intention for his project, a matter I will attend to more fully in this essay.

imagination. But Arendt's point here is that the shape of totalitarian epistemology presumes that truth is a feature of ideological consistency, and that any event in conflict with the ideological order must be reframed or discarded as necessarily untrue. "Human beings need the constant transformation of the chaotic and accidental conditions into a man-made pattern of relative consistency," Arendt writes, because of "those capacities of the human mind whose structural consistency is superior to mere occurrence" (352). If we inevitably operate on a presumption that the truth will *make sense*, then what makes sense from an ideological standpoint becomes a way of defining the truth.

Arendt surmises that "totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency" and that "this escape grants [the masses] a minimum of self-respect" (352). It is no coincidence, then, that so much of totalitarian media takes up the theme of self-respect among the common man. Long's "every man a king" maxim is a prime example of this kind of messaging. In literary terms, this maxim fails as realism—not every man can be king, logically speaking—but its romantic appeal makes it a compelling fiction nonetheless. We might say it makes sense as a fiction even if it doesn't make sense as a fact, as the political-media structures around the rise of Long (and other totalitarians) routinely emphasizes the fictional over the factual.

There is striking similarity between propaganda and novels—in which a "fact" lacks any external referent and can only speak for itself. This is perhaps why both Lewis and Warren found Long, a would-be and never-was dictator, a compelling figure. In Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* and Warren's *All the King's Men*, we find two texts that, by virtue of their fictional framing, forego the realm of journalistic verification. There would be no solid facts, these novels suggest, that would satisfy the question of whether Long might have become an American dictator because those facts would be inevitably shaped by the public discourse rooted in his political power.

'Propaganda for Only One Thing': *It Can't Happen Here* and Epistemological Alterity

The hero of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* is the editor of the *Daily Informer* in Fort Beulah, Vermont and is "locally considered 'a smart fella but kind of a cynic'" (3). Doremus Jessup has made a career of insisting that his neighbors be realistic about the world around them, but while following the Presidential campaign of Senator Buzz Windrip, the editor encounters something that seems almost unreal. Jessup watches one of Windrip's stump speeches with varying degrees of horror and curiosity, engrossed in the man's populist appeal even as the speech itself slogs among "a mishmash of polite regards to Justice, Freedom,

Equality, Order, Prosperity, Patriotism, and any number of other noble but slippery abstractions" (99). Like the real-life Long, Windrip is an orator with nearly superhuman command of the audience's attention and a tendency to portray himself as a victim of the mainstream press. Even when Windrip admits his lust for power, he explains that he only needs the power to better serve the common good. As Jessup looks on, it seems as if Windrip were "talking to each individual, directly and solely: that he wanted to take each of them into his heart; that he was telling them the truths, and the imperious and dangerous facts, that had been hidden from them" (99).

Lewis feared a Long dictatorship in the U.S. and thus wrote *It Can't Happen Here* over a four-month period in 1935, shortly after reading journalist Raymond Gram Swing's *Forerunners of American Fascism*. Sing likened Long's rise to that of European fascists and called the Kingfish "the embodiment of the appetite for power" (qtd. in Hair 276). Lewis's concern about the rise of fascism was also kindled by his wife, Dorothy Thompson, who had interviewed Hitler in 1931 and would be the first American journalist expelled from Nazi Germany three years later (Scharnhorst 385).[10] Lewis was concerned that Americans were unwilling to acknowledge the threat of fascism or authoritarianism on their own shores, and with his novel, he wanted to show how *imaginable* American fascist rule could be. *It Can't Happen Here* functions as a propositional demonstration of the empirically unprovable—that it *could* happen here. Jessup's persecution under Windrip's Corpo government displays Lewis's efforts to recruit Americans to his vision of liberal centrism as the reasonable alternative to authoritarian ideology.

Some critics have suggested that *It Can't Happen Here* played an important historical role in shaping anti-fascist efforts in the U.S, but we should be suspicious of this view. To take the novel's alternate history or satirical title at face value would suggest that Lewis was writing to an unwitting or ignorant American public, but it seems more likely that the novel was merely a participant in an anti-fascist mentality already taking root. Thompson raised the alarm with her reportage on Hitler,[11] and Lewis's novel seems both an effort to join in her political

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[10] Understanding the biographical context in which Lewis composed *It Can't Happen Here* can help us to revise previous accounts of literary history that frame the novel's conception as a logical extension of Lewis's other works satirizing various aspects of American public life. While Thompson's career had gained tremendous traction during the early '30s, Lewis had severed ties with his publishers and begun an increasingly transient lifestyle. Lewis had won the Nobel prize in 1930, and according to biographer Mark Schorer, the "prize had come to him at precisely the right moment: it was the moment at which Lewis, the serious novelist, was finished" (30). While his wife grappled in the press with those men who would eventually launch the world into global war, Lewis composed novels that critics widely considered second-rate.

[11] Thompson's writing about Hitler was as celebrated as it was sharply critical; she wrote of her initial meeting with the dictator: "He is inconsequent and voluble, ill-poised, insecure. He is the very prototype of the Little Man" (qtd. in Carlson). Following her 1932 sketch of Hitler in *Cosmopolitan* ("I Saw Hitler!"), Americans might have been tempted to dismiss the would-be Fuhrer as too ridiculous to be a true threat. But by 1934, with the

project and to leverage some of her publicity. Lewis was purportedly envious of his wife's success, as he is reputed to have said that if he'd divorced Thompson, he'd "name Adolf Hitler as corespondent," because he was so "intimately exposed to her interest in international affairs, a subject of the discussion of which, he continually complained" (Schorer 33). But having failed at journalism himself, Lewis likely saw *It Can't Happen Here* his contribution to the anti-Fascist cause, one that trades journalistic verification for fictive speculation.[12]

It's not clear how Long would have received the novel or whether *It Can't Happen Here* would have made the difference in a 1936 Presidential campaign; Long was assassinated just weeks before the novel reached bookstore shelves. But Lewis's novel still provokes questions about the intervention of fiction into public affairs. Would it be possible for Lewis's contemporaries to draw viable or justifiable conclusions about the real Huey Long from a thinly veiled version? As Keith Ronald Perry writes in his study of *It Can't Happen Here:*

> Berzelius Windrip is just akin enough to the Kingfish for readers to recognize him as a version of Huey Long, but, at the same time, he is not so completely akin to him that his very creation deprives Lewis of the imaginative as well as argumentative license that the novel as a genre affords him. Protected underneath the mantle of fiction, Lewis was free to place near the center of the novel not just an adulterated version of Long's biography, but a worst-case-scenario of what Lewis admittedly feared, what he admittedly was fighting to prevent: a 1936 Huey Long presidency. (64)

Indeed, the novel makes only a scant effort to cloak the comparison between Long and Windrip. In a scene in which Jessup lectures his neighbors on the fragility of American democracy, he acts as a mouthpiece for Lewis: "there's no other country in the world that can get more hysterical—yes, or more obsequious!—than America. Look how Huey Long became absolute monarch over Louisiana, and how the Right Honorable Mr. Senator Berzelius Windrip owns *his* state" (17, emphasis in original). Lewis endows Windrip with a list of "The Fifteen Points of Victory for the Forgotten Men" in mockery of Long's "Share the Wealth" platform.[13] It was clear that Lewis saw himself engaged in debate with a politician capable of

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rise of Nazism and Thompson's expulsion from Germany, her "Little Man" image took on a new life as an example of how even a flawed leader could tap nascent Fascist sympathies among the masses. Her later work characterized Hitler as ruthless and power-hungry, not the "drummer boy" she'd called him after their first meeting, but it was an atmosphere amenable to dictatorship that had empowered him in the first place.

[12] Unlike so many canonical American novelists of his time, Lewis had no great success as a traditional reporter. As a young man, biographer Mark Schorer writes, Lewis "tried to be a newspaperman without success" (7).

[13] Like both Hitler and Long, Windrip writes a self-serving autobiography titled *Zero Hour* that is often excerpted at the beginnings of the novel's chapters.

disrupting the categories of fact and fiction, and by writing a novelized version of Long, he might at least levy a critique that couldn't be blamed for using the same tactics.

Lewis hoped to show that in the face of totalitarianism, novelists offered vital resistance to political propaganda, even if it meant becoming propagandists themselves. *It Can't Happen* here marked a convincing return to prominence for Lewis, as the book sold more than 320,000 copies and was serialized in the *New York Post* amid a mix of positive and lukewarm reviews (Scharnhorst 389-90). The popularity of the book begat a theatrical version (in which Lewis himself would star) and a screenplay that saw its production halted over concerns that the film would complicate matters for U.S. ambassadorial relations with the Italian and German governments. During this well-publicized 1936 controversy Lewis called his novel "propaganda for only one thing: American democracy" (qtd. in Scharnhorst 386).

It behooves us to notice that *It Can't Happen Here*, which Lewis had hastily written and almost certainly rushed through with minimal revision, is preoccupied with propaganda and those who create it. Windrip's chief propagandist and right-hand man, Lee Sarason, is imagined as capable of both finding news scoops and turning them to his political advantage:

> He could smell out a husband-murderer, the grafting of a politician—that is to say, of a politician belonging to a gang opposed by his paper—the torture of animals or children, and this last sort of story he liked to write himself, rather than hand it to a reporter, and when he did write it, you saw the moldy cellar, heard the whip, felt the slimy blood. (29)

For Sarason (and perhaps Lewis), propaganda is at least partially rooted in the same events that would be reported in the news, but Sarason's ability to make sure his readers "felt the slimy blood" elevates reportage with the ideological appeal of propaganda. The true tactician behind Windrip's takeover of the U.S., Sarason seems to operate a step removed from the propaganda he creates. His use of facts is not ideological but rather strategic in such a way that recalls Arendt's claim that "the true goal of totalitarian propaganda is not persuasion but organization" (361). That is, Sarason is less concerned with the epistemological viability of his pro-Windrip news than its ability to rally the masses.[14] In his autobiographical *Zero Hour*, Windrip argues that an "honest propagandist… will learn early that it is not fair to ordinary folks—it just confuses them—to try to make them swallow all the true facts that would be suitable to a

[14] This is, perhaps, a crucial part of Arendt's explanation of totalitarian propaganda as reflective of, rather than instructive toward, an already existing mass ideology. "The success of totalitarian propaganda," Arendt writes, "does not rest so much on its demagoguery as on the knowledge that interest as a collective force can be felt only where stable social bodies provide the necessary transmission belts between the individual and the group; no effective propaganda based on mere interest can be carried on among masses whose chief characteristic is that they belong to no social or political body, and who therefore present a veritable chaos of individual interests" (348).

higher class of people" (181). Despite his roots as a "'hard-boiled reporter' of the shirt-sleeved tradition" (28), Sarason follows Windrip's philosophy that power functions better through ideological consistency than in trying to reasonably sort out the facts. He insists "that he would rather be called a prostitute than anything so sissified as 'journalist'" (28), finding no shame in propagandizing.

Sarason's conversion from journalist to propagandist precedes Jessup's heroic transformation from a small-town editor to a voice of resistance. As an editor, Jessup was too slow to react to the threat of fascism, his journalistic view too narrow to adequately conceive of the ideological forces at play. As those around him grow nervous after Windrip's election, Jessup prefers to think of political change as a sign of the system's essential operation rather than its instability. Most critics of *It Can't Happen Here* identify Jessup's failure to react quickly and adequately to the threat of fascism as his so-called tragic flaw, but perhaps this reading overstates Jessup's role in his society because it implies that an earlier resistance to Windrip's campaign might have altered the novel's imagined history. Lewis's novel, at least at its outset, does not repudiate Jessup's estimation that he is powerless against the forces of history moving around him; after all, "Compared with Lee Sarason as a newspaperman, little Doremus Jessup of Fort Beulah was like a village parson compared with the twenty-thousand-dollar minister of a twenty-story New York institutional tabernacle with radio affiliations" (29), an allusion to Huey Long's ally, "radio priest" Charles Coughlin.

Jessup's first act of resistance is in fact a relatively small one—one that in other contexts strikes us not as resistance but simply as Jessup doing his job as a journalist. His former groundskeeper-turned-Corpo, Shad Ledue, becomes county commissioner and throws an entire edition of the *Informer* into the river, a "Last straw—plenty last" for Jessup (172). Jessup vows to become one of the "murderous Jews" being slandered in the Corpo press and "to do something for his own people" (172). He sits down to pen a relatively even-handed objection to the tactics of the Windrip regime:

> Believing that the inefficiency and crimes of the Corpo administration were due to the difficulties attending a new form of government, we have waited patiently for their end. We apologize to our readers for that patience… we may expect nothing but extirpation of all honest opponents of the tyranny of Windrip and his Corpo gang. (172-73)

Jessup's staff, especially the man expected to manually carry out the printing, express reservations about publishing the anti-Windrip editorial, with knowledge that the Corpo regime

has jailed people for lesser offenses.[15] In Jessup's article, his liberal politics (he was initially willing to wait and see how the Corpos would govern) dovetail with his position of power as a newspaper editor. Because of his audience, he is hesitant to act, but that audience is also used as his reason for a change of course. "If a man is going to assume the right to tell several thousand readers what's what," Jessup claims, "he's got a kind of what you might say priestly obligation to tell the truth" (175). The editorial is both an act of resistance to the fascist regime and an insistence that journalism carries an implicit adherence to truth. Jessup's audience only exists because of a presumption that he has a "priestly obligation" to truth that propagandists don't.

But the novel shows the presumption of journalistic truth is easily coopted by Corpo ideology. After the *Informer* is seized and Jessup is sentenced to helping turn out editions of a pro-Corpo paper, it becomes apparent that journalism and its processes of verification offer no resistance to totalitarian rule. In fact, public trust in verification only aids Jessup in cranking out Corpo propaganda with "no more sense of shame than was felt by old colleagues of his who in pre-Corpo days had written advertisements for fraudulent mouth washes or tasteless cigarettes, or written for supposedly reputable magazines mechanical stories about young love" (200). Lewis, ever a keen eye to the hypocrisies of his American milieu, sees journalistic truth as pliable to the political and economic forces underwriting its production.[16] Propaganda, on the other hand, need not admit this hypocrisy. Factuality is nearly irrelevant to the meaning of propaganda, or as Jessup puts it: "if you did tell the truth a Nazi, it would still be a lie" (379). Lewis is perhaps drawn to the coherence of totalitarian propaganda because, like a novel, it can produce meaning without respect to its truth or factuality.

What Lewis puts forth, I want to suggest, is an epistemological alterity—creating a "what if?" story-world that offers a coherent, thoroughly imaginable vision of the future. That future could be as viable as the one in Long's speculative autobiography *My First Days in the White House*, which begins with the line "It had happened" (Perry 81-82). By framing his novel as both propaganda, Lewis suggests all ideological systems might be understood being merely fictional constructs. That is, the constructedness of propaganda marks it as an epistemological counterpart to the novel—if indeed fascism (or even Long-ism) provides a means to know the world, this epistemology is rooted in fiction and not a fixed reality. *It Can't*

[15] Lewis lists more than a dozen real-life journalists, presumably because he admired their professional integrity, who are supposedly imprisoned under the Corpo regime. He adds glibly that "Few writers for Hearst were arrested, however" (219).

[16] Jessup is "an ordinary newspaper hack" in his own estimation, unlike John Dos Passos and H.L. Mencken, whom the Corpos exile to Canada (202).

Happen Here asks its readers to imagine fascist ideology as a fiction "readable" in a mode similar to that of the novel itself.

As Jessup is jailed and then later released with the help of influential friends, he joins with journalists-turned-propagandists for the New Underground, but they falter as because they "were cramped by a certain respect for facts which never enfeebled the press-agents of Corpoism" (283). And yet, as Jessup works for the resistance, he decides to stop using a scintillating story about Hitler solely because it isn't true (379). Lewis and the rebels are both desperate to hold on to the possibility of fact-based social reality. But there is a constant question of whether Jessup—and by extension, Lewis's novel in general—is sufficiently realistic in its view of world events. In a similar argument staged with his son, Doremus is told that "we've got to base our future actions not on some desired Utopia but on what we really and truly have. And think of what they've *actually* done!" (239, emphases mine). Although Lewis is committed to demonstrating the common fictionality of propaganda and novels, he wants to maintain the possibility of a fixed reality beyond these ideological structures.

If *It Can't Happen Here* is indeed propaganda, given the definition of propaganda embedded in the text itself, is it only propaganda "for American democracy," and what might Lewis mean by that? Lewis was nearly as suspicious of politics on the left as he was of Fascism. His protagonist is a replication of Lewis's own centrist ideology. "As a newspaper man, Doremus remembered that the only reporters who misrepresented and concealed facts more unscrupulously than the Capitalists were the Communists," Lewis writes. "He was afraid that the world struggle today was not of Communism against Fascism, but of tolerance against bigotry that was preached equally by Communism and Fascism" (358). This repositioning of both communism and fascism as equivalently "other" is a trademark of American liberal centrism, and within the novel's thematics, the rationality of centrism alone promises a reliable correlation to truth.[17] As one critic argues, "*It Can't Happen Here* is a modern realist text that is both thematically and formally liberal" (Yerkes 291), a kind of sobering call to the American bourgeois who would read such a novel in the first place. Lewis calls for reason; Doremus himself puts it this way: "More and more, as I think about history… I am convinced that everything that is worth while [sic] in the world has been accomplished by the free, inquiring, critical spirit, and that the preservation of this spirit is more important than any social system whatsoever" (359). But the "free, inquiring, critical spirit" does not transcend its own

[17] This is a sustained theme in Lewis's work. For instance, the Nobel-prize winning *Babbitt* traces its protagonist's fluctuating public standing through his appearances in the local newspapers. But in a scene toward the end of the novel, Babbitt dismisses Leftist reports about a labor strike as "all lies and fake figures" (*Babbitt* 298). Although Lewis is ironizing Babbitt here, deliberately suggesting that Babbitt's conservatism makes him ideologically unable to see the strikers cause for what it is, that line of thinking nonetheless infers an *actual* state of affairs that Babbitt can't recognize either.

ideological construct, nor does Lewis's novel do much to illuminate the stakes of a larger political conflict between historical-economic forces. [18] Lewis's novel struggles under the weight of its own desire to reference the world outside its pages, or as critic Stephen L. Tanner writes, "its methods are largely those of slapdash journalism… its focus is on politics rather than people, the characters being little more than walking ideas" (61). Those "walking ideas" are more characteristic of a propagandistic impulse than a journalistic one, and insofar as the novel communicates a politics, it is an anti-Long message lacking in a clear political alternative. Like the propaganda it means to skewer, *It Can't Happen Here* functions on its imagination of the nation's future. It is, at best, anti-propaganda propaganda.

Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and Narrative Credibility

By the time Robert Penn Warren published *All the King's Men*, a winner of the 1946 Pulitzer Prize and eventually a classic of American political fiction, Huey Long had been dead for more than a decade. Warren had worked as an assistant professor at Louisiana State University from 1933 to 1942, where he taught Long's daughter, Rose, but only saw the governor in person once (Perry 236-37). Despite having no direct contact with Long, Warren was aware the Kingfish also held the purse-strings that funded his *Southern Review*, and he would have been familiar with countless stories of Long's retributory tactics. But he had nothing to fear from Long, because by the time *All the King's Men* hit the shelves, Warren had moved away from Louisiana, and the Kingfish was a bygone figure of the Depression years.

Warren would have preferred to sever any ties between his novel and the real-life Long. When the novel was pre-released to critics in 1946, the *New York Times's* Robert Gorham Davis wrote a review of *All the King's Men* that began with an indictment of Long's political career; he suggested that Warren aimed "to justify Long and the intellectuals who played ball with him; to romanticize him" with poetic prose. Other critics levied similar charges, setting off a decades-long debate about whether to read *All the King's Men* as a form of political biography, historical novel or something else entirely.[19] Part of the literary controversy,

[18] In his analysis of Huey Long's various fictionalizations, Perry points out that the political climate around Long, as much as Long himself, called for scrutiny: "Lewis, it seems, reasoned that if his readers could make what is, after all, the very easy jump from fictional to factual demagogue, they might more readily apprehend the true nature of what, to Lewis, were the hidden designs of leaders like Long" (302).

[19] Although I am not committed to proving or disproving competing claims about the relation between Stark and Long, I will submit that the overwhelming similarities between the two make it difficult to take Warren's claim very seriously. Long, like Stark, narrowly escaped an impeachment hearing during his time in office. Stark's political platform is in many respects indiscernible from the fundamental points of Long's "Share the Wealth" plan. And the assassinations share clear similarities, both committed by a doctor following the ousting of a judge.

certainly, thrived on Warren's repeated insistence that he hadn't been thinking of Long at all (Warren argued the novel was originally a play, centered on a Southern politician named Talos and dealing with classic philosophical themes). Warren would later clarify that his writing couldn't help but absorb the circumstances of the period in question, but the public saw his denial of Long as a ruse:

> This disclaimer, whenever I was callow enough to make it, almost invariably greeted by something like a sardonic smile conspiratorial wink, according to what the inimical smiler or the friendly winker took my motives to be? Either I wanted to avoid being a fascist or I wanted to avoid a lawsuit. Now in making the disclaimer again, I do not mean to imply that there was no connection between Governor Stark and Senator Long. Certainly, it was the career Long and the atmosphere of Louisiana that suggested the play was to become the novel. ("Note" 480)

The implication that Warren either "wanted to avoid being a fascist" or avoid a lawsuit likely owed some of its credence to the antifascist posture established by Lewis and his cadre ten years earlier. If one considered Lewis's Buzz Windrip as a clear analogue for Long, then Warren's nuanced philosopher-governor Willie Stark in *All the King's Men* appeared to justify totalitarian politics. These charges irked Warren. He initially treated the Stark-Long comparisons with disdain; he had, he pointed out, composed the entirety of the novel after leaving LSU for Minnesota. But Warren's position inadvertently produced other pressing questions. If he wasn't writing about Huey Long, what exactly was he writing about? If the public were to follow his directive to ignore the Stark-Long similarities and reduce the text to mere make-believe, then the novel seemed to lose any of its social relevance. Warren was pushed to explain how *All the King's Men* could be about Long-ism without actually being about Long.

As Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* fell out of favor and Warren's novel replaced it in the popular consciousness around the Kingfish, Warren eased his stance on the debate about the Stark-Long similarities. "Long and the world he dominated did provide the original stimulus for the writing of the novel, and did suggest some of the issues that emerge there," Warren admitted in a reissue of the novel about 30 years later. He maintained that the "nature of Huey Pierce Long is, however, far from the concern of my novel, and even today I have not the ghost of a notion of what he in truth was" (qtd. in Perry 255). In other words, Warren wanted to set aside the question of whether he was actually writing about Long because, for him, a work of fiction is not actually about anybody in the same way the news of the day could be about a politician. "One of the unfortunate characteristics of our time is that the reception of a novel

may depend on its *journalistic* relevance," Warren writes in his "Notes to *All the King's Men*" (279, emphasis mine). He wanted to forestall a journalistic or actualistic reading of the novel and instead emphasize the ideological structures reproduced within the text. In framing his work this way—even while still taking up the "issues" he perceived in Long-ism—he implicitly suggests that his fiction does not require facts to represent the truth of American political life.[20] "Though I did not profess to be privy to the secret of Long's life," Warren clarified in a 1953 essay, "I did have some notions about the phenomenon of which Long but one example, and I tried to put some of those notions into book" ("Note" 480).

In trying to cut through the public conflicts concerning Long, Warren's text is somewhat preoccupied with producing its own narrative credibility—a reason to believe its fiction, so to speak. The novel's narrator, Jack Burden, is a journalist whose entire function relies on credibility, and for Warren, the narrative's subversion (and subsequent restoration) of Burden's credibility is a demonstration for the novel's own viability. Burden, a reporter and *Chronicle* columnist, is fired for aligning himself too closely with Stark but is complacent about leaving the newspaper and joining Stark's inner circle because. As one critic has put it, "the newspaper world holds no idealistic significance" (Berry 134-35). Burden's credibility is both demonstrated and destabilized by his ongoing philosophical journey to sort ideal from fact. His desire to find truth is doubled by an inability to identify it. At the beginning of the novel, Burden tells us that only "principles" and ideals hold any real value, and yet they are not real themselves: "What you don't know don't hurt you, for it ain't real… If you are an idealist it does not matter what you do or what on around you because it ain't real anyway" (45). Although Burden admits he'd been a "brass-bound Idealist" in his college days (45), he has become immersed in a world of facts in service to Stark. And yet, Warren seems to hint, those facts couldn't possibly be the only source of truth.

Burden's training as a fact-finder and digger of "dirt" makes him valuable as a narrator, but just as valuable to the governor. He finds himself employed in Willie Stark's inner circle precisely because he can find compromising information, and Burden's credibility makes that information valuable. For Stark, dirt is a symbol of the austere empirical factuality, capable of being manipulated for the political purposes. "Dirt's a funny thing," he says in an early scene. "It's dirt makes the grass grow. A diamond ain't a thing in the world but a piece of dirt that got awful hot" (69).[21] Burden reliably delivers information on Stark's political enemies, and in the

[20] One political scientist's analysis of *All the King's Men* would suggest the novel is meant to "illustrate a set of political dangers inherent in certain commonly held views about the character of American democracy and to show how these dangers are manifested both in the practice of our politics and in the character of our citizens" (Lane, Jr. 811).

[21] This passage replicates the real Kingfish's pragmatic take on power; as one biographer puts it: "He was completely frank in admitting his desire for power…. There was no point to be right only to be defeated, he

governor's political philosophy, this "dirty" information is inherently powerful. As Stark says, "You don't ever have to frame anybody, because the truth is always sufficient" (508).[22] That is, Stark's political vision suggests that empirical facts might be necessarily damning and this notion of "truth" implies its own explanatory framework. Burden, on the other hand, begins the novel desperate to believe in ideals inviolable by the "dirt" of fact.

Burden's reportage is caught between facts and ideals especially as he grows closer to Stark's power. "I hoped to give that character a dynamic relation to the general business," Warren explains, "to make him the chief character among those who were to find their vicarious fulfilment in the dynamic and brutal, yet paradoxically idealistic, drive of the politician" ("Note" 478). Even though Burden possesses the skill-set of the reporter, his departure from the *Chronicle* signals that his own idealistic desires, in Warren's words, "allow another perspective than the reportorial one" ("Note" 478). Even Davis, in his blistering *New York Times* review, agrees that Burden's practices as a reporter, though they make him a "thoroughly unpleasant teller of the story," do allow him to "move freely through the worlds of ideas and action, of the old and new politics, because he is nothing in himself."

Not only does Burden's philosophical temperament place him between worlds of fact and ideal, he is similarly positioned as both an outsider and an insider with the Stark regime. And it would be fair to point out that Burden had a predecessor in the actual story of Huey Long, who hired George H. Maines away from the Hearst newspaper chain to become one of several press corps agents tasked with searching out damaging information about Long's enemies (Williams 641-42). Burden's physical proximity to Stark—the novel opens in the cramped space of Stark's motorcar and childhood home—makes him a witness to the private machinations behind the governor's public rule at the risk of his moral integrity. Thus, Warren implies a broad analogy between Burden's relationship to Stark and the reader's experience with Long-ism, as *All the King's Men* asks readers to consider the extent to which they might have been drawn into the real-life Kingfish's political influence.

Burden's attempt to navigate fact and ideal in his professional service to Stark is replicated both in his personal quest to uncover the "truth" of his life and his literary performance as the novel's narrator. Burden is initially characterized by a zealous adherence to the actual, a kind of paradoxical ideal itself. But looking for facts, he tells us, is his "proper job" as a former history student who "does not care what he digs out of the ash pile, the

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emphasized: "First you must come into power—POWER—and then you can do things" (Williams 750, emphasis in original).

[22] It's worth noting that this philosophy of power-in-truth is not solely Stark's; even as a reporter for the *Chronicle*, Burden threatened interview subjects by telling them that private information "might get into the papers" (82).

midden, the sublunary dung heap, which is the human past" (235). As the novel's narrator, he implicitly makes the case that the narrative is similarly constructed, as if his story can be trusted because it's what actually happened, as if his desires had no part in shaping it. One would be tempted to say that Burden's journalistic credibility is reconfigured into a kind of narrative reliability, except that thinking of a novel this way would be impossible. His insistence on his own reliability only produces a parapraxis undercutting that reliability. The narrator of *All the King's Men* says he will only give us the "facts" when we already know, as readers of a fiction, that he is incapable of giving us any facts that would not necessarily involve our interpretation of his literary performance.

All the King's Men is as much about its narrator as it is about Willie Stark, the presumed focus of its story. As Peter Brooks has pointed out, literary work of the 30s and 40s is often preoccupied with the "way stories are told, and what they mean" in a way that "seems to depend as much on narratee and narrative situation as narrator" (255). Many critics take up a similar line in explaining Burden's narration of the curious middle section of *All the King's Men,* in which he adopts a third-person narrative affectation, telling the story of graduate student Jack Burden's doctoral project about a Confederate named Cass Mastern. The history of Mastern was never finished, nor was Burden's degree; he tells us:

> It had not been successful because I the midst of the process I tried to discover the truth and not the facts. Then when the truth was not to be discovered, or discovered could not be understood by me, I could not bear to live with the cold-eyed reproach of the facts. (236)

The facts of Cass Mastern's life are certainly not what Burden hoped to find. Mastern is indirectly responsible for a slave being (quite literally) sold down the river after she witnesses Mastern's adulterous affair with a woman named Annabelle Trice. Mastern also claims culpability for Annabelle's husband's suicide. To Burden, it seems that the "facts' of Southern histories like Mastern's, or antebellum history largely considered, are irreconcilable with traditional Southern ideals. Critic John Blair describes this as a conflict of honor and tradition, as Burden will discover "a process of believing in something else that he knows is in and of itself false. He must recognize the past as past, and yet he still must glean from it the value it holds for the present" (458). Burden reintroduces this episode into *All the King's Men* because, as he says, "it has a great deal to do with the story of Jack Burden, and the story of Willie Stark and the story of Jack Burden are, in one sense, one story" (236). Warren explicitly instructs us to read the novel's drama through the (un)reliability of its narrator, as the biases and inconsistences in Burden's narration aren't merely incidental but profoundly constitutive of the text's meaning. By formulating a structural analogy between the reliability of Burden's facts

and his reliability as a narrator, Warren makes an implicit appeal for privileging the fictionality of his novel over the "journalistic relevance" with which his critics wanted to read it. Warren defines imagination as "the lie we must learn to live by" (Blair 458), and *All the King's Men* is a meant to be exactly such a lie.

Reconstructing the 'terrible division':
Verification as Ideology in "The Case of the Upright Judge"

If we take seriously the claim that Willie Stark's story is Jack Burden's story (both in the sense that these arcs produce the same kinds of meanings and that Burden "owns" the governor's narrative), then we ought to read *All the King's Men* as a combination of Burden's narrative "facts" and the ideals those facts are meant to evidence. Just as the novel itself attempts to represent Huey Long's politics without referencing the actual Huey Long, Burden's investigations repeatedly point him toward an idealistic truth to which the facts might or might not fit. For Warren, understanding Long-ism calls for an examination of the categories of fact and ideal partly because, as Arendt has suggested, the appeal of totalitarian thought is in its bending of fact to ideological ends in public discourse. [23] In Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here,* he frames totalitarian movements as wholly ideological, but Warren's authoritarian is more complicated. Rather than focusing on the way that facts are made ideologically compliant, Warren demonstrates that categories of ideal and fact are mutually constitutive in ways that defy easy categorization. The real Long, after all, tended to counter charges of demagoguery by pointing toward a "factual" reality from which he supposedly drew his interpretations. "A perfect democracy can come close to looking like a dictatorship, a democracy in which the people are so satisfied they have no complaint," he once said. "A man is not a dictator when he is given a commission from the people and carries it out" (qtd. in Williams 762). That pragmatism inspired Warren to see Long (and Willie Stark) as men of fact (i.e., the verifiable satisfaction of the electorate) rather than ideal (anti-dictatorship for anti-dictatorship's sake). Willie Stark is not an easily dismissed propagandist like Windrip because he seems to draw his ideas from reality—not the other way around.

[23] In Davis's scathing review, he suggests that Warren's intellectual project of investigating such categories is implicitly productive of a totalitarian politics. He writes that "Robert Penn Warren is fascinated by the strong man of action as many of our war novelists were fascinated by romanticized Nazis. And the question of 'All the King's Men' is solely whether the man of ideas can work with the dictator in the interests of historic change; whether, in carrying out that change, the unscrupulous vulgarian [sic] is not really a better man than the selfish, dignified, discreet and also immoral politicians from whom he seized power." But in this instance Davis is too enamored of the novel's "journalistic relevance" to read it as an autonomous art work.

Whereas Lewis hangs his novel on the contingency of the future, Warren's novel is preoccupied with the past. *All the King's Men* is a historical reconstruction that is itself preoccupied with historical reconstructions. Warren's earlier works, such as *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* and *Night Rider*, display Warren's commitment to restaging historical events with an emphasis on how narrative "facts" shape and are reshaped by the ideals of their narrators. That shaping, for Warren, produces the coherence and thus the meaning of the text. In the widely published *Understanding Fiction,* Warren and his collaborator Cleanth Brooks mount an argument for the "importance of truth of coherence as distinguished from the truth of correspondence. Since a work of literature does not pretend to be a factual document of actual events, but a typical and representative 'action,' the demands of truth of correspondence tend to be limited to correspondence to human nature and to the human norms" (Brooks and Warren 173). What matters in Warren's fiction is not its actuality, or what they call the "truth of correspondence," but rather a truth of the conceptual coherence that can be measured against current ideas about "human nature."

With *All the King's Men,* Warren carries forward this project of reconstructing the past as a cipher for present public discourse.[24] Warren's novel might have struck his 1946 readers not as mere historical reconstruction but as a pressing examination of the possibility of American dictatorship. The end of Long's life didn't necessarily mean the end of an authoritarian threat, and Willie Stark symbolizes that ongoing danger. As Perry has argued, "*All the King's Men* is a novel that succeeds not because of what facts from Long's life it incorporates, but because of the life that arises from amidst those facts: the character who is, not the figure who was" (284). The novel itself is essentially a collection of three reconstructions of the past (the Cass Mastern episode, the transformation of Cousin Willie into The Boss, and the "Case of the Upright Judge") that come to determine the truth of Jack Burden's narrative "present." These reconstructions are united by Warren's desire to create a "parable of fact and truth," writes critic Richard G. Law, who argues that Burden's narration represents "another elaborate parable which has to do simply with the way the mind orients itself in the incomprehensible flux of the world and creates in it some sustaining order and meaning" (1). That is, the political present demands a reckoning of the history's facts with current ideological frameworks.

[24] Warren would, in fact, keep working both with historical reconstruction and a distrust of news reporting in a later novel titled *The Cave.* He bases the plot on a real-life story of a Tennessee miner at the center of a media circus after he gets caught in a hole. *The Cave* focuses on the emotional drama of a boy named Isaac Sumpter who claims to have seen the trapped man alive and is selling the story to news outlets across the country, but he is lying about having seen the caver. After being protected in his life, he moves to New York to become part of what Warren terms as "Big Media" (371).

Burden's narrative maintains a self-reflexivity in his attempt to understand how his own idealism shaped both the "factual" events of the story as they unfolded and the way he inevitably shapes those facts again during his narrative reconstruction. In the first part of the novel, Burden relays the story of finding Cousin Willie, a backwoods lawyer so innocent he refuses to drink anything except soda pop. Stark is determined to unite the people with a plan "full of facts and figures" (106), but Burden tells him:

> But they don't give a damn about that. Hell, make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em think you're their weak erring pal, or make 'em think you're God Almighty. Or make 'em mad. Even mad at you. Just stir 'em up, it doesn't matter how or why, and they'll love you and come back for more. Pinch 'em in the soft place. They aren't alive, most of them, and haven't been alive in twenty years. Hell, their wives have lost their teeth and their shape, and likker won't set on their stomachs, and they don't believe in God, so it's up to you to give 'em something to stir 'em up and make 'em feel alive again. Just for half an hour. That's what they come for. Tell 'em anything. But for Sweet Jesus' sake don't try to improve their minds. (108)

Cousin Willie gets drunk, takes Burden's advice, makes a rousing speech, and catapults to power after seizing on a local tragedy. His newfound pragmatism leads him to chase votes rather than to improve anyone's mind.[25] We're confronted with the question of why Burden tells the story this way, not only in its reduction of the all-powerful Stark into a pitiable country lawyer, but with Burden as a corrupting influence that steers him toward his destructive pragmatism. Despite Burden's insistence that "I never tell anybody anything. I just listen" (119), Burden admits in the Cousin Willie episode that his participation in the making of the narrative would have inevitably altered the course of events. His narrative reliability is doubly suspect: has he grasped the actual chain of events, and can he narrate in such a way that wouldn't further alter the reader's ability to see the truth? Law argues that "one need only remember the mode of narration and the unreliability of Burden as narrator to recall how purely subject the apparently 'historical' account is. What Burden sees is always a function of what an event means at a given time, and his hard 'facts' have a way of altering in the course of the book as Jack himself change" (2). Burden must come to grips with the inevitable

[25] In *Night Rider,* Warren portrays Percy Munn making a speech similar to those ascribed to Stark in *All the King's Men.* "There is nothing here," Munn tells the crowd "except what you have brought with you from your homes, wherever they are. There is no hope except the hope you bring here. *There is nothing here but an idea.* And that idea is dead unless you have brought it life by your long trip here. It does not exist unless you give it life by your own hope and loyalty" (25, emphasis mine). The rhetorical trick here is that Munn identifies the group's ideological root and calls it out as such, but he suggests in his speech that the ideology belongs to the audience already. Thus, he empowers the audience to see embrace ideals on their own terms.

distortion of retelling, just as Warren's novel suggests the "real" Huey Long is repeatedly displaced by attempts at representing him.

But the point of the novel isn't merely to point out that facts are nearly impossible to recount or reconstruct in a consistent matter. Rather, I want to argue, *All the King's Men* arrives at the conclusion that any publicly recognized fact is inseparable from its ideological framing. *All the King's Men* develops a repetitive structure around the "terrible division" of fact and ideal, in which Burden and his counterparts fail to prevent tragedies because they cannot reconcile the two. The Oedipal structure of "The Case of the Upright Judge" begins with Stark's direction for Burden to investigate Judge Montague Irwin, who Burden knew as a kindly neighbor from his youth. Burden finds incriminating information about one of Irwin's shady political deals, but this also unearths facts about Burden's familial history. The incongruity of Burden's idealized memories and the newfound information inspires Burden to indulge in memories of his childhood. We learn of Burden's past after his father leaves, his abruptly ended love affair with Anne Stanton, and his failed first marriage. He would like to find versions that satisfactorily accord with the facts, but those recollections seem too much for Burden, especially in light of the documentary evidence he uncovers about Judge Irwin's dirty political dealings. Burden is disillusioned with finding dirt on Irwin, and he initially frames this disappointment as a confrontation with an objective reality:

> So I had it after all the months. For nothing is lost, nothing is ever lost. There is always the clue, the canceled check, the smear of lipstick, the footprint in the canna bed, the condom on the park path, the twitch in the old wound, the baby shoes dipped in bronze, the taint in the blood stream. And all times are one time, and all those dead in the past never lived before our definition gives them life, and out of the shadow their eyes implore us. (342)

Burden's emphasis here on the physical object reflects his documentary practice; objects surviving from the past can produce actual meaning through analysis in the present. "That is what all historical researchers believe," Burden says. "And we love the truth" (342). But this is an actualistic truth—a kind of truth irrefutable on its own terms and yet doesn't comport with Burden's understanding of social reality. He struggles to reconcile that disparity.

Meanwhile, Governor Stark foregoes such a reconciliation of fact and ideal, relying instead on pragmatism to conquer all. He wants to cement his legacy by building a state-of-the-art hospital, and he wants Burden's help in securing the talented surgeon Adam Stanton to run the facility. As always, Burden hesitantly agrees, but he is suspicious of the chances for the pair to work together. Adam Stanton, Burden explains "is a romantic, and he has a picture of the world in his head, and when the world doesn't conform in any respect to the picture, he

wants to throw the world away" (370-71). Stanton is the kind of idealist that Burden respects and perhaps even wants to be, if not for the nagging facts he sees in his investigations. Stark, meanwhile, is dismissive of Stanton's idealism, and in his first encounter with the doctor, he argues that "what folks claim is right is always just a couple of jumps short of what they need to do business… folks in general, which is society, Doc, is never going to stop doing business. Society is just going to cook up a new notion of what is right" (387). That is, in Stark's pragmatic worldview, the actual conditions of society's "business" will dictate the ideological apparatuses that come to surround them. This is, according to the governor, an inevitable historical development, because "Society is sure not ever going to commit suicide" (387) for the sake of its ideals (but, of course, Adam Stanton eventually will).

Although Stark acts in service of political pragmatism, his commitment to factuality belies Warren's suspicions about the growing influence of logical positivism in American thought. For Warren, scientific thought "represents merely too selective a discourse with the world" and is more properly understood as no more than a "method of verifying facts and postulating" (Law 3), the same of which might be said about the journalistic practice taking shape in the first half of the 20th century. As Law explains, "Scientific knowledge is *power* knowledge; it bestows control because it generalizes from experience and reduces the 'world's body' to a set of useful principles" (3, emphasis in original). Warren, perhaps anticipating a Foucauldean understanding of scientific discourse, thinks of verifiability and an actualistic worldview as an expression or confirmation of political power rather than a wholly sufficient basis for knowledge. Neither fiction nor science, Warren seems to suggest, would be adequate alone as the basis for public discourse. In *It Can't Happen Here,* Lewis warns America of trusting an ideological fiction spun by the wrong Adam Stanton; Warren begs the same question of Willie Stark's devotion to fact.

Nonetheless, Stanton's idealism proves to be as catastrophic as Stark's pragmatism. At first, Burden does not try to persuade Stanton to join with Stark on ideological grounds. Rather, he thinks that by giving Stanton the "facts"—including the fact that his sister, Anne Stanton, is carrying on an affair with Stark—Adam will have to change his ideals accordingly. "I couldn't cut the truth to match his ideas," Burden says of Stanton. "Well, he'd have to make his ideas match the truth" (391). But of course, this isn't how ideals work; Adam sets out to make the facts match his ideas. Characteristic of a Southern honor code, Adam sets out for revenge. He shoots Stark and then himself, producing the first "death of the father" in the novel. Following the shooting, Burden's narration reverts to a third-person affectation, recasting himself as a student of the Stark/Stanton history:

> He had seen his two friends, Willie Stark and Adam Stanton, live and die. Each had killed the other. Each had been the doom of the other. As a student of history, Jack Burden could see that Adam Stanton, whom he came to call the man of idea, and Willie Stark, who he came to call the man of fact, were doomed to destroy each other, just as each was doomed to try to use the other and to yearn toward and try to become the other, because each was incomplete with the terrible division of their age. (657)

The "truth" has killed Burden's friends, not because it existed per se, but rather because it has come to light. But more importantly, the epistemological division characterized by fact and ideal is rendered as a political division; power refracts and reorients each category, with "truth" acting merely as an expression of power by either side.

The "Case of the Upright Judge" culminates in a similar climax as the Stark/Stanton murder, with the exception that Burden survives the encounter between fact and ideal. After Burden attempts to blackmail Judge Irwin with his damning evidence, the Judge claims he didn't realize that the late Governor Stanton (Adam and Anne's father) had covered up those misdeeds on his behalf. "That was the pitch of his generosity," the judge tells Burden, "Not ever telling me" (524). Judge Irwin hesitates, saying "I could just tell you something" but won't (523), presumably because he wants to spare Burden the pain of knowing that Irwin is his biological father. But shortly after their encounter, the judge shoots himself in the heart, and Burden's mother reveals the truth of his parentage (525). "Most people lose one father, but I was particularly situated, I had lost two at the same instant," Burden says. "I had dug up the truth and the truth always kills the father, the good and weak one or the bad and strong one, and your left alone with yourself and the truth" (533). When Burden learns that he will inherit Irwin's estate, the Oedipal cycle is complete, and he "burst out laughing" because the "whole arrangement seemed so crazy and so logical" (533). This moment, in which the archetypical plot structure is perceived as "so logical," implies a different kind of truth at play in the death of Judge Irwin; there is, of course, the documented, factual truth of his scandal made public, but there is also the "truth" of the story's form. And more to the point, *All the King's Men* seems to say, that one sort of truth doesn't exist without the other.

To put it another way, the "facts" of the novel, which structure a series of "public" reveals, are meaningful only in the context of a fictional plot. Following the death of Irwin, Burden says that "It was as though I were caught in a more monstrous conspiracy whose meaning I could not fathom…for ends I could not conceive and for an audience I could not see but which I knew was leering from the shadow" (629). And of course, that's true; we are his unseen audience, and the plot of the novel is a monstrous conspiracy, its meaning legible to us

but always above or beyond Burden's grasp. When, from his deathbed, Stark says that "It might have all been different, Jack" (603), the point is that no, it could not have been different. The novel structure, perhaps unlike reality itself, is fixed—the ideas of the novel create the facts of its world, and though we may draw interpretations from the facts we excavate, their meanings are rooted in the ideological framework of the novel. As Peter Brooks defines novelistic plot, the "recovery of the past" is the "aim of all narrative," but "the attempted recovery of the past makes know the continuing history of the past desire as its persists in the present, shaping the project of telling" (311). This is, of course, one way of thinking through the epistemological differences of actuality and fictionality: the actual is knowable only in relation to a subjective position in a perceived chain of events, while the fictional renders those events as legible through coherent plot. As *All the King's Men* turns toward its tragic endings, Burden comes to understand how an actualistic worldview is insufficient in understanding the "gradual piling up of events" (577) as they're happening:

> This lack of logic, the sense of people and events driven by impulses which I was not able to define, gave the whole occasion the sense of a dreamlike unreality. It was only after the conclusion, after everything was over, that the sense of reality returned, long after, in fact, when I had been able to gather the pieces of the puzzle up and put them together to see the pattern. That is not remarkable, for, as we know, reality is not a function of the event as event, but of the relationship of that event to past, and future events. (577-78)

What Burden describes here, of putting historical events into a causal chain, constitutes the work he does as a historian and journalist. But it is also the work of the novelistic plot. Burden says that the narrative "only affirms what we must affirm: that direction is all" (578). The dual insistence on the death of the father (i.e. the destruction of the past) and the idea that "direction is all" suggests that any reconstruction of the past is doomed to the ideological demands of the present moment—that Stark was, in a limited sense, correct in thinking society will "cook up a new notion" to fit the ends of dominant power structures. And yet these "new notions," like the "notions" about Huey Long that inspired Warren's writing, will inevitably reconfigure the actual events.

Burden's devotion to the "dirt" of factuality is reversed by the novel's climax, when Burden's mother confronts him about why Judge Irwin committed suicide. She wonders if Irwin was pressured into it, and Burden lies that "he wasn't in any jam" (650). When she asks Burden again if he's telling the truth, he swears to God that he does. Burden, whose narrative has consistently emphasized his truth-telling, reverses himself in a lie that he calls "a going-away present" to his mother. Burden justifies this lie as an act of selflessness inspired by the

late Governor Stanton's earlier coverup, saying "that was true. It was really true" (652). He effectively subverts his earlier stance in which contradictory facts and ideals could not both be true. "I had given my mother a present," Burden says, "which was a lie. But in return she had given me a present, too, which was a truth" (652). This "truth" of the mother—a way of understanding the narrative of her life—is incorruptible by any fact he might conceal or reveal. Burden has abandoned the verification of his historical and journalistic training, and he instead understands knowledge-making as chiefly an exercise of power, useful for malevolent and altruistic ends alike. "All knowledge that is worth anything is maybe paid for by blood," he says. "Maybe that is the only way you can tell that a certain piece of knowledge is worth anything: it has cost some blood" (647). The blood spilled in the events of the narrative—Irwin's, Stark's and Stanton's—reinforces the correlation of truth and violence as twin functions of political power, acting as justification for one another. Perhaps this is why, as Law points out, Warren "is cautious about claiming to provide any ultimate 'Truth' through the medium of his art" and the "focus in all of [Warren's] fiction is therefore on the engagement of the ordering consciousness of the world, not on a presumed ultimate reality beyond the observer" (4, emphasis in original). This "ordering of consciousness"—or ideology in its most general terms—is the domain of the novelistic form.

Both Warren and Lewis show concern about whether actualistic public discourse, even under the best practices of journalistic verification, might succumb to the relativity of truth introduced by a quasi-authoritarian figure like Huey Long. Common sense might lead us to say that in cases of democracies-turned-dictatorships, the public fails to know a demagogue for what they actually are. But these novels demonstrate otherwise; if the public fails, it's in an inability to *imagine* the truth about a dictator. Lewis doesn't attempt to prove the danger of American Fascism but implicitly asks his readers to imagine that *it can happen here.* In the case of *All the King's Men*, a jaded former journalist abandons his drive to separate ideal and fact to see them instead as united. There exists no pure verification without ideological shaping, Burden learns, and there no ideals unshaped by the facts of the world.

(Re)reported Histories:
Journalism and Culture in *John Henry Days* and *The Shipping News*

For all their ubiquity in historical research, newspapers can make for more complex reading than we sometimes think. One the one hand, the news offers a "first draft of history" in its accounts of the day's facts, useful for historical reconstructions. A copy of the *New York Times* from a random day in 1953 might tell us who the mayor was, which law was debated, how well the Yankees were hitting. But those facts are embedded within the ideological frame of their historical production; that same newspaper can be read symptomatically (that is, interpreted) for signs of the racism, ableism or sexism that seem obvious from our vantage point decades later. We're barred from seeing a newspaper in the terms of pure actuality intended for its first audience, our historical distance making it impossible to think the headlines show the world as it really was.

So, archival newspapers might tell us as much about the texts' creators than the objective world the newspapers presumably represents. Even while acknowledging that capacity for interpretability, we nonetheless often treat them as the textual objects fundamental to *objective* history. Most historians prefer to parse the objective facts from their ideological frames, but perhaps as I have demonstrated in my reading of *All the King's Men*, I am skeptical of that possibility. It is more likely the case that we are simply caught up in a shifting historical definition of which ideas do or do not qualify as facts in yesteryear's newspapers. Nor can we ignore the economic and political contexts in which an objective fact enters the public record; when we consider the market's unifying effect on news reportage of historical events, it behooves us to look at what lies outside the actual version constituting history's "first draft."

This is especially important when considering the histories of people who, for one reason or another, were not historically considered worthy of mainstream news coverage. In the context of U.S. history, major newspapers exhibited a long and damning history of excluding or mispresenting communities of color. Following race riots in 1967, U.S. President Lyndon Johnson ordered the so-called Kerner Commission to report on the underlying sources of violence, finding that "important segments of the media failed to report adequately on the causes and consequences of civil disorders and on the underlying problems of race relations." The commission urged white America to "publish newspapers and produce programs that recognize the existence and activities of Negroes as a group within the community and as a part of the larger community." To anyone living in communities of color, the conclusions of the Kerner Commission must have seemed obvious, but the news industry was slow to expand coverage or diversify newsrooms (Gonzàlez and Torres 304-306). Meanwhile, media historians

claim that "newspapers, radio and television played a pivotal role in perpetuating racist views among the general population" that coincides with the "primary authorship of a deeply flawed national narrative" (Gonzàlez and Torres 2-3). This narrative has overemphasized the criminality of people of color, has reinforced individualist explanations for links between race and poverty (Marchi 927), and often retreads "contemporary racist attitudes and contributes to ill-informed political decisions and public policy" (Campbell et al. 15). Media critic Peter Campbell says the "invisibility" of oppressed groups in news coverage reflects "a [journalistic] common sense that is decidedly white and that contributes to an understanding of minorities as a peripheral part of mainstream American society" (42). Attempts at addressing these shortcomings have largely failed, often because of an emphasis on news values—objectivity, newsworthiness, actuality—partially designed to uphold a matrix of racial disenfranchisement in the first place.

This is not to say that people unrepresented by the popular press were powerless to maintain and preserve cultural narratives outside of the mainstream.[26] Alternative publishing methods, oral cultures and private archives offer endless accounts in opposition to dominant culture, but because mainstream journalism—and the popular conception of history—privileged a paradigm of actuality in defining the real, those alternative accounts were positioned as not *actually* true. Considered illegitimate as sources of public knowledge, cultural forms originating among impoverished communities or communities of color have often been positioned as myth, folklore or mere fiction.[27] The modus operandi of actuality, as I've described, is that facts have to be verifiable, and so it was crucial for white America to think of its narratives as verifiably true while any counternarratives—like those experiences of racial and economic injustice obscured by popular history—were unverifiable and thus undeserving of serious consideration. With their narratives relegated to mere imagination, and with no real possibility of using the apparatuses of actuality to their own ends, marginalized communities in America produced cultural narratives that did not rely on empirical factuality because, frankly, facts were not on their side. But to discount the relevance of, for instance, traditional black cultural forms like songs, slave narratives and folk tales as mere mythmaking would repeat of the same categorical error qualifying their mythos in the first place.

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[26] It's important to recognize this journalistic history as not one of passive victimization, as "people of color have been protesting their exclusion from the mainstream media and false press portrayals of their communities since the early years of the Republic" (Gonzàlez and Torres 7).

[27] Journalism's distaste for mythos is so deeply ingrained that even in hoping to rectify racial injustices, media scholars often talk about dispensing with "the racial myths that so many white Americans cling to" (Campbell 5). What about myths that nonwhite people might "cling to?" Resistance to mythos generally, even when Campbell argues for resisting the "myth of marginality" obscuring underrepresented peoples, inadvertently reinforces the politics of actuality by which those communities were excluded.

Nevertheless, when contrafactual or non-actual narratives are encountered in historical archives, they are treated as interpretable objects rather than objective data, incapable of furnishing our histories with the force of actuality. This posture toward cultural history re-inscribes the logic by which journalistic practice also minimizes and overlooks creative communities.

It might be unsurprising, then, that novelists often do the work of bringing contrafactual cultural histories forth for public consideration. Fiction, like the contrafactual myths of marginalized cultures, operates with disregard for the reign of factuality as such. When a novelist concedes the fictionality of an imagined alternative history, the dominant version of history is often opened up for similar scrutiny. In *After the End of History*, literary critic Samuel Cohen describes a trend among the postmodern writers of the 1990s to concentrate on historical narratives after the Francis Fukuyama's proclaimed end to ideological conflict. Rather than seeing the past as closed, Cohen argues, contemporary novelists might strive to reopen "the national past to investigate the process whereby what happened has become history" (3). Historically interested novels of the long '90s tell stories "about the effect of historical forces on the lives of individual characters and on the way they construct their understanding of their personal and national pasts"—one that that is "deeply shaped by dominant national narratives" (28). These dominant national narratives, I would add, circulate in mainstream journalism in such a way that consistently produces a sense of narrative coherence rather than the real-life contingency that Cohen sees acutely illuminated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Although Cohen does not directly address the works of Colson Whitehead or E. Annie Proulx in his monograph, subsequent critics have identified these writers as similarly interested in historical reconstruction via metanarrative. And in the case of two novels—Whitehead's *John Henry Days* and Proulx's *The Shipping News*—journals and journalistic work feature prominently in their explorations of cultural histories. Following Cohen's analysis, critic Michael K. Walonen argues that "Colson Whitehead's novel *John Henry Days* is part of a larger trend in contemporary (post-Cold war) American literature of exploring overlooked or alternative historical currents as a means of coming to terms with the complexities, contradictions and epistemological uncertainties of postmodern America" (67). And Proulx, whose novel has been repeatedly analyzed for its politics of representation and Newfoundland heritage, wrote *The Shipping News* at the same time she conducted research for her novel, *Accordion Crimes*, a panoply of vignettes depicting American immigration and ethnic difference. Both authors worked themselves as journalists, and though they address vastly different historical formations, they both implicate reportorial work (or lack thereof) in the fate

of diminishing cultural narratives. Whitehead's novel harkens back to Reconstruction as his reporter-protagonist covers a 1996 festival; Proulx invokes the mythic settlement and resettlement of Newfoundland as her third-rate newspaperman tries to reclaim his family home. In both cases, these novels emphasize the fictional, folkloric qualities of alternative cultural histories and of their own aesthetic strategies, as *John Henry Days* and *The Shipping News* demonstrate actualistic truth as a tool of cultural erasure.

Many John Henrys: Narrative Multiplicity as History

John Henry lives at the crossroads of two historically oppressed American identities, both a black man and a working-class hero. Versions of the legend emphasize these characteristics in different proportions, depending on the person telling the story, but the substance is usually similar: John Henry was the most productive steel-driver on the railroad, and his contest against a steam drill cost his life. John Henry appears in countless ballads, children's stories, blues songs and other histories as a testament to the past, doomed to be replaced by endless innovation, largely because his martyrdom signals an irrepressible American courage and work ethic.

Perhaps as long as the legend has been circulated, so has the question of whether it is based on a historical figure. In the late 1920s, scholars began a serious search for John Henry's origins. The most notable, sociologist Guy B. Johnson, found it difficult to pin down the actuality of John Henry's existence, in part because his field interviews tended to be contradictory and interviewees often recanted on their memories. Black Americans had reproduced so many narratives of John Henry—some understood as myth, others as fact, still others as something in between. Johnson's findings suggest that a singular, consistent version of the legend would only diminish the story's vitality among the communities that circulated alternate John Henrys. But the research conducted by English professor Louis Chappell pushed Johnson to take a position on John Henry's historical existence (Inscoe 89-90). Both researchers were white (which would have been the standard then even for researchers of black culture), and I would suggest the desire to prove John Henry's actuality was borne of a desire to legitimate both his narrative and their research.[28]

In 2006 historian Scott Reynolds Nelson resumed the search for John Henry, concluding that the steel-driving man was actually imprisoned by Virginia's Black Codes and forced to work for the C&O railroad. In Nelson's history, John Henry was among hundreds of

[28] Johnson's race was confused in later decades by anthropologist Brett Williams's false claim that Johnson was black (Inscoe 89).

workers killed at the Lewis Tunnel in the early 1870s. Like the white scholars before him, Nelson has good intentions, hoping to depict John Henry as a real historical figure but also as representative of the murdered black men of which white Southern history should be "embarrassed" (23). Despite his claims to be happy to think of John Henry as only a legend, Nelson is preoccupied with verifying John Henry's existence and the details of his death, presumably because in his history (which could only be considered merely "embarrassing" from a white perspective), the verifiable is what really counts.[29]

Rather than searching for John Henry as a historical singularity, as journalists and historians seemingly must, Colson Whitehead instead embraces the multiplicity of steel-driving myths in his 2001 novel, *John Henry Days.* The narrative comprises a patchwork of characters and storylines, including a historical reconstruction of John Henry's final days with his sidekick, Lil' Bob, at the Big Bend Tunnel. Figuratively speaking, every character is a reincarnation of John Henry. From a blues singer trying to hack it on Chicago's south side to a black professor trying to win tenure among white colleagues, each version of John Henry is a black laborer trying to outpace technology and overcome obstacles of class and race. Threaded through the novel is the story of black freelance journalist J. Sutter, a jaded New Yorker who arrives in Talcott, West Virginia to cover the U.S. Post Office's unveiling of a commemorative John Henry stamp. Unlike the other versions of John Henry, J. lacks the characteristic work ethic; or rather, his primary motivation is to *not* work, as he begins the novel on a "jag" in which he is trying to see how many days he can live off the perks and expense accounts of his employers. He will occasionally file a story, sometimes not, because in J.'s view, he is but a mere man pitted against a machine of "pop" content machine (even he wouldn't call it journalism) mired in kitsch and hyperreality. As the novel's protagonist travels to West Virginia, worried that either his jag or Southern racism will kill him soon, we wonder whether J. is nothing more than a cog in a machine built to kill John Henry for good.

J. joins up with his fellow freelances, an eclectic group of journalists who mostly share J.'s outlook and are hoping for prime rib at the press events for Talcott's John Henry Days festival. J. also meets a woman named Pamela Street, a fellow New Yorker who has come South to listen to a museum's offer for her late father's collection of John Henry memorabilia, which the old man had displayed in his New York apartment. A budding romance with Pamela leads J. to consider that maybe there is more to John Henry Days than a free stay at the Talcott

[29] In fairness to Nelson, he wants to keep alive the actual fact of John Henry's existence even while allowing the legend to take on other meanings. "Nailing down the song to a single interpretation is impossible," he writes. "This is largely because John Henry died without leaving us a written testament, making his story almost infinitely mutable" (172). What is at issue, from my perspective, is that even a "written testament" does not negate the meanings of subsequent John Henry legends.

Motor Lodge and a vapid travel feature for a new online magazine. As the officially sanctioned events gradually turn John Henry into the kind of marketable icon with which J. is familiar, he and Pamela seek a more authentic version, one that doesn't fit neatly onto a postage stamp. But when a disgruntled postal worker shows up at the festival and opens fire, the novel ends in uncertainty whether J. survives or writes a heartfelt John Henry story.

Whitehead's ambiguities, contradictions and loose ends within the structure of the novel formally reproduce the multiplicity of John Henry myths circulating since Reconstruction. The prologue to *John Henry Days,* for example, offers a mosaic of anecdotes about the steel-driving legend, some of which were collected by the white sociologists pursuing a historic John Henry in the '20s and '30s (Inscoe 90). One account claims John Henry as the invention of a Kentucky work gang; another insists the man was a resident of Mississippi later shipped to Alabama. "In regards to the reality of John Henry," one Ohio prisoner writes, "I would say he was a real live and powerful man, some 50 years ago, and *actually* died after beating a steam drill" (3, emphasis mine). The question of John Henry's actuality, which so beguiled 20th century researchers, is something of a misdirection in the novel. More important to *John Henry Days* are the politics necessary to separate claims about John Henry's actual existence (i.e., the historical, journalistic or objective account) from the irreconcilable narratives of John Henry maintained by communities of color. In the novel, testaments about John Henry's authentic history, or sometimes the authentic history of the legend itself, are presented in response to a call placed in the *Chicago Defender,* one of the most important black newspapers in U.S. history. In the first few pages, *John Henry Days* juxtaposes two approaches to African-American cultural history. On the one hand, we have the *Defender,* a relatively sturdy historical-textual object from which an "objective" history might be drawn. And on the other hand, we have the disparate stories of John Henry, which Whitehead's novel—a fiction itself—demonstrate as forms of black cultural experience that constitute a contrafactual history.

Walonen calls *John Henry Days* a "secret history of the post-Reconstruction United States" (67) because it chronicles generations of black Americans facing epochal changes in their respective labor markets. Whereas John Henry faces the steam engine, J. confronts "the internet age of 'infotainment' bombardment and what critics (after Jean Baudrillard) have come term hyperreality" (70). By framing black cultural history as "secret," Walonen suggests its concealment under layers of ossified (and white) actualistic history; black history is figured as a collection of metanarratives that invite commodification and enter the cultural marketplace of "pop" with a force of "realness" or even "hyper-realness." The journalism industry, which often transforms "authentic" cultural artifacts into mainstream commodities, is the machine

which J. must face; writing is his nine-pound hammer. But at the novel's outset, J. is more hipster than hero, considering himself "too old to pretend that there is anything but publicity" (136), and so his contest at the Big Bend Tunnel will be decided by whether he allows the "machine" version of the John Henry story to be the only one reported out of Talcott that weekend. As critic Peter Collins writes, the novel proposes the possibility that J. might "give up writing the marketable story and to search for a more authentic, less obscured and whitewashed, version of history" (286). Collins argues that *John Henry Days* thematizes a resistance to commodification (and subsequent erasure) of cultural history, but I would like to add that the "marketable" version of cultural history, in the context of the mid-1990s media portrayed in the novel, is one in which the actual truth and the marketable truth are made indistinguishable. That is to say, the publicly accepted version of history is also exactly the version made available by the market, as historical narratives gain legitimacy mainly through market share—the story that sells also survives.

We ought to scrutinize, then, how the novel's alternative cultural history figures against the protagonist's professional labor and market viability. It's not abundantly clear, especially at the outset of the novel, when J. is picking up strangers' receipts to attach to later expense reports, whether he's really working at all. His writing for magazines and websites represents "a form of marketing" (Collins 285) that makes it seem J. is only perpetuating the oppressive systems he once dreamed of defying as an idealistic intern. J. is ambivalent about whether his quest to break Bobby Figgis's junketeering record is an attempt to outlast the pop machine or a submission to its power. Although J.'s fellow junketeer One-Eye is obsessed with removing his name from the List that keeps freelancers connected to events like the festival in Talcott, J. is unsure whether life exists beyond the pop marketplace. His jag is an effort to float in the system rather than to resist it; his main work is in making sure his expense reports are filed with receipts attached, his checks are cut and his schedule is replete with free meals and hotel stays. He thinks the John Henry articles will be another "little bubble of content he will never see. Fart in a bathtub" (135). He doesn't see anything authentic in the John Henry Days festival, cares little about the truth of John Henry and doesn't identify with the black folk hero beyond his recurrent fear that the South will kill him. The most remarkable feature about J.'s labor in the pop marketplace is that it is so alienated as to not seem like labor at all.

In other words, stories initially seem to mean very little to the protagonist of *John Henry Days.* J. operates on principles espoused by the quintet of junketeers in Talcott who describe four ways to write articles in their contemporary media climate: Bob's Debut, Bob's Return, Bob's Comeback and, arguably, Bob is Hip (71-73). Repeatedly writing articles in these preformed molds sustains the pop cycle but also flattens all identity into the ubiquitous

Bob (rather than, say, the mythical Lil' Bob who serves as John Henry's work partner in some of the novel's sections). During the John Henry Days festival, a Post Office official's speech suggests to the reader how the John Henry narrative can be flattened into a Bob narrative, as the official tells a crowd that "John Henry was an Afro-American, born into slavery and freed by Mr. Lincoln's famous proclamation. But more importantly, he was an American" (66). The faux-cultural sensitivity of "Afro-American" is subsumed by the more ubiquitous "American" that "helped build this nation into what it is today" (66). J., cynical though he might be, understands that this kind of pap is ideal material for journalistic content; it unifies the John Henry mythos into a coherent and agreeable figure rather than dissembling into a multiplicity of contradictory and contrafactual stories. Whitehead's assemblage of John Henry narratives, on the other hand, foregrounds the importance and meaning of the stories *as* stories—factual, fictional or somewhere in between.

Although J.'s reportorial work resembles that of many other black characters, his most significant foils are two 1920s academics who set out to conduct interviews and gauge the verifiability of John Henry's actual existence—based loosely on the real-life researchers Johnson and Chappell. In reality, both were white, but in Whitehead's novel, Guy Johnson is portrayed as an ahead-of-his-time black professor collecting a disappearing oral history (and trying to prove the value of his research to a white university department). The choice to make Guy Johnson into a black researcher confounds some readers; one writes that making Johnson black produces "a strange mix of fact and fiction" that defies the idea that "African Americans had more of a stake" in John Henry's being proved an actual historical figure (Inscoe 89).[30] But why think of historical stakes as only a matter of proving actuality? Whitehead's prescience in *John Henry Days* is a turn away from dominant historical and journalistic paradigms and toward the multiple, mythological cultural history at the margins. "Which John Henry do you want to know about?" an elderly interviewee asks the imagined, black Guy Johnson. "I know so many John Henrys" (162). Johnson might be frustrated by the inconsistences he finds among those who claim to be eyewitnesses to John Henry's contest, but the scope of his research—he's looking for the *ballad* of John Henry more than John Henry himself—ultimately allows these "John Henrys" to stand as a folkloric tapestry. Johnson's real-life rival, Chappell, remains white in *John Henry Days,* and the acclaim he earns for identifying the "real" John Henry clarifies their historiographical division along racial lines: white history seeks to prove the actuality of John Henry and thus integrate it with the dominant historical perspective.

[30] Inscoe has misread Whitehead here, even implying that the racial confusion was accidental or unintentional on the author's part.

Inconsistencies in John Henry narratives collected by Guy Johnson, both the real and imagined versions, recall the ways in which racism is often reformulated into skepticism for beliefs outside the mainstream. An insistence on a singular, historical version of John Henry requires communities of color to accord with a history of domination, but keeping alternative John Henrys "alive" via storytelling offers symbolic resistance to the dominant order. As Walonen puts it, alternative histories like the one running through Whitehead's novel "are best approached as strategic interventions seeking to shift or at least call into question prominent signifiers within the mythographic sign system that is a culture's dominant sense of history" (77). Whereas the actual truth is understood as self-evident and autonomous, truths produced in folklore and fictional utterances inevitably lead us back to those who speak them. Whitehead's aim in *John Henry Days* is to draw attention to the narrative production, a form of labor, that occurs beyond the edge of dominant historical sensibility. Collins writes:

> It is a folktale that John Henry possesses the power to ignite change to produce communities. By paying attention to folktales, and particularly their production, the sections of *John Henry Days* that concentrate on the past do less to narrate history than to narrate the process by which history is a vital force in people's lives. However, history can only be such a force outside the frame of a master narrative. (288)

Resisting a master narrative, and in turn resisting the tendency of a once-alternative narrative taking dominance, involves a practiced devotion to ambiguity. Pamela Street, heir to the world's largest collection of John Henry memorabilia, tells J. that the John Henry story is "within the realm of physical possibility" and that there's no "proof he didn't do it" (188). In other words, she says, the story of John Henry is neither verified nor disproved by the historical record. But the point of the ballads is to make his existence unverifiable, so that the meaning of John Henry can neither by coopted or obscured by a dominant history. A mutable version of the John Henry narrative allows people of color to make and remake history for themselves, just as Pamela and J. might shape the story coming out of the John Henry Days festival.

But we never know exactly how J. reports on the festival—an ambiguity that leaves the novel without a sense of closure. Whitehead's desire for open-ended history, one might say, lends itself to an open-ended future. The final section of *John Henry Days*, titled "Adding Verses," opens with Whitehead's playful proposition to forget the mortal John Henry and instead consider the immortal "Ballad of Jo Jo the Steam Drill." For Whitehead, the problem with thinking through history from the perspective of the "winners" of technological change, is that "Progress may be imagined as a railroad line, its right-of-way surveyed through rough

plains of trial and error, deep gullies of botched innovation, until the terminus of perfection is reached, the last cross-tie firmed into earth with one final spike" (341). A teleological narrative of progress renders black cultural history into mere "rough plains" and "deep gullies." On the other hand, resistance to an actualistic, oppressive historical narrative entails an ambiguity about the future. We don't know for certain whether J. will continue his jag of junketeering or give it up, we don't know if he'll share a cab and a budding romance with Pamela back in New York, or whether, as hinted by the last line of the novel, J. acknowledges that his full name is John. We also don't know whether J. is one of the two journalists shot dead when the philatelist Alphonse Miggs, driven to insert himself into the slurry of television news, pulls a gun at the John Henry Days festival.

Even if J. survives that shooting, it's possible he refuses to write about John Henry Days at all, wary of the damaging legacy of trying to reduce the myths to a glossy-magazine version. According to Pamela, "there are many versions of the song, as many versions as there are people who sing it," and each singer's experiences and gaps allow them to assemble their own John Henrys (373). What will J.'s be, and just as importantly, what will it mean? In an earlier passage, while Pamela contemplates the statue erected in John Henry's image, she wonders "how can you fit it all in?" (262), or in other words, how can an aesthetic representation compensate for a necessarily multiple history? She is a bit disappointed in the sculptor's rendering, but knows she "she can't fix him. He is open to interpretation" and that "She is confusing the statue before her with the man, and the man with her conception of the man" (263). Reading John Henry is a complex matter of separating the sign, signifier and signified; and in *John Henry Days*, it's the "conception of the man" that counts. Whitehead's novel is not a search for the actual John Henry—it couldn't be less interested in whether there is a "there" there—but for the possibilities of reconceiving the steel-driving man as an empowering and enlightening fiction. After burying Pamela's father's ashes near a possible gravesite for John Henry, J. Sutter "has a story but it is not the one he planned," and tells it will involve real labor because "the dirt had not given him any receipts to be reimbursed. He does not even know if it is a story. He only knows it is worth telling" (387). Whitehead's novel, sprawling in so many narrative directions, turning back on itself, leaving innumerable loose ends, is also a story worth telling.

Work like hell to learn something': Dispatches from Annie Proulx's Newfoundland

Just as Colson Whitehead's J. Sutter journeys to the American South with dread—he knows that his ancestors were likely enslaved south of the Mason-Dixon—so too is Annie

Proulx's reporter-protagonist Quoyle wary of his homecoming in the 1993 novel *The Shipping News.* After the death of his unfaithful wife, Quoyle follows an aunt back to his ancestral home in Newfoundland. A "third-rate newspaperman" (1) and befuddled father of two, he is taken aback by the rugged Newfoundland countryside, the quixotic ways of its residents and the dark familial past that seems common knowledge to everyone but him. The Aunt convinces Quoyle to resettle near the town of Killick-Claw and to use the insurance money from his adulterous wife's death to fix up an ancestral house that their forebears had once dragged across the ice. Quoyle takes a job at the local newspaper, The *Gammy Bird*, to make ends meet, and his job is to report on the comings and goings of ships. The novel unfolds in a bittersweet bildungsroman as Quoyle finds his way as a journalist, ingratiates himself into the community and gains the affection of a widow named Wavey Prowse.

Readers and critics have celebrated Proulx's Pulitzer-Prize winner for its depiction of the harsh Newfoundland landscape and sense of fancy, though locals have bristled at the novel's sometimes parochial stereotypes of Newfoundlanders.[31] In either case, Proulx's work is often regarded as a revival of literary regionalism, and though she was not native to the Canadian province, her version of Newfoundland, with its seal-flipper pies and screech-ins, spurred a Newfoundland tourist industry keen on reproducing the culture detailed in her novel.[32] One of the chief characteristics of that culture is its emphasis on traditional rites, folktales and myths—and the threat of a new economic order displacing those traditions. It would seem a journalist from the "outside world" like Quoyle would threaten to further diminish the role of mythological discourse in Newfoundland culture, the same way the vitality of the John Henry myth might be replaced by a marketable, empty version. Whereas J.'s slacker tendencies allow him a chance at redemption, Quoyle's saving grace is that he is so bad at his job that he spends most of the novel with his hand clasped over his chin, trying to make sense of what he sees. Newfoundlanders don't comprise racial group per se but rather a distinct linguistic culture;[33] for Quoyle to return to his ancestral home is a matter of taking on the language and customs of the island. In the novel, his journalistic work is a litmus test for whether he's a real Newfoundlander.

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[31] These "readers continue to read for realism and subject themselves to its framing," one critic points out, and Newfoundlanders might be especially concerned with "the politics of identity and place, undoubtedly a serious issue for those being represented, but also for those interpreting such representations" (Scanlon 101).

[32] In this case, the simulacra of Proulx's Newfoundland has threatened to replace the "real" island both symbolically and economically. Residents have pointed out that the literary success of *The Shipping News* added to the island's growing dependence on tourism, essentially obscuring any authentic Newfoundland with the tourism industry's desire to provide a Proulx-esque version to travelers (Lerena 23).

[33] National identity among Newfoundlanders has often been expressed as an issue of language rather than ethnicity (Webb 73), as scholars have pointed to a rich oral culture unifying the island's Irish and English immigrant descendants.

According to Jack Buggit, publisher of the *Gammy Bird*, reporting the news in Newfoundland is simple enough for someone of Quoyle's ancestry. He just needs to "run a front-page photo of a car wreck every week, whether we have a wreck or not" and to get a list from the harbormaster about which ships enter and leave Killick-Claw's port (69). But Quoyle says he doesn't know anything about boats. Quoyle found the job at the newspaper partly because he'd been asked if he had any "maritime connections" and said his grandfather was a sealer (31), neglecting to mention that he'd never met that grandfather, who was rumored to have died at the ripe age of twelve. "Well, you can tell your readers that or work like hell to learn something," Jacks tells him. "Boats is in your family blood. You work on it" (69). With Jack's reference to the "family blood," Proulx binds themes of heritage, history and work. Assumptions like Jack's rely on a pair of overlapping logics: one, that having ancestors from the area[34] would inform Quoyle's cultural identity and experiential knowledge; and two, that this identity and knowledge would prove useful for his journalistic work.

But at the novel's outset, Quoyle feels no more like a real Newfoundlander than a real reporter, and he must work to integrate himself in the Killick-Claw community by "reclaiming" his heritage. The first step is learning how to tell stories. Where Quoyle's grandfather might have been a sealer, and all of his ancestors loggers and fishermen, Quoyle's labor is in the making of stories. In *The Shipping News*, stories are imagined like knots, pulled together based on how a sailor wants to use them, and as some critics have identified Quoyle's heroic quest as a matter of tying "good knots" to protect against the bad ones (Flavin 241), with narrative knot-tying a protection against being a lone untethered coil.[35] Quoyle must tell stories (i.e. work) to survive, whether or not the stories are true. The same might be said of cultural groups and their histories, as perhaps only through active storytelling can a linguistic culture like Newfoundland's be kept alive. But that survival must fend against the tendency of mainstream journalism to produce actuality and singularity in the historical record. As Quoyle learns more about his family's dark past, and of the history of the area, the question of whether this history is *actually* true becomes irrelevant. Proulx's project, like more obviously historical novels that offer alternative or "lost" versions of history, is to point out that the "actual" history tends to ignore or overlook disempowered groups, to replace traditional ideals with new ones. Fiction-making is a way of both preserving and practicing a vanishing way of Newfoundland life.

[34] It's worth saying that Quoyle's ancestors are "from" Newfoundland in only the particular sense that they have shed their immigrant identities, whatever European countries they came from.

[35] "Like his namesake, a piece of rope without a knot, Quoyle is without connection, a fragment, a man large in mass but molded by others to be easily walked on," Flavin writes. "Quoyle is inertial" (240).

Although I don't have the opportunity in this essay to address the complexities of Newfoundland history, I would like to consider the importance of storytelling traditions in the context of the island's resettlement politics. Newfoundland has been home to disparate and usually small outport communities, in part because of the rugged terrain. A British colonial policy outlawed permanent settlement and thus encouraged fishing populations to disperse along the coast in smaller groups to avoid authorities (Iverson and Matthews 1). Life was often hard in these isolated communities. Following annexation by Canada, the federal and provincial governments oversaw relatively large resettlement efforts from the early 1950s through 1975, in schemes that offered outport residents cash incentives to leave their homes behind and move to larger population centers where they could be assured of access to teachers, doctors and other modern amenities. Resettlement's "long term economic goal [was] to turn a peasant, subsistence-level society into a market-oriented, industrial one" (Iverson and Matthews 137) by replacing traditional pluralistic economies with globalized fishing and oil interests backed by the state. As a result, many Newfoundlanders abandoned their trades for new ones, with these economic transitions deeply affecting the communities and cultures formerly sustained by the outports.

Jack Buggit, publisher of the *Gammy Bird*, represents one of these displaced Newfoundlanders. He describes the old days of fishing: "It was a hard life, but it had the satisfaction. But it was hard. Terrible hard in them old days. You'll hear stories would your hair blue overnight and I'm the boy could tell 'em" (64). The "hard life" of the past exists now only in those stories; the lifestyle left behind with the old economy. But, Jack tells Quoyle, "Guess *you* know about that, being who you are!" (64, emphasis in original). At this point in the novel, Quoyle doesn't know any stories about the old ways, and as a result, doesn't know "who he is." Jack goes on to describe his failure to find a new job through Canada Manpower, until he gets the idea to put his storytelling ability to use; he tells provincial authorities that he'd like to start a local newspaper and even suggests he'll hire 50 of his fellow displaced fishermen. "How do you know things?" he asks them, "You read 'em in the paper!" (67). But it's obvious even to Quoyle that Jack doesn't ascribe to mainstream journalistic practices. Ads are faked, stories are regularly spun, and verification is no concern for the staff of the *Gammy Bird.* Jack even resists the government's efforts to introduce him to journalistic principles:

> They sent me off to Toronto to learn about the newspaper business. They give me money. What the hell, I hung around Toronto what, four or five weeks, listening to them rave at me about editorial balance, integrity, the new journalism, reporter ethics, service to the community. Give me the fits. I couldn't understand the half of what they said. Learned what I had to know

> finally by doing it right here in my old shop. I been running *Gammy Bird* for seven years now, and the circulation is up to thirteen thousand, gaining every year. All along this coast. Because I know what people want to read about. And no arguments about it. (67)

Even though journalism is the new work replacing fishing in Jack's life, the *Gammy Bird* is resistant to the paradigm of actuality underlying most journalistic enterprises. Jack, yearning to maintain his cultural identity, will run his Newfoundland paper without a Toronto expectation of factuality. He has taken on the money from the new economy and a network of readers—"thirteen thousand, gaining every year"—without replicating its journalistic norms, opting instead for a paper that sensationalizes "Blood, Boats and Blowups" (158). For Jack, accepting journalistic principles would mean having lost the self-sufficiency of the outport life. Critics have pointed to Jack as a figure exemplary of late capitalism, as Jack feels "he has lost control of his life" (Cooke 200). Quoyle, on the other hand, "is conscious that diminished self-sufficiency has become the norm in postmodern society" (Cooke 200), and so he must choose between the reportorial strategies of the postmodern order or indulging in Jack's nostalgia for the old ways, however deluded that might be.

We should notice how Proulx's project in *The Shipping News* bears striking similarities to Jack's; her novel traffics in the stereotypes of Newfoundland that distinguish it from the outside world, even if those details don't reflect actual life on the island. Proulx is interested in representing Newfoundland's cultural history without necessarily documenting it per se, insisting that that "fiction can bring change" (qtd. in Cooke 194) or, perhaps, stem its tide. The survival of Newfoundland's culture is figured as a matter of its constant reproduction of old folk tales and myths, and the novel stages a reckoning with the "facts" of global capital's expansion. Consider the scene in which Quoyle first reports to the wharf to collect the shipping news of the novel's title. The harbormaster, Shovel, gives him a pair of logbooks so he can copy ship names, and Quoyle asks why they wouldn't provide him with a computer. Shovel reveals that he does in fact have a digital version, prints out a complete record for Quoyle to use, and tells him" "Now you'll remember that we do it two ways … So when the storm roars and power's out you'll look into the old books it'll all be there" (80). Just like the shipping news can be accomplished "two ways," Proulx seeks a form of representation that blends the old way with the new, both myth and fact.

A former journalist, Proulx "consciously presents herself as a storyteller who bases her fictions on fact" collected through archival research and fieldwork (Scanlon 90). But to *base on* fact is not to claim as fact. Instead, Proulx's patchwork of fact and fiction might render

parts of the "factual" world as legible in the same way that one would approach fiction. "This is a work of fiction," Proulx writes in the prefatory material to the 1993 edition:

> No resemblance is intended to living or dead persons, extant or failed newspapers, real government departments, specific towns or villages, actual roads or highways. The skiffs, trawlers and yachts, the upholstery needles, the logans, thumbies, and plates of cod cheeks, the bakeapples and those who pick them, the fish traps, the cats and dogs, the houses and seabirds described her are all fancies. The Newfoundland in this book, though salted with grains of truth, is an island of invention. [36]

As critic Julie Scanlon has pointed out, Proulx reproduces the long list of seemingly disconnected detail that has historically functioned as a technique of realist verisimilitude, all the while calling them "fancies" (90). Scanlon argues that Proulx's reportorial practices, even framed as fiction, suggest a "faith in mimesis" and a desire for her fiction to work metonymically (90). Proulx repeats this technique throughout the novel, choosing fragmentary images, culled from her journalistic research and her beloved *Ashley's Book of Knots*, to build her version of Newfoundland. For instance, when Quoyle is walking near his ancestral home, he sees "A hundred feet away, a fin, a glistening back," the tantalizing part preceding the whale slipping beneath the surface; and minutes later, he finds "intricate knots in wire" only later revealed as human hair and an ambiguous symbol of the history of the "dead Quoyles" (104). Proulx's metonymic rendering requires "an attentiveness and agency from readers wanting to believe" (Scanlon 98) that the Newfoundland in *The Shipping News* might also be a small part of a larger, "real" place and culture.

Proulx's novel presents a paradox of writing about place: readers encounter her Newfoundland, which both is and is not referential of the "real" Newfoundland. The factual details she incorporates do not verify the narrative in the journalistic sense, nor are they simply the verisimilitude of novelistic setting. Rather, the indeterminacy of facts reframed as "fancies" implies Proulx's postmodern suspicion of being able to know a culture geographically and temporally distant from her readers; where we cannot know, she seems to suggest, we have to instead imagine. As much as Quoyle tries to learn about his new surroundings, his most

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[36] Proulx's preface to *Accordion Crimes,* which she was working on while completing *The Shipping News*, shows her sustained attention to archival research and fictionalizing techniques: "Necessarily, historical personages mingle and converse with invented characters. In some cases invented characters have been placed in real events; in others, real events have been slightly or greatly fictionalized. The story of the fictional accordion maker is set into a fictionalized account, based on March 1891 articles in the New Orleans paper the *Daily Picayune*, of the real 1891 lynchings of eleven Italians in New Orleans. Throughout the book appear real newspaper advertisements, radio spiels, posters, song titles, scraps of verse, labels on common objects and lists of organizations; mixed in with them are fictional and invented advertisements, spiels, posters, song titles, verses, labels, objects and lists" (17).

enduring lessons are acknowledgements of what he cannot know—the murky past of his family or the sleek whale disappeared beneath the water's surface. Proulx's Newfoundland, one critic suggests, demonstrates that "absolute knowledge doesn't exist as a comprehensive entity; only as a broken, gap-toothed mosaic" in which we might see "narrative splinters" of fact, and any "conviction of trueness in [Proulx's] fiction" is a disavowal of the "epistemological mirage" of ever knowing the totality of reality (Edgecombe 116-119).

Proulx has offered a different explanation for some fragmentary aspects of the novel's style, in which sentences sometimes lack subjects or seemingly disparate details are compiled in inexplicable lists. "I was trying to give the feeling of the older style newspapers that had those little subheads, condensed thoughts, little crammed up precedes to events," Proulx says. "And also that's the way people talk in Newfoundland" (qtd. in Flavin 239).[37] Her glib generalization aside, Proulx's interest in Newfoundland speech and newspaper style points us toward Quoyle's writing as a microcosm for the novel's aesthetic. Quoyle's first lessons in newswriting come as an off-and-on reporter for *The Mockingbird Record* in upstate New York, when his editor and friend, Partridge, tells him: "Short words. Short sentences. Break it up. Look at this, look at this. Here's your angle down here. That's news" (7). Partridge's suggestion that this choppy news style will allow Quoyle to "put some spin" (8) on his articles recalls Proulx's own metonymic turns. But Quoyle fails to take these lessons to heart, partially because he misunderstands which details should be included and which ought to be left out, misunderstanding which details of the record might show him the "real" Mockingbird or much of his own life.

Quoyle's naivete begets his downfall in New York, but it also demonstrates the epistemological gulf between what he thinks of his own life and what it might take to *actually* know what goes on in the world around him. After Quoyle is fired from the *Record*:

> He abstracted his life from the times. He believed he was a newspaper reporter, yet read no paper except *The Mockingbird Record*, and so managed to ignore terrorism, climatological change, collapsing governments, chemical spills, plagues, recession and failing banks, floating debris, the disintegrating ozone layer. Volcanoes, earthquakes and hurricanes, religious frauds, defective vehicles and scientific charlatans, mass murderers and serial killers, tidal waves of cancer, AIDS, deforestation and exploding aircraft were as remote to him as braid catches, canions and rosette-embroidered garters. (11)

[37] Newfoundland linguist G.M Story's take on Newfoundlander speech offers Proulx a defense: "I find that Newfoundlanders are, can be, typecast and we sometimes invite it by laying it on a bit thick, broadening the speech a bit or exaggerating weather or playing it for fun, or sometimes ironically. I don't find that offensive at all. I find it interesting and I rather enjoy it" (qtd. in Webb 336).

Proulx's list, which goes on to included newly discovered galaxies and mutating viruses, pairs Quoyle's naivete about his wife's sexuality (as suggested by the "braid catches, canions and rosette embroidered garters") with the impossibility of recognizing global catastrophes. Quoyle walks around asking, "Who knows?", Proulx tells us, "For no one knew" (11).

So, to consider Quoyle in a different light, his problem isn't his naivete per se, but rather that he lives in a cultural context in which being naïve, or acknowledging the limits of actually knowing anything, leaves him bereft. He doesn't know "the stuff of others' lives" because he is "waiting for his to begin" (11), which won't happen until Quoyle moves to Killick-Claw, where his readers are amused by how little he seems to know about boats (143). To become a Newfoundlander, he not only has to learn about ships, but Quoyle must also talk and write about them in a way that his new community always has. His scant training on *The Mockingbird Record* won't impress Jack Buggit or his readers; the *Gammy Bird* is a "tough little paper" and "a hard bite" (63). Quoyle looks at the sensationalist news and complains he doesn't "know how to write this stuff" (63), but he'll discover that, like Proulx's style, it's matter of leaving room for the reader's imagination.

With the arrival of the *Tough Baby*, a botterjacht supposedly designed for Hitler, Quoyle first begins to learn how to situate himself as a Newfoundlander. While interviewing the boat's owner, Bayonet Melville, Quoyle's notes are ruined by rain, and so later that week he writes his article by memory—shoddy journalistic practice by industry standards, but ideal for the *Gammy Bird.* The result reads a bit like Proulx's prose:

KILLER YACHT AT KILLICK-CLAW

> A powerful craft built fifty years ago for Hitler arrived in Killick-Claw harbor this week. Hitler never set foot on the luxury Botterjacht, *Tough Baby*, but something of his evil power seems built into the yacht. The current owners, Silver and Bayonet Melville of Long Island described the vessel's recent rampage among the pleasure boats and exclusive beach cottages of White Crow Harbor, Maine during Hurricane Bob. "She smashed seventeen boats to matchsticks, pounded twelve beach houses and docks into absolute rubble," said Melville. (141-42)

Quoyle's writing shows his developing sense of imagination and community. He reports the fact that "Hitler never set foot" on the yacht, but he follows this up with the insistence "his evil

power" is there all the same. The actual evil of the *Tough Baby* lies with its current owners, part of a class of global rich who see Newfoundland as "the most utterly desolate and miserable coast in the world" (120). The Melvilles delight in telling the story of how the *Tough Baby,* a symbol of the global economic influences that wrack Newfoundland, smashed up the boats and homes of a similar place called White Crow Harbor. Quoyle's readers might find it difficult to recognize the extent of global capital flows and exploitative industries in those terms; it is much easier to see the damage caused by an evil boat. The story of the *Tough Baby*, while not confronting the actuality of these abstract forces, nevertheless gets at their truth. In writing the piece, Quoyle gets his first sense that he's "writing well. The Melvilles' pride in the boat's destructiveness shone out of the piece" (142). The people of Killick-Claw understand and hate the pride, or the shamelessness, of global capital's destruction. "That's the kind of stuff I want" (144), Buggit tells Quoyle, who at age 36 has finally done something right, and more importantly, something that shows he belongs.

Reclaiming the Past, Resettling the Future

The *Tough Baby* article is Quoyle's first successful foray into traditional Newfoundland storytelling culture, but that tradition, like the outports themselves, is materially vanishing. "There's two ways of living here now," Jack Buggit says of their island. "There's the old way, look out for your family, die where you was born, fish, cut your wood, keep a garden make do with what you got. Then there's the new way" (285). The "new way" replaces traditional subsistence economies with work abroad and domestic products with "every goddamn cockadoodle piece of Japanese crap" one can buy (285-86). It's the old way that Quoyle's after, as he and his aunt try to resettle the green house out on the point. But given the destruction of Newfoundland's industries by the encroachment of a global market, it's improbable the "old way" will persist for Quoyle, which would render his efforts at resettling his home moot. What's more, Quoyle's family history does not seem like a lost paradise as much as dark past that no one ought to claim as their own.[38] He is anxious to uncover the story

[38] One critic writes: "Proulx does admire the traditional work and skills and the ethos of helping one's neighbour (and indeed self-help), but she also approaches the notion of heritage with some irony. In her characterization of the American blow-in Quoyle, she seems to be gently mocking the urban (North) American quest for heritage" (Cooke 196). I'd argue the more compelling case for Cooke's reading might be the character Gagnon in Proulx's *Accordion Crimes.* The French-Canadian was adopted in Maine when he was a toddler; but returns in search of some essential part of his cultural identity: "He would return someday, like an insect cracking out of its winter case, he would wake speaking, thinking in French a joyous man with many friends his lost family would come back" (Proulx, *Accordion* 194).

of his heritage but also tempted to let them sink into the past. Then novel figures Quoyle as a genuine descendent to a culture that both relies on old stories and might become one itself.

The precarity of Newfoundland's traditions, at least in the landscape of Proulx's novel, emphasize the role that storytelling plays in sustaining the "lost" culture of Newfoundland's outports and fishing towns. By the time that Proulx set foot on Newfoundland, residents would have been familiar with a number of competing narratives about the "old way" and how to assess the successes and failures of state-sponsored resettlement programs in the 20th century.[39] Although "some argued that people were being forced to move against their wishes, that the programme was socially disruptive and that the economic benefits to resettlers were modest at best" (Hoggart 216), others recognized that the outport communities could not have survived capital expansion into the region. Moving from small and underserved outports to larger cities meant more than a change in labor practices for resettlers; they were sometimes treated as outsiders in their new communities, and in the absence of old hardships, the communal ties that had once sustained them fell away. According to a pair of sociologists who interviewed resettlers in the late '60s, "The destruction of 'nonviable' fishing villages through household resettlement is also the destruction of a traditional system of reciprocity and interdependency… Effective ties of kinship and friendship, as well as the mutually supportive merchant-fisherman relationship, are severed by the strains of resettlement" (Iverson and Matthews 103). Once removed from the outports, Newfoundlanders relied on stories about the "old ways" to keep memories of those outports alive and attest to resettlement as a fundamental cultural experience.

But these stories about outport life are as contested as the narratives of government's intentions in establishing resettlement schemes.[40] For each elegy, there seems to be the caveat that outport life was unsustainably hard on its residents and unnecessarily limiting to younger generations. Historian Raymond Blake writes of his childhood in the outport community of Pushthrough, a town which had seen its population shrink to 204 people by 1966 and voted to resettle because of a lack of teachers in its school (222). Blake describes a life in which fresh water had to be carried a kilometer, electricity was out of the question, homes were difficult to

[39] Resettlement continues, though on a different scale, to the time of this writing. The *Northern Pen*, a newspaper that Proulx used as research into Newfoundland's journalism, reported on the resettlement of an outport called William's Harbour in November 2017. Residents plan to maintain their old community as a summer vacation spot, and according to one resident, returning in summers "will be like returning to childhood."

[40] Narratives framing resettlement as positive or negative participated in policy shifts for the programs at large. One of the authors of *Communities in Decline* expressed concern about whether his study benefited the government or the people (Webb 314). "'If there is a lesson I learned from writing *Communities in Decline*," Matthews reflected from a position more than forty years later, 'it was that they don't leave reports on shelves … they actually implement them'" (Webb 316).

heat and the surrounding region offered little sustainable sources of cash income (224). "Many critics of resettlement never lived in any of the isolated communities like Pushthrough when decisions were taken to relocate," Blake writes, "and thus they could not fully appreciate the circumstance of those involved" (241). Similarly, Newfoundland historian Jeff Webb, who studies the intellectual history of resettlement in his *Observing the Outports*, writes that criticism of resettlement "errs by implying that Newfoundlanders resisted rather than supported the changes. Most Newfoundlanders were eager to modernize and pressured the government to provide a better living. As one of my relatives on the island of Greenspond, which lacked medical facilities, once said to me, 'you only need to sit up with a sick child one night for you to want a causeway'" (278). Resettlement narratives often weight material gain against cultural disappearance, as Blake acknowledges the loss of "a complex web of kinship" and oral traditions for the "newcomers" to larger towns (241-42).

Storytelling represents an effort to sustain that oral tradition, and by extension, webs of kinship.[41] In 2001, *Maclean's* profiled resettled Newfoundlanders, including singer Anita Best, who collected oral histories as a way of retaining pride in their ancestral lifestyle. As Best describes them, the stories about lost communities often center on contrafactual or supernatural beliefs:

> Belief systems were completely different in those days. If you saw dead fellows—they were never called ghosts, they were called spirits or dead fellows, or by their names—it was generally a warning of some kind of bad weather approaching, so you would move your boat. I would hear people talk about them quite matter-of-factly. Some people might laugh, but in some of the communities, if there was a critical mass of believers, you wouldn't go out after night without some bread in your pockets in case you met the good people—aka, the fairies, or the little people. Those things were actually believed and practised. In my community, we never went out without bread in our pockets. (Gushue 24)

To the extent to which these things were "*actually* believed and practised" (emphasis mine), stories of outport life showed that once the physical communities had vanished and their "critical mass of believers" dispersed, their beliefs and practices also disappeared. Or, perhaps, those beliefs became relegated to the category of fiction and mythology. "The community I grew up in is gone," writer Pat Byrne says in the 2001 *Mclean's* piece. "The house I grew up in is gone. It's now just summer cabins and alder bushes. In some senses, we're working only now

[41] As one fisherman expressed it, "You can't value lost friendship—and someone comes along and offers you one hundred dollars for it!" (Iverson and Matthews 91)

on memory, and that's it. And it's too bad. It's become the stuff of legend and poetry" (qtd. in Gushue 24). Where the outports once stood, only "legend and poetry" remain.

Quoyle's journey in *The Shipping News* differs from the those taking part in Newfoundland's resettlement programs because the government stipulated that residents, once they'd accepted cash incentive to move, were legally barred from returning to their former homes.[42] For the vast majority of Newfoundlanders, the loss of traditional culture was reified by an inability to return to their ancestral grounds, but having come from away, Quoyle has a chance to rebuild the green house on the cliff. Proulx caricatures residents who chose to stay in their outports with the cousin Nolan Quoyle, who lives alone in a cabin in Capsize Cove. He practices traditional ways—tying curse knots again Quoyle and his aunt—but lives in squalor. Nolan is eventually forcibly transferred to an asylum in Misky Bay. "Bloody place is full of loonies," he says (296), though he can't help but appreciate the creature comforts of modern living afforded by the institution. Nolan spends the balanced of his days incarcerated, unable to go back to his traditional life but also helpless against the lunacy he encounters in modern society, a symbol of resettlement's grim alternatives. In light of Nolan's fate, Quoyle's attempts to return to the past seem both understandable and doomed.

Quoyle initially doesn't "know the stories" (162) of the dark family history that Cousin Nolan represents. Because the communities are materially lost, Quoyle must learn the stories from the *Gammy Bird's* Billy Pretty, and it is precisely because this cultural history is unrecoverable (and, essentially unreportable) that Quoyle might become part of it, reclaim it as his own. As part of his tutelage, Quoyle accompanies Billy to the abandoned Gaze Island, where Billy's family lived before "the government moved us off Gaze in 'sixty" (163). Billy tells him about the Quoyles' resettlement during the 1880s or 1890s, "dragging that green house miles and miles across the ice, fifty men, a crowd of Quoyles and their cunny kin pulling on the ropes" (162).[43] During the journey, Billy demonstrates how he navigates by song—the oral history useful to avoid the numerous rocks that the nefarious Quoyle family once used to lure unsuspecting sailors into shipwrecks. When they reach the abandoned settlement on Gaze Island, "Quoyle had never imagined such a secret and ruined place" and tells Billy it seems "strange" (164). His expression of alienation prompts another story from Billy, who describes

[42] Sociologists Iverson and Matthews indicate in their 1968 study that "The older members of the community, in particular those on pension, tend to speak most nostalgically about Anderson's Cove, wishing many times that they could go back" (82).

[43] Iverson and Matthews suggest a similar moving practice continued through the 20th century. They describe one relocation effort in which men from surrounding communities came and hauled houses 300 yards uphill by hand until a bulldozer lent by the government showed up. "Altogether fourteen houses were moved in this manner. The total damage was one broken window and a split wall caused by the bulldozer which finally arrived to help the movers. That so much could be done under these conditions with so little loss is a testimony to the pluck and ingenuity of these fishermen" (35).

the five families living on the island and intermarrying: "Boy, they was kind, good people, and the likes of them are gone now. Now it's every man for himself. And woman, too" (164-65).[44] Billy rehearses the familiar narrative of an authentic, interdependent community, and it's remarkable that he frames the story itself as past: "They *used to say,* over in Killick-Claw," he tells Quoyle, "that Gaze Islanders were known for two things—they were all fish dogs, knew how to find fish, and they knew more about volcanoes than anybody in Newfoundland" (164, emphasis mine). Billy's "they used to say" shows the gone-ness of even the story itself, not to mention the obsolescence of being a "fish dog" in the era of radar-fitted trawlers.

Billy Pretty fills the back pages of the *Gammy Bird* with recipes, stories and gardening tips, all attempts at turning outport domestic life from what "they used to say" into what is still said. Billy is an expert in homes and the labors necessary to maintain them.[45] "There was a joinery of lives all worked together, smooth in places, or lumpy, but joined," Billy tells Quoyle. "The work the living you did was the same things, not separated out like today" (169).[46] In order to reclaim his past, or at least to identify with Billy's Newfoundland, Quoyle must resist his work and life being "separated out." He, too, might romanticize the labor of his Newfoundland ancestors to counter the narratives of efficiency and growth characterizing late capitalism, and in doing so, Quoyle's storytelling itself can be seen as an acceptable form of labor. For Quoyle, decent Newfoundland labor means crafting his news columns to reflect the narrative techniques deployed by the locals. As Proulx's inspiration, Clifford Ashley, writes in his *Book of Knots,* "The character of a sailor's knotting depends to a great extent on what branch of service he is in" (2), and in a book where knots represent narratives, the stories a person tells also depend on his occupational concerns. [47]

Quoyle's ken for Newfoundland tradition leads to a climactic battle with his editor, Tert Card, over international oil companies. Quoyle pens a piece titled "NOBODY HANGS A PICTURE OF AN OIL TANKER" that valorizes the image of eight schooners headed out to

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[44] Proulx will later ironize this sentiment when, during Nutbeem's going-away party, when a man leads the charge to destroy Nutbeem's boat by yelling "Every man for hisself" (256). The men are in fact acting as a group, albeit a senseless one, with the goodhearted intention of disallowing Nutbeem to leave on a solitary journey.

[45] The story of his father's immigration to Newfoundland—a Home Boy from the streets of England, sent to labor but spared by a shipwreck and adoption—embeds his storytelling practice in discourses of what it means to claim a place as home. His father, William Ankle, found a new identity as William Pretty, Billy explains, because he worked as an integrated member of the community (whereas most Home Boys were treated as servants).

[46] In arguing for the collection of oral histories in outports, one notable Newfoundland historian called for "pride in *the type of people* our forbears were, and in their vocations, without apology for the characteristic simplicity and lowliness—(this stance is the more needed now we are part of a larger and harsher people)" (qtd. in Webb 95).

[47] *The Ashley Book of Knots,* persistently excerpted by Proulx, discusses the decline of knotting in an age of steamships and other entertainments available to sailors. "Abruptly, however," Ashley writes, "in the second quarter of the twentieth century, knotting began to pick up again, and sailors the world over evinced a renewed interest" (4). Proulx perhaps envisions the same kind of reclamation for Newfoundland labor practices.

the fishing grounds and the "great skill and sea knowledge to sail them" (201). The gist of Quoyle's article is that the "old way" is not merely picturesque but also deeply intertwined with a long history of Newfoundland labor, one that Card would like to see ended with investment in the Grand Banks oil fields. "Newfoundland is going to be the richest place in the world," Card argues, imagining a life of leisure in Florida after collecting on his investment in oil. "It's a new era. We'll be rolling in the money" (199). Billy, though, insists that "outsiders" will see the benefits of oil, that it will never "trickle down to the outports" and that oil investment leads to moral and environmental degradation (199). [48] The two men argue over who benefits from the influx of capital, with Card taking up the argument that Billy's romance of bygone outport culture ignores the material suffering that often took place in those communities. "Nobody, nobody in their right mind would go back to them hard, hard times," he says. "People was only kind because life was so dirty you couldn't afford to have enemies. It was all swim or all sink" (200). Card's argument, combined with the dark past of the Quoyle families, represents Proulx's complicated take on the economic unrest accompanying Newfoundland resettlement. Quoyle's decision to stick with his anti-oil story, which focuses on his own efforts to clean up a spill from an oil tanker (appropriately named the *Golden Goose*), signals a desire to hold on to a cultural past outmoded by an expanding capitalist order. Quoyle's oil tanker story positions the question of economic struggle as a cultural one—whether oil and its "new way" of living can possibly preserve the island's past (or ensure its future).[49] As Quoyle understands it, Newfoundlanders rely upon knowledges that might seem folkloric or superstitious to outsiders, as evinced by Jack's tendency to "know" when someone's boat has capsized and they need to be rescued (97, 212). Quoyle's column becomes a treatise not only on traditional labor but on its interdependence with traditional cultural ways.

But Card intervenes, changing the column to "PICTURE OF AN OIL TANKER" and writing that "Oil and Newfoundland go together like ham and eggs, and like ham and eggs they'll nourish us all in the coming years" (203). Card insists he "Straightened it out, that's all. We don't want to hear that Greenpeace shit" (203). Card's invocation of what "we" want to hear is meant to remind Quoyle that he's an outsider and not a real Newfoundlander.

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[48] Wavey Prowse describes to Quoyle the death of her husband, Herold, on an oil rig: "the government didn't have any safety rules for these things. The design of the rig was bad. Nobody on the rig knew who was in charge… they was after the oil, no attention to the water or the weather" (194). The expansion of oil into Newfoundland is a danger because it doesn't appear that outsiders know enough about the island.

[49] "Where has the fish gone?" Jack Buggit asks rhetorically. "To the Russians, the French, the Japs, West Germany, East Germany, Poland, Portugal, the UK, Spain Romania, Bulgaria—or whatever they call them countries nowadays" (292). Buggit's diatribe represents the lived experience of overfishing by global interests, even if he doesn't "know" what the countries are called.

Quoyle's defense is that being a real Newfoundlander is fundamentally a matter of defending traditional ways. He calls Card's edits "rotten cheap propaganda for the oil industry" that make him "look like a mouthpiece for tanker interests" (203), objecting that Card's sin is having interfered with Quoyle's *work* by changing the story. Uncharacteristically forceful in this scene, Quoyle demonstrates a greater devotion to journalistic craft than ever before: "'This is a *column*,' bellowed Quoyle. 'You can't change somebody's column, for Christ's sake, because you don't like it'" (203, emphasis in original). Like the fishermen, Quoyle sees his livelihood threatened by Card's style and its capitalist vision, but he wants to keep Billy's "they used to say" alive in the pages of the *Gammy Bird*. "Quoyle becomes the nostalgic countermeasure to both Tert Card's pro-industrialism and the inevitable loss of a way of life," one critic explains. "Quoyle sees the oncoming oil tankers, the chain stores, and the other trappings of modernity, senses the passing of culture and a people, understands that the Newfoundland he claims as home and the Newfoundland that will be are radically different" (Chafe 92). The matter of the column is left to Jack Buggit to settle, and, always a stalwart for the "old way," he sides with Quoyle. Card eventually leaves the *Gammy Bird* to publish a newsletter for the tanker industry, and Quoyle becomes managing editor. He is no longer his "stupid self in Mockingburg, taking whatever came at him" (241). Championing outdated industries, safeguarding local traditions and journalistic craft—"All in the day's work" (288)—are unified threads in Quoyle's transformation into a Newfoundlander.[50]

The problem, of course, is that Quoyle's claiming Newfoundland identity does nothing to materially stem the tide of capital expansion or change the economic facts of the oil industry. We are reminded, as it were, that *The Shipping News* is a fiction imagined by a blow-in to Newfoundland. As Jack puts it, "We live by rules made somewhere else by sons of a bitches don't know nothin' about this place" (293), meaning both the routine exploitation of neoliberalism's global reach and the fact that Proulx's characters are "ruled" by an outsider's imagination. The question, then, is what to make of the novel's role in representing, and thus materially changing the island via its tourism industry. When Quoyle takes over the *Gammy Bird* near the novel's end and insists the "paper has a life of its own, an existence beyond earthly masters" (330), Proulx implicitly positions her novel as both part of and apart from Newfoundlanders' cultural heritage.

[50] Critic Paul Chafe has pointed out that "*The Shipping News* is unique among island narratives in that it ends with the 'castaway' remaining on the island. Quoyle is able to find true happiness on the island— a love 'without pain or misery' because he doesn't try to change the island; he changes to fit it" (86-87). In other words, Quoyle does not replicate the drive for conquest embodied by the oil industry; he resists seeing himself as an invader of any kind.

As such, *The Shipping News* ends with various far-fetched scenarios that invite both "factual" and "mythological" explanations,[51] with those interpretations structuring the division between new, outsider ways and old, Newfoundland ways. Rather than opening narrative contingencies, as Colson Whitehead does in *John Henry Days*, Proulx opens the book's present—and Newfoundland's future[52]—by insisting on hermeneutic multiplicity. The final chapter's epigraph, taken from *The Ashley Book of Knots*, says "There are still old knots that are unrecorded, and so long as there are new purposes for rope, there will always be new knots to discover" (324). That is, Proulx seems to want to say, the rope of human consciousness has been tied in countless narratives and can still be entangled in countless more. The novel's ending is dominated by the climactic drowning accident of Jack Buggit, which seemingly signals the end of Jack's "old way." But what do we make, Proulx asks, of the fantastic fact that Jack Buggit rises from his own coffin?:

> For if Jack Buggit could escape the pickle jar, if a bird with a broken neck could fly away, what else might be possible? Water may be older than light, diamonds crack in hot goat's blood, mountaintops give off cold fire, forests appear in mid-ocean, it may happen that a crab is caught with the shadow of a hand on its back, that the wind be imprisoned in a bit of knotted string. And it may be that love sometimes occurs without pain or misery. (336-37)

The reader can make of Jack Buggit's story what she will—the knots don't always hold.[53] In this climactic flourish, Proulx insists on the idea of possibility as such, making it clear that any interpretive foreclosure is also a damage to the people who hold alternative explanations of the world.

In one final scene, Wavey tries to explain to Quoyle's daughter Bunny that a broken-necked bird is dead, and when they go and look for the bird later, it's missing. Wavey suggests the grim probability that the bird was carried off by a scavenger or the ocean (representing the threat of global capital), but Bunny prefers to think it flew away (336). We might be inclined to agree with Wavey's interpretation because it so much more viable to our understanding of the actual world. But in doing that, we also assent to the loss of radical possibility in Bunny's

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[51] Most notably, Quoyle's daughter, Bunny, dreams prophetically about the green house breaking away from its cables and blowing away, symbolically releasing the Quoyles from the darkness of their pasts.

[52] Just after his foiled attempt to seduce Wavey, Quoyle is left lying close to the soil, where he can see "the complex wires of life were stripped out and he could see the structure of life." In this confrontation with abstract nature, he first imagines the past as "generations like migrating birds" but also envisions a future in which the "deserted settlements [are] vigorous again" (196). Against the "hard fact" of the rock, Quoyle begins to understand the coherence of past and future as a structure of overtly imaginative thinking.

[53] Some critics have read this passage with irony, as "the novel makes clear that the love story cannot efface the economic, ecologic and cultural challenges facing the community" (Cooke 206).

interpretation—and in Billy Pretty's tales, and in Quoyle's finding real love, and in the hope that Newfoundland's history might survive without further pain or misery.

Impossible Reports:
The Disappearing Public in E.L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks*

Detective stories typically end when the investigator finally unearths the clue he or she needs to prove, and once the detective narrates the crime, justice is dispensed swiftly in the denouement. This narrative mechanism relies on the faith that once the public is granted full view of the evidence, legal procedures and the force of public opinion will hold criminals to account. Obviously, some detective stories resist tidy endings, but generally speaking, the job of the investigator is finished once the story of the crime is assembled and verified by the evidence—extant public structures will take care of the rest. But if the public does not or cannot act on the investigator's findings, what happens to the perpetrator? What happens to the truth of the story?

Such is the concern for McIlvaine, the narrator of E.L. Doctorow's 1994 novel *The Waterworks.* McIlvaine is not a detective, per se; he's the editor of the weekly *Telegram* in New York in 1871, a city that Doctorow portrays as a frenetically modernizing juggernaut. The novel is set in motion when one of McIlvaine's freelance writers, Martin Pemberton, goes missing. The search for Martin leads McIlvaine to consider the young man's earlier claims to having seen his dead father, Augustus Pemberton, on the streets of New York—despite Augustus supposedly dying months earlier. The elder Pemberton made a fortune in the slave trade and selling so-called "shoddy" to the Union army during the Civil War, and according to his son, he has somehow cheated death. McIlvaine enlists the help of the police's Edmond Donne, the only New York captain to heave earned his commission instead of buying one (85), and together the pair discover that Augustus's corpse is missing from its grave, a dead child left in his place. They suspect that the Pemberton affair is tied to a spate of rumors that street children are being kidnapped, and McIlvaine knows that many of the city's dispossessed children work as newsboys, in "the most shameful position in the newspaper business" (118). But given the overwhelming pace of life in New York, not to mention the corruption of the Boss Tweed outfit running the city, the children's plight never makes the headlines or inspires public intervention.

As McIlvaine and Donne learn, children are in fact taken from the streets and housed in an orphanage, where an accomplished doctor named Sartorius uses them for experiments. A police raid on the orphanage rescues Martin Pemberton from a dingy cell, and after a short recuperation, he tells McIlvaine that he, too, had been part of Sartorius's experiments. He reveals that a group of capitalists, his father among them, have faked their own deaths and

given their fortunes to Sartorius in hopes the scientist can give them everlasting life. In exchange, Sartorius houses them in a secret facility within the city's waterworks—the uptown reservoir that sustains the metropolis's rapid growth—in a trancelike, undying state. McIlvaine is haunted by memories of an incident at that reservoir during his first days as a reporter, long before the Civil War, when he saw a young boy drowned there and then spirited away in a black carriage. McIlvaine is tempted to believe that Sartorius could have been that same evil figure from his memory, though that's impossible, temporally speaking, because Sartorius would have been too young. In any case, the capitalists are left to die, the Tweed Ring is busted up for scandals even more insidious than the Pemberton affair, and Sartorius is committed to asylum where he soon dies. Martin is returned to his fiancé, and the Pemberton fortune is turned over to his stepmother. The villains are punished, and heroes like Donne are rewarded, but the public never really knows of the evil mix of capital, science and political corruption that stole children from the streets. McIlvaine never reports the story in the *Telegram* or any other newspaper, saying that what he found was "not … reportorially possible … that there are limits to the use of words in a newspaper" (208). It isn't until three decades have passed that McIlvaine tells his story, in a memoir rather than a newspaper article.

McIlvaine's decision not to publish his story is especially remarkable considering that because he's not a traditional detective, his knowledge of the scandal doesn't trigger any legal procedures, so it's *only* through publicizing the story that he would give the public a chance to bring Pemberton, Sartorius and their cohort to account. In this essay, I'd like to more fully consider the question of reportorial impossibility, not only as McIlvaine comes to understand that formulation, but also how *The Waterworks* thematizes Doctorow's skepticism of his own fictional "reports" and the publics in which they circulate. In reconsidering the 30-plus years that pass between McIlvaine's unreported narrative of the Pemberton scandal and the version he recounts later, we see truth receding in a process of history. The people of New York in 1871 have "vanished" into the past, the imagined public disassembled by time itself, and history, like the waterworks themselves, has seen its constructions usurped for private ends. Jameson calls Doctorow "the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past" (24), but he might also be the poet of the disappearing public—a disappearance that seems to McIlvaine unreportable because there is no cohesive public to which he would report it. The loss of historicity that Jameson describes in Doctorow's work is produced concurrently by the understanding of the postmodern public as a fragmented sphere of competing subject positions, a plurality that denies claims to actualistic, objective "master narratives" of history. In *The Waterworks,* Doctorow imagines the conceit of a unified public to be a phantom of history, part and parcel of a "presumption of continuous modernity, and the extent to which modernity

is an illusion" (Doctorow qtd. in Tokarczyk 204). The public, like history itself, is always already beyond reach and beyond report.

Throughout his career, Doctorow held a complicated stance on mainstream journalism, writing that there is "something we honor in the character of a journalist—whatever it is that makes him value reportorial objectivity and assure us at the same time that it is an unattainable ideal. We recognize and trust that combination of passion and humility." ("False" 25). Doctorow thinks of journalism as chasing its own kind of phantom in the actuality it purports to represent, so that news coverage's "objective" reality is just one more competing truth. Doctorow's fiction approaches factuality with perhaps even more skepticism than other postmodernists, including the New Journalism developing during the 60s. Talking to the *New York Times* after the release of *Ragtime,* Doctorow stipulated that his aesthetic goal was to "'deify' facts: 'give 'em all sorts of facts—made up facts, distorted facts. It's the reverse of Truman Capote. I see all these new journalists as guys on the other side'" (Foley 172). The critical difference is that Capote and the other new journalists blend fact and fiction in service of representing an objective truth that they presume to exist in the world, but Doctorow's flattening of fact serves only the story itself, leading him to conclude that under the logic of postmodernism, "there is only narrative" ("False" 26).

So, for Doctorow, texts—whether novels, newspapers or histories—are made narratively true by combining manifest public facts and formal ideals. In a series of lectures delivered in 2003, Doctorow revealed a childhood "epiphany": assigned to write a profile for a journalism class in high school, he produced an account of Karl, a doorman at Carnegie Hall. His depiction was so moving, apparently, that his teacher wanted to send a photographer to get Karl's photo and have the story published. The young Doctorow then had to admit he'd invented Karl, but he would insist that if "there wasn't a Karl the Doorman, there should have been. And what about Kafka… he wrote from his imagination about thing that weren't verifiable from the real everyday world, but they were true!" (*Reporting* 36). In Doctorow's thinking, even though he hadn't reported on the verifiable, actual existence of Karl, he captured something like Karl's ideal "form"—the idea of Karl that was both totally imaginary and profoundly reflective of lived experience.[54] In *Reporting the Universe*, Doctorow wants to take seriously Emerson's assertion that "in a writer's eyes, anything which can be thought can be written; the writer is the faculty of reporting and the universe is the possibility of being

[54] On the one hand, Doctorow wants to frame all facts as essentially fictitious, but on the other, some fictions are more "true" than others, in the Karl-the-Doorman sense. One critic accuses Doctorow of long wanting "to have it both ways: the skepticism of saying everything is a fiction and the scruple to say that some stories are morally superior to others" with such moral absolutes obscured by an aesthetics of metafiction (Williams 147), but Doctorow understands his work as more concerned with the interior functions of human consciousness than any ontological absolutes.

reported" ("False" 26-27). Seeing the universe as the realm of human consciousness leads Doctorow to a skepticism that there is anything beyond that consciousness, meaning there's no singular, objective truth that could ultimately verify the facts in which journalists work, and so a fictional "report" can be as true as a factual one. In either case, Karl the Doorman exists.

But that's not to say that Doctorow doesn't believe facts exist, nor that he doesn't appreciate the importance of fact-finding practices of journalists. In *The Waterworks*, our narrating hero is the kind of journalist who prizes facts; in his memoirs, McIlvaine strives to be as transparent as possible about the narrative he's creating, even if those attempts undercut his own credibility. McIlvaine narrates with a sense of duty to his readers. He begins the novel by describing what Doctorow calls a "religious temperament" ("False" 25) in his approach to editing the *Telegram*, telling us that "If journalism were a philosophy rather than a trade, it would say there is no order in the universe, no discernible meaning without … the daily paper" (14). At the outset of *The* Waterworks, McIlvaine is unsure of whether his story about the Pemberton affair means anything anymore, having let three decades pass since the events of 1871. He is similarly ambivalent about his profession, at times treating journalism as sacrosanct but also characterizing mass media as "the cheapest, commonest realm, the realm of newsprint" (10). McIlvaine worries that a man-made newspaper cannot adequately represent the variance of New York, with its sprouting factories and neighborhoods, and that it is better to imagine the newspaper as produced directly by an unseen authority over the city. "My greatest pleasure," McIlvaine reveals, is "reading my own paper as if I had not constructed it myself. Summoning the feelings of an ordinary reader getting the news, my constructed news, an as *a priori* creation of a higher power – the objective thing-in-itself from heaven-poured type" (14). McIlvaine would like to see his *Telegram* as not mere synecdoche of New York but as a public reified into text—he's stifled by the knowledge that the newspaper will only ever be of his own making.

McIlvaine doubts any writer claiming an objective representation of reality, and he sees attempts at objectivity as an affectation of the modern public. "We did not feel it so necessary to assume an objective tone in our reporting then," McIlvaine explains. "We were more honest and straightforward and did not make such a sanctimonious thing of objectivity which is finally a way of constructing an opinion for the reader without letting him know that you are" (29-30).[55] For McIlvaine, reportorial objectivity is just a way for modernity to explain its own sense of progress, a false belief that representing the world as a novel possibility. "You may think you are living in modern times, here and now," McIlvaine cautions his readers at the

[55] Doctorow theorizes a similar framework to privilege novelists, who "are to be trusted because ours is the only profession forced to admit that it lies---and that bestows upon us the mantle of honesty" ("False" 26).

beginning of the 20th century, "but that is the necessary illusion of every age. We did not conduct ourselves as preparatory to your time… I assure you, New York after the war was more creative, more deadly, more of a genius society than it is now" (11).[56] The same might be true for Doctorow's readers.

Part of McIlvaine's narrative difficulty is that he recognizes that his 20th century audience is unlikely to trust his version of events, no more likely than the public in 1871. The essential unprovability of his story doesn't change over time—in Doctorow's terms, there are still "only narratives"—even though his partner, Donne, pushes him to verify every finding of their unfolding investigation. "There are things that have to be found out, you see, corroborative things," Donne tells him. "This is the way it happens – you want evidence of what you already know" (111). The only reasonable purpose for McIlvaine to pursue evidence of what he already knows is to prove the story to the public—something he never quite feels he can do. He suspects Martin Pemberton held the same skepticism when he had earlier launched headlong into an investigation of his father: "As a member of the journalistic profession Martin knew he could have applied the same careful methods Donne was now advocating. Instead, he'd leapt over all of them and – desperately, awesomely – had dug up a grave at night" (112). Finding his father's leads to Martin's disappearance, and McIlvaine's hesitates to follow because then he "would end up standing in that grave … and every reporter in town would be in there with me …" (112, ellipses in original). In other words, McIlvaine thinks providing evidence of the discovery would irretrievably publicize the story, with the greater part of the mystery still in the shadows. He chooses then to keep the investigation solely his, suspicious that a public version of Martin Pemberton's story would be manipulated or "owned" by nefarious forces.

McIlvaine's decision to delay publication is partly commercial (he wants the *Telegram* to profit from the story before other papers can get ahead of him), but he also craves editorial control. He begs Donne to keep the story an exclusive, saying "This is mine – there wouldn't be a story if I hadn't found it" (111). But the story doesn't exist without McIlvaine's telling it, caught between his desire to make it public and his desire to "own" the story. The problem for McIlvaine, from a Habermasian perspective, is that journalistic narratives in the public sphere are inseparable from their service to private concerns. Habermas argues that with the rise of mass media "the threshold between the circulation of a commodity and the exchange of communications among the members of a public was leveled; within the private domain the

[56] After helping Martin Pemberton raid his father's grave, an artist named Henry Wheelwright laments: "These are modern times! Our city is lit in gaslight, we have transcontinental railroads, I can send a message by cable under the ocean … We don't dig up bodies anymore!" (105).

clear line separating the public sphere from the private became blurred" (Habermas 181). Even though McIlvaine might try to engage in some form of class politics, lending what aid he can to the disappeared Martin Pemberton or arguing publicly on behalf of New York's street children, the *Telegram* and its readers are caught in a system already coopted by capitalistic, private forces. Among those forces are other newspapers, many of which McIlvaine explains are bought-and-paid-for by Boss Tweed, not to mention the considerable sway exercised by capitalists like Augustus Pemberton. But in keeping the story to himself, even with the intention of protecting it, McIlvaine is serving other private interests, whether it be the Pemberton family or scoring an exclusive for the *Telegram.*

For McIlvaine, the question of the story being "reportable" is essentially one of its becoming public. But when he and Donne learn that the missing street children are seized at the behest of Sartorius's immortal capitalists, it appears the story is, in some ways, already public because people have "seen" the plight of the street children. It is helpful here, I think, to clarify the terms of publicity, especially concerning media and the public sphere, that operate similarly within the text of *The Waterworks.* Although Habermas suggests privately owned mass media as incapable of facilitating a true public sphere, media critic John B. Thompson suggests that publicity is determined not by economic ownership, but instead by the access granted to the modern political subject. As he argues *The Media and Modernity*:

> What is public… is what is visible or observable, what is performed in front of spectators, what is open for all or many to see or hear or hear about. What is private, by contrast, is what is hidden from view, what is said or done in privacy or secrecy or among a restricted circle of people. In this sense, the public-private dichotomy has to do with publicness versus privacy, with openness versus secrecy, with visibility versus invisibility. A public act is a visible act, performed openly so that anyone can see; a private act is invisible, an act performed secretly and behind closed doors. (123)

Thompson's clarification is useful here because it helps to frame McIlvaine's discoveries as publicized by virtue of their visibility, if not public in terms of ownership or legal status. Sartorius's experiments can be considered an essentially private act (Augustus Pemberton and the other dying men are paying him not only to keep them alive but also explicitly bar him from sharing his techniques with the rest of the population), hidden away from public view. But every private aspect of the conspiracy has a public counterpart. The secret lab is built in the public waterworks, the kidnapped street children are housed in a public orphanage, and the "unending" interior lives that the dying men experience in a trancelike state—their immortality and inhumanity reminiscent of the 19th century corporation—is facilitated by their faked public

deaths. So, it is not simply that McIlvaine feared the truth would be commodified or usurped by a commercialized media market, but rather that he can't report to the public about those visible iniquities it can already see and nonetheless ignores.

One reason McIlvaine does not immediately report the Pemberton story is that he loses his job at the *Telegram* for protesting his publisher's decision to protect the Tweed Ring, but as he says, he could have sold the story to another newspaper. His hesitance to report the story belies his growing concern that New York itself is not as unified as the daily newspaper would suggest—in fact, the newspaper version might be a sign of the city's dissolution. "In a village, people don't need a newspaper," he writes. "Newspapers arise only when things being to happen that people cannot see and hear for themselves. Newspapers are the expedient of the municipally dissociated" (87). He suspects, too, that the newspaper's success is built both symbolically and economically on the exploitation of the newsboys: "Only where we have newspapers to tell us the news of ourselves … are children not assured of keeping their names" (83). As McIlvaine learns more of the sinister plot, he is unsure whether the story is ready for the public or the public is ready for the story.

In other words, McIlvaine worries that modernity renders certain stories, like the rampant injustice of capital exploitation, untellable or unreportable. Doctorow said in a 1994 interview that though the novel reflects his concern for the "thirty or forty thousand vagrant children running about, most of whom will end up disastrously" in turn-of-the-century New York, the latter America is hardly any better, as "we seem to be able to accept, even in our own day, enormous losses among our fellow citizens for our own comfort" (qtd. in Silverblatt, 189). He attempts in *The Waterworks* to tell two kinds of stories at once, drawing our attention to the public and the private, the visible and the invisible, as a way of representing an underlying modernist logic. McIlvaine, though, is unsure of how to represent the invisible, unreportable world, insisting that he isn't telling us a "ghost tale" (64)**,** and saying instead that "the world I am spreading out for you here in the flat light of reality is the newsprint world… going on simultaneously with this secret story invisibly in the same lines" (64-65, ellipsis mine). The question for McIlvaine is whether the "flat light" of the public gaze can penetrate Sartorius's dark secrets.

Although McIlvaine does not report the story for the *Telegram,* he is able to report it, in a sense, in *The Waterworks.* McIlvaine's audience for his later account is unclear, its stuttering syntax giving it the feeling of a spoken, ruminative recounting, but the repeated and overt acknowledgement of the reader's presence suggest a written memoir. His reader is one of his contemporaries at the beginning of the 20th century, and so his account lacks the revelatory, journalistic qualities it might have had 30 years prior, though the evils of scientific overreach,

capitalist exploitation and authoritarianism transcend the time gap.[57] He explains his decision to hold the story as a matter of thinking there would always be more time to tell the story, that in fact it was timeless:

> So there was every reason to go ahead … except that – I confess it here – it was despicable, but I felt I had … time. The more of the story I could get, the more it would be mine. Exclusively. Did that mean I found myself prepared to put the interests of the story ahead of the lives of people in involved in it? I'm not sure. Possibly it can't be rationalized … but there is some instinct that prefers … unintruded-upon meaning. That whoever tells our moral history … must run behind, not ahead of it. That if, in fact, there is meaning, it is not tolled out by church bells but suffered into luminous existence …. Maybe I felt that to print the story now, or what I knew of it, would be an intervention … a trespass of the reporter into the realm of cause and effect … that would change the outcome. Still secret, these events could unfold naturally or unnaturally. If you're not convinced, let's just say that I didn't think the story was reportable, accurately, until it was all in. That there was no story … until I saw Sartorius. (207)

McIlvaine's desire to avoid the "realm of cause and effect" emphasizes his desire to observe and report upon on a story without his presence changing it. But the impossibility of "unintruded-upon meaning" also emphasizes the "truth" of McIlvaine's story is merely that of a textual object—the account can be "objective" only in its rendering McIlvaine's consciousness into an interpretable text. The story does not and cannot claim any objective view of the actual world. In that sense, we might think of McIlvaine's first "unreported" story as a journalistic reportage, whereas his secondary narration is a report in the sense of Doctorow's subjective "reporting the universe." The characters in the Sartorius plot are imagined (or, in the case of Boss Tweed, "deified" factual figures), but it's the "form" of their evil that rings true.

Doctorow's pursuit of evil, which he imagines in timeless forms of capitalist greed, differs from McIlvaine's pursuit in that a fictional "report" (i.e., a novel) does not necessarily anticipate action on the part of a contemporary public. For McIlvaine, the journalistic version of the story is only reportable insofar as it would be actionable for the present public; his after-

[57] Doctorow says in a 1995 interview that *The Waterworks* presents an "idea of the elusiveness of villainy. If you think about it, the old man Augustus Pemberton is never seen alive. His existence is reported secondhand from the newspapers or the fact that his son saw him. His factotum, Simmons, is found only after he's dead. As for Tweed, you never see more than a glimpse or two of him. He's a ruling ethos, a configuration in the clouds. As McIlvaine says, you can't really get your hands on these people" (qtd. in Tokarczyk 205).

the-fact version removes his account from the realm of "cause and effect" he worries about altering.

Avoiding narrative interference leaves McIlvaine in a kind of trap: he doesn't want to go public until the entire story is known, and yet once the entire story is known, it will be too late for the public to intervene. The story must become past—must become history—to keep it safe from the public. But so long as McIlvaine keeps the story himself, it is less like history than private memory. As such, he feels the need to get the story out before he ages further. "I had staked out my claim to a story," McIlvaine says, "in effect negotiating with the police for my rights in it … but, after all, how phantom it was … no more than a hope for words on a page … insubstantial words … phantom names … its truth and actuality no more than degrees of phantomness in the mind of another phantom" (114). Without becoming "words on a page," McIlvaine's discoveries of the Pemberton affair might be no more than a vanished memory, a true reportorial failure. "I report, that is my profession," McIlvaine says. "I report, as loud noise testifies to a gun. I have given voice to the events of my life and times, and from my first timid type-inch of apprentice writing until the present moment I have taken the vow to do it well and truly" (59).

McIlvaine has only failed to report once before, when as a cub reporter he witnessed a child drowning at the reservoir and didn't write an article about it. This is one of the few moments in the novel that addresses any event outside the Pemberton investigation, though it will later be subsumed by the story's events. On that day, not long after the Civil War, McIlvaine is powerless to say anything about the dead body pulled from the waterworks and then seized by a mysterious figure: "that Sunday at the reservoir, the faculty was suspended, there was to be no account for the *Telegram* from me" (59). The incident later resurfaces in McIlvaine's dream of Sartorius, confusing the chronology and challenging the distinction between history and memory, intricately tangled in the three decades between Sartorius's death and his reincarnation in McIlvaine's tale.

Architecture and the Trap of History

Immediately after the passage in which McIlvaine contemplates his story's "phantomness" and intangibility, he turns to an explanation of what physical newspapers meant to a city like New York in 1871. For McIlvaine, the allure of the newspaper is that it reifies New York society into neat columns of text; it renders the conceptual public visible in the same way that new construction projects, especially publicly funded projects like the waterworks, give substance to the otherwise invisible workings of modernity. The newspaper

constructs the city each day; McIlvaine calls its reports are "the collective story of all of us" (11), and its regular publication schedule marks the passage of time in a structured unfolding of history. Doctorow figures the newspaper page as a version of New York's skyscrapers[58] and a representation of modernity:

> In those days we ran stories straight down, side by side, a head, subheads, and story. If you had a major story you ran it to the bottom of column one and took as much of the news column as you needed. It was a vertical paper, no heads shouting across the page, no double-width columns, and few illustrations … It was a paper of seven columns of words, each column supporting its weight of life, holding up, word by word, another version of its brazen … terrors. The first papers were commercial sheets, mercantile advices, with cotton prices and ship sailings – sheets you could serve on a dinner plate. Now we ran off eight pages of seven columns, and only if you stretched your arms wide could you hold the paper taut to full width. (114)

The skyscraper/newspaper column image is a critical symbol for modernity, both in its aspirational quality and potential for horrifying McIlvaine with its revelations. On the one hand, he wants to see the news articles as "projections of the multiple souls of a man," but they also show a "life of brazen terrors spending itself across seven word-packed columns of simultaneous descent" (115). Both the newspapers and the skyscraper are derived from a more fundamental, humanistic search for form, perhaps, but their facades obscure the shadowy workings of capital, which only become legible in something like the Pemberton affair. If we want to see the truth of modernity, McIlvaine says, we must read the disparate articles as part of a larger whole: "So in this news story, now, my, this … yesterday's news … I warn you, the sense is not in the linear column but in all of them together" (115). To read the juxtaposition of a newspaper page presents its own challenges: why do we have a story about a public crime next to a story about a diplomatic visit, the celebration of a sports victory next to a military atrocity in some far-off locale? But this is even more difficult when trying to read one newspaper against prior versions—the history that is stacked beneath its façade. For McIlvaine, reading the newspaper in light of history is akin to seeing how the city's architecture can "express the monstrousness of culture. As the complicit expression of the ideals of organized human life it can call forth horror" (58).

[58] It is critical to note here that McIlvaine's vision of a New York newspaper as synecdoche presents an anachronism, or at the very least the chronological mixture of memories, because the majority of the city's early skyscrapers would have been constructed after 1880—during roughly the same period that separates the Pemberton affair from the time of McIlvaine's narration

The newspaper is also a kind of civic architecture, akin to the waterworks: a product of modernity made possible by technological advances, capital investment and public resource compilation. But just as Sartorius can conceal his laboratory within the pump station and reservoir, McIlvaine learns that the newspaper—and the objective history it creates on a daily basis—can also conceal a prison. When men like Augustus Pemberton enter Sartorius's compound, they swear off public life to instead become secreted away; McIlvaine begins to suspect that the same is true for his story. Doctorow says that he discovered in his own novel "the despair of being locked in history" (qtd. in Tokarczyk 204), and the extent to which McIlvaine is "locked in history" is dramatized at the novel's midpoint, when the unraveling mystery of Pemberton's disappearance is both suspended and spurred forward by the break-up of the Tweed Ring.[59] A disgruntled lackey drops incriminating evidence to McIlvaine at the *Telegram,* but like every other publisher in the city, McIlvaine's boss forbids him to print it. McIlvaine quits in protest, and when the *New York Times* eventually exposes the ring, "All hell seemed to be breaking loose. The collapse of a system, even a system that subjugates them, unsettles folks" (151). McIlvaine worries that he cannot publish his findings about the Pemberton affair because the city cannot suffer another shock so close to the unearthing of Tweed's corruption—another scandal in which the revelation merely verifies what the public already knew. Though McIlvaine calls it "sheer misery not to have my paper" (177), it's not actually his being unemployed that stops him from publishing.

Rather, McIlvaine senses that to give his story over to the public would also be to give it over to the ravages of modernity. More specifically, he fears Sartorius, with his monstrously cold scientific demeanor, as the apotheosis of modernity's growing appetite for empirical knowledge without moral consequence. He calls the doctor "his disempowerment" (177):

> I was haunted … not by ghosts, but by Science. I felt afflicted with intolerable reality. All my fears were compounded into a fear of the night. I was without my profession, my reason for being …. My cockiness. Somehow, deprived of the means to report it, our life and times, I imagined myself at its mercy. Life seemed to be an inevitable disease of knowledge … a plague that infected all who came in contact with it. (192)

McIlvaine fears he cannot publicly report the Pemberton affair to the public without a complete, objective version; he cannot sufficiently remove himself from the story, nor can he hope to include every relevant fact connected to his investigation. Under the acquisitive logic of modern capitalism, his story might spiral infinitely outward, beyond the reckoning of a

[59] "Where you'll find mankind not shackled in history is Heaven," McIlvaine tells us, "eventless Heaven" (6).

single report. “The most terrible thing was that the only hope in dealing with it was in acquiring more of it,” McIlvaine says, “more of this dread spirit of knowledge” (192). But from his perspective, scientific knowledge has produced an architecture of history that buries morality under its façade of abstraction. As he says, “time estranges us from the belief we are all given – the pious and blasphemous alike- that we are born to live in pleasure or pain, happiness or despair, but always in great moral consequence” (235).

Time, which would have become increasingly standardized between the events of 1871 and McIlvaine’s narration,[60] has only further estranged him from the events he narrates—leaving the former, disempowered version behind. McIlvaine begs the reader forgiveness for rearranging the chronology of his narration, worried that the “raucous equality” of experiences would make his narration “suspect” (123). But it is only by violating the chronology—which certainly his memory would do irrespective of his desires—that he can lift the meaning from his experience thirty years later. His telling the story is an attempt to escape the history in which he finds himself locked. Journalists, he says, are “souls much too … in life … Our life and times are all and everything. We’re totally occupied with social and political urgencies … And death … death is nor more than obituary. Anyone’s death, including our own, is yesterday’s news” (166). But at the same time, he worries that his later version, its audience unclear, is no better, because it relies too much on his own subjective perceptions, which exceed the comfortable realms of facts and cannot pin down any hard truths. But, in a metafictional sense, McIlvaine reflexively sees himself as existing only as a narrative fiction in the first place: “My only worry … my only worry … is that I’ve given myself so completely to the narrative that very little of my life is left for whatever else I might intend for it … and that – it’s really an uncanny feeling – when the story ends, I will end” (236). And he’s right—McIlvaine is bound by the pages of *The Waterworks.* Like the old men kept in an undead state in Sartorius’s lab, McIlvaine is not dead and not alive, either: he is trapped in history, trapped in the waterworks just as much as they are.

‘You Suffer the Story You Tell’: History and *The Waterworks*

Having discussed McIlvaine’s two “texts”—the journalistic report never written in 1871 and the memoirs produced later—as a matter of temporal estrangement, I’d like to turn to

[60] Those three decades saw the adoption of World Standard Time, an outgrowth of train-time standardization and an imperative for the geographic expansion of market forces. Theorist Jonathan Martineau’s recent work on time and capitalism, which calls standard time “a social system in which the requirements and the logic of capital accumulation tend to colonise more and more social practices in contested processes” (130), theorizes time standardization as another form of resource management under capitalism, not unlike the management of water accomplished by the reservoir and pump station.

the question of *The Waterworks* as a historical novel. Jameson holds Doctorow in high esteem because his 1975 *Ragtime* dramatizes postmodernism's "evident existential fact of life that there no longer does seem to be any organic relationship between the American history we learn from schoolbooks and the lived experience of the current multinational, highrise, stagflated city of the newspapers and of our own everyday life" (22). In the context of the *Waterworks,* though, the "stagflated city of the newspapers" is not only a postmodern one—it's also Doctorow's vision of premodern New York. McIlvaine's insistence that his New York was as chaotic as subsequent versions refigures Jameson's loss of historicity as a symptom not of postmodernism per se but of what Doctorow calls the "presumption of continuous modernity" (qtd. in Tokarczyk 204). If the Pemberton affair was not "reportorially possible" for McIlvaine's public, does it follow that history itself is similarly reportorially impossible, and that, as Jameson wrote, Doctorow shows us only that we are "condemned to seek History by way of [its] own pop images and simulacra of that history, which remains out of reach" (25)?

It is important to reiterate that the thirty-year delay in McIlvaine's narration renders his account a work of memory rather than of historical documentation—"I'm an old man now," he says, "and I have to acknowledge that reality slips, like the cogs in a wheel" (235). Had McIlvaine reported the Pemberton affair, he might be reformulating the "objective" history those texts would make possible. But in their absence, we have only McIlvaine's memories, which are unreliable, circular and self-reflexive. The scene he remembers from his prewar days as a young reporter—of watching a young boy drown in the reservoir before being spirited away by a stranger in a black coat—is reimagined as a dream, the black-clad stranger being Sartorius smiling at McIlvaine as if at a "complicitor" (219). It couldn't have logically been Sartorius, but the reader must ask whether that first drowning was a historical event misremembered or a complete fabrication on McIlvaine's part.

McIlvaine attests he "began suffering this dream long ago, years before these matters I've been describing to you … before I knew there was a Sartorius" (219). That claim is also a metatextual turn,[61] describing Doctorow's process writing the novel, having based it on a three-page story in *The Lives of the Poets* published 10 years prior. The story version of the "The Waterworks" only describes the drowning of a boy in the waterworks and the seizure of his corpse by an unknown stranger (no characters have names, nor is McIlvaine a part of the

[61] Doctorow reprises Sartorius's character in the 2005 *The March*, which in part tells the story of a young Wrede Sartorius working as an army surgeon during Sherman's March in the Civil War. Sartorius anticipates the onset of modern medical science and his own "future" in *The Waterworks*. His intertextual character is figured as both ahistorical and historically bound, like the science he represents. "He lived in the present as if there were no future, or in such a state of resolution that when the future came it would find him as he was now," Sartorius's lover thinks in *The March;* he is "as finished in his soul as he was at this very moment" (141-42).

story). Doctorow described the story as haunting, its own unsettling ambiguity later informing McIlvaine's struggle to recount what he'd seen in the Pemberton affair. "Finally you suffer the story you tell," McIlvaine says. "After all these years in my head, my story occupies me, it has grown in the physical dimension of my brain … so … however the mind works … as reporter, as dreamer … that is the way the story gets told" (219). Ostensibly, it's mostly as a "dreamer"—rather than as a reporter—that McIlvaine narrates later, and Doctorow, from his vantage at the end of the 20th century, stages his novel as an analog of that process. The author's consciousness, in Doctorow's view, reorients and mixes the very history that one might try to apprehend or recount; just as McIlvaine places Sartorius at a previous scene where he couldn't have possibly been, so too must a historical novelist imagine a cohesive society that would not have actually existed.

At the risk of conflating Doctorow with his narrator, I might point out that it is hardly McIlvaine's fault his contemporary public is unable to address the evils produced by its systematic modernization, nor is it Doctorow's fault that history—the kind of actualistic, often monolithic history of Jameson's "schoolbooks"—holds no discursive power in postmodern cultural logic. In other words, Doctorow's public might have lost its sense of history, and his theory of interpretation (which tends to see the meaning of a text as a negotiation with the reader) makes any "fact" of history subject to the reader's historiological preconceptions. That is, if a postmodern public tends to view a version of history as just one among many other histories, Doctorow finds himself in a situation in which a genuine attempt to represent Jameson's "real" history in fiction would go unrecognized or be confused for merely another historiological irony. He seems to anticipate as much when considering McIlvaine's decisions about when and how to publish his account. During their meeting in the asylum toward the novel's end, Sartorius tells McIlvaine that reporting his story "will not be possible for a long time," and he must wait **"**Until you have the voice for it. And that will only be when your city is ready to hear you" (241). Was premodern New York capable of hearing about Sartorius in 1871? Is America ready to hear Doctorow in 1994? The three decades built into McIlvaine's narration, as well as the temporal estrangement of *The Waterworks* as a historical novel, is an attempt to historicize the audience itself—a reminder that a "voice" once possible might no longer be possible (i.e., Jameson's lost historicity), but also that the public of the future is yet to construct its own histories. Jameson suspects that postmodernism renders any "view of things is in reality 'merely' someone else's projection" (150), an apt description of McIlvaine's late account. His subjective version of the story is both unreportable and unverifiable, like the novel itself. In this way, Doctorow suggests that any loss of historicity as symptomatic not of late capitalism or its cultural logic, but instead of the individual subject's inevitable disconnect

from the realm of factual, publicly acknowledged history. Thus, any of the narratives that we produce—whether we call the journalism or fiction—cannot escape the subjectivity of their creators.

What would it take to see fictions as legitimate "reports" of the universe? In Doctorow's estimation, there are two kinds of power circulating in the world; one is the "power of the regime" found in "its manifest reference to the verifiable world," but the other is the power of freedom, "inhering in a private or ideal world that cannot be easily corroborated or verified" ("False" 16-17). The modus operandi for many postmodernists has been to conflate the two, insisting that the "manifest world" is itself an illusion, just as private and unverifiable as ideal subjectivity. But Doctorow wants to hold out the possibility of these separate realms, hoping that the subjective can tame facts, because the regime of power is also "man-made" and thus "infinitely violable" ("False" 17). Violating the power of fact might be accomplished by misusing them—that is, by coopting the facts of history into fictional narrative. In McIlvaine's context, the "facts" of the Pemberton affair exist outside of his consciousness, (Doctorow says journalists deal in "a world of facts discovered" ("False" 21)) and yet his private narrative carries its own meaning, even decades later. He writes:

> …it is the nature of villainy to absent itself, even as it stands before you. You reach for it and close on nothing. You smash your hand on the mirror. Who is this looking back at you? Perhaps you're aware by now of the elusiveness of my villains. This is a story of invisible men, dead men or indeterminately alive … of men hidden, barricaded, in their own realm behind the thick walls of the brownstones of New York … You have not seen them, except in the shadows, or heard them speak, except in the voices of others … They've been hiding in my language … men who are only names in your newspapers … powerful, absent men. (213-214)

The same text meant to shine light on the "invisible men" also renders them hidden; the same subjective consciousness that produces their images is incapable of lending them verifiable substance. McIlvaine lacks any evidence that these evils exist outside his own vision. In that sense, it would seem that the scandal of capitalism is no more "reportable" in contemporary fiction than McIlvaine's journalistic account in 1871. There is a danger here, Doctorow seems to imply, that the evils of capitalism might be neutralized by framing everything as mere imagination. He wants to hold out the possibility of facts, even if he cannot sufficiently produce them for the public.

Although *The Waterworks* includes a rosy denouement, as Donne and Martin Pemberton host happy weddings and McIlvaine finds a new post at the *Sun*, McIlvaine is also

bereft and alone, unable to say exactly what he's witnessed. His report is never quite finished. The closure is incomplete, the bad guys missing or unpunished, and villainy continues to elude the public grasp. In trying to put his tale to rest, McIlvaine struggles with what Sartorius implies as the difficulty of living in an age of modern science, having told him: "Sometimes I cannot understand how these demanding questions of truth do not impel everyone – why I and a few others are the exception to the mass of men so content with their epistemological limitations that some even make poetry of them" (216). All McIlvaine can do, estranged by time and now incapable speaking to the public of 1871, is to turn to poetry, and so the novel ends in a passage Doctorow has crafted in Whitmanian style. We see New York "frozen in time," with a long list of occupations and machineries (most of which would be defunct by the time *The Waterworks* was written), a vision that McIlvaine acknowledges as romantic "illusion" (253). He cannot follow through on the impulse to leave us with that illusion, though, even if he says he will. Instead McIlvaine clarifies "in reality we would soon be driving ourselves up Broadway in the new Year of Our Lord, 1872" (253). The stillness of poetic illusion is broken by the carriage's motion, recalling both the kidnappers' carriages and the perpetual motion of modernizing New York. McIlvaine's story submits to the standardization of time and date, the narrative obfuscated by history. Reality is there and not there, like a phantom just beyond McIlvaine's grasp, but he must pursue it. Such is an attempt that Doctorow, his work forever staging a loss of the real, seems to find both admirable and impossible.

Conclusion:
Fiction in the 'Reality-Based Community'

I remember standing beside the dirt runway of a little country airport, dress slacks flecked with mud, while a dog barked in the distance. In front of me, a behemoth pile of discarded glass loomed, shattered jars and pop bottles heaped as high as I could reach. They were supposed to be recycled but had instead been dumped at the edge at the edge of the Hermann Airport, where city workers hoped the trash would eventually disappear in a flood of the Missouri River. I lifted my Nikon D60 for a few hasty snaps. Another mammoth pile glimmered nearby, oddly beautiful as the crushed glass refracted sunlight. The dog's barks grew closer.

This was an early morning in October 2009. I was twenty-three years old, in my first journalism job, and acting on an anonymous tip passed on by a disgruntled city services worker. City workers were supposed to drive truckloads of recyclable material to a plant about an hour away, but it was cheaper and easier to abandon the wine bottles and marinara-crusted jars to the floodplain. Someone—who I wouldn't name then and wouldn't name now, though everyone in town might have easily guessed his identity—had passed the tip on to my boss, a man named Jeff Noedel, who sent me out to check on the rumor.

Noedel had quit his public relations job in St. Louis and returned to an ancestral home in nearby Berger, Missouri. He was as mercurial as he was physically imposing, a liberal-minded gay man standing well over six feet tall. He'd spun his local political blog into a fully-functioning hyperlocal news site staffed by a pair of kids fresh out of college, in the hopes that he might replace weekly newspapers across the state with our model of cheaper, faster reportage. He hired me to run the bulk of the site's editorial operations, from covering Friday night football at the high school to chasing down car crashes. It was a low-paying job in the middle of nowhere, and I'd been hired because I wore a necktie to my job interview. That's how I found myself at the airport trash pile.

Soon enough, the dog arrived on scene, a German shepherd that stopped a few yards short, waiting for its master to crest the hill behind. I stopped taking pictures of the trash pile long enough to wave at the man approaching. He called off the dog.

The man was the airport manager and the town optometrist. As the former, he wanted to know what the hell I was doing out there.

I pointed toward the heap of glass, as if it would explain itself.

"That?" he asked. "The city guys just dumped that last week."

He didn't see the impropriety of leaving waste in a protected floodplain, nor was he aware he'd given me on-the-record confirmation of the pile's origin. But he did tell me to get off airport land before he called the cops, and though I might have argued my right to be on public land, the dog was also on his side.

I would later confront the mayor with pictures of the trash heaps, file a series of reports about the dumping and cover-up, and instigate an investigation by the Department of Natural Resources. Citizens who'd spent hours cleaning and sorting their recyclables were appalled. Others, who'd been directly or indirectly involved with dumping practices for as long as a decade, refused to talk to me and labeled me an outsider who didn't understand country ways. When the DNR mandated the city clean the airport dump site or face catastrophic fines, much of the public blamed my reporting for straining public resources. To them I was no hero. The mayor never invited me to his house again, and I had to drive an hour to find a different optometrist.

That episode remains among the proudest of my short-lived career in the news. The stories and photos themselves are gone, lost when Noedel's company folded in 2010 and the digital archives were disputed between the publisher and some investors. But I remember clearly the sparkle of that misplaced garbage, the giddy rush of bringing a governmental misdeed to light.

E.L. Doctorow talks about journalism as a kind of priestly pursuit of impossible truth, and I was once one among the faithful. I'd grown up in St. Louis and garnered a scholarship to attend the University of Missouri's renowned School of Journalism, an institution famous for turning out highly-trained, job-ready reporters around the country. But in college, I was a middling student writing for the *Columbia Missourian* or *Vox Magazine,* often overly reliant on my prose style to cover gaps in my shoddy reporting. I was uncomfortable approaching strangers, shied away from controversy. Calling a grieving family when reporting on a fatality made me feel invasive and exploitative. And yet, with the encouragement of professors, I believed that a necktie and plenty of coffee could turn me into a quality news reporter yet.

In those days, it seemed like journalism was an industry devoted to reinvention and redemption. For all the reasons well-rehearsed by now, newsrooms were shrinking and becoming more flexible, dynamic units. Everyone hoped to find a niche of profitability in the oncoming digital age. At the same time, the major players also needed to rectify their grievous mistakes of the last eight years, increasingly aware of their culpability in the expansion of the War on Terror. In the 2006 book *Hubris*, veteran reporters David Corn and Michael Isikoff detailed the administration's "selling" of the Iraq War and the failures of journalists to challenge the Bush administration's official narrative. Many believed the national press had

been pirated for political purposes, leaving journalists only to "maintain an enduring if fraying commitment to the objective of trying to be objective (often euphemized as fair or balanced), which ironically supports the reliance on officials as surrogates for authoritative information" (Bennet et al. 59). The age of "access journalism" threatened to make media into political mouthpieces. What journalism needed, critics suggested, was a return to the principles of its Pentagon-Papers-and-Watergate era, when news outlets assumed an antagonistic posture toward officeholders. Only then would the fourth estate realize its public service role and restore the balance of power.

Young and idealistic myself, I found this idealism persuasive. We took for granted that the public—however one wants to imagine such a thing—would share the industry's nostalgia for the just-the-facts reporting of a bygone era. That was easier, anyway, than facing the prospect that objective reporting no longer played a critical role in American democracy, as the Bush administration had seemingly demonstrated in its ongoing unfixing of reality. As covered by a number of historians and critics, the War on Terror relied on public support buoyed by imprecise or inaccurate reporting encouraged by administration officials. In 2002, the *New York Times's* Ron Suskind wrote that Presidential aide Karl Rove

> "said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

Rove has since disputed the quote, but the point was clear: journalists should understand that the only "reality" reported in their newspapers would be tailored by powerful interests. Even if journalists acted in perfect accordance with professional ethics and protocols of objectivity, the reality they portrayed was in itself un-objective, having already been produced for specific political ends. Where the question to journalists had once been how to best represent the world as they found it, the post-9/11 era introduced doubt that there was a representable world at all, laying groundwork for the Trump Presidency and its "fake news" rhetoric years later.

Standing in that muddy airport field in 2009 and looking at the piles of shattered glass, I still believed objective reporting was a viable prerogative. I thought then that my pictures of the trash piles would be proof beyond dispute, and that my community would acknowledge the

same truths I saw in that pile of glass. I was unprepared to face a public of people who argued the trash wasn't the problem—I was, because my reality wasn't theirs.

I wonder how our national narratives taught us how to read the smaller ones during those years. We were all aware of the war, being waged elsewhere, perhaps fought by people we only barely knew. The war seemed to exist as an "out there" that the public sensed but couldn't fully explain. As it played out on our televisions and in our newspapers, the War on Terror had the quality of undeniable reality and yet immense unknowability. That combination set us all upon a landscape difficult to navigate with any certainty. Public distrust of media grew, but so did the sense that the public survived only on an ideological battlefield bereft of trust in much of anything.

During my year in Hermann, I had other adventures as a reporter: picking grapes before dawn with farm workers, paddling the Missouri River with a cadre of do-gooders, climbing 90 feet up a firetruck ladder. But Noedel's company ran out of money, and shortly after, so did he. My tenure in Hermann ended just shy of a year, our online venture having failed to unseat the local print weekly or to attract an investor. I packed up and moved back to St. Louis, already burnt out on trying to be a reporter.

But the war continued, as it does today, and indeed might forever.

For a while, I freelanced and experimented with writing fiction, which precipitated my return to the University of Missouri for a master's degree in English. I wished deeply to write about my failure as a journalist and about my sojourn into a rural town. It seemed to me that Hermannites, though they liked me well enough, didn't have a place in their community for a person like me. They did not trust me, an outsider from the world "out there" and its phantom war, to report responsibly on their community. They didn't think I could ever really know what it was like to be them. In retrospect, they were almost certainly correct.

In grad school I read the French tale *The Return of Martin Guerre,* in which an imposter takes up the life of a departed soldier, with the entire town tacitly supporting the arrangement. I tried to imagine what it would have been like if that story had taken place in Hermann, what it would have been like if I had been replacing a beloved soldier—maybe that was a way of thinking through my failure to fit in. I wrote a short story to imagine that scenario, but after showing it to novelist Marly Swick, I saw that I was too close to the source material.

I shelved the story for years, but it became the germ for my novel, *We Regret the Error*. I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Illinois at Chicago when renowned writer Cris Mazza, who would help me through early drafts of the novel, pointed me to the idea of the rural weekly newspaper as exactly the kind of oddity that readers want to know more about.

But, she asked a group of grad students in her workshop, what novels have been written about reporters? What exactly do journalists signify in worlds of fiction?

I have attempted to answer Mazza's provocation with the essays in this exegesis. Reporters are everywhere in American novels of the 20th century (and before that, certainly). Reporters circulate through the naturalist texts of Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair and Stephen Crane, trying to show the world as it is. In modernism, reporters like Hemingway's Jake Barnes or Sherwood Anderson's George Willard seem either sick with reality or powerless to change it. And reporters in postmodern novels, which I've looked at more closely in this study, position journalists as peddlers of increasingly unreliable metanarratives about the formation of public knowledge. Of course, my own novel is also an attempt to answer Mazza's provocation—one that attempts to extend a common aesthetic project among the authors I've written about to the era of the War on Terror, during which I came of age.

Assessing novels written about journalism presents a unique challenge. Steve Weinberg, a professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, has collected hundreds of novels about journalists. He finds almost all of them unsatisfactory because they distort the *actual* experience of being a reporter for narrative effect. Writing in the *New York Times* in 1989, Weinberg opines that America has yet to see a great journalism novel—what he then called his "White Whale." In the monomaniacal fashion of Captain Ahab, Weinberg read hundreds of the estimated 2,300 novels featuring journalists as their protagonists (Weinberg, "The Reporter"). "Bad writing is everywhere," he writes, "but journalism seems to have come in for more than its share of silly plots and wooden dialogue. The depictions suffer from a lack of verisimilitude that is all the more astonishing when one takes into account how many of the authors are journalists themselves" (Weinberg, "The White Whale"). In other words, Weinberg asks whether novelists shouldn't "get it right" when portraying a profession that's all about getting it right.

But even if novels were to borrow from journalists' "real" experiences, they must always stop short of actuality—this is the current boundary of literary form. Whereas Weinberg thinks novels about journalism ought to get the facts straight, I find that journalism, as a literary subject, better asks what it means to be a fact in the first place. After all, novels traditionally individualize a public issue, so I would ask how a subjective view of fact-making changes the way we see public facts. My research has narrowed Weinberg's field to include only those novels considered part of a literary canon; there is, undoubtedly much to be said about the distinctions between the literary and the "genre" novel with regards to journalism, though that was not my focus here. The focus on the literary de-emphasizes representational accuracy and turns instead to questions of representational practice. For instance, the fictional

journalists who face down versions of Huey "Kingfish" Long, in Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* and Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, can tell us very little about the historical figure, but they can illuminate the structures of fact and ideal that contour totalitarian messaging. Novels like Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* and Annie Proulx's *Shipping News* don't replace the cultural histories they explore, but they instead dramatize how cultures are reported out of or into public history. And perhaps no single writer has done more to cast skepticism on the existence of a coherent public sphere than E.L. Doctorow, whose novel *The Waterworks* highlights the enduring question of whether the public can adequately know—or be told—the story of its own iniquities. All considered, these novels I've attempted to analyze, and a score of other similar examples, suggest that when we see a journalist in literary fiction, it behooves us to ask where the fact-seeking journalist ends and the fiction-making author begins. In doing so, we might critically analyze the discursive functions of factuality both in the text and in real-world institutions.

My aspiration for *We Regret the Error* is to continue the tradition of representing journalists at the edges of fact and fiction, but I would hesitate to think of my novel as Weinberg's "White Whale." There is far more fiction than fact here. Creative liberties have significantly reshaped the novel's autobiographical aspects, its small-town newspaper and its background of Operation Enduring Freedom. Journalists are likely to object to the professional practices I've described (even though I've conceded that my protagonist, David Sinclair, is an especially poor reporter). There exist innumerable facts of military service or small-town life that won't accord with my novel's imagined world, but *We Regret the Error* is meant to capture the essence of small-town journalism in 2006: the trusted newspaper, the town it serves and the intricate ways in which the two constantly inform each other. In doing so, I hope to plumb enduring questions of truth, especially as our idea of truth coincides with the political structures of a community like the fictional New Rome, Illinois.

We begin the novel shortly after Sinclair has published an unpopular article that juxtaposes New Rome's patriotic zeal with the grim casualty numbers of the war. His predecessor, Buck Neely, retired from the *News* after 33 years of service and suggests Sinclair try to win the community's favor with a laudatory profile of a local hero, Tiberius Marks.

As Sinclair's antithesis in the novel, "Tie" enjoys nearly unlimited adoration in the public eye. But beneath the veneer of glory, he is deeply conflicted about the nature of truth and his ethical imperatives in war. Just as the Iraq War was "sold" by journalists as a response to 9/11, Tie's public reputation for heroism is used as proof of the war's legitimacy. His real reasons for fighting, as Sinclair learns, are more complicated. He is an unhappy warrior, afraid that he cannot protect his loved ones, equally afraid to turn his back on the rural and working-

class men asked to fight on both sides of the war. Much of Tie Marks's story is inspired by the real-life saga of NFL star Patrick Tillman, who walked away from a lucrative football career to serve in the Army Rangers. As chronicled by Jon Krakauer in *Where Men Win Glory,* Tillman was killed by friendly fire while serving in Afghanistan, but the U.S. Army misrepresented his death in order to continue using Tillman's "martyrdom" as a morale boost for the war effort. In the case of *We Regret the Error,* Sinclair's motives for maintaining Tie's heroic image are less clearly strategic, but the public's desire for the patriotic narrative is much the same. The fact that Tie is missing from the beginning of the novel to its end only emphasizes the unknowable, "out there" nature of the war he's asked to fight and the moral injury he's asked to endure.

The only person in New Rome who knows about Tie's inner conflicts is his fiancé, Ernestine Burden. In many ways, she represents the repentant portions of the American public during the latter years of the War on Terror. She regrets urging Tie to return to the war, but she also can't imagine a world in which she and Tie are allowed to choose differently. Stuck in New Rome while Tie is serving in Afghanistan, Ernie appreciates that Sinclair listens and acknowledges the ambiguities of her life. She knows that Sinclair develops romantic feelings for her, and though she doesn't return those feelings, she craves relief from the pressure of being Tie's fiancé. Ernie struggles to manage the public narrative about Tie just as she struggles to decide her own future, and her relationship with Sinclair is complicated in these passages by her culpability in an erroneous report about a fatal car crash. Ernie, too, has some errors to regret.

Interspersed among the novel's passages are a series of letters penned by Tiberius Marks's grandmother, who creates her own "journalistic" account of the world as she sees it through the frame of her front window. A matriarchal figure clinging to the legacy of her grandson, Henrietta Marks maintains a self-reflexive narrative, marginally aware of its biases and shortcomings. Henny is nonetheless eager to enforce her sense of morality and order on the chaos of her life. Her letters, addressed to Tie but never actually sent, intervene in the larger narrative by dramatizing the potential of safeguarding a coherent, individualistic narrative in the face of contradictory facts. She doesn't think of her version as necessarily true or false, she only thinks of it as the best version available to her, the one that she'll choose for posterity.

In the latter sections of the novel (not included here), Sinclair learns the truth about Tie's status as missing-in-action, and he tries to convince Ernie to make that information public. When she refuses, and as pressure builds on Sinclair to try and save his job, he publishes a fabricated news article about Tie dying heroically in combat. In the immediate aftermath, the community finally warms to Sinclair, even as he waits to be found out and fired. Ernie is horrified both by his lie and by the way her friends and family refuse to see it as such.

After Sinclair's predecessor, Buck, does some fact-checking on the story, the U.S. Army becomes aware of it, and they send a group of officials to New Rome. To Sinclair's surprise, the Army says it can neither confirm nor deny the article, and with the officials' tortured explanations, the novel leaves open the possibility Tie was a traitor whose death was ordered and then covered up, perhaps with Sinclair's unwitting aid.

The novel's competing facts and fictions destabilize the role of the *New Rome News* where Sinclair works, even as the paper faces the same economic pressures as real-world news organizations during the last decade. The novel features a number of historical glosses that demonstrate how actualistic thinking has shaped both journalism and history in relation to literary realism. These glosses read as an "objective" account of historical facts and yet paradoxically take on a mythic character, whereas the main story action makes use of traditional realist aesthetics, in which non-objective, character-driven perceptions are the basis for a sense of reality. In doing so, I aim for the project to divorce fact and reality both in its themes and textures, perhaps reinvigorating a sense of how fictionality and subjectivity remain a vital presence in our public discourses.

In recent years, objective journalism has failed to intervene the tide of so-called "fake news" (or the various economic and ecological catastrophes accompanying it). But rather than a rejection of objectivity, journalists are more likely to try more of the same in the next decade. I expect the industry to entrench itself in actuality, its own outmoded ideological construct. Take, for instance, the popularity of the *Washington Post* slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness," debuted in early 2018. Its ad campaign implies that the "light" of traditional, objective reportage is the lifeblood of rational discourse in American democracy. We should notice the conservativism underlying that presumption, even in a paper that President Trump has lambasted for progressive leanings. I'd urge us to acknowledge that traditional reportage, perhaps like American democracy itself, has always been structured to situate actuality in service to other powers. The challenge before us is to take seriously the role of both fact-making and fiction-making in shaping our social reality. I hope that *We Regret the Error* represents more than an elegy a dying journalistic paradigm; the novel is meant as an invitation to reimagine how we make the facts of the world, and in doing so, how we might remake the world itself.

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Excerpts from

We Regret the Error: A Novel

Section One:
Faces and Names

On an unlovely morning in a little Illinois town, thirty miles east of the very heart of the world, the *New Rome News* fell upon doorsteps and driveways, just as it had every Monday for nearly a century. The elementary school principal and a dental hygienist and a roofer each woke, checked for their heartbeats first and their copies of the *News* second. A nurse coming home from the night shift plucked the paper from cracking brown leaves strewn on her lawn, a reminder she really ought to do something about the overgrown white oak at her fence line. And the town's florist, who hated so much the prickle of autumn infiltrating her cotton robe, for only a moment risked opening the front door to retrieve her copy. They each carried out their weekly rituals, skinning the plastic sleeves from the rolls of newsprint, snapping the paper into shape with a pop and rustle, ignoring for a few moments their coffee mugs descending to room temperature.

The mayor slept in that morning, and so he didn't hear his wife crumple the paper and toss it into the trashcan long before he'd get a chance to see it.

At her own breakfast table, the bank manager nearly spat out her oatmeal, called her husband to get a look at what the new editor decided to put into the paper.

The Baptist minister called the Catholic priest to see if he knew anything about this.

A bedraggled lawyer who had taken to sleeping in his office, marital relations at a stage of touch and go, had just begun looking over the article in question when he noticed a hister beetle skittering across his floor, and he couldn't stop reading long enough to roll his paper for a healthy whack. So, it lived.

And on the plastic benches of the local fast food dining room gathered a faithful crew of four local curmudgeons, jeans threadbare at the knees and gunmetal glasses frames precariously at their noses, salivating both for the greased biscuit-egg sandwiches and the scuttlebutt cued up for them by the front page of that morning's paper. They passed around a single copy while trying to decide who would best deliver this new editor a good bawling-out, though in truth they'd never step away from the safety of their geezerly quartet.

Members of the local Parent Teachers Association consulted their lists of telephone numbers. The folks at the nursing home half-yelled to each other in the rec room. And over at the trainyard no one much cared for reading, but they would later hear about the article, shake their heads and ask what the world was coming to.

The chamber of commerce president, a confirmed bachelor groggy from a night of heavy drinking and wearing only ratty underwear on his damp sleeper-sofa, checked the masthead to make sure that this was indeed the *New Rome News*. It was.

And that morning, in a chilly farmhouse painted in robin's egg, the phone rang incessantly for the former editor of the *News*. Buck Neely was supposed to be retired, he told his indignant callers, and he didn't know anything about the abomination in this week's. The *News* was no longer in his hands. His lips puckered around those words, their cloying sadness. "I don't really even know David Sinclair," Buck told an especially aggrieved member of the VFW. "I don't know why he would have published something like that." Buck's wife stood by in a flannel nightgown, unable to sleep. She threatened to pull the phone cord from the wall.

Much closer to town, the advertising manager of the *News* answered a phone call from her neighbor's aunt and then sent her husband to the end of the gravel drive for their copy. Even after three decades tending the weekly's acreage of ad space, Sissy Branch hardly read the paper, unless something on the editorial side was likely to upset her customers. "What horseshit," she said while looking over the front page. Sissy harbored her share of doubts about the new editor, this David Sinclair kid from somewhere around Chicago, with his sloppy hair and habit of walking sock-footed about the office, and now he'd done it. "Get my stand mixer down," Sissy said to her husband, knowing she'd spend the day delivering plates of make-good chocolate chip cookies to aggrieved advertisers.

Meanwhile, Henrietta Marks ascended fourteen kneecapping steps from the bottom of her staircase to her second-story apartment on Market Street. She steadied herself against an armchair, a bit out of breath and dog-tired as the late September dawn reached her sitting room. A woman of her age. She made herself a cup of Earl Grey, settled in for a quiet morning. But frown lines ran the length of her cheeks just after she opened the paper. And then Henny Marks was a hornets' nest. She could barely steady her hands while she read the article, could barely take up her pen and notebook quickly enough, and by the time the sun had risen over Market Street, she filled a dozen pages with her response to David Sinclair.

Only later that day would the *News* find Ernestine Burden, picking at a ham sandwich in the teacher's lounge at New Rome High and doing her best not to think of her fiancé gone missing at the edge of the world, when someone asked her what she thought of the article in the newspaper that morning. Had she ever seen anything so disrespectful, especially considering? She hadn't, not until she read a copy of the *News* in the privacy of her driver's seat, spreading the paper over the steering wheel, wondering who this David Sinclair might be and whether the war had finally come to New Rome.

Soft-bellied and worried about an early recession of his hairline, concerned perpetually with the thoughts of people who rarely thought of him, David Sinclair was destined to be a disappointing newspaperman, or more accurately, to never be a real newspaperman at all. He fell easily in and out of love, not only with people but with ideas, their proximity to truth always mysterious to him. He was born with overwide feet that sagged over the edges of his soles. If pressed, he would admit he was certain of nothing, but it seemed his entire life pointed him toward a future constellation he couldn't quite finger. Sinclair had a way of nodding in agreement to anything said in his company, so that people would never suspect he wasn't listening in the slightest. He drank enthusiastically and rarely shaved the hair from his neck, and he had excelled at nothing save an ability to put many words to paper under the threat of deadline. Enough to be the editor of the *New Rome News.*

On this September morning he drove his unremarkable sedan along the two-rutted path to Buck Neely's farmhouse. The interior of the car, which had been handed down to him as a graduation gift, was papered with hamburger wrappers and half-used notepads. Sinclair parked a good pace from the front porch, and when he got out of the car, he waved to Buck, who nodded from a weathered oak chair.

Fog smelling of wet cardboard settled in the surrounding paddocks. Sinclair started forward, realized he forgot the copy of the *News* he'd brought to the old editor, and went back to pull it from the passenger seat.

Buck barely blinked while he watched his replacement's approach. Three decades of service clung to Buck like sweat on a collar, his mouth settled for good into a frown. He retained a full head of hair, though it had gone white shortly after his youngest daughter's departure to the state college. In conversations he avoided direct eye contact, preferred instead a squint to the middle distance. He almost exclusively wore plaid.

At their first meeting Sinclair had assumed Buck found something particularly distasteful about him personally. Buck had told him he was only hired because he wore a necktie to his job interview, and he treated Sinclair like a notebook-toting flunky through a few weeks of on-the-job training before Buck's official retirement. Buck used a marker to slash through Sinclair's first articles, scolded him for forgetting a backup battery for the camera, generally bulldozed Sinclair for having the gall to take his place as the editor of the *News.*

Buck's scowl that morning did not surprise Sinclair as he pulled up a second chair.

"What took you so long?" Buck asked, leaning against a backdrop of peeling white paint and half-smashed fly carcasses.

Sinclair passed him a rolled-up copy of the paper. “If you’d like to come into town one of these weeks,” he said, “you could pick up a freebie at the office. Or I could have Mrs. Branch add you to the paper route. I’m sure we could—”

“And pass up the chance to get the story from the editor himself?” Buck snapped open the paper, held it as a barrier between the two of them, so that he had to peer over the top edge of the news section to meet Sinclair’s eye.

Sinclair wondered aloud if Buck might consider giving up reading the *New Rome News* altogether, if he really meant to devote his retirement to the little grove of walnut trees at the property’s edge.

Buck folded the paper over and pointed to the front-page story, sticking it out so Sinclair could see it, as if he were unfamiliar. “What the hell is this?” he asked. “How did you screw up a city council proclamation?”

The proclamation approved last week in council chambers had stated that New Rome was, in the words of whichever councilmember had written it, “committed to stand against terrorism at home and abroad.” The representatives of the people of New Rome declared their undying commitment to life and liberty, generally, and war in Afghanistan, specifically.

“Oh, that,” Sinclair said. It had seemed, Sinclair explained now to Buck, like he ought to try and add some perspective.

It just so happened, Sinclair’s front-page article read, it had been almost exactly five years since the first military casualty in Operation Enduring Freedom. “The city’s official decree,” Sinclair had written, “comes after more than 300 American casualties in the conflict. The first was Master Sergeant Evander Earl Andrews, who was part of the 366 Civil Engineer Squadron, a unit tasked with constructing an Air Force Base in Qatar in 2001. He was 36 years old, and he was killed by a forklift.”

“This headline,” Buck said to Sinclair now. “‘Council supports war’s deadliest year.’ What the hell were you thinking?”

“Maybe it would be good,” Sinclair said, “to balance out the proclamation. Give a little national context to the paper.”

“Context?” Buck said.

“Kind of a reminder about how long—”

“Who said your job was context?”

Someone must have told him that. It didn’t sound like something Sinclair would have come up with on his own.

Buck read aloud from the article: “Following Sergeant Andrews’s death, his hometown newspaper called his story a spotlight for the war on terrorism. It is a reminder that America’s

small towns continue to supply their young men to a dangerous international conflict with no clear end." Buck narrowed his eyes at Sinclair. "Do you have any idea where you're at? I thought you were trying to keep this job."

"I am," Sinclair said, and that was true. Since graduating in the spring, he'd applied to more than a hundred jobs: a copyediting position at the *New York Times* for which he was laughingly underqualified, a staff writer opening at a magazine about the polymer industry, a part-time gig covering junior college sports in Montana. For his troubles he hadn't received so much as a phone interview. He had in fact been staring at a collection of job applications for bookstores and coffeehouses when the phone rang and he first heard Buck's voice on the other end, and he'd agreed, yes, immediately, he would love to find out more about what might be waiting for him in New Rome.

"You've got to think about the long run," Buck said. "Don't forget the *News* is a one-man show, always has been and always will be. But people here care just as much about their news as they do in the big city. Maybe even more sometimes. Could have sworn I told you that before you got here."

Sinclair nodded.

"Keep your head on straight. Don't go trying to start any shakeups or shakedowns. Cut this political crap. No anonymous sources or any of that gumshoe bullshit. Spell people's names right. Even if it's John Smith, you'd better ask. Don't forget everyone in this town is related, except for you. Plan on showing up. To everything. Early. And stay until the end of the football games, no matter how far down our boys get. But don't think twice about those high school girls. Or the ones about to graduate. Or the ones who already graduated."

Nodding.

"On second thought," Buck said, "head out of town if you need that kind of company. Do yourself a favor and run your front page past Sissy Branch, especially if you've got yourself an inclination for, what did you call it, context. Sissy won't read the stories, but she'll at least see the headlines. We don't write bad stories about our advertisers. Or kids of our advertisers. And you don't have to wear that goddamn tie anymore. Only bankers and mayors wear ties. Remember this is a one-company town. Who cares if all they do up at the top of the hill is make soda pop bottles? It's not going well these days. Don't write about it. Don't ask about it. People here like to believe that everyone's white and everyone's Christian. Don't even ask about straight or gay. People in this town just want to see everybody the same, and you're not going to change that, facts be damned. Give them what they care about. Don't miss a fire, even if it's just a grass fire. Wave hello to people at the grocer's. Keep a little of the good stuff in your desk, but only for emergencies. Or if you'll be up all night with the layouts. I expect

you realize Homecoming is around the corner. You need to be at every part of it: the parade, the game, the dance. Get the grip-and-grin for the king and queen. That's a highlight. Faces and names, kid. That's what's kept this place open for a hundred years. It's not about fighting some war. Wars come and go. Don't forget what we're about. Faces and names."

Sinclair promised he wouldn't forget, though he probably would.

"As for this," Buck said, shaking the newspaper, "scrounge up a big shovel. You'll need it for the shit headed your way."

"I just thought," Sinclair said.

"We've got kids over there, you know. I don't suppose you've heard of our boy, Tiberius Marks? That's a name you should have known already. Made special forces last year. He's over there fighting, and you go on about, what did you write here, the 'deadliest year.'"

"I didn't know."

Buck shook his head. "Didn't know? You'd better find out."

When the wind picked up on Fourth Street, Ernestine Burden leaned in. Twenty-three years old, undertowed by her hometown, Ernie, as her friends called her, felt perhaps too deeply the needs of those around her. She was never one to take the last slice of cake. She camouflaged herself in the unremarkable, could be passed easily on the street, a shock of brunette hair and eyes plucked from an old sepia-tone photograph. She was given to wearing too-large sweaters and slipping quietly through crowded rooms. She hated the implication that she was adorable, or pretty, or otherwise anymore lovable than anyone else. Ernie loved radio hits of the 1970s and midcentury novels, she had tutored college calculus and she dreaded seasonal allergies. In New Rome, she was a square peg. She knew it. She'd spent four years at the state college studying to become a teacher, but after a few fumbled job interviews, her efforts had so far won only an extended stay in her childhood bedroom. Her fiancé had disappeared on the other side of the world.

And now, despite an autumn storm curtaining off the town, she hurried along the sidewalks cracked years ago by tree roots, worried that rain would soak right through her worn canvas sneakers. About her shoulders Ernie held tightly to a New Rome High varsity jacket, a relic of wet pleather once belonging to Tiberius Marks. Ernie was just a few minutes late for a meeting with the new editor at the *News* office.

"I'd like to do an article about him," the editor had told her over the phone. "Everybody is really proud of him, seems like."

Yes, she'd agreed then. It also seemed that people only talked to her because they wanted to know about Tie. But she knew about other things, Ernie wanted to say. She had finished a senior thesis on frontier narratives. She knew the recipe for a mean wild mushroom risotto. The mysteries of organic chemistry bared themselves to her.

"Could you come in and do a short interview?" David Sinclair had asked. "It would be nice to get some of the personal side. People like that."

So, she'd agreed to stop by the office after her shift as a substitute teacher at New Rome High. Ernie hadn't expected the rain, and the only jacket she could find in her car was Tie's old letterman, which made her feel small and cramped-in and a bit foolish, given that her students walked around in similar versions. At least the jacket was large enough for Ernie to fold the sleeves and repel the damp

Despite growing up in town, she had never actually been inside the local paper's office, and when she opened the door of the *News*, she found the front room empty. A desk to her right was cluttered with glossy magazines and stacks of papers, a clock-radio at the corner blinking 12:00. A narrow hallway led deeper into the office space, but she couldn't see exactly where it might go. The lights were on, but with the dark skies outside the place was dimly lit and uncomfortably quiet.

She called out, and then for the first time saw the face of David Sinclair, edged from a doorframe. He said her name, by way of a question, and she said his by way of an answer.

"Come in," he told her. "It looks awful out there."

Here was an odd thing in New Rome, a newcomer. Occasionally Ernie would meet transplanted retirees fleeing the city's bustle for cottages at the edge of town, but never someone as young as Sinclair. New Rome bled youth, as most of Ernie's counterparts graduated high school and left for towns with more work, or a few chased down college degrees, or they joined up. Others took up residency in the Lee County penal system. One or two disappeared with lovers, one or two returned alone. Ernie might have gone somewhere, too.

"Thanks for braving the storm," Sinclair said as he showed her into a dank little room not much larger than a broom closet. Newspapers stacked up everywhere. An unreasonable odor of stale coffee and mold and sweaty knees. "Want to have a seat?"

Sinclair took the varsity jacket and for want of a coatrack laid it over a filing cabinet. He pulled out a chair for her and then settled into a green faux-leather job with stuffing spilled from its seams. He wore a collared shirt but had failed to tuck it into his slacks, or maybe it had

become untucked and he hadn't bothered to fix it. He asked Ernie if she minded his using a digital recorder, which she supposed she didn't.

"Okay," he said. "So, we can jump right in, if that's okay with you. What sort of person gets a name like Tiberius Marks?"

"He's one of a kind."

"And you and he—"

"Engaged."

"And now he's—"

"Gone," she said. "Overseas, I mean. He's active duty."

Sinclair nodded but did not offer any of the stock phrases to which Ernie had grown accustomed. He didn't call anyone a hero, didn't thank her for her sacrifice.

"How long has he been away?" Sinclair asked, holding a pen just above the notepad before him on the desk. His mouth hung open while waiting for her answer.

"This time, it's been just a couple months," Ernie said. "He left at the end of July."

"Not too long before I got here, I guess. And where is he stationed now?"

Ernie explained that she had dropped Tie off at the airport two months ago, and that he'd then flown to another military base, and then on to Kabul. From there it might be anyone's guess, because his unit was meant to move in secrecy through the mountain regions, and families back home were kept on a need-to-know basis.

"Sorry to disappoint," Ernie said. "There's just not much I can tell you."

Sinclair nodded, smiled.

Ernie crossed her arms over her chest. Two weeks earlier, she had received an early morning phone call from casualty services notifying her that Tie had failed to rendezvous with his unit and so had been officially listed as missing, but this was nothing to worry about quite yet, she'd been told. Special forces operators were known to occasionally sidetrack, miss check-ins and return safe. The call was just a formality, the officer said. "And on the off-chance that Sergeant Marks has been captured by enemy combatants," the sandpaper voice on the phone had told Ernie, "well, he is probably more of a threat to them than they are to him." She was supposed to keep this to herself, if possible, and wait for further word. None had come.

"He's in Afghanistan," she told Sinclair now, in the squalid office. "That's as much as we can say."

"Top secret or something?"

They expected a four-month deployment but maybe longer, Ernie explained. Becoming standard for Operation Enduring Freedom. “He’s a what they call a weapons sergeant 18B,” she said.

“Which is?”

“His job is to fire anything with a trigger.”

“Huh,” Sinclair fidgeted in his chair. “Well. Most of what I know about him so far is just what I found in the morgue. Mostly his football days and school awards.”

“The morgue?”

“Sorry. Reporter-talk for old newspapers.”

Sinclair pulled an edition from his stack, pointed to a picture of Tie printed alongside an article about his first deployment to Iraq. Tie half-smiled in a way that worried to beauty, eyes shadowed under the crease of a brow. By that age he’d grown into his sledgehammer jaw and a second helping of shoulders.

“Yeah,” Ernie said, looking away from the picture. “Buck always wrote that stuff about him.”

“I thought it would be nice for the town to get an update, I guess,” Sinclair said. “They’d appreciate a different kind of war story.”

“Because of that article you wrote last week?”

Sinclair tugged at the hem of his shirt. “I hope you didn’t take it personally. It seems like a lot of people took it personally.”

“Actually, I liked it,” Ernie said. “I thought it gave everyone a little perspective.”

“Context, maybe?”

“Sure.”

“Since that story,” Sinclair said, “it seems like nobody’s willing to talk to me. Just yesterday I went out to interview a county commissioner at his farm. We were standing there with cow shit around our feet, and I introduce myself, and he says something like, ‘Don’t know that I can trust you any farther than I can spit.’ Who says that?”

“Where are you from, anyway?” Ernie asked. “Chicago?”

“More or less.”

She nodded. “Do you like it, here in town?”

Instead of answering her question, though, Sinclair asked what she did for work.

“I pick up days as a substitute teacher,” she told him. “Anyone with a four-year degree, they’ll take. A few women are taking maternity leaves this semester, so I do all right.”

"I don't envy stepping in for someone else," Sinclair said, indicating the stacks of newspapers around them. "Everyone keeps telling me they miss Buck. Some of them have even called him and asked him to come out of retirement."

"People around here warm up slowly."

Sinclair nodded again. "I'll take your word for it. A real local."

Ernie chewed her tongue. A real local. Yes, she'd grown up here, where everyone remembered what she looked like in second grade with a dollar haircut and two missing front teeth. But she wanted to clarify: Sinclair ought not see her as a pitiful remnant. She'd gone away and come back for her reasons, maybe only for something like love.

"New Rome seems nice enough," Sinclair offered. "I'm sure you're happy here with—"

"Aren't you supposed to be asking me about Tie?"

Sinclair nodded. "Right. Tell me something. Who is he, really? What should I put in this article?"

It would be easy for Ernie to rehearse the facts: Tiberius Marks was born June 13, 1983, in the hospital in Dixon. His mother taught history until her untimely death from an aneurysm, a freak thing. Tie was four. He went to live with his grandfather and grandmother, one long dead and the other the venerable Henrietta Marks. Tie had been the high school valedictorian, offered an athletics scholarship to play strong safety for a school in eastern Missouri. He left college after the 2001 terrorist attacks. After two tours in Iraq, reenlisted and began special forces training. Never knew his father, no.

But what about the real Tiberius Marks? Sinclair was asking.

How could Ernie have put it to him? Think of the strongest and fastest kid from your childhood days, she might have said, think of his smile and his self-assurance with a baseball bat in his hands. Now imagine him tutoring the other kids after school. Watch him place a ripe apple on the teacher's desk and ask no credit. He spends his weekends volunteering at a food pantry. See him with his hand over heart, almost crying while he says the pledge of allegiance. He has never been pulled over for speeding. He never misses the toilet bowl. Think about a homecoming king who goes to the dance unaccompanied because he really honestly believes he hasn't yet earned the privilege of escorting anyone, but he could take anyone he liked. He could take the vice principal. Think about a boy who signs autographs and apologizes for his bad handwriting. Tiberius Marks can fix the engine to an old pick-up or a set a broken leg. See him cast a line into the river and pull from it the catch of the day. See him give away his coat to a needy man in December. If asked he will tell you that New Rome is the greatest little town in the entire world, and he'd hate to have been born elsewhere. And when he puts on shoulder

pads and a helmet, his fans say, he becomes the other team's worst nightmare. He tackles so hard that time stops. After the game his opponents thank him for their humbling, and Tie shakes hands with each of them. He quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson. "It is easy to live after the world's opinion," he says casually. "It is easy in solitude to live after our own. But the greatest man is who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude." You'd think he might be President someday except that it would be beneath him. When he looks at you, really looks at you, it is like the dropping of a bomb. If he were to touch you, it would hurt, and you would try and get him to do it again. Lightbulbs burn brighter in his presence. Dogs follow him down the street. Loving Tiberius Marks is like breathing, Ernie might say. To be loved by him would be like giving up breathing forever. She could have said all of this and meant it.

"He's just a regular guy," Ernie told Sinclair. "Down-to-earth. Doing what anyone would do in his situation."

"Humble?"

"Right."

As Sinclair scratched onto his notepad, Ernie untethered the standard lines: Tie was bravely serving, dedicated to bringing democracy abroad. They all looked forward to Tie's homecoming, but they knew he had important work over there.

"Maybe this isn't just an article about Tie, though," Sinclair said, nodding as if coming upon a genuine invention. "Maybe it's about you."

The instinctual jangle of a foot, a bit of panic. Ernie was not, she needed to explain, anyone's portrait of a lonely homefront woman. "I'd rather we didn't bring any of—"

"Yes," Sinclair said, miming the spread of a newspaper. "I think that would really be good. An inside look at those left behind. And then of course, a follow-up when Tie actually returns home."

"I'd rather not."

How this newcomer must have seen her: a small life in a small town, Ernie a stand-in for the ruins of a far-off war, a prop of history. A woman in a story about all women, maybe. Ernie felt keenly the claustrophobia of the little newspaper office as she imagined the front page of the *New Rome News* with her own picture beside Tie's military portrait, in the future hung in a frame in a living room in a little ranch house just outside town, where she would spend the rest of her life hosting planning meetings for the VFW Auxiliary and picking up her son's little green plastic army men and trying to remember in which junk drawer she'd folded up and placed her mind.

"It's just," Ernie said and then stopped.

Outside boomed rare October thunder. “Not letting up,” Sinclair said, craning toward a grimy corner window. “We should get back to—”

“Actually,” Ernie said, “I should probably get going.”

She stood while Sinclair fumbled with his recorder. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said, “I have a meeting or something to get to.”

“At least let me walk you out. Maybe we can talk again sometime this week.”

He followed her to the front door, where he stuck out his hand for a shake. She was surprised by its softness. They repeated each other’s names.

“I’ll see you around?” he asked.

“Whether you’d like to or not,” she said.

Into the rain and wondering if something regrettable had passed between them, or something regrettable had gone unpassed. Ernie was halfway up Market and sopping wet before she realized she’d forgotten the varsity jacket.

October 12, 2006

Dear Tiberius,

I was brought up wary of a storm so late in the season. Big fat clouds come rolling from the west. I cannot see them, not from my window. But I can feel them, out there over the plain. My bones still good for something. There’s lightning, too—the kind of big Illinois lightning you feel like you can catch in a jar. I don’t suppose you would have much use for that, and I doubt you’d care much for thunder.

From my window I could see the Burden girl running through the weather. She ought to know better. I might have mistaken her for someone else but for your jacket around her. Big on her shoulders. I watched her until she turned down Fourth Street. You will accuse me of spying again. But you of all people know what it means to keep a promise.

I tried earlier today to watch the television, as you suggested. The first hour turned my stomach. My window suits me better, especially if I’m to keep an eye on things. I can tell you that twice today a police car has driven past, once with someone in the backseat. I saw a group of schoolchildren bully the smallest of their cohort with taunts and kicks to his rear. The mayor

was picking his nose in his driver's seat. But I thought you'd be especially interested in the Burden girl, hurrying down Market Street. The second time, without your jacket. Where has she left it, I wonder? With whom?

I must cut short this particular letter. I have another to write. The newspaper distributed earlier this week cannot go unanswered.

Your Loving Grandmother

The history of the *New Rome News* had so steeped in its revisions that Buck Neely sometimes referred to the paper as "the best little rag east of the Mississippi, truth be told." Buck implied the proper understanding wasn't that New Rome had its own newspaper but rather that the newspaper had its own town. "We might have collected a warehouse of Pulitzers," Buck once told Sinclair over a short stack of pancakes, "if the outside world cared half as much about apple-pie politics and gun raffles as Lee County." Sinclair didn't even know guns could be raffle prizes.

But in any case, the town believed its newspaper still strong when the new editor arrived. A blessed exception to the rule, perhaps. The city dailies were all backsliding, newsstand sales and ad buys disappearing. They blamed the internet. They blamed short attention spans. And even some of the little rural weeklies like the *News,* those little mom-and-pops scattering the plain, had folded when the bottoms fell out of their local economies. A plant might shutter one day and close a dozen more businesses in its aftershock. Outsourcing, they blamed it on, or taxes. But the *New Rome News* had soldiered on under Buck Neely's editorship, readership steady and reputation firm.

"You've got to understand the history," Buck had told Sinclair, seated across from him at a diner table sticky with blueberry syrup. "You're one in a line of us, a long line."

Most small-town newspapers, Buck told him, had colorful monikers like *The Southland Clarion Call* or *The Molina Sunrise,* but in New Rome the original publisher preferred the staid authority of a big-city title. Richard Eberhardt had opened the *New Rome News* office in 1912, and since then the populace had just called it "the news." The paper had been published every Monday, except for a short time during the Great War when Eberhardt left town to retrieve the body of his son, who had died from an untreated case of trench foot and botched amputation at Amiens. The *News* covered church bake sales and school board races with equal aplomb. It

became the standard-bearer of local celebrity, printing wedding announcements and a gossip column polite enough for mixed society. In 1937 the *News* was listed as the official publication of record for the town and surrounds, meaning it reprinted every real estate sale and legal notice at the expense of Lee County taxpayers.

The publisher Eberhardt might have been the most well-known man in New Rome at his sixtieth birthday, but he didn't tell the attendees of his celebratory picnic that he'd been shitting blood for months. When the cancer finally got him from the inside, his paper was left to a man named Farrelly, who as a local boy had helped run the presses.

Farrelly installed himself as publisher and editor and chief correspondent, and he secured wire services to bring war reports to New Rome after Pearl Harbor. He would then spend a good portion of the '50s photographing the weekly progress of the interstate highway, and his greatest moment was making sure to get the Kennedy story onto the front page of the November 25 edition. Farrelly envisioned New Rome as a place much bigger than it really was, and his readers appreciated that. He died in particularly unsettling circumstances, his wife finding his limp body slumped against the steering wheel of his car, burning through the balance of its gasoline in a closed garage.

The next editor took over in the late sixties but lasted only a year and was forgotten. Then came a man by the name of McClean, whose most memorable contribution was a strict refusal to print anything coming out of the antiwar movement, making it so that some New Rome residents doubted the veracity of television stories about a place called Kent State. The Farrelly family still owned the paper but eventually relinquished its claim and sold out to a holdings company that was swallowing up the rural weeklies. The unrelenting promise of efficiency and profitability. McClean died of a heart attack at his desk and turned the paper over to another local kid. That was Buck Neely. That was 1973.

The Fourth Street news office wedged between a barbershop and a space ritualistically filled and vacated by toy stores and taxidermists, and once had even housed a Swiss émigré with a talent for watch repair. Now the barbershop was closed, a sign of the hard times come upon the country and only beginning in New Rome. In the course of reciting this history for Sinclair's benefit, Buck had wondered aloud whether the creep of this blight would ever reach the pages of the *News*, much less the bankrolls of Trumpet Publishing. But no, he'd said, the newspaper had lasted 94 years and would probably last until the town had dried up and blown away.

Sinclair arrived unprecedented, the first to be born outside of New Rome and see his name on the masthead of the *News.* Buck had been forthright with him: had there been anyone in town who could write his way out of a paper bag, they never would have sought someone from the outside, much less someone of Sinclair's suburbanized pedigree, with a degree from Medill, a couple years of service at *The Daily Northwestern,* clips from his stints as a stringer for the *Daily Herald.* But the holding company liked the idea of cheap entry-level labor, and anyway Buck liked to consider himself as forward-thinking a man as could be found in Lee County. Also, Sinclair had showed up to his job interview wearing that necktie.

Sinclair now forewent the necktie, sitting in the *News* office two days after the visit from Ernestine Burden. Though he tried to concentrate on his work he would occasionally look at the seat she'd occupied and try to conjure up the precise timbre of her laugh or the odd verbena-and-peppermint smell that lingered behind. He had transcribed their interview and then listened to the tape again, for reasons he couldn't explain. Thinking of her this way should have embarrassed him, if not because of her being affianced, then at least because an enlightened twenty-first century man ought to be able to have a wholly professional interaction with a twenty-first century woman, nothing more. He ought to be better. But living in a town otherwise bereft of suitable female companionship, Sinclair allowed himself a sliver of a daydream.

In an attempt to busy himself, or at the very least to appear busy to the *News* business manager sitting at her desk up front, Sinclair clicked idly through crash reports posted online by the highway patrol. His routine was a simple one: he set aside any reports that listed New Rome as the site of the wreck or as the residence of either driver. If Buck could be believed, car crashes always made for quality news. "No context needed," Buck said and laughed at him. "But it's nice if you can get a photo with some broken glass in it." The only way to get a front-page photo was to listen to the police scanner and hope to get lucky, keeping the camera close at hand and car keys easily found. Without pictures, crash stories would still run, but maybe on the second page, unless there was a fatality.

Because Sinclair slept through so many of these catastrophes, especially those on dark country roads he still didn't know, the best he could do was rip the details from the troopers' reports and repackage them: John Doe, some years old, of New Rome, was involved in a two-car wreck late Saturday night. The other driver, Jane Doe, of some other Podunk, sustained serious injuries as a result of the wreck, according to a report from the state highway patrol. And so on.

If Sinclair found something among the posted reports, he needed to verify the person's connection to New Rome because, as Buck had put it, no one here wanted to read about a

disaster among strangers. The best way for Sinclair to verify his John Doe involved scouring the local telephone books and church directories to confirm Doe's address. Professional standards called for a second verification for the trooper's report, which was certainly more reliable than not, but it wasn't unheard of that an officer, standing in the dark and cold of a remote highway and reading a license by flashlight, could make a mistake. If there were any discrepancy in the official crash report and the other listings Sinclair located, he'd have to start making phone calls, which usually felt like more trouble than it was worth for the wrecks that occurred with startling regularity around New Rome.

The easiest way to verify the John Doe was to call out to Sissy Branch, whose little domain as the business manager of the *New Rome News* was just at the other end of Sinclair's hallway. Sissy had been there nearly as long as Buck had, and her list of advertising clients shifted very little from week to week, many of the local businesses operating on peculiarly long contracts and chipping in an eighth-page every week as a matter of course. Sissy did everything to keep the paper running, except reporting the news. At various turns, she referred to herself to as a circulation specialist, advertising executive, vice president of operations and, oddly, life coach.

"Mrs. Branch?" Sinclair called out.

Sissy shouted her reply from the front of the office space.

Rather than shout back, Sinclair walked down the short hallway and found Sissy with scissors in one hand and an edition of *US Weekly* in the other. He was mildly curious about how she kept the paper's numbers up while spending most of her time at her desk leafing through glossy magazines and clipping images from their pages.

"Do you know a guy named Gerald Howe?" Sinclair asked, leaning against the corner of the wall.

"Jerry," she said, "yes. Did something happen?"

Sinclair clicked the pen in his right hand. "He lives here in town?"

"Is he in some kind of trouble?"

Sinclair told her he'd found an accident listed as fatal, though it was the other driver, a man with a listed residence across state lines, who'd died. "Minor injuries for Howe," he said. "I don't know if I've got something."

Sissy chewed the inside of her cheek. "Truth be told, I haven't seen him in the flesh since a church picnic two years ago. But yes, he's local."

"People would care to read about him?" Sinclair had already decided that he'd run a brief about the car wreck, the only question being where he'd place it. "The other driver died."

"In that case, everyone is going to hear about it days before the paper comes out," Sissy said. "They'll want to see it in print, though."

Sinclair had only begun to learn this about New Rome, how any item printed in the *News* had already circulated through the beauty shop and church pews days before. Whether it was a railway worker who'd attempted a 3 a.m. drive home after a quintet of boilermakers or a grocery clerk lifting a dozen cases of macaroni and cheese from the back room, Sinclair would be the last to know. But the locals still wanted a published version to corroborate or amend or outright dismiss what they'd repeated to their neighbors over the weekend. The job of the newspaper wasn't so much to bring them the news as to remind them what the *News* was: the black-and-white version, reliably inscribed on a few hundred sheets of newsprint.

"What about that letter from Henny?" Sissy asked Sinclair. "Printing that?"

He didn't know what she was talking about.

"I left it on your desk yesterday. You were listening to your little tape recording, but I thought you heard me."

"Who's Henny?"

Sissy was back at it the scissors and *US Weekly*. "Aren't you supposed to be doing a story about Tiberius? That's what Buck said."

Sinclair nodded.

"Then you ought to know that's his grandmother, Henrietta Marks. Henny. She used to be a real mover and shaker around here, still tries to get a hand in things when she can. You ought to read that letter. I'd say you probably want to print it."

Letter to the Editor: Know Thy Neighbor

In more than seven decades as a reader of the *New Rome News* I have never seen such a misfit article as the item on the front page of last week's edition. Our town's support for the troops shall remain unquestioned, and our newspaper should reflect as much. The editor's unfounded opinions of the war struck me as neither timely nor local, which as I understood it, are the basic criteria by which the *News* supposedly sets about its coverage.

I do not wish to jump to any conclusions about the new editorship of the *News*, especially as any undue criticism would only reinforce a presumption that New Rome is overly hostile to

outsiders. Surely the editor himself has learned that we are a welcoming community. But it seems to me also that there are certain biases natural to a young man raised in an urban setting, and the editor mistakenly believes Master Sgt. Andrews's tragic loss has any bearing on the courage of our town. Surely Sgt. Andrews's hometown grieves for him still, but we reside, Mr. Sinclair, in a place unlike any other. Or, if you please, even if all happy towns are alike, each unhappy town is unhappy in its own way.

That is not to say that New Rome is an unhappy town, though perhaps Mr. Sinclair would like to see us unhappily divided. Trouble sells newspapers, and this article was clearly meant to trouble us.

Perhaps Mr. Sinclair is the last to know that my own grandson, my only surviving relation, is currently deployed in the conflict which his article characterized as a lost cause. We support my grandson in his fight.

Any effort to spin tragedy into leftist propaganda will only degrade the integrity of the *New Rome News*, and last week's article casts unnecessary doubt on the items of important local reportage. My hope as a loyal subscriber is to see our paper returned to the political neutrality and high standards of quality enjoyed under prior editors. If not, then we shall have to look elsewhere for an unspun truth.

In Earnest,
Henrietta Marks

A story long lost, rediscovered, shelved again: the Burdens had come to New Rome in the year after the Civil War, Jeremiah Burden exiled from his Tennessee hamlet because of his Union sympathies. He pledged loyalty both to Lincoln and to slaveholding, seeing no incompatibility in the issue, but his neighbors saw mendacity in his hedging. So, on a soggy spring morning, a posse arrived at Jeremiah's doorstep with a sack of chicken feathers and the promise of hot tar, and as a matter of courtesy they gave him the option of packing his wagon and leaving his homestead by dusk. Between courage and the road, Jeremiah's choice was an easy one.

With two daughters trailing behind the wagon, his wife earlier taken by winter and consumption, he wandered northward. The trio found distrusting eyes and little purchase upon

which to build a new life. One of his daughters drank from a questionable stream and died in a mess of sweat and diarrhea. When his other daughter stoutly refused any more wandering, Jeremiah spent his last Union scrip for six acres outside of New Rome.

The surviving daughter, Rebekah, wore black for her departed sister and for her betrothed dead in Andersonville. As local legend had it, she spoke to no one in New Rome for as long as she lived. And with only Rebekah's grief and a passel of goats for company, Jeremiah resolved to start life anew in the Illinois loam. He remarried, and the new wife, a dyspeptic woman named June, bore a single son to bear the family line. The boy's birth papers sat blank for years, per an inexplicable superstition of Jeremiah's that God could not take a child who hadn't yet been named. They called him Babe for the first ten years or so, until June insisted upon calling the child after the recently elected James Garfield. In 1881 the President was shot dead by a man who'd selected his pistol because he thought the ivory-handled .442 Webley might appear quite beautiful in future museum exhibits. The Burden boy kept his name.

Garfield Burden, shrewd as a businessman and lucky as a farmer, multiplied the family holdings, took up residence in a big house and ran for the city council. By 1897 he had a finger in most pies around town. On an unseasonably cold day in August, he wed the daughter of a grain trader. She grew round in the spring and in summer delivered Jeremiah Burden, Jr. But she lost too much blood in the birthing, just days before her first wedding anniversary.

Even bountiful harvests in Gar's fields did nothing to still the gnawing hunger he felt for the possibilities lost with his beloved. He had no answer for the curse of Burden women, and feeling emptied out, was compelled to swallow all of New Rome. He doubled his business holdings and stockpiled favors owed. Gar was nearly elected mayor in 1904 but lost in part because of rumors of an invalid aunt he kept secreted in a shack beyond the edge of town.

In 1918 the Great War drew Jeremiah, Jr. into its maelstrom, and the father took up long nights with brandy at his fireplace, reading any account of war he could procure. It soothed him to imagine the minutiae of his son's daily trials. He imagined regimental marching, the bitter scorch of thin coffee. Gar was at his fireside when he received word that Junior's unit took on a heavy barrage while encamped in a copse of sweet chestnut and hornbeam, exact location lost, and he would not return to New Rome. Stricken with grief, Gar took a second wife and, despite his graying hair, hoped to rear a new son. Before his fatal heart attack in 1922, he sired a girl named Ernestine Burden, a new hope for the many Burden women who had been blocked from the light of history.

It was this first Ernestine Burden that the people of New Rome would come to think of a as a peculiarity. In Gar's absence, the family plots and Jeremiah Senior's original soy farm

were sold off. The Burden women became townspeople, the girl brought up in a modest two-story close to Market Street. Ernestine was an exceptional beauty, twice winning for Strawberry Queen and carried once in an open-top Ford in the parade through town, her waving silhouette captured in overexposed photographs against a cloudless country sky.

When F.D.R. announced another war in 1941, there wasn't a single boy in New Rome who didn't stand his place in a volunteer line, and Ernestine was there with a basket of cookies for the bravest of them. Some versions of local lore say she kissed each departing boy; others say she refused each of the boys and was desired all the more.

By 1943 every son of New Rome had been called, or in the cases of flat feet and fluttering hearts, they fled to some distant place to avoid suspicion of cowardice. And so, when spring came and Ernestine's belly began to swell with new life, the town forgot its manners and wondered aloud who had brought on her condition. After she refused polite suggestions she ought to name a father, the elders of New Rome demanded she tell them whichever old lecher might have put her in this bad spot. There were no immaculate conceptions left to be had, they told her, and all the boys were gone. Perhaps to call off their hunt, Ernestine insisted that whoever the father was, he was far away. Whether she meant some doughboy in the Pacific Theater, or a runaway, or a drifting highwayman, no one knew.

Later that year, Samuel Burden was born fatherless in New Rome. Despite their best efforts at protection, his mother and grandmother were unable to prevent the old women who would call the boy to the side of the street and hold his face between their palms to search for any resemblances. These inspectors never found any, but endless fascination with his lineage made the boy an object to behold.

Samuel grew up sullen and moody, preferring a day alone with a fishing pole and a still spot in the woods. He was neither an exceptional student nor athletic nor handsome. He considered it a personal achievement to find a comfortable place where no one asked too many questions or scrutinized the divot below his lip. After high school he got a job at the bottle factory, anchored in manhood by his responsibilities to a dying grandmother and a mother who grew old before her time. He lived in the same room in the grandmother's house even after her death. He worked days at the plant and cared for the first Ernestine by night. When she too died, his life withered to shiftwork and microwaved dinners by television light.

This might have ended the line of Burdens, if not for the construction of the public library in New Rome. With it came a truckload of secondhand books and a button-nosed librarian by the name of Anne, knew no one in town and nothing of the mysterious origins of Samuel Burden. She was hard of hearing and, for a time, all alone in a town where no one else spoke with their hands. And then one day she was scouring the library files to figure out what

had become of their copy of the *Guinness Book of World Records*, which, as Anne explained to the patron waiting on the other side of her counter, was America's most stolen library book. The patron was Samuel Burden. He smiled at her and began waving his fingers so clumsily that she did not recognize his fumbles as attempts to sign. "I'm trying to learn," he explained in an overloud voice. "I was hoping you could teach me." She had no idea how he knew she signed in the first place.

The pair wed during the Reagan years. With a stone's weight in his heart Samuel agreed to leave his childhood home for a bungalow where he and Anne could start their lives together.

A daughter was born. They named her Ernestine and called her Ernie.

For her part, the second Ernestine grew up with only the roughest outline of this history, which belonged to the crumbling memories of New Rome's elders, themselves shut away in dim, musty places. Ernie knew her father and mother as shy but pleasant people, functional in their occupations but loath to join in the communal or spiritual life of the town. Her mother brought Ernie to the library nearly every day, so she could watch over both her daughter and the collections of the New Rome Public Library.

So, Ernie spent her childhood whiling away afternoons with the dog-eared classics and secondhand bestsellers, funds affording. Even then favorite stories were those in which the damsels remained in distress, in which happy endings held forever beyond arm's reach. It irked her to put down a book in which the story was so tidily tied up. It made returning to real life, the world without order or virtue, impossible.

But such was the world which Ernie now inhabited. Since her return from the state university, she found New Rome all thorns and brambles. Familiar sidewalks and shopfronts made her claustrophobic. Ernie believed herself a profoundly different person than the acned teenager the townspeople remembered, and it salted her to be reminded constantly of her previous iterations. Everyone knew her, it seemed, and no one did.

And so these days, Ernie woke in her childhood bedroom, its walls still covered over with posters of boy bands and the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team. The twin mattress on which she slept sagged in its middle from the groove of years. Beside the bed stood a table with a perpetually half-empty water glass, a clock-radio with speakers long gone to fuzz, and an old corded phone, which this morning rang twice before Ernie had the wherewithal to answer.

Yes, she mumbled into the phone. Yes, she could come in for Mrs. Dunleavy.

Ernie had always slept fitfully, tosses and turns, but the last weeks had been among her worst. She lingered in bed, threw off her comforter to cool the sweat gluey on the back of her tee shirt. She looked at the clock. Whatever she had dreamed of was gone now, unmemorable. Ernie considered calling Principal Grissom back, reconsidered, let the minutes tick by on their own. Then, a knock at her bedroom door.

"I thought I heard your phone," her mother said, face peeking through a slight gap.

"Were you standing outside the door or something?" Ernie sat up in bed.

"Was it Tie?"

"No, it wasn't Tie."

Her mother signed an apology. She was only trying to be supportive, Ernie knew. She'd decided not to tell her mother that Tie had gone missing. Let her go on believing he would call or write any day. Her mother worried enough as it was.

"They've got a class for me today at the high school," Ernie told her mother. "I'm going to be late if I don't hurry."

Within twenty minutes she'd run her body under hot water, pulled a brush through her hair, picked out the baggiest sweater in her collection and thrown back a half cup of sugary coffee. She drove a Ford Taurus her father had pushed well past its warranty and then handed down to Ernie. Occasionally its locks stuck closed, and its brakes squealed incessantly despite new rotors and pads. The air conditioner only suggested a lukewarm breeze. More than once Ernie had to pull off the road and dump a gallon of water onto the Ford's engine to keep the heat and smoke down. For years they'd expected on the car to give out, but now it seemed it might persist in a half-dead state forever. Ernie banged the dashboard to keep the radio from going out while she drove toward the high school.

She turned in to the parking lot, the Ford's radio struggling through a plaintive piano ballad, the sun making phantoms from dust across the windshield. The lot was nearly full, the morning bell just moments away from ringing. The problem was that lateness compounded. This row full, the next row full, she thought she saw an open spot but it turned out Mr. Bradley's motorcycle was parked there. Finally she saw a spot between a wood-paneled station wagon and a pickup made monstrous by a lift-kit. The Ford lurched toward it, whining with her effort at the steering wheel.

Ernie slammed on the brakes.

From the left corner of her vision a whir of blue cut into the parking spot she'd aimed for. It was a coupe, not a real sports car but a plasticky approximation, caked with the mud of Lee County roads, a bumper sticker reading *My Kid Can Beat Up Your Honor Student.*

Ernie swore and honked her horn. The driver of the blue coupe raised a single middle finger over his shoulder.

And this is what she thought without really thinking: this kid must not know who I am. This kid must have mistaken me for a fellow student, the old Ford an easy target. He must not realize who he's fucking with. No, he must not know I am the fiancée of Tiberius Marks, who could remove a trachea with one flick of his wrist, who could kill this kid from a mile away in a calm wind. What would happen if Tie were here right now? He could have reduced this kid to a bloody spot on the asphalt before Ernie could even put the car in park. This kid, she thought, does not know his luck.

Ernie watched the coupe's driver emerge. She recognized his army surplus camouflage and messy hair. His name was Jimmy Flint, an itinerant troublemaker from one of the families living just beyond the edge of town, the sort of folks generally unwelcome in New Rome's polite circles. Jimmy himself had been suspended more than a half-dozen times for fighting or pulling girls' bra straps or telling teachers go fuck themselves. She'd heard rumors of his being caught a few times smoking pot on school property, and the local sheriffs cycled him through a perpetual game of catch-and-release.

Jimmy Flint smiled at her through the glare of her windshield. Waved as he shuffled toward the school.

Ernie pulled the Ford up next to him. He grinned while she stretched awkwardly to crank the passenger side window.

"You can't do that," she said to him, the window open halfway.

"Park my car?"

"Whip in front of people. You'll cause an accident."

"How was I supposed to know you wanted that spot?" Jimmy scratched at his mop. "I'm not a mind reader."

"Just get to class."

Ernie waited for him to move along before she leaned over again to roll up the passenger-side window. No need to let him see it twice.

The radio in the Ford buzzed and then went quiet. She pounded at the dashboard, at first to revive the music, and then to exorcise the wondrous disappointment of being Ernie. Whiling away her days, yelling at teenage misbehaviors.

She circled the parking lot in search of an open space, was obliged to drive across the road to an open field the school commissioned as overflow parking. She swore again. There was no possibility she'd be on time for first period.

Ernie rubbed her eyes with her palms, and with a deep breath was reminded of the sour odor that had persisted in the Ford since she accidentally left a burrito in its trunk for two weeks. She would have hated for Tie to see her like this. Maybe it was for the best that he was gone, she thought. She could be as wretched as she wanted it to be, as long as no one was watching.

On the way across the parking lot she stopped at Jimmy Flint's car and checked she was alone. With the tip of her car key she scratched a long line in the car's passenger door.

David Sinclair knew of two contradictory but time-honored traditions among serious reporters: first, that journalists kept their distance from the public they wrote about, to stay independent in heart and mind; and second, that a reporter ought to aspire to regular, man-on-the-street status among that public, welcomed with more hugs than handshakes. No free lunches at the invitation of school board candidates, but at the same time, don't turn down the chance at a bull session over gifted beers. Sinclair knew some reporters swore off voting in elections because it would require them to admit favoritism, but on the other hand, birthday cards and Sunday phone calls were the best way to groom sources. A real reporter was supposed to be both apart from a story and a part of it.

In Sinclair's case, keeping his distance was proving no trouble. After his latest publication day meeting with Buck Neely, in which the old editor had congratulated him on reprinting Henrietta Marks's letter, and in Buck's words, proving his willingness "to take a swift one right to the sack," Sinclair sat alone in his dingy apartment overlooking Market Street. Publication day meant rest, but inactivity depressed him. For a while Sinclair tried to watch the television, the bunny ears affording him only a snowy view of two morning talk shows, and even a midmorning beer hadn't livened things. On as many as a half-dozen occasions he spread out the edition of the *News* on his coffee table, reread the Henny Marks letter, and tried to tell himself it wasn't so bad. He called home to his mother but only got the answering machine.

At one point, desperate for company, he headed into the office, but Sissy Branch was apparently out making her rounds that day, and he was just as lonely as at home.

Then he saw the half-crumpled varsity jacket abandoned by Ernestine Burden.

Ten minute later he parked his car in front of New Rome High School, a sprawling brick compound that in a previous decade must have been the pride of the community. Years of freeze and thaw now wearied its façade. One batch of brick had been graffitied, with what

slur or innocuous drawing Sinclair could only guess, and it had been half-effaced, now resembling a purple bruise near the building's front door. While he walked across the parking lot Sinclair glimpsed the edge of a classroom through a window, a pair of kids slouched behind beige desks, a clutter of jackets and bags, the boredom palpable. Sinclair's palms sweated enough that he rubbed them against the hips of his slacks.

The halls inside smelled of sawdust and old onion. Sinclair introduced himself at the high school's front office, currently occupied by a gray-haired woman with viridescent costume jewelry. The woman told him they didn't keep mailboxes for substitutes teachers. "Wait, no," the receptionist said. "You know what? Ernie, I mean Miss Burden, is on her planning period right now. You can probably drop in on her. Room 113."

In the hallways of checked tile Sinclair heard the unmistakable drawl of a teacher delivering for the hundred and twelfth time a lesson, the lecture stopping momentarily to call out a kid named Trevor for failing to pay attention. Sinclair was not too far removed to recall the slow agony of sitting in rowed seats, staring into the face of a teacher repeating a bit of long division or listing which countries comprised the Axis Powers. He much preferred being a reporter, or whatever it was he was doing now.

The door to 113 yawned, and inside he could see Ernie over a stack of papers at the desk. She didn't notice him at the threshold, and longer than he ought to, Sinclair stood and watched. He imagined how she'd be described in a newspaper story: female, white, 23 years of age, slight build, brown hair and, what color were her eyes, hazel?

She looked up and saw him there. "Oh, hey," she said. "It's you."

He held the jacket up by way of explanation. "They told me you'd be free."

She stood to greet him. Sinclair thrust out his hand for a shake, but that was clearly the wrong maneuver, as Ernie looked away from his outstretched palm and toward the stack of papers on the desk. "I was just looking at these essays."

"What about?"

"Oh, you know, the nature of right and wrong. The ethical requirements for participation in democratic society."

He nodded. "The small stuff."

"How'd you know I was working today?"

"I'm really good at my job."

"No, really."

He shrugged. "Just got lucky." He held out the jacket to her, which Ernie received a bit clumsily. She let it fall into a heap next to the desk.

"Don't want the kids to see me in that," she said. "Sorry for leaving it behind."

"I almost ran out into the storm the other night."

"I'm glad you didn't," she said. "You would have had to use one of those old newspapers to—" She mimed opening a newspaper and using it for an umbrella. "I wouldn't have wanted you to ruin any of them."

"That's okay, we have plenty of them."

"Yeah," she said. "I saw."

Already Sinclair regretted talking, or even coming to see her at all. We have plenty of them? Was that the best he could come up with? He offered to let her get back to reading the essays.

"Honestly," Ernie said, "it's nice to get a break, talk to someone who can read and write above a tenth-grade level. In middle school they teach the students to make all the essays the same. It's really mind-numbing."

Perhaps because of Sinclair's nodding, she continued her explanation: how the new federal standards for school funding really put the squeeze on rural districts, and in order to get more money, they needed higher scores on standardized tests, real No Child Left Behind stuff, and that meant that the teachers worked from this formula for the highest average scores, and that's what they were doing nowadays, which Ernie clearly couldn't see as sound pedagogy, but maybe, she said, she was just being young and idealistic because the test scores were, after all, getting better.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm kind of far into the weeds on this."

"That's okay," Sinclair said. "Maybe this is something I could write about. You know, for the paper."

"Only if you think Henny Marks would like it." She smiled at him.

"You read that."

Ernie put a hand to his elbow. He fought a shiver.

"They love nothing better than seeing someone put in his place," she said. "And Henny's our best at it." She let her hand fall back to her side.

"That reminds me," Sinclair said, "I was thinking I'd ask Henny for some more details about Tie. And you and I should talk again, too. Maybe we can get together for another interview. Or just hang out or something."

She made the face of someone assessing subpar produce at the grocery store. "If you really want to," she said. "After all the Homecoming nonsense is over, sure, I guess we could talk about Tie some more."

"I would love that," Sinclair said, and he would wonder later, as he trudged back through the stale halls, if saying that was another mistake.

October 20, 2006

Dear Tiberius,

They were beyond my count, the throngs upon Market Street this afternoon. You should have been here to see it. Jack Foster, his wife. Their three kids. Sally Gerber. Mitch O'Donnell from the Pachyderms chapter. That little blonde who opens the bakery in the morning. Boob Bickerstaff straight from the repair shop and still wearing his coveralls. Greasy looking, you know. Honey Tolliver standing there right at Market and Third. Arms crossed. Those school teachers were there in a pack. Sheila Bass, Eustace Stevens. The Burden girl stood with them. She must have been freezing, the way she stood there rubbing her arms. Bridget Smith and her twins. Didn't see anyone from the plant. I guess it wasn't a holiday for them. But I could see the Schaefers and the Kirkseys and the Carletons. All the usual families. Too many for me to write down now. You could hear the applause for the floats even before the sound of the band.

Surely some among them asked about you. Surely some asked about me, as well. But they roll on without us, Tiberius.

In front, Mayor Nolte, driving that old Corvette so slow. In his backseat, a girl covered in flowers. She must have been our queen, and the fact that I don't know her name—is this a pity to me or to her? She waved without grace. Half a tub of Vaseline all over her teeth. Behind her another open car, Red Barnett at the wheel, our unknown king in the backseat, trying to look tough in those shoulder pads.

Perhaps most remarkable about this Homecoming parade is the new editor, David Sinclair. You should have seen him, walking in the middle of the road, like he had some right, getting in the faces of the court, trying to get their pictures. I can't guess how many photographs he must have taken. Like he'd never seen a parade before. The mayor had to motion him to get out of the way.

In my pile of mail sits a letter from Mr. Sinclair. I have not yet brought myself to open it. No doubt it is a personal apology for his newspaper article. Printing my letter was sufficient. His letter of apology will only embarrass us both, I'm afraid.

And now, like all parades, this one has passed.

Your Loving Grandmother

It little mattered that New Rome's football team had not won a single game that season, or that their record was unlikely to improve any time soon. On Homecoming night, the stadium hummed, the faithful adorned in bright blue sweaters and scarves, stamping their feet on the bleachers, metal clanging. The stands brimmed so full that the chromed seats disappeared and the crowd seemed to hover in neat rows above the field. An old scoreboard stood at one side of the stadium, the clock operator praying that for the first time in years the wiring would make it through an entire game without letting him down. Styrofoam cups of hot cocoa and cider, whiskey splashed here and there, circulated among the Friday night veterans. Kids threw popcorn at each other. Someone in the fourth row attempted to rouse a collective cheer, but unable to recruit anyone nearby to contribute more than a mumble, she let it dissolve in the thrum. The crew over at the concessions stand must have given up on cleaning the flattop, the burnt grease of cheap hamburger wafting as far as the 20-yard line. The New Rome boys, decked out in their scuffed white helmets and sun-faded blue jerseys, cups and jock straps shifting uncomfortably in splotchy spandex, milled about their sideline. Lights from the corners of the stadium cast the players in shadows ten feet tall.

High up in the bleachers Ernestine Burden sat among some of the teachers from New Rome High School, women who had only recently been her instructors and now were, in a slanted way, her peers. Most of them had tempered the night's mandatory enthusiasm by downing Coca-Colas spiked from Sheila Bass's flask, a souvenir from her summer trip to The Grand Ole Opry, which she made a point of mentioning no less than three times as she obliged the other women with pours.

"This is going to be a long night," one of the teachers said and motioned toward the opposing sideline. "Judging from the size of those boys."

"We'll be out of it by halftime."

"Maybe I should run to the bathroom now."

Ernie let the circle talk around her, let a bit of whiskey and coke slide below her tongue. None of her old high school friends were around these days, save for the Hutton twins, who she'd seen shooting tequila in the bed of a pickup outside the stadium, and she'd declined their invitation to, as they put it, party Tijuana style. Neither of the twins had ever been out of Illinois. The Hutton boys suggested maybe Ernie would go road-tripping with them, which would amount to circling around Lee County until the twins found an excuse for a fistfight. Ernie declined.

Her parents had long ceased coming out to these kinds of things, and she wished she might have done the same. But at least Ernie's chaperoning the Homecoming dance later that night would bring in a few hours' wages.

"Must be nice to be back in your old stomping grounds," one of the teachers said to her. "Cheering for the old team."

Ernie gave her a placating smile.

"Nothing like when your boyfriend was playing, though," another teacher said. "Maybe if he was here, we'd have him suit up and sneak out there."

Yes, Ernie agreed, she'd love to see Tie out there. She'd love to see him anywhere.

In her high school days, she'd attended the games only as a matter of social necessity, no other place for New Rome's teenagers to gather on Friday nights. But Ernie had been disinterested in football and its players alike. She'd never taken special notice of Tie in his blue uniform. She was vaguely aware that people considered him a great talent, but she didn't know which position he played or which colleges had sent out scouts to get a look at him. New Rome played in Class 1A, with the lowliest of the high school programs, barely enough players and patchy fields. She did not think it any great accomplishment that Tie had lifted New Rome's football team from hopelessness into mediocrity, even though the Booster Club and the sports page of the *News* begged to differ.

"I don't know why they call it homecoming, anyway," Sheila Bass said, swirling another plunk of whiskey into her plastic cup. "Nobody comes home for these things anymore."

"You waiting on someone in particular? Seems to me that you either love it enough to stay here or you never come back."

"I say good riddance."

One of the teachers touched Ernie lightly on the elbow, leaned in to her. "Tie excepted, of course."

Maybe the others were about to mimic that ritual, to tell Ernie they were all sure Tie would return home safe and sound, but feedback squealed from the loudspeakers.

The crowd quieted as the announcer called for the national anthem, and like schoolchildren the people of New Rome complied with an unspoken order, standing and gazing toward the stars and stripes hung limply from a pole in the corner of an end zone. Men removed hats. Palms pressed to chests. Everywhere breathing slowed. The announcer said something about gratitude for the men and women serving the nation. A nodding of heads.

Why exactly everyone stared so intensely toward the flag, Ernie wasn't sure, but she was grateful because it might keep them from looking at her. Since Tie had disappeared into the other side of the world, she had often caught people rubbernecking at her, in the grocery store or a pancake breakfast or as she jogged through town. They ogled, like they wanted to see if she was proud or happy or secretly very strong and not at all worried about the wellbeing of her fiancé.

And at times like these, with the New Rome marching band blaring their opening notes, oh say can you see, Ernie's gut ached, whether from the suspicion of being watched or the suspicion she ought to be. What was it Henny had said to her, after she'd promised not to tell anyone Tie was missing? Smile wide, laugh at everything, remember he would hate for them to fret. They love him and so they will love you, too. Don't let them down. So, Ernie put her hand on her heart and smiled while she mouthed the words, by the dawn's early light, and she stood as tall and straight as she could without flinching.

Amid the stillness a solitary figure flitted: David Sinclair, hidden behind his camera, squatting between rows of football players. He paid no attention to the anthem, didn't bother to look where everyone else was looking. When Ernie hazarded a glance in his direction, Sinclair dropped his camera for only a second. He put a hand over his eyes and squinted into the stands. All other eyes on the flag, but his meeting hers. And then he raised his camera again, just in time for the petrifying pause before the land of the free and the home of the brave.

David Sinclair had known heartache before. His girlfriend from senior year of high school, Gwen, had gone away to Purdue University when he'd gone to Northwestern, but they were supposed to remain long-distance devotees. For much of a semester they did, until Gwen's phone calls went from every day to every other, and she came home at Thanksgiving break and admitted she'd been sleeping with a boy named Clayton for several weeks. Sinclair resisted her explanations of dissolution and distance, and almost immediately he forgave her. He forgave her even when she clarified that she wasn't apologizing for what she'd done, only trying to

make obvious to him what was going on. He'd kept sending Gwen letters for months, long after this Clayton guy was also an afterthought. It was embarrassing to think of, now.

But then, hardened by this first heartbreak, Sinclair had entered a series of casual dalliances, until Naomi, the campus paper's photography editor, invited him back to her dorm room after a late night of editing. She insisted they sleep fully clothed together in her bed, without so much as kissing. In the morning she declared they were meant to be lovers. Naomi was a largely mystifying presence. She wore pigtails and listened to music that confused him. Naomi belched in front of Sinclair's mother and tried to get him to watch snuff films she dug up from the dark corners of the internet. Sinclair viewed her with a potent cocktail of love and fear, and it lasted a half-year before Naomi suggested they were probably better as friends after all, or maybe it was best they pretend to be only colleagues. Sinclair told her that friendship was no longer an option, not after she'd taken his virginity in the back row of a crowded theater showing, of all things, *Seabiscuit.* The only possibility was an unamicable parting, an overdue acknowledgment of the fact that he and Naomi did not desire the same things from each other.

So, by his own accounting, Sinclair's heart had broken twice, and he felt no pride in the fact that he'd never broken someone else's. Even though he wanted to believe his prospects at love were better than his career outlook, both seemed dim as Sinclair found himself standing amidst a quiver of high schoolers on a Homecoming dance floor in the middle of soy country. The kids screwed up their faces at his presence, parted around his position. He felt overgrown, conscious of the belly straining the buttons of his shirt. The lights and the noise of the dance disoriented Sinclair, reminded him of once getting lost in a riverboat casino while drunk on vodka tonics.

But then the sight of Ernestine Burden buoyed him, as it had during the football game earlier, and he steadied his camera's viewfinder to put her at the center. Ernie was all angles in a party dress, etched from a tableau of high school pomp. Spangled bunting and pearl-tinted balloons. Her hair pulled back into a tight bun, a silver chain hanging about her neck, she toyed with the fingers of her left hand. Ernie turned toward him, and she blinked at just the moment the shutter clicked.

Not that Sinclair would admit any specific feeling for Ernie. His only experience of romance showed it to be a thing of convenience: two people's lives written into the same lines, so that they couldn't help but run together. He would have never met Ernie, he thought, in any version of his life other than the one placing him in that high school gym with his camera and notepad. Any feeling he had for her, and he wasn't admitting there was any, would be too much a twist of fate.

Sinclair let the camera swing from his arm as he made his way toward Ernie.

"You have to warn me," she said, her voice straining against the boom of the dance music, "before you do something like that."

"Public place," he said. "No reasonable expectation of privacy."

Ernie smiled. "What are you doing here, anyway?" she asked. "Creeping around and taking photos of teenagers?"

"And their unsuspecting chaperones."

Buck had instructed him to get photos of all the day's events, especially the queen and king, who were supposed to be crowned any minute and would feature prominently on the next front page of the *News*. "I never went to any dances in high school," Sinclair said, leaning close enough so that Ernie might hear him without shouting. "Does anything newsworthy happen?"

'There will be some slow dancing. Some teenagers making out. I'll bet that Principal Grissom will haul out a few boys who smell like liquor. Maybe some unfortunate girl will break a heel. But that's about it."

Sinclair nodded. They watched as the teenagers of New Rome, not numbering more than three hundred or so, swayed in evening dresses and business casual attire, the gymnasium rumbling. Some sang along to the music, some danced close. Others stood and watched, eyeing their counterparts with suspicion and awe. Rainbow lights spilled from a rotating ball hauled out by the deejay and precariously hung from a rafter. Table runners and banners spelled out the dance's theme, *A Night to Remember*, a hotly debated choice among that year's steering committee, Ernie told Sinclair. *Paris Chic* and *Under the Sea* would have to wait for 2007. Balloons, filled too early and without enough helium, sagged at the corners of tables. Sugary punch overran the rims of plastic cups and became sticky underfoot. Girls in plaited coifs accompanied each other to the bathroom in groups no less than a half-dozen, leaving the boys tugging at neckties knotted against stiff collars. A mélange of perfumes mixed with underarm sweat, and there weren't sufficient hairpins to go around. From their spot at the edge, Sinclair and Ernie watched this all together and did their best not to feel utterly misplaced.

Occasionally two of the teenagers would melt into one another, and then they would linger into a kiss, tongues going, as if no one were watching, and this, Ernie explained to Sinclair, was exactly the sort of thing she was supposed to put an end to, as far as her official capacity as chaperone was concerned.

"Look at those two," Sinclair said conspiratorially, nodding over his shoulder to a pair of students huddled in a corner, fully locked into one another's maws. "Are you going to do something?"

"Like what, tell them this isn't the time and place?" Ernie shrugged. "What time and place do they have?"

"You're the worst chaperone I've ever met."

"I'm just waiting until they're all in cars and off school property. What's your excuse?"

He shrugged. "I guess I don't have one. Do you want to dance?"

"What?"

"Do you want to dance?" Sinclair repeated.

While Ernie looked at him, half-smile, the deejay's song faded, and the twang of a slide guitar announced a slow, shuffling country ballad. Sinclair felt himself blush. He wanted to explain to Ernie that no, he didn't mean they should dance together, not like that, not to a slow song. He thought they could just go out there and flail around for a while, make each other laugh. He didn't mean this. All around him unaccompanied kids fled the dance floor for refuge against the walls while their coupled peers eased into a metronomic back-and-forth.

"I can't," Ernie told Sinclair.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm still engaged," Ernie said and held up the back of her hand to display a diamond ring. "It's not you. All these people here, they'd—"

"Of course," he said. "I just meant—"

Then the phone buzzed in Sinclair's pocket, and he reached for it. Buck was calling. Sinclair held up the phone by way of explanation, the reporter's reprieve, and ducked out of the gymnasium and into the hallway.

"You're still at the dance?" Buck's voice was tinny through the phone.

"Sure. Trying to make sure I get some nice candid—"

"That must be why you didn't hear the scanner. We've got a wreck out on Humboldt Road. EMS and fire on their way. You should be, too. Just north of 67."

North of 67, Sinclair thought. It should mean something to him. He was about to ask Buck, but the old editor had already hung up.

When Sinclair pocketed the phone, he saw that Ernie had followed him out to the hall. "I have to run," he told her. "Bad car crash. Somewhere called Humboldt. On 67, I think. I'm supposed to get out there as soon as possible."

"That's outside of town," Ernie said. "Do you know how to get there?"

He didn't.

"I'll come along, then."

"What about—" he motioned back toward the rumble of the dance.

"They don't need me."

Sinclair could have said no, could have warned her that this call might be unpleasant. But Ernie had already swept past him, asking whether they could take his car, hers famously unreliable. He followed her through a set of heavy doors, their shoes clomping on the tile, the boom of bass fading behind them. And then they were crashing through the night air.

In short breaths Ernie tried to give him directions as they half-ran to his car. Sinclair sprinted ahead so that he could open the passenger door for her.

"You're right," she said. "I should drive. Give me the keys."

He stammered, trying to explain to her that he was attempting chivalry, even as he rummaged through the pocket of his jacket.

"I thought we were in a hurry," she said, and she flung open the passenger door for him to get in.

Sinclair's car handled like an overpowered lawnmower, but Ernie's years with the quirks of her old Ford had at least prepared her to deal with the sedan's leftward pull and its jerks between second gear and third. The occasional flashing of the check engine light didn't bother her, either, though it worried her when Sinclair couldn't tell her the last time he'd had an oil change.

While she drove, Sinclair fiddled with a noisy little box that caught signals from the local police scanners. He struggled to refold a map of Lee County that had proved no help.

Outside the car groves of swamp oak flashed past, the shine of a quarter-moon casting the landscape in photonegative blur. Lingering potholes intermittently bounced the sedan. It was just cold enough to fog the corners of the windshield.

In his excitement Sinclair's fingertips shook, and he tended to repeat everything he said three times. "I think the turn is coming up," he said. "Any second now, we should hit that turn. The turn is around here somewhere. The turn—"

And indeed it was, this was the turn, and Ernie braked only slightly as they rounded the bend, where they could now see a pair of headlights shining from a roadside ditch. At first glance the scene looked less like an emergency than a watercolor rendition of placid country at night, roadside grass bent with condensation, a breeze rustling through leaf-thin trees. Only these two beams of light out of place. But as they approached Ernie could make out the truth of it: the lights led back to a pickup truck with its front smashed and its tail dropped into the ditch, and beside it, and still on the road, a tangle of metal that only vaguely resembled a car.

Sinclair asked her to pull over to the side of the road, several yards from the wreck. Ernie could see now that two bodies stood in the darkness watching their approach. “You should stay in here,” Sinclair said, but she was already opening the car door and stepping onto the pavement.

“Oh Jesus,” Sinclair said. “Oh Jesus, oh Jesus, that’s bad.”

Ernie had never seen something like this before. Fender-benders, once a highway pileup, but nothing like this: the car had folded in on itself like deranged origami, the outside displacing the inside, the straight lines of the car reconfigured in obtuse angles. And the windshield’s glass had all blown out, and the dashboard had been dislocated so that somehow the steering wheel protruded from the car like bone after a compound fracture. And yet something about the car, its size and shape and patches of rust, stirred her memory. At its tail end, in the dying light she saw a bumper sticker: *My Kid Can Beat Up Your Honor Student.*

Beside her Sinclair moved so slowly, with his pen and his paper and the camera hung behind his back. They were close enough now to make out the faces of the pair standing in the road. One man held his head, a little blood flowing from a cut there. The other wore a coat over his pajamas.

“Where’s the damn ambulance?” the pajama-wearing man asked. “I called them, what, fifteen minutes ago.”

“What happened here?” Sinclair asked.

“They just swerved,” the bleeding man, who must have been the pick-up truck’s driver, told him. “I didn’t see them—”

Sinclair asked the man what time it was when the accident happened, which way he was headed on the road, which way the other car was going.

The man looked at him. “You’re not a cop,” he said.

“No,” Sinclair said. “Just trying to figure out what happened.”

“Jimmy,” Ernie said, to no one in particular. “Jimmy Flint.”

She stepped toward the wreck. She called his name, his full name, the same way that she might get the boy’s attention in a crowded hallway. She felt Sinclair’s hand on her shoulder, pulling her back.

“Hold on, hold on,” Sinclair said. “It’s not safe. Hold on. The gas tank—”

“He’s in there,” she said. “He must be in there.”

Sinclair, both arms around her now, pulled her back to the very edge of the road, stepping across the plastic deconstruction, away from the carnage.

“Sorry to say it,” the man in the pajamas was saying, “but I don’t think he made it.”

“His head,” the other man, said, “clear off—”

"Did you see him?" Sinclair asked, and the man nodded.

Sinclair kept his arms around Ernie. She let him. Because now she had seen it, too, the havoc of a single redirecting instant. One minute there had been a cheap sports car and a stringy-haired kid. And then, as she would never forget it, a pile of car parts and a human body without a face.

Nothing of these events seemed particularly real to Sinclair. Instead he had the odd sensation of taking part in a stage play, one in which everyone else knew their lines and left him to ad-lib. An audience watched from the dark. The old farmer in pajamas knew how to take direction. The other driver, too. The ambulance coming around the bend, the fire engine in tow, arriving on cue. Even Ernie stood at the edge of the scene like a faithful chorus. And there Sinclair stood, with his pen and his camera, calling for his next line, trying his best to remember to do his job.

Despite shaking hands Sinclair pointed his camera toward the wreckage. He could not bring himself to peer inside or even press his face to the viewfinder. Could not look, could not look away.

When the ambulance reached the scene, a pair of blue-shirted men jumped from its doors, one paramedic squat and burly, the other so lanky that together they might have resembled a comedy duo. The man in pajamas urged them toward the crumpled car. Setting down a bag of supplies near the car's front bumper, the shorter EMT half-crawled under the remnants of the car's hood. "Goddamn it," they could all hear him say, "how many did you say were in here?"

Then came the fire truck, from which a gang of broad-shouldered men would eventually pull various machinery, each hammer and bar and claw more menacing than the last. They laid siege to the wreckage. According to Sinclair's watch, it was 10:51. One of the ambulance crew held a flashlight and fished through the bag of medical supplies while the other laid his body across the front of the car, his torso disappearing into the caved-in driver's seat. The firefighters approached with the jaws of life, and the EMT ceded his position and let them get to work, a big spotlight coming to life on top of the rig and bathing the scene in an off-yellow glow. Under this illumination Sinclair could see new and horrifying iterations of damage. He fought the urge to vomit. The blood painted over the EMTs sleeves and speckled across countless pieces of glass. Sinclair snapped pictures.

A sheriff's deputy was the last to arrive on scene. He left his patrol car blocking both lanes of traffic, just in case any oncoming drivers would be tempted to gawk. The deputy, a straight-backed and hard-faced type, stood halfway out of the car while he called for a second ambulance. At the edge of the deputy's hat Sinclair could make out a military buzzcut, the man's jaw working at a piece of chewing tobacco with enough force to mill pine.

Producing a little notebook from his pocket, the deputy began interviewing the bleeding man, asking for the same details that Sinclair had asked earlier. Sinclair stood close enough to overhear, began copying down notes just behind the deputy's shoulder.

When the bleeding man saw this, he stopped. The deputy turned to Sinclair and asked him what the fuck he thought he was doing.

"*New Rome News,"* Sinclair said, lifting his pen and pad.

"You need to go home, kid."

Sinclair nodded, but he didn't move. He wasn't sure what to do.

"You need to clear out," the deputy said again. Sinclair thought he noticed the deputy's hand moving toward his holster, but perhaps it was only his imagination, the product of too many movie caricatures.

"I'll call your office in the morning," Sinclair asked, "for the report? I've got a deadline."

The deputy told him to fuck his deadline. "Your girlfriend needs to go home, too."

"She's not my—" Sinclair stopped short because the deputy now was reaching for his radio, as if to call for backup or otherwise escalate.

"I'm going," Sinclair said, "I'm going."

As he backpedaled he scattershot photographs of the firefighters and EMTs doing their best to extract the remains from the heap, hoping the camera might capture a still-life. Without thinking, Sinclair took Ernie by the hand and pulled her back toward the car. This time when he opened the passenger door for her, she sat inside. He lowered himself into the driver's.

The keys were still in the ignition, and as he turned the engine over, Ernie craned her neck to watch the action at the scene. Her hair, before gathered in the tight bun at the dance, had loosened to a cascade over the back of her neck, and Sinclair lingered on that fact. Everything so out of place.

Sinclair was a nervous driver under any circumstances, and it took him four tries to wheel the car around and begin their exit. Then they watched in the rearview mirror as the dome of emergency lights faded. He drove slowly, half-attention to the road while listening for chatter on the police scanner. The deputy's voice cracked on, relaying information for the pickup truck driver. Then he called in the license plate number of the crumpled car.

"You knew whose car that was," Sinclair said to Ernie, not really a question. "I'm sorry. Did you know him?

"The high school," she said. "He's a student there."

"Are you sure it was his car?"

"Yeah."

Sinclair apologized again.

"It's awful," she said, putting a palm to her forehead. "It's just, you know, he wasn't the best kid. His name was Jimmy. Kind of a troublemaker. I'm not saying he had it coming or—"

Sinclair held up his hand, and they listened to the police scanner as the dispatcher read out the details of the car. It was registered to a Jacqueline Flint of New Rome.

"That's his mother," Ernie said, "I think."

Again the deputy's voice crackled across the radio. He confirmed the fatality of the car's driver. What they could tell from the remains: male, younger, white, medium build. No other passengers.

"He lived in New Rome?" Sinclair asked Ernie.

She paused, removed her hand from her forehead. "Are you using this for the newspaper?"

"I have to," Sinclair said.

Whatever enchantment had earlier descended upon him, from the dance or the Homecoming festivities or having Ernie beside him, had dissipated.

"I didn't think you'd have to see something like that," he said to Ernie. "No one should."

"But," she said.

"But it's news," he said. "People will want to see it. I'll check back in the morning to see if the crash report is filed. And then I'll try and get it into the paper. That's all. It's just the job."

The car shuddered through rows of corn, the scenery outside having resumed its quiet void, the inside of the car alive with the hiss and pop of the police scanner. Sinclair slowed as they rambled through empty crossroads and rolled past the shadows of dilapidated barns.

Ernie laid her forehead against the window as they neared the town limits. Sinclair wondered if she was horrified by the crash or by his plan to report it, or by both. He considered telling her that if it were up to him, he'd delete all the pictures and act like he'd never been there, and it was only at the behest of Buck Neely that he would even consider reporting on the accident. True enough.

"Listen," Sinclair said, "if it weren't me doing the reporting, someone else would."

"I need to tell you something," Ernie said.

Sinclair nodded.

"When we were talking the other day, about Tie. It's more complicated than what I told you."

"Okay."

"I mean, God, my fiancé kills people for a living. Even saying that out loud—"

Sinclair reached for the volume knob on the police scanner. He was unsure why Ernie was telling him this now.

"He's never described it to me or anything," she said. "He doesn't talk about it. In fact, he won't. And I'm pretty sure it's because he's killing people, and not just one or two. I don't know how it happens, if it's like with bombs or bare hands. I don't think he enjoys it."

"I would hope not."

"But it really doesn't matter," Ernie said, shifting her weight toward Sinclair, then away again. "Back in his first tour, Tie was still regular infantry. A lot of those guys never even shoot their guns. Just walk around and throw small rocks at bigger rocks. Tie said he was more bored than anything else. But I know he went out once, on some operation. He started telling the me the story but never finished. Just didn't want to talk about it. But I think that was maybe the first time he killed anyone. If I had to guess. And after that he joined special forces. He was worried about his fellow soldiers. He was worried that the leadership was going to get his friends killed. Maybe that they'd get him killed. I'm saying this all wrong."

"Start over, then," Sinclair said. They crossed the bridge into New Rome proper, the streetlights ending the uninterrupted night.

"I'm trying to say that I get it, that sometimes who you are and what you do aren't the same thing. You have your job, Tie has his. I have mine. But Tie is not really like anyone you've ever met. He's one of those people that's good at everything. Never in his entire life did he run up against something he couldn't do. He's just genuinely great at anything he puts his hands to. Normally people like that drive me crazy, the unfairness of it all. But somehow Tie gets away with it, because every time he's great at something, every time he wins without even really trying, he just apologizes for it. He feels so bad to be so good at everything. He can't help it. You can't hate him because you're too busy trying to make him feel better about it all."

"Huh."

"A lot of boys from around here go to the army," Ernie said. "It's a way out of New Rome. It's a decent paycheck, and for a lot of them it seems like it's either the army or jail.

With the army they at least get to shoot things. And then they go in for basic training, and they sort of get broken down and made into abstract things, soldiers, and that makes them better. Tie, he really wanted that experience, to become like every other soldier."

"That makes sense."

"Does it? I don't know that it does. But what other way to explain it? Except he found out that part of being normal is that you can die like anyone else. And all his talent or ability, whatever you want to call it, can make him good at killing but no safer. So, he has to keep killing."

"Are you okay?" Sinclair asked, turning the police scanner off entirely. "After what happened back there?"

Ernie put her fingers to her forehead. "I don't know what I'm saying. It's late."

Sinclair stopped the car at the four-way intersection in the middle of town. He asked if she should go back to the dance, but it was late enough that things would be breaking up anyway, and the news of Jimmy Flint's crash would be working its way through the grapevine. Ernie didn't want to be there.

"My place, then?" he asked. "I could use a drink."

And then the car was moving again, and Ernie was coming home with him, and they were both thinking about the dead boy beyond the edge of town, and how improbably life arrived and departed in just such a way.

October 20, 2006

Dear Tiberius,

You'll forgive me for writing twice in one day, but I couldn't sleep, even at this lonely hour. Market Street sends its lights and sounds through my window. Seven cars in the last ten minutes alone. It must be the Homecoming dance, the energy of the young. Cacophony from some ridiculous limousine. Minutes ago three boys passed just below my window, stumbling drunk, voicing lewd intentions. Even those passersby I could have ignored, but for you, Tiberius, I must write down exactly what I saw next.

I watched a single car stop too long at the crosswalk, so that even from my vantage I could see inside: the new boy, the editor over at the newspaper. In the passenger seat, our Miss Burden. She wore a dress and jewelry. You should have seen her, out so late with this stranger. Women

in her family have never been trusted here. The car eventually parked just across the street from my window, and the pair together ascended to an apartment across the way. I'm guessing Mr. Sinclair's. I saw the light flicker on. We have hardly any moon at all, this time of the month. At this distance and with the shades drawn they were only silhouettes. But I watched, of course, the shadows moving over there. And though I could not hear their music, it was plain to me, as plain as the words I write you now, that they were dancing. Their shadows were dancing.

Your Loving Grandmother

A better reporter than David Sinclair might have unearthed the material of that Homecoming night, most importantly that Jimmy Flint was in fact nowhere near Humboldt Road and Route 67 when his mother's car broke against an oncoming fender.

At the time the driver's forehead whipped mercilessly into the steering wheel, Jimmy slouched against bales stacked in a distant hayloft, his classmates drinking and carrying on in the barn below, half a bottle of gut-rot in his bloodstream and other half in his left hand. A local reporter would have known a kid like Jimmy wouldn't be caught near the crepe-paper and sherbet punch in the high school gym that night. He'd bypassed those festivities for the afterparty held in a decaying outbuilding on a foreclosed farm outside of town, a spot set far enough from the road that the party's clinks and shouts died harmlessly in the October sky. A better reporter than Sinclair would have known which kids to hunt up and question, which parents might pick up the phone in the middle of the night to help him reconstruct exactly what had happened. But Sinclair would never ask about Evan Brewster, nor would he see the photographs of the final night of Evan's life, the ones that would keep him forever dressed in a crisp white shirt and purple silk tie to match his date's dress, standing next to Sarah Purnell at the bottom of the stairs while Mrs. Purnell urged them to smile wider and wider. On the kids' faces, pained excitement. The girl wore braces and a corsage.

This, the version Sinclair would never know, a true story nonetheless: Evan Brewster, fifteen years old, shared perfunctory handshakes with Mr. and Mrs. Purnell when he'd come through the door, and in his adolescent fears he'd become conscious of the condom stashed in the rear left pocket of his slacks. Perhaps the circular outline had become visible. He'd wanted to run his hand across his left ass cheek to reassure himself, but Mrs. Purnell kept telling him to

smile for the pictures. Evan's toes curled in the undersized dress shoes loaned by an older cousin.

Sarah, earlier in the week, said so casually to him, "My parents think I'll be sleeping over at Heather's." And since that invitation Evan's life had switched to a certain track. Arrangements had to be made. He'd acquired the corsage, a key to another cousin's unoccupied cabin, a promise from Jimmy Flint that he could borrow his car. And the condom. Ran his hand along his left ass cheek to check it was there. Any thoughts about his homework or even the football game, in which he'd mostly ridden the bench, were secondary to his daydreams of what Sarah Purnell looked like without any clothes. He would have imagined above all else the round of belly skin he'd seen when Sarah wore her two-piece at the New Rome swimming pool in August, just that little hillock of flesh above her bikini bottoms. To just lay his head on that patch of flesh he'd have given anything, including a half hour of posing and arranging for Mrs. Purnell's photography.

In the backseat of the Purnell station wagon, Sarah would have boldly entwined her hand with his, even where her mother could see. Mrs. Purnell asked polite questions of Evan: did he enjoy his part-time job bagging groceries, which was his favorite subject in school, and he wasn't one of those boys that spent all his time with video games, was he? When the car pulled up in the parking lot of the high school, Evan stepped out and ran around its perimeter to open the door, Mrs. Purnell smiling at the gesture.

With the taillights of the Purnell family car disappearing along the road, the teenagers would have the relief of going unwatched. They laughed for no reason at all, Sarah apologizing vaguely for the embarrassment they'd endured with her mother's photos. Evan denied any imposition. "I will meet you inside," he said, meaning the door to the gymnasium from which they heard muffled pop music. "I need to take care of something first."

And then, as if it were the smallest thing in the world, the girl delivered a peck to his cheek, disappeared through the gymnasium doors.

In a beat-up Chevy at the far end of parking lot, Jimmy Flint would sit waiting. The older boy nodded at Evan and pointed to the passenger seat, where Evan slid in. The inside of the car always smelled of fast food and weed. The motor was off but the radio on, autumn cold seeping through the windshield. Jimmy leaned back in the driver's seat and took a long draw off a bottle concealed in a brown paper bag. Then he would pass it to Evan.

"What is this?"

"Schnapps," Jimmy said. "Peppermint."

"Disgusting."

"You'll thank me," he said. "They'll just think you smell like toothpaste and aftershave or something. Leave you alone."

"You're not going in?"

"I doubt they'd have me." He retrieved the bottle, took another shlug and passed it back. He would watch Evan do the same.

"I really appreciate what you're doing for me," Evan said. "Can I have the keys?"

"Just hold on a second." From out of a jacket pocket the older boy produced a glass pipe and a baggie. With care he packed the bowl. He raised the pipe to his lips and flicked a lighter in the dark cab of the car. These, too, he would pass to Evan.

"You said I could borrow your car," Evan said. "You promised."

"Have a hit."

Against his better judgment Evan would comply.

"I'm not leaving you hanging," Jimmy said. "Especially after I saw your date. That girl is looking for it."

"Listen, I'll pay you a hundred, like I said."

Jimmy lifted a hand as if insulted. "Not between friends. I just need you to drive me out to the barn party first." It would only take a few minutes, he said, and no one would notice Evan was late.

"Look at that," Jimmy said, pointing across the parking lot. "There goes Miss Burden."

Evan grunted his assent.

"She's kind of crazy, but still. What I wouldn't give."

The inside of Evan's mouth would go skunky after the weed. He picked up the peppermint schnapps and though it burned he swished the stuff between his teeth and swallowed. The taste grew worse all the time. "You better be careful who you say that to," Evan said, meaning about Miss Burden. "Her boyfriend is a sniper or a Navy Seal or something. Kill you before you knew what hit you."

"She flipped out at me in the parking lot the other day. Like I said, kind of crazy."

They would watch Miss Burden. the so-called crazy one, walk into the twilit purple of the gymnasium. Smoke curled against the windshield, the engine tick-tickering as it cooled.

Feeling the schnapps and the weed start their work, Evan let himself daydream again about the little rise below Sarah Purnell's bellybutton. If he got close enough he knew he'd find there little white hairs just enough to fuzz at the end of fingertips or tongue. His free hand brushed his slacks.

"We better get going soon," Evan said.

Jimmy would pass the pipe to him. “Almost cashed. That’s you, my friend.”

The next day would always come. Too long past dawn, Ernestine Burden woke, pushing away her dreams, not of car crashes but of Tiberius Marks. He had been there beside her, she was sure of it, the vague sense of familiarity lingering. She opened her eyes to the cobwebbed ceiling of a strange apartment, a crick in her back from the worn couch on which she lay. Her skin was damp under the scratch of a quilt spread over her. Had Tie put it there? She caught not sight or smell of him but felt him by sheer proprioception. It was as if he were just standing over her, just behind her, astride the border of sleep and waking.

And then she heard a voice from the other room: hushed, male, but not Tie’s. And seeing the empty glasses and vacated bourbon bottle on the coffee table she could now locate herself in David Sinclair’s apartment.

Ernie sat up in the morning-after. She touched the sides of her head, her hair matted down from sleep, her temples painful to the touch. How many drinks and how many hours she’d shared with Sinclair, she couldn’t say exactly, except that it seemed to her now that it was without a doubt too many. Ernie recalled keeping each other awake, both resolved to talk about anything and everything except the crash, as if they could erase it by lack of mention. Sinclair had told her about his time in college, his parents, how he was hoping to adopt a shelter dog once he’d settled. She told him about her vanilla childhood, her parents still living in town and the kind of schools she would make if she could make them from scratch. And at some point, if she was remembering correctly, they’d put on some music, joking, laughing about how they’d never got to have that dance, stepping on each other’s feet as they swayed, ridiculous in the cramp of the apartment, pretending together, her head once resting on his shoulder, their hands clasped, making fun of themselves because no one could see.

She could barely make out Sinclair’s voice through the door. He was on the phone with someone, from the sounds of it. She checked her watch and saw it was just after 10 a.m. Someone would spot her coming out of the apartment if she left now, and she wondered if it would be better to wait until later, when it would not be so clear that she’d spent the night. She rubbed at her eyes, which felt as though they were attempting to escape her skull. She ran the back of a hand across her mouth to wipe drool collected there, marveled at how badly she smelled.

Then Sinclair emerged from the bedroom looking no worse for wear. Holding a cell phone in his hand, he smiled at her, the grin of coconspirators. He told her good morning too cheerfully, asked her if she'd slept okay.

She lied and said she did. Ernie sat up on the couch so that he could sink into the vacated space beside her, and the old sofa puffed a cloud of dust under his weight.

"I was on the phone with the sheriff's department," Sinclair said, placing the phone on the coffee table, among the empty tumblers and stains of spilled whiskey. "The deputy, whoever he was, I didn't get his name, he hasn't filed the report yet. They said he won't be back on duty until this evening, and he'll file it then."

"Oh," she said. She didn't know why he wanted to talk again about the crash.

"So, I don't know. Buck would have me wait on the official report, but if I do that, it might be too late. Have to get the story in by noon today to beat the deadline for Monday. Can I get you some water or something?"

"I should go home," Ernie said. She stood, fighting dizziness and a tumble in her stomach.

"Right," Sinclair said, standing too. "I'll give you a ride."

"I'd rather walk," she said. "It's better that way. People."

"I've got to drive, anyway, if you—"

"No," she said.

He nodded. Ernie wondered if he understood anything she said.

"Everyone will know about the crash by tomorrow," she told him. "That's how this town works. People will be on their phones today circulating rumors and then ironing them out after church tomorrow. Everyone will know about Jimmy by Monday morning."

"So, I shouldn't bother getting it into the paper?"

No," she said, "I think you should. People will want some reassurance."

Sinclair nodded. He told her she was right. "It was nice, though," he said. "Last night."

Ernie nodded, hoping that would discourage him. "I'll see you around," she said, and before he could do anything odd like reaching out to hug her, she grabbed her purse from the coffee table, scooped up the heels deposited at the foot of the couch, and steadied herself for a descent of the stairs. There were too many.

She wished she'd brought a second pair of shoes as soon as her bare toes hit the cold sidewalk outside the apartment. Ernie leaned against the front of the building to slip the heels back on, trying to keep her face turned away from a passing car and whatever driver might have been witness to this maneuver.

A high sun followed her up Market Street, Ernie discovering in the first two blocks that a small blister had formed on her left big toe. As in innumerable small towns the main drag of New Rome cobbled together a handful of businesses in nominally historic buildings, their facades in need of tuckpointing and fresh paint. The insurance agency and the dentist were both closed for the day, vacancy the rule for Saturdays among local shopkeepers. A small contingent waited in line at the bakery, so Ernie kept her head down as she passed. The party dress didn't serve her much better than the heels, and she itched for Tie Marks's old varsity jacket to throw over her shoulders and keep her from the chill of the October morning.

Home wasn't far, but it was far enough for her to replay moments from the night before, to grow embarrassed about their dancing, just the two of them. If Sinclair remembered it, she told herself, he surely knew it was a joke. She couldn't have been serious. The car crash, the drinks, whatever she had said in the car, it had all been too much. As long as she hadn't said anything about Tie being missing.

The brisk walk putting her in better stead, she threw open the front door to her parents' house. Her mother was working a shift at the library that morning, which spared Ernie having to answer any questions about the dance, much less about where she'd been all night. Passing through the living room, she waved to her father, who lay in his armchair and watched college football. He grunted his greeting, told her there was coffee waiting in the kitchen.

But swallowing the hot coffee turned Ernie's stomach a bit, so she tried water instead. The results were scarcely better. She'd never, even in her college days, stood up very well to a night of drinking. She'd been the kid who complained of a stomachache at just about every cake-and-ice cream party, and habitually she threw up at even the tamest roller coasters. A strong heart but a weak stomach, her mother said once.

Ernie changed into running clothes, thinking a jog over to the high school might be in order. She needed her car, for one, and hadn't she heard somewhere that exercise could cure a hangover? She was not a competitive runner, but she was a determined one, and this morning a jog seemed like the right kind of penance.

Having donned shorts and a sweatshirt with a New Rome High School logo, she kissed her father on the top of the head and forced herself out onto the sidewalk.

She circled the subdivision to get her legs under her before heading out onto the main road, which was technically a county highway but saw little traffic. Its shoulders were wide enough that she could use them as a jogging lane without much fear of passing cars, though she refrained from listening to music so she could hear any cars coming up from behind. It would be no more than a mile to get into town, and then she would follow another road to the high school parking lot, where hopefully the Ford sat where she left it.

A truck slowed as it drove past, headed the other direction. The driver waved at Ernie. She recognized the guy but couldn't name him. Perhaps he was a student's parent or a road worker or someone she'd seen a dozen times but never shaken hands with. She waved back.

Settling into her pace Ernie tried to recount all the things passed between her and Sinclair. Particularly she hoped that in the light of the day none of it would seem unsayable. She'd told him about small town adolescence, how she'd boomeranged back, her deal with Tie to stay in New Rome until they were free to chase bigger and better things. The way Sinclair listened so intently to her talk of the future, how she wanted badly to help kids and give them the right books to read and make some little difference, seemed embarrassing now, self-indulgent. But Sinclair was a good listener, she had to admit. Maybe the first to ever listen to her so well.

At one point, Sinclair had asked if she was happy, not in this hypothetical future, but right now in New Rome. She had answered in the affirmative. Sinclair might have known she lied.

Ernie heard the whoosh of a car coming up the highway from behind, so she slowed and moved over to the edge of the grass. As the car passed she saw in the passenger seat a teenaged boy with shaggy brown hair and wispy little mustache. She recognized his stupid grin, like the one that Jimmy Flint had given her after she'd honked at him in the parking lot. The boy in the car grinned just like that. Just like that.

The car left her in its wake. No, Ernie told herself, that boy couldn't have been Jimmy Flint, because she had seen his overturned Chevy and the mess of blood over the blacktop of a country highway. There was no way she could have seen Jimmy in that passing car, she thought, any more than she had really felt Tie standing over her as she woke that morning. Her breath gone shallow, she stepped into the grass at the roadside, her hands sinking to her kneecaps as she bent and fought off the urge to vomit, her weak stomach betraying her.

And then because there was nothing else to do, she ran again.

David Sinclair's route wended through patches, some a dozen square miles, where service to his cell phone flagged or died altogether, and so he followed directions he'd scrawled into his notepad. While he drove he tried also to balance the unlidded mug of coffee that twice had spilled its contents onto his khakis. He ought to have been keeping an eye out for highway troopers, who sometimes liked to park in shaded nooks just where the road might bend and

watch for speeders like Sinclair. But no matter. He contemplated his wristwatch, calculating the minutes remaining before the absolute close of the deadline.

The *New Rome News's* holding company had published a spate of rural weeklies and a couple dailies for midsized towns, a thin-stretched empire. More recently Trumpet Publishing had taken on printing training manuals for the bottle factory and St. Thomas's missals, whatever it could scare up from the surrounding countryside to try and offset the price of ink. Trumpet's warehouse and printing facility lay equidistant from all the little nowheres it served, a central spoke in the greater wheel of nowheres.

Even though it was a landmark unto itself, Sinclair had no more luck locating the printshop than he had in finding anything else in his first six weeks in Lee County. He crisscrossed the Rock River Valley, whiskey-tired and still nervy from the events of last night. He would turn down a gravel road, doubt himself, give up and turn around. Signs helped him little, and he couldn't keep directions straight. The car crash and the dancing and then the inexplicable moment of Ernie hurrying off.

Eventually Sinclair pulled his car onto a gravel parking lot outside an off-white industrial structure alien in the surrounding countryside. Thirty-six minutes after eleven.

As he stepped from the car he couldn't be sure whether this was exactly the address he'd scrawled down for the printer's, and the blank installation before him admitted no clues. It looked like an overgrown and whitewashed toolshed. This had to be it.

Sinclair found a heavy gray door at the side of the building. He knocked. He knocked again. Then he took both balled fists and pounded once, twice, thrice against the door. He began to circle the building to look for windows, which didn't exist, absent a couple of miniscule squares positioned well above eye-level. His watch showed only about twenty minutes before the deadline. Back to the door he went, knocked with the hammy part of his fist instead of knuckles. He varied his rhythms. He bellowed. He kicked the door once or twice. How long this went on, a lifetime, maybe a few minutes.

Then the door opened, a man with protective earmuffs in his hand. He glared. "What are you trying to do, bust the door open?"

"Are you Tiny?" Sinclair asked.

"Who's asking?"

He seemed, to Sinclair, perfectly average-sized in every way, a straggle of brown hair combed over his pate. The nickname likely of the ironic variety, but that was certainly a question for later.

"I'm Sinclair. You said on the phone that you could hold the presses until noon. And sorry about all the banging."

It was too late for Sinclair to redo the layout entirely, but Tiny agreed to show him to an office where could write in a new front page before the edition was plated. Buck Neely had strictly forbidden him to make any such late-stage changes, but this seemed to Sinclair an exception. Buck would probably thank him later.

Sinclair followed Tiny onto the printing floor, past the dinosaurs of printing equipment, only some of which he recognized. The machinery hulked to the ceiling and from wall to wall, a monstrosity of chutes and belts and pipes. A few pieces creaked with life. Levers jutted out every which way, buttons lit up or flashed. The smell of the place reminded him of a service station, or maybe the time he'd accidentally wandered into the stockroom of a Wal-Mart. On the far wall Sinclair could see a dozen reams of paper stacked.

"In here," Tiny said, indicating a wooden door off the printing floor. On the door were a pair of placards, the first which said *Office* and the second which said *Keep Tiny Out*. Tiny produced a keyring from his pocket, found the right one and turned open the lock.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Sinclair asked him, pointing to the second placard.

"That's my boss's office," Tiny said. "Mr. Doyle."

Sinclair waited for the man to crack a smile, which he didn't. "Press starts at noon?" he asked.

Tiny pointed across the way to one of the gray-yellow machines. "At twelve o'clock I push the button, whatever you've got set up on the computer."

Sinclair thanked him and headed into the office, little more than a desktop with messes of paper piled about. He sat in front of the computer, which had been turned off and would take a torturously long time to boot up.

With a glance at his watch he knew he'd have a handful of minutes to write the story and add in a photo. With the computer stalled on a screen with a spinning circle, Sinclair stuck his head out of the office and called to Tiny.

"Yes, sir?" Tiny was rolling a ream of paper across the printing floor.

"What sounds better to you: *Homecoming crash claims teen,* or *Local boy dead in two-car wreck*?"

Tiny shook his head. "Neither sound good to me, particularly if you were in the crash."

"I just mean for my headline."

"I couldn't say."

"*Homecoming crash claims teen,* or *Local boy dead in two-car wreck*?" Sinclair repeated. "Which one gets your attention more?"

"I suppose the first," Tiny said. "Makes me think of a homecoming parade. Makes me think of two of those floats crashing into each other. That what happened?"

"No," Sinclair said, "It was just—never mind. Thanks for the help."

The story would be a thin one, even by Sinclair's standards. He had the scant details gathered from the scene: the names and residences of the involved parties, the responding officer's name, the location, the time. He had approximate response times for the EMTs and fire crew, which would likely be disappointing for those readers bankrolling the ambulance district. There was no time to call the sheriff again for confirmation.

For now, Sinclair had to make sure Tiny didn't start the presses until he had something ready for the front page. What he really needed was the picture, a dramatic had-to-be-there gasper. The trick was to find the most terrible photo that didn't have any visible blood or body parts. Blood and body parts went beyond, Sinclair thought, the limits of journalistic good taste, but anything short of a dismemberment would suit.

Thumbing the buttons at the back of the camera, Sinclair flipped from one image to another: too dark, out of focus, too much blood, too shaky, someone's elbow in the shot, too much blood, too much blood, way too much blood, red light coming from one of the emergency vehicles, too much blood.

He went through and through like this until the gauntlet of carnage gave way to Ernestine Burden winking in a party dress, dark hair lost in the dim lighting of the gym, smile shining through. And Sinclair's breath caught itself a little, and he stared at this picture for several moments longer than his deadline afforded.

If journalism must be the first draft of history, that draft calls for prodigious revision. Even in a place like New Rome, the facts were bound to give way to the distortions of their retellings: exactly how long after the 1982 election had a box of uncounted ballots been discovered under the county assessor's desk? Who threw the first punch in the brawl that decamped the Lee County Fair in 1998? Did Jack Rodney really fall drunkenly into the river last year, only to be washed ashore the next morning unscathed? The *News* answered. Memories might inevitably tangle, but editions of the *News* lingered for years in a big box at the local library.

Buck Neely often said holding something in his hands meant something about its worth. He'd told Sinclair as much, but the version of objectivity preached endlessly by Sinclair's journalism school professors had failed to impress on him that it would be objects, not memories, from which the truth was invented.

The logs at the sheriff's office, for instance, had escaped Sinclair. According to those logs, at 4 p.m. that Saturday, Lee County Deputy Eric Plummer reported for duty. And before

his coffee would have gone cold, he wrote the crash report he'd neglected at the end of his previous shift. His details of time and date and circumstance would largely mirror those in Sinclair's article: the pickup truck was traveling southbound and the call to emergency services came from a local farmer roused from his bed. All affirmed Sinclair's version except that in Deputy Plummer's, the deceased driver would be listed as unidentified at the time of the report.

After Plummer left his desk for the winding backroads of Lee County, a new document arrived in the sheriff's office: a missing person's report forwarded by the New Rome police. A 15-year-old named Evan Brewster reported lost, the requisite 24 hours passed since his parents had last seen him. No one would have reacted much to this notice because teenage boys were what they were, the weekend was what it was, and most of those cases resolved themselves. No would think to match the missing person's report to the unidentified fatality, Brewster being too young to legally drive.

An insurance adjuster working Saturdays made the trip out to the county to assess the damage on the pickup truck involved in the Homecoming night crash. He would await a final report from Plummer, but he performed the initial work of photographing the truck and taking a statement from the insured. He was told that Mrs. Jacqueline Flint was not in fact the driver of the other car, though the Chevy was registered in her name. The insurance adjuster, a man from DeKalb who two years prior had suffered a heart attack and now chewed aspirin four times daily, searched for Flint in the phone book and gave her a call to obtain her insurance details. He left her a message on an answering machine and entered this into his official log, which of course Sinclair never saw. Later the insurance adjuster made note of the fact that Mrs. Flint called to tell him that she, quote, had no idea that her car was involved in an accident and that this better not be some kind of scam.

Late Saturday night the county coroner admitted one visitor to the morgue for the purposes of identification, according to the record kept there. Mrs. Jacqueline Flint, per the coroner's report, attested that the cadaver in question did not belong to her son. The body had been brought in with a pair of old dress slacks, but the only things left in the pockets were a single condom and fourteen dollars. On a separate piece of paper, the coroner scratched a list of names belonging to young men who might have been driving the car. Jimmy's friends, according to Mrs. Flint. This list would be used by the sheriff's office to make some inquiries by telephone, and one of the dispatchers there recognized Evan Brewster's name.

Only after midnight could the coroner file his report identifying the body, the grieving parents asking repeatedly how their son could have been in a car crash, Evan only having a learner's permit. Mrs. Brewster insisted there must have been some mistake, even as she

looked at the remains spread on the cold metal table and recognized without a doubt the arms and chest and fingers and toes of her baby boy. If there were some mistake it wasn't clear whose it was, and Mr. Brewster shook his head and told the coroner to cover up the body before it drove all of them crazy.

And it was not until Deputy Plummer's Monday shift that he would sit heavy at his desk, coffee still so hot that it burnt the end of his tongue white, and amend his crash report. Later that day Mr. and Mrs. Brewster would meet with staff at Sealy and Sons Funeral Home to draw up the details of the funeral, choosing not the priciest casket in the showroom but a respectable polished elm, just a few lilies and "On Eagle's Wings" for the main hymn. Only then, late in that meeting, hours after the weekly newspaper had been sown across lawns throughout Lee County, would the funeral director delicately obtain the necessary information for an obituary to be placed in the *New Rome News.*

No way of knowing, Ernestine Burden thought, what will come, what will go, what will remain. She had paused at the window of the consignment store on Market Street, the laze of mid-Monday traffic puncturing an otherwise serene autumn day. In the window of the junk shop, a patchwork teddy bear sat atop an old, red-rusted Kraft shortening tin, and beside that, a pail of silk hydrangeas, sun-bleached to pale imitation. A radio and cassette player, made to look like a vintage Montgomery Ward, collected dust next to the handlebars of a yellow Schwinn. A scuffed wooden sign advertised five-cent baths. An *I Like Ike* button, a canteen stamped U.S. Army. Merle Haggard's *Going Where the Lonely Go* was propped in front of a cardboard of old records. Like all junk shop windows, this one displayed faded advertisements for Coca-Cola, with beehived blondes touting a promise of health and happiness, one pearl-toothed woman holding an infant on her hip and urging mothers to start baby on cola earlier. In the corner sat a television set with accompanying VCR, its screen reflecting Ernie's face as she gauged the believability of a put-on smile.

The offerings in the junk shop window hadn't changed, Ernie thought, since she'd begun her visits to Henny Marks's apartment above. With the best intentions she'd promised Tie that she would keep an eye on Henny, that she'd at least make sure the grocer's delivery boy had dropped off her sundries, but she'd let her commitment lapse most weeks. It was one of those things: she would miss a week, dread apologizing to Henny, use that as an excuse to avoid her a while longer.

Time escaped Ernie, but distance was easy, Henny housebound for weeks. The old woman had redoubled her hermitage since Tie went missing, insisting she stay close by her old rotary phone, just in case. “If I go out to the hairdresser’s,” she’d once told Ernie, “that’s exactly when they will call to let us know he’s safe. And I’ll be sitting there with my hair in curlers, none the wiser. I’d never forgive myself.”

If she really believed that, Ernie had pointed out, she ought to go for a dye job. Good news missed was still good news, even late. Henny snorted and shook her head at the thought.

And this morning, Ernie lingered on her reflection in the junk shop’s glass, fixated on the zit emerging just below her chin. She could see stacks of board games on the shelves inside, assortments of glassware, unpaired salt-and-pepper shakers. She couldn’t recall the shop open for business, its contents more like a museum now. Ernie could only guess at the dust accumulating inside. She wondered what it was like for Henny, living above the shop and the rusting Americana beneath her floorboards, and whether she imagined herself a queen atop the midden.

Okay, okay, Ernie thought, I’m going up. She rounded the corner and pressed at the buzzer beside the door there.

Like many obligations this one could be made tolerable by its predictability. Ernie would wait for Henny to hear the buzz and unlock the door. Then she would climb the stairs to the apartment, where she would find Henny by the window, leaned back in an easy chair with stacks of notebooks at her sides, a few stained tea cups strewn about. Then Ernie would ask her empty questions about how she was feeling. She would receive only vague answers in return. Ernie would do some dishes or sweep the floor or take on some other small chore and then say goodbye. Henny typically wore a full face of makeup, even if she never left the apartment anymore, perhaps out of a longing for the old days when she worked a nine-to-five or simply a genteel paranoia that she ought to always look her best. The apartment, though, ran into a state of minor disrepair, jam-smeared plates in the sink and cobwebs left to linger in corners, and Henny’s notebooks, growing in number as of late, would cover any available surface.

Ernie pressed again at the buzzer, her first having gone unanswered.

Clouds obscured late morning, a hesitant breeze skittering dry brown leaves across the sidewalk. Ernie pressed the buzzer again, listening for a sound beyond the door, but she heard nothing. She called Henny’s name.

Still without an answer, Ernie considered two possibilities: first, that Henny had died alone in her apartment and it would fall to Ernie to somehow arrange for her removal; and second, that the death of Henny Marks, though unpleasant immediately, would let loose one anchor that held Tie and Ernie in New Rome. Ernie ought to have felt guilty for the former,

maybe, and the latter, definitely. But after ten minutes or so Ernie's knocking at the door, ringing the buzzer, calling out, feeling like a failure of a granddaughter-in-law-to-be, pressing the buzzer again, Ernie finally heard the shy click of the outer door's unlocking.

"For Heaven's sake," Henny said from her perch near the window, after Ernie had climbed the stairs to the apartment. "An old woman should be able to sleep in if she chooses."

"It's Monday," Ernie said.

"I know what day it is."

"Then you know I usually come on Mondays. Don't tell me you were sleeping there by the window. It's not good for your—"

"You're late, anyway," Henny said. "I had to climb the stairs to get this morning's paper myself."

"It's cold in here," Ernie said.

"Don't you touch the thermostat. Hasn't your father taught you anything?" Henny wore a wool blanket over her shoulders like a cape, her marigold blouse untucked at the hips. Though she wore no earrings today, her earlobes sagged from a life of ornamentation, slipping just below the curl of her silvery hair. Henny crossed her hands on one trousered leg, kept an eyebrow vigilantly raised in Ernie's direction. "Honestly," she said, "you don't have to prove anything to me by coming here. I can manage quite well on my own."

"The night Tie left," Ernie said, "you told him you were happy we'd spend more time together."

Henny toyed with her beaded necklace. "That night," she said, and that was it.

Ernie didn't know what to say, either, about that last night they'd all been together in this apartment, just before Tie's departure. Henny had laid out a spread like never before: a pork loin crusted with parsley, mashed potatoes from scratch, Brussel sprouts scorched in butter, a half-dozen fresh rolls from the baker's, a salad of arugula and beetroot, two bottles of wine. They heaped their plates with the offerings, remarked how beautifully it had turned out. The wine was poured. But Ernie's appetite had abandoned her, and judging from the way Henny ventured only nibbles, so had hers. They sat hushed, the prospect of their parting too serious to attempt small talk about plans for the autumn.

Then, Tie had lifted a dinner roll in mock ceremony. "This is my body," he said, "take it and eat of it." He split the roll in two, chewed at a half. "I just want to know which of you is going to betray me."

Ernie remembered the clink of Henny's fork as she tapped it against the edge of her plate. "Tiberius."

"Listen," Tie said, "they all seem dangerous until you come out alive."

His grandmother had shaken her head.

"All I'm saying is that there are more dangerous things," Tie told them then, "statistically speaking. There a dozen ways I could have died in New Rome. Farm machinery, car crash. If I survived growing up here, I can survive anything."

He had failed to cheer either of them.

And now, back in the apartment but alone with Henny, Ernie shook off the feeling that Tie was there with them still. She moved to a wooden chair next to Henny's, relocated a stack of notebooks so that she could sit. There was a copy of the *New Rome News* folded among the notebooks, but she looked away. She didn't want to know what Sinclair had written about the crash.

"People see you, you know," Henny said. "Around town. People can see what you're up to."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I've seen girls like you before. Once knew a Kate Brubaker. Real pretty girl with long eyelashes, a little on the plump side. Her fiancé was sent to Korea. Gone for a year or more, as I remember it. And meanwhile she started taking long evening walks with a boy from over near Dixon. I'll tell you, when her fiancé came back, safe and sound, all he heard about was this fellow showing up on Kate's stoop with pansies every Friday. And you know what? They called off the engagement. Never married. You might want to remember Kate Brubaker."

Ernie now saw that from Henny's window, she could peer into David Sinclair's apartment across the way. Too small, this town.

"Whatever you think you saw," Ernie said, "it's not like that. I only talked to him because he wants to do a story about Tie. Kind of like a long interview."

Henny shook her head. "I know what I saw, young lady. I don't care what college that boy went to, you can't call that an interview."

Ernie shook her head, wondered exactly how extensive Henny's spying might have gone. She knew the old woman had a knack for it, often questioned her about things that she thought Tie and she kept in confidence.

"Miss Burden," Henny said to her now. "You owe my grandson better. And you can trust I've been honest with him." She glanced at the notebooks stacked near her feet.

"Do you mean these?" Ernie said, picking up the notebooks, shaking them as if secrets might spill from their leaves. She stood, seized a half-dozen of the notebooks. The pages flapped like the wings of a panicked bird. "Where is it?" Ernie asked. "Which one of these?"

"Put those down," Henny said, a crooked finger pointed in Ernie's direction. "Those are not for you."

"You don't know anything," Ernie told her, "sitting here at your window. You don't know what you saw. You're only going to make Tie upset."

Henny bared her teeth, looked down at the spilled notebooks at the mosaic of spidery script that Ernie had bared. "I know what I know," she said.

"You're writing all these stupid letters," Ernie said. "Tie will probably never even read them."

Henny made a noise, something between a yowl and a sigh. "Don't," she said.

Ernie had cut her, she knew. But Henny's spying, whatever she might have written to Tie, bushwhacked her, wrested away her fragile grasp on things. She and Henny had long modulated between icy formality and empty cordiality, Tie a conspicuous battleground between them. And now Ernie felt them moving toward something new.

"Maybe it's time you stop with these," Ernie said, shaking a notebook in her hand, "and think about what'll happen if Tie—"

"Get out," Henny said, voice like bone on cement. "Out, now, and never back again."

Superstition among small-town journalists would indicate real news waits for reporters to leave town. This was, as Buck Neely had more than once explained, the chief reason he'd refused any vacation for three decades, allowing himself to leave town no longer than one night, and even then he needed a fairly compelling reason. In 1978, he'd taken a brief honeymoon at the behest of his new wife, and the results had been disastrous: New Rome's oldest structure, the mercantile building at the head of Market, burned to the ground in a fire so hot that it melted the vinyl siding of buildings across the street. The mercantile's smoldering remains were cleared without the *News* printing a single photo, and Neely more than once stopped at the site to gaze at its blackened space of earth, the story already old news.

So, it was only against Buck's advice that David Sinclair allowed himself so much as a lunch break. He hadn't seen his family in the Chicago suburbs since taking the job in New Rome. He booked no excursions. He planned no trips.

But that Monday morning, the fatigue of the job winning him over, Sinclair departed into a luxurious nap. Socks removed, one hand tucked into the spandex waist of his boxers, Sinclair slept soundly on his couch until early afternoon.

Sinclair's telephone hadn't rung loudly enough to wake him for any of three calls from Buck, the two calls from Sissy Branch at the *News* office, the one from a local councilman whom he'd interviewed for a story about culvert replacement on the town's east side. It was

eventually the backfiring of an old Plymouth, firing below his window just before one o'clock, that woke him. Sinclair stared at the list of missed calls, yawning and scratching at his bared stomach, wondering what could have been the matter.

When Sinclair returned Buck's call, the old editor asked what in God's name he could have possibly been doing all day. He ordered him to the *News* office while he still had a job.

Sinclair stared at the phone, nauseated by the prospect of going in. Nonetheless he found a rumpled pair of khakis and his lucky necktie.

"In that journalism school," Buck asked him when Sinclair walked through the front door of the *News,* "they teach you about the five dubyas?" He was seated next to Sissy Branch at her desk, and he indicated Sinclair should sit in the chair across from them.

"What?" Sinclair asked, lowering himself carefully into the seat.

"Should have been journalism 101," Buck said. "You must remember those dubyas. Indulge me."

"You mean who, what, when—"

"Now hold on," the old editor interrupted him. "You're going too fast. Who. As in who the hell are we talking about? As in who the hell cares? Everybody in a news story is just a stranger. You meet and forget them. That is, unless you really know who they are."

Sissy leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. She looked like she was enjoying Buck's performance.

"What was that second one you said?" Buck asked. "What? Same thing. What happened, that's what people read the newspaper to know. Simple on its surface. But in this town, they've already heard some version. Whatever the what is, it's not new, not really. And besides, how long do you have to be alive to figure out all the things that ever could happen? The what's never new, not really. How many times do you open a newspaper and think, 'Well, shit, that has really and truly never happened before?' People like you and me, never. Seen it all. What happened? The same thing happened, over and over again. That's what happened."

Sinclair nodded, no closer to understanding what was going on.

"You want to talk about when something happened? Sure, kid, you've got the basics here," Buck said, holding up a copy of the newspaper and putting a knobby finger to the photo of the car wreck. "I got the time of night. I get when people started showing up on scene. It happened on Friday. But when did it really happen? This kid in his smashed-up ride. It happened the year before, and it happened the year before that. It'll happen next year.

"Where did it happen? This one was out on Humboldt Road, north of town. But last year's was south of town. The next one will be on Market Street. It happens everywhere. It

happens here. That's why we print this stuff. It happens here, and that's the only thing that matters about where. You have to understand what I'm saying."

"I do," Sinclair said, though he didn't.

"I lost track of the dubyas," Buck said to Sissy, but she only shook her head, an unhelpful spectator.

"I think you're on why," Sinclair said.

"They want us to write about why this shit happens. Sure, we'll give them that. We'll give them the version for the paper. The car was going too fast around the bend. The other driver didn't have his brights on. Alcohol or drugs, maybe. You get your why in there, and people accept it because they have their whys, too. But it's a bigger why. Something to do with bad luck or God or having it coming. Or they know this is just the way things are. That's why."

Buck rapped his knuckles against the desktop. "Isn't there another one?"

"Maybe 'how,'" Sinclair said. "But that's six."

"And that doesn't start with a W, either," Sissy offered.

"Any newsman worth his salt can tell you how something happened," Buck said. "How does the world work? Two vehicles, a dark country highway, the laws of physics. That's how. Everybody in this town already knows how these things happen."

"You didn't like the article," Sinclair said.

"Haven't you been listening to a word I said?" Buck pointed to the photo of Jimmy Flint's mangled car. "This might have been the best thing I've seen on the front page of the *News* in years. And there's one reason, and it's got nothing to do with those five dubyas you learned from some professor. It's the other dubya, the only one that matters to people when they read the newspaper: will. As in, will this happen to me? They look at this photo and they've driven down this road and they've probably even seen this junky old car around town. Will it happen to me? That's what you want them to think. And for a second, even if just for a second, they open their newspapers and they think, yes, maybe it will happen to me. Maybe I'm not unlike this poor Jimmy Flint kid. That's how things change. That's real news."

"You have a roundabout way of paying a compliment," Sinclair said.

"You have a generous definition of a compliment," Buck said. "Because the only problem with your story is that you killed the wrong kid."

Before Sinclair could guess where it had all gone wrong, Buck and Sissy launched into a stereophonic reaming. How could he have named Jimmy Flint when the kid wasn't even there? *I had someone who identified the car*— How could he have run the story without checking with the cops first? *They didn't file their report before deadline, and the guy at the printers*—Do you know what the Flints must have thought when they opened the paper this

morning? *I can't imagine*. Do you know what this does to the poor family of the kid who actually died, and anyway, do you even know who he is? *No.* Do you even know Evan Brewster? Did you know he was only fifteen? Did you know that the obit came in the fax this morning while you were what, napping? Do you know what this does to the paper? Do you know what our advertisers are likely to do about this? Do you know how many reporters get fired over fuck-ups of this level? What in Jesus's middle name do you have to say for yourself?

Sinclair retraced his steps of the night, the next morning, trying to remember the scattered details, how careless he'd been when the job demanded unrelenting care.

"A kid like Jimmy Flint," Buck said, "people said he might have been tempting the devil all his life. But now they don't know what to think. Not when it's a nice kid like Evan."

"I had no idea."

"Do you know what Sissy is going to be doing this week to cover your ass?" Buck asked. Sinclair noticed for the first time that Sissy held a pair of scissors, pointed at him. "She's going to have to bake four hundred chocolate chip cookies and hand-deliver them to every one of our advertisers and beg and aw-shucks them until they stop worrying that the *News* has taken up with fiction-writing instead of reporting."

"Those cookies," Sissy said, "they take time. They take time."

Sinclair wondered if four hundred cookies was a reasonable estimate, given the circulation numbers.

"And you know what I'm going to have to do?" Buck said. "Call the publisher on your account and try to explain. Beg for your job."

"I'm assuming I'll be fired," Sinclair said.

"Maybe you should stop making assumptions."

Sinclair nodded. "I'll run a correction, then," he said. "First page of next week's edition. I'll come right out with it. I'll give the spread to this other kid. I'll do a whole write-up."

Buck leaned back in his seat and looked at Sissy. She shrugged.

"I'll call the Flint kid's parents and apologize. I'll apologize to the other family, the cops, whoever— "

"Who ID'd the car, anyway?" Buck asked him.

"They ran the plates, the cops did. I heard it on the scanner. Registration came back to Somebody Flint. Judy or Jackie Flint, maybe. I was driving."

"Where'd you get the kid's name?"

"I had someone with me."

Buck shook his head. "What's her name?" he asked. "How old is she?"

"It's not like that."

"You're in no position for a Woodward and Bernstein act. Just tell us who it was."

Sinclair looked down, tried to smooth a wrinkle across the front of his pants. He cleared his throat, told them about Ernie, carefully, about how they'd been talking at the dance, about how she'd gone with him to the accident site. He told them that Ernie claimed to know Jimmy Flint from the school, that she'd given Sinclair the name, and the verification over the radio seemed like enough.

He didn't mention Ernie coming back to his apartment after the crash.

"She's engaged," Sissy said nonetheless, waving her scissors in Sinclair's direction. "You know that, right? She's engaged to a man in the military. He's serving his country, he's—"

"I know, I know," Sinclair said, though he wasn't sure what Tie Marks had to do with this. "We're just friends."

"How'd you come up with this headline anyway?" Buck asked him, rattling the frontpage inches from his face. "I thought you studied journalism, not drama."

"I was rushed. I asked this guy at the printing facility, and he seemed to like it. Tiny Something—"

Buck dropped the paper and looked to Sissy. For a moment they didn't move, and whatever they silently exchanged, Sinclair had no idea. Then Sissy shook her head, started to giggle. Buck let out a chuckle, then almost a belly laugh, both having a good guffaw. If Buck had gone as far as to slap a knee it wouldn't have surprised Sinclair.

"I don't get it," Sinclair said.

"Tiny Showalter doesn't know how to read," Buck said, breath short between laughs. "And you go to him for advice. Maybe we should make him the next editor."

This only aggravated Sissy's chortling, and Sinclair tried to laugh, too, as if he had been in on the joke all along.

October 25, 2006

Dear Tiberius,

We have the kind of rainy morning you loved as a boy. Fat storm clouds rumbling through, like they are in no hurry. You must remember the old days, my pulling wool blankets from the hallway closet, a hot kettle whistling in the kitchen while you burrowed into the couch, book in

hand. I hope sincerely, wherever you are now, you might still see a lazy storm and love it. What are the odds, Tiberius, of rain?

In my solitude I opened the correspondence from the young man at the newspaper. To my surprise, David Sinclair neglected any apologies. Instead he asked me a favor, to come and talk about you. It appears you might have a new fan. The letter only said that he was hoping to work up an article on your service, and though some acknowledgement would be welcome, I'm not sure he can be trusted with your story, present circumstances considered.

After all, Mr. Sinclair's behavior thus far has not recommended him. This morning, with the rain speckled against my window, I watched the funeral procession for the Brewster boy. Such a bungling by the newspaper, to name the wrong young man. And Mr. Sinclair with the gall to show his face.

You should have seen it. A police car led the way up Market Street, lights flashing and a long line of mourners in tow. A few passersby stopped and lifted their umbrellas to get a better look at the passing cars, waiting for the hearse at the end. I saw Jenny Brewster, her hands pressed against the glass of a truck window, gazing at the hearse carrying her son. Heartbreaking, Tiberius. Constance Jefferson, the boy's maternal grandmother, passed away several years ago, before you were even born, and so was spared the grief today. It pains me to admit the things that have been said since the truth has come to light. Some have said they wished it had happened that the Flint boy instead. Seeing that look upon Jenny Brewster's face made me, for one unforgivable moment, wonder if there would have been some mercy in that. But might there also have been some merciful suspension of the truth for Jenny Brewster, if just for a few sweet hours of believing her son still lived?

I saw Mr. Sinclair at the rear of the procession, leaned halfway out of his car's window, shooting photographs. It looked like he had never seen a funeral before.

Your Loving Grandmother

P.S. I find it curious that Mr. Sinclair's letter mentions nothing of your Miss Burden, as if she could ever stand to be hidden.

On the day after the funeral, during which he'd spent hours attempting to ignore the whispers pointed his direction, shamefully proffering an apology to the Brewsters, wishing he could hide beneath a few feet of earth, David Sinclair's courage failed him. He decided to call in sick.

Sinclair could hear the ruffle of glossy magazines when Sissy Branch picked up the office line, asked him what was wrong. Sinclair coughed dramatically into the phone. "I think it's a stomach flu," he said. "Or maybe food poisoning."

"Maybe it's both," Sissy said. "I could imagine that happening to you."

"Me, too."

Whereas others in his situation might call a trusted friend to talk breathily about everything gone to shit, Sinclair knew that wallowing, alone, was among his few areas of expertise. He wore his most threadbare sweatshirt above a pair of half-torn boxer shorts. He sat in front of the coffee table and swept aside drafts of apologetic letters to the Flints, the Brewsters, Buck, Sissy, Trumpet Publishing Company, Ernestine Burden, anyone who would listen. In their place he set up a bottle of beer and a shot glass refilled between sips. The only watchable thing on television was a rerun of *Law and Order*, and for a few minutes Sinclair was buoyed, but then the characters on the screen became hollow light and sound. He masturbated once without enthusiasm, trying to concentrate on a brassiere-and-panties advertisement ripped from a Sears catalog. At lunchtime he helped himself to half a box of Pop-Tarts and lay face down on the couch, at first resisting and then accepting the sour crust perfuming its cushions.

Sinclair anticipated an equally despicable midafternoon, but the doorbell to his apartment sounded with two sharp buzzes, his breath coming in gulps after lifting himself up on an elbow. When he stumbled to the window, he saw Ernestine Burden there on the sidewalk. She buzzed again and then looked up at him, making eye contact and holding it. He held up a finger to her and then half-tripped down the stairs to greet her.

"Are you feeling all right?" Ernie asked when he opened the door.

"Yeah," he said, remembering too late he had neglected to put on pants. "I'm fine."

"Sissy said you were sick today."

"Right. I think it was a short thing. I might be allergic to Sissy."

She nodded, her eyes finding and then fleeing his bare legs. "Can we talk?"

Sinclair invited her up the stairs, trying to remember as they ascended whether he had left certain items lying about: the Sears advertisement, dirty socks, a red-inked draft of a short story he'd started writing in college. He had just enough time to sweep up the detritus from the coffee table and offer Ernie a seat.

"I probably shouldn't stay long," Ernie said. "I just wanted to come over and check on you. Apologize."

Sinclair worried it would make things more awkward to excuse himself and find some pants, and maybe things would seem perfectly natural and quite friendly if he didn't bother with such social niceties, so he didn't.

"Apologize? For what?" Sinclair asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Everything. You must be in so much trouble."

"They probably won't fire me right away, I don't think." He shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Do people know it's my fault?" she asked. "Do they know I'm the one who said it was Jimmy?"

"No. No one knows."

Buck knew, Sinclair thought. Sissy knew.

"Maybe you could put that in the correction or whatever," Ernie said. "That it was my fault. Then at least people would know."

Chances for minor heroism came so rarely in Sinclair's life. He savored this one. "It doesn't matter now," he said. "It's between you and me. Between us."

"I found out from one of the other teachers," Ernie said, "on Tuesday. I didn't believe her at first, but then I started asking around. It was awful the way people talked about it, like they wished it really had been Jimmy, but they knew different. I wanted to call you, but I thought you'd be mad at me. I'll understand if you'd rather not see me again."

But in fact Sinclair had been thinking the opposite, dwelling these last few days on the thought of her, so frequently that even he was a bit ashamed. On more than one occasion he had started dialing her phone number only to halt in fear of further damage. "Of course I want to see you again," he told her now. "You're kind of my best friend here."

"I'm probably your only friend here."

"Besides, I think we can set things right. I need your help with this article on Tie."

"You still want to do that?"

"More than ever," he said. "A feel-good story about Tie is exactly the kind of thing that could help me get back in good graces."

"When were you in their good graces?"

"Fair enough."

"Does it have to be about Tie, though?" she asked.

"You said it yourself, everyone here loves him. Even Buck said it was a good idea."

"There's something you should know, then." Ernie's gaze roamed the apartment, over the empty potato chip bags and the half-used rolls of paper towels, anywhere but right at Sinclair. They both sat still, and then Ernie shook her head. "Later, I'll tell you later."

"Maybe you could stop by the office next week? We can do a longer interview?"

Ernie stood, nodded yes. "I know you're not feeling well, so I should go."

Perhaps, Sinclair thought, this was how she ended every conversation, with an abrupt exit. Or maybe it was just with him. He followed her down the stairs, asking Ernie to imagine the story: Tiberius Marks, hero, and the beautiful woman at his side. A profile in courage, a way of putting a face to the war. Not only a good story for the *News* but a centerpiece for Sinclair's clipbook, maybe even a ticket to a better job somewhere else, though he didn't mention that particular hope to Ernie. They reached the bottom of the stairs.

"One more thing," Ernie said, halfway through the door already. "I think we should say that whatever happened that night, especially the—weird dancing, that it didn't mean anything. We were both shook up about the crash. Just friends, right? We're just going to be friends?"

Sinclair would like to believe he reacted with such convincing nonchalance in that moment that Ernie would never notice his entire body cringe in the holey sweatshirt, nor would she have seen his bare knees goose-pimpled in the cool afternoon air.

"Of course," Sinclair said, nothing further from the truth. "I know we're just friends."

Section Two:
The Dog-Biting Man

The search for Tiberius Marks would inevitably lead to a scattering of family beyond the borders of Lee County, each one claiming kinship with a Marks from just across the Mississippi, or living on the ancestral plot at the foot of the Smokies, or running a dairy farm up in Wisconsin hill country. But in New Rome, most traced their branch of Markses to the middle years of the Second World War, when without recommendation a cotton-frocked girl showed up at the city courthouse looking for work.

Her name was Henrietta Corrigan. Some people thought she had been thrown out by a family of east coast immigrants. Others guessed she had wandered in from one of the surrounding fields, so mismanaged as to go bust despite the wartime demand for wheat. In either case Henrietta carried a certificate as a serviceable typist, and the municipal judge, whose aides had all departed for the war, took her on at twelve dollars a week, a figure that rankled the old-timers. But Henrietta dressed neatly and showed up on time and didn't bother the judge about his long lunch breaks, and so in his eyes earned her keep.

Crime, like everything, ran slow in New Rome, and so Henrietta had little to do outside of filing and occasional stenography service. Quietly she earned the trust and then the dependence of the local juridical set, and even after V-J Day she kept her post, making as much per week as any working woman in a three-county area. To the envy of local matrons, she wore silk blouses on Wednesdays and Fridays. When she bought a newly renovated second-floor apartment on a Market Street corner in the mid-'40s, rumors painted her a carpetbagger, usurping the proper place of New Rome's returning servicemen. Young Henrietta Corrigan spoke little and to very few of her neighbors then, at least as they remembered it. Polite, sure, but severe.

She might have lived the rest of her life in solitude, agnostic toward the opposite sex, except that in the years after the war it was not uncommon for a woman to receive her share of tipped caps from men arriving in town for work. Crops boomed in the postwar fields around the town, and during the high seasons, the local farmers were happy to take on extra hands. Some called it a rural renaissance. Others guessed they were simply being rewarded for saving the world from the evils of fascism. No matter, heavy seasonal yields brought truckbeds of Indiana and Tennessee men through the vast middle of the state, toiling away a season in the soy, on their way to stockyards or trainyards or auto plants in Chicago. One of these men called himself Elijah Marks.

Elijah, remembered as a lean man and a chewer of wheat stalks; impeccably mannered, both a churchgoer and a frequenter of taverns, a man just as at home splitting wood as talking politics. Once, some people say, Elijah saved a whole family who'd overturned their canoe just off the riverfront. And when he'd retrieved the last of their four children, sputtering and soaked, he went back into the river to try and salvage the canoe as well. He had been a soldier, everyone knew, or at least they suspected, though he didn't visit the veterans' clubs or march in any parades.

Elijah Marks stayed on for a year, doing odd jobs around New Rome before disappearing from the church pews and barbershop benches, likely to find work up north. Scarcely anyone noticed his absence. One might have guessed that he had dissolved into the work of roadbuilding or selling vacuums door-to-door, and that he would never be called back to New Rome. But after a courtship conducted beyond the glimpse of the local church ladies, he had left Henrietta Corrigan very much in love.

With the help of an acquaintance in the postal service, Henrietta made sure her letters reached him wherever he went. She wrote him letters over her morning oatmeal, during the judge's long lunches, at the last embers of her evening cigarette. Something she wrote must have drawn Elijah back to New Rome, and upon his return, they married. A girl named Sally was born.

In those first honeymoon years Elijah remained only tentatively tethered to town and family. He was a wanderer by instinct. In contrast to his steadfast wife, whose new role as a mother brought her further into town life, Elijah persisted at the boundaries. He worked odd jobs, and on the occasions he took up more permanent employment, he was a sullen and uncooperative worker. He was fired from a job as a meat cutter when he declared himself incapable of spilling any more blood and left Janet Kowalski's side of beef to rot. For two years he sold used cars, until he was let go for telling all the customers that buying an automobile was the first step to dying in a car wreck.

For years the little Marks family subsided on the courthouse wages of Henny Marks, as everyone now called her. After Sally enrolled in the local kindergarten, Elijah was granted leave to travel with a carnival, operating an air rifle game until that, too, grew insufferable and he returned home.

Their uneven domesticity rarely lasted. Having blown out the candles on a triple-layer chocolate cake Henny baked for his fortieth birthday, Elijah left for the west coast because, as he put it, he couldn't stand the thought of spending one more day in New Rome. Henny fought him bitterly, cursed his wanderlust, but he was as determined to go see the country as he was to

remain faithful to her. In the end Henny packed him a basket of cold chicken sandwiches and Anjou pears and waved as his pickup kicked up dust on the road out of town.

Henny and Sally supplied vague explanations for his leaving, but New Rome circulated its share of stories. He had gone out to Hollywood to be in the pictures, they said. He certainly had the looks for it. Or maybe he blew into some Wyoming ranch to try his hand at breaking horses. Or maybe he chased the sun ever westward, across mountains and oceans, and he'd be back someday to tell them all about it.

This was the middle sixties, when Elijah disappeared, and Sally felt his absence like a deep wound. She was a girl entering her gawky teenage years, bound to a mother more interested in the town's social vortex than her daughter. Henny ran for president of the Parent-Teacher Organization but forgot Sally's thirteenth birthday. Henny was even then at the forefront of no less than a half-dozen civic organizations and church groups, seemingly thrown into extroversion to salve Elijah's absence. She wrote her husband twice a day, though most letters went unanswered. Or worse, unsent.

After those oppressive years in her mother's apartment, Sally left for a college in Iowa to pursue studies in the classics. The oldness of the Greeks and Romans seemed a great comfort to the incongruences of her life. She aspired to Cicero's humanitas. She let Sophocles convince her of the inevitable. When she read Julius Caesar's dispatches from the Gallic wars, the frontlines seemed distant in neither time nor place. She stopped telling people she came from a place called New Rome because it seemed so embarrassingly misnamed. And there in Iowa she experienced joy for the first times since Elijah had disappeared.

Sally's college years were not without their own tumults, though, and solaces came from an unexpected source. Her mother carried on a regular and lengthy correspondence with Sally despite the fact they'd barely spoken during her teenage years. Henny wrote elaborate and idiosyncratic letters narrating every wrinkle of change within the borders of New Rome. In reply Sally wrote of her classes, her college crushes, the instance in which a professor had invited her to dinner and then let her drink half a bottle of wine even though she was underage. When Sally returned home after senior year, she expected to take up an intimate friendship with her mother, as the letters had suggested, but found her as cold and unavailable as ever.

Sally Marks rented a trailer on the southern edge of town and taught history at the local middle school. She was no expert on Washington or Lincoln, which seemed to her only footnotes in a much broader history, sallow American imitations of their classical forebears, but she did her best. Almost by accident she spent a decade half-mothering those of New Rome's children who needed it, buying up old copies of Thucydides and Plato when she saw them at used book stalls and giving them away to any students who showed even tepid interest.

Partially because she saw herself turning into her own mother, overly invested in other people's lives as recompense for gaps in her own, and partially because Sally's thirtieth birthday passed her with a grinding sadness, she decided to take in a man. She chose poorly: a shiftabout named Harold O'Bannon. His friends called him Happy. He drank wine from boxes and smoked mentholated cigarettes, but he would drive Sally to the movie theater in Dixon and proved a surprisingly gentle lover. She let him move in with her, abided his halitosis and sharp toenails.

They wrangled on until, for reasons unclear, the relationship cooled, and Happy pulled up stakes. No one was sure where he went, but Sally remained in New Rome with a positive pregnancy test on her bathroom sink and summons from the U.S. Army in her mailbox. One Harold O'Bannon called to reinforce the ongoing efforts in Grenada. Sally tried for weeks to send word to him but to no avail. He'd shipped out, whether of his own accord or the Army's. Sally was going to keep the baby, she decided, and it would be simpler if Happy never knew. By the time her feet swelled beyond the capacity of her high-tops, she'd resolved to forget him altogether.

Sally named the baby Tiberius. He had been one of her favorites of the emperors, after all: a stepson of Octavius later adopted by Augustus, a general renowned for his victories on the northern frontiers, burdened by his fate. Tiberius's reign saw peace and a twentyfold increase in the Roman treasury, a caesura in gladiatorial contests, a refusal to claim a calendrical month as his predecessors had done. Pliny the Elder called Tiberius the gloomiest of men. Some say he went mad at the end, bereft at the loss of his son, abandoning his empire to crumble under the rule of his inferiors.

The darkest part of the story, that which Sally found so sad and sweet: the elderly Tiberius hid outside Rome, in a building rumored to house torture and dark secrets. On a day in the middle of March, sickened by exhaustion, the emperor ceased breathing, bound for a reunion with his departed son. Tiberius's successor, Caligula, was there in his villa, his supporters and sycophants gathering around the corpse, when the impossible happened. Tiberius woke up. He began to regain his faculties. His pain had kept him alive. But that second life was only long enough to be smothered with a pair of nearby pillows, Caligula impatient to see him gone. Tiberius had lived too long and too many times.

And here, Sally Marks liked to imagine, a new Tiberius, a gift for all that would know him. When she delivered the baby, he did not cry, not even after the doctor struck him. The baby simply looked at mother and physician as if he had expected to find them there, in that exact scene, in that exact time. He sighed to let them know he was breathing and set them at ease. When Sally brought him to meet Henny, the new grandmother nodded at the baby and

said that it looked like no one she had ever seen before, certainly nothing like Happy. Sally didn't press her mother on that point.

Sally continued to teach history until the day a pulmonary embolism stopped her heart. She was cooking macaroni and cheese on the stovetop in her kitchen. The four-year-old boy she lived with found her laid out on the linoleum tile and then sat beside her, as if he were always supposed to do so, in that exact scene, in that exact time.

TRANSCRIPT
OCT. 30 INTERVIEW W/ ERNESTINE BURDEN
27:43—29:27

DS: How do you know all of this?

EB: From Tie, mostly. But my parents knew a lot of the older stuff about Henny and Elijah. Happy, too. I think my dad knew him.

DS: Do you believe all of it?

EB: It was in her letters, too. Henny's, I mean. That's where Tie got some of the more personal stuff. She wrote so many. Sometimes she sent them, sometimes she didn't, but Tie has read pretty much all of them. And he pieced this stuff together from there.

DS: So, Tie doesn't know where his father is?

EB: (pause) He doesn't say much about it. I'm not sure it bothered him. When he was a kid, they told him his dad had been called up and never knew about the pregnancy. His mom didn't want Happy around, for whatever reason, and Tie trusted her judgment, I guess.

DS: Has Tie ever tried to find him?

EB: Well, after he went to live with Henny, his grandfather came back. Stayed for good. Kind of filled in, I guess. Do you really need to know this stuff?

DS: Helps me get a better idea of who Tie is. That's what I want to put in the article, you know? I want people to get to know the real Tiberius Marks.

EB: That's

DS: Hard, yeah.

EB: That reminds me, I saw your story about Evan's funeral.

DS: The correction.

EB: I'm sure people will understand, eventually. They'll forgive or forget. Always do.

DS: Someone told me the Brewsters might sue me. They wouldn't do that, would they?

EB: People say a lot of things.

DS: (pause) Yeah. Where were we? How did you and Tie get together?

In the thick of June 2005, soggy heat inundated the Illinois plains. The humidity, yellowing armpits of T-shirts and beading on glasses of iced lemonade, was only rarely interrupted by a midday breeze. As the summer moved in that year, Ernestine Burden hid away at a part-time job in the New Rome Library, where she was supposed to shelve books, keep the coffee pot filled and help elderly patrons to their cars. For less than minimum wage, Ernie took orders from her mother, who had on several occasions accused herself of bald nepotism in bringing her daughter on for the summer work. But no one else in town would work for such a pittance, as she'd told Ernie that first morning they'd arrived together at the little brick building.

Ernie considered the summer a prison sentence. Friends from college had secured internships in Peoria or Urbana, or they wasted afternoons half-drunk, stretched beside by pools while pretending to take summer classes. One particularly lucky girl was to embark on a backpacking trip around Europe, her collection of maps and guide books painful for Ernie to behold as the girl wondered aloud whether Italian pasta tasted better than the blue-boxed stuff. To temper her envy, Ernie had tried to convince herself that traveling alone would be its own torment, loneliness being loneliness even at the base of the Eiffel Tower.

Not that New Rome would feel any less lonely. Ernie resigned herself to months of yawning in the sticky midmorning air, counting down hours at the library and saving every penny until she could return to her real life. Her duties at the library included a book club for elementary school students, which her mother suggested was good for her teaching resume, and boxing outgoing inventory, which reminded her that even old books were more capable of leaving New Rome than she was.

Her chief summer project was more complicated. Ernie's mother had charged her with inventing a system to keep a man named Gary Chalmers from hogging the library's sole internet-connected computer. State grant money promised that more computers would arrive someday, but they'd said the same about high-speed internet access, and New Rome would still be on the old telephone wires for years to come. That left just one library computer with access to the outside world, and it was almost always occupied by Chalmers. Ernie's mother suspected that he used the computer to cruise conspiratorial chat rooms and watch those gruesome beheading videos while she was occupied in other parts of the library. And unless another patron showed up to challenge him for computer time, she had no call to boot him. "This is just the kind of problem that you can help me with," her mother told Ernie at the summer's beginning. "He stinks to high heaven. And even I can hear him breathing from the children's section, breathing through his mouth. I've given up on trying to talk to the man."

Ernie's efforts at conversation with Chalmers produced no better result. In the first week she'd invented a new 30-minute computer policy and told him he would have to log out every half hour, even if no one else was waiting. Chalmers sensed a ploy, perhaps, but happily agreed to comply. For long stretches of the day only Ernie, her mother and Chalmers occupied the little library. He wore oversized Hawaiian shirts and cargo shorts, tugged absentmindedly at the messy strands of facial hair rimming his mouth. Ernie did her best to annoy him with her every-half-hour checkups, asking him kindly to log out, and Chalmers had the pluck to thank her for each reminder, clicking demonstratively on the log-out button, stretching dramatically, and then resuming his throne when no one else asked for it.

After this first approach failed, Ernie set out to befriend Chalmers and to convince him that life outside the library, with its promise of sun and air and human interaction, would be a healthy alternative to his daily ritual with the desktop. He disagreed. Ernie touted the benefits of buying his own home computer, maybe on an installment plan, where he'd have privacy. Chalmers insisted he was fine. At one point, Ernie took to standing behind Chalmers as he used the computer, hoping that the constant surveillance would embarrass him into moving along. It did not.

The tug-of-war might have continued for the entirety of the summer if not for the reappearance of Tiberius Marks.

That day Ernie sat in the children's section reading a misplaced Joyce Carol Oates novel when she heard the ring of the antiquated bell hung above the library's door. It was midafternoon on a Tuesday, and she guessed the visitor would be a retiree looking for a biography from Old Hollywood or the new John Grisham novel. But when Ernie peeked through the bookshelves, she saw Tie there, talking to her mother. He wore a pearl-button shirt, closed halfway. Tie wiped sweat from his crew-cut as the air conditioning took its hold, standing straight-backed and cross-armed, a built-out version of the Tie Marks of her high school memories.

Later recounting that moment, to herself and others, Ernie might wonder at what she truly felt. Was it, like she said sometimes, akin to love at first sight, something like love at hundredth sight, or was she only struck by a familiar face, flushed as it was from the heat outside?

Whatever Tie said to her mother, he stopped when he saw Ernie around the corner.

"Ernestine," her mother said, "you remember Tie."

Of course she did. Because she didn't know what else to do, she extended her hand, and he took it in an awkward shake, palm bone-dry.

"He needs help getting on the computer," her mother said, nodding over her shoulder to the corner of the library where Gary Chalmers hunched over the desktop.

"Right." She smiled at Tie.

At that point Ernie knew only those things that everyone in New Rome knew: that Tie had joined up after the terrorist attacks, that he'd done his turn, that his grandmother still lived in her old apartment on Market. So rather than bring up any of that, to blandly say it was nice to see him again, Ernie said nothing, gestured for him to follow her to the computer and its petty tyrant.

Chalmers didn't look up from the computer, even after she cleared her throat dramatically. "Mr. Chalmers—"

The man didn't respond.

"Mr. Chalmers, we have another patron waiting."

The man still didn't look at her but said, as a matter of fact, only fourteen minutes had elapsed since he'd logged in. "You'll have to wait sixteen, no, fifteen and a half more minutes," Chalmers said, his eyes on the computer screen. He scratched.

Ernie looked toward the front desk, but her mother just shrugged. "You see what I put up with," she signed.

"I'll be quick," Tie tried to intercede. "I just need to check a couple of—"

"Has there been a change in policy," Chalmers asked, deigning a glance at Ernie, "or can I finish my business in peace?"

"Mr. Chalmers—"

"This interruption should come out of his time, by the way, and not mine—"

The events of the next few moments, even as Ernie would try to recall them later that day, were confused, too quick to track. In her clearest recollection, Gary Chalmers was in the middle of a protest, and she must have reached out a hand to his shoulder as a conciliatory gesture. Chalmers was saying something, making some noise, she was sure of that. And she could almost picture her hand on his shoulder, could almost remember the tips of her fingers against his arm's pudge. Chalmers must have reacted somehow, grabbed for her hand or stood up quickly, because what else would have made Tie react the way he did?

In a single and horribly quiet maneuver, Tie seized Chalmers by the neck with one arm, doubled his grip with the other. The man's eyes bulged, his glasses askew, and he was half-standing as Tie's grasp lifted him from the chair. Ernie remembered that split-second clearly, the fear with which Chalmers thrashed uselessly in Tie's grasp. And then, the next moment: Tie leaning over the other man's frame and squeezing his windpipe and yelling at him to calm down. The swift force of it like something Ernie had seen on television, maybe, but never in life. Panic and tears coming to Chalmers's eyes, hidden partially by his displaced glasses-frames, the man's cheeks turning purple as Tie held his grip. "Don't you ever try something like that," said Tie, though his tone was neither angry nor excited. "Don't you ever try something like that again."

Gary Chalmers would never return to the library after that day. But Tie would, often. And despite what she had or hadn't seen that day, Ernie's mother would insist each time that Tiberius Marks was the politest young man she'd ever met.

TRANSCRIPT
OCT. 30 INTERVIEW W/ ERNESTINE BURDEN
33:29—34:38

DS: What do you think Chalmers would say about the whole thing now?

EB: He would just be kind of, I don't know. I'm sure he's sorry.

DS: Sorry for being attacked by a marine in a public library?

EB: Tie's not in the marines. He's army.

DS: Did it scare you at all, though? That Tie could be so violent?

EB: Not then.

DS: Do you ever think of Tie as a violent person? Unpredictable?

EB: I feel like you're judging me.

DS: No, it's just a surprise.

EB: What do you mean?

DS: Do you find that attractive, the whole macho thing?

EB: He's not like that.

DS: (pause) Sorry. I don't really know what I'm doing.

EB: I'm getting that.

DS: I know this article should be about pounding your chest and waving your flag. Just a story about a guy who grew up wanting to serve his country. But maybe not.

EB: Well

DS: Well, what?

EB: There's something else. But can we keep it out of the article?

Years before Elijah Marks would die in bed beside his wife, his heart petrified while she slept through it all, Elijah's grandson asked him about the war. That afternoon they were tooling on the carburetor of a rusted-out Chevy in the garage Elijah rented so that he could collect and repair all manner of automotive castoffs. The place smelled of motor oil and sawdust, and Tie's fingers smudged with grease from every surface. A pair of birds nested under the eaves of the garage and made a racket whenever it was occupied. That afternoon, Tie wrenched at a lawnmower engine his grandfather had declared beyond help.

"You traveled a lot," Tie said over his shoulder, apropos of nothing. "When you were younger."

"Quite a bit," Elijah replied, seated at a workbench and busy with his own fiddling.

"I mean like, far. Out of the country."

"In the service."

"Before grandma?"

"Before everything."

They tinkered in silence before Tie spoke again. "You think I could do that?"

"No," his grandfather said. "Never."

"Why not?"

"What we did in that war, what was done," he started to say, "just, never again."

Tie hopped from his stool and laid the troublesome machinery on Elijah's workbench for inspection. "I fixed it," he said.

The old man grunted, probed Tie's handiwork.

"What was it like?"

"I'd rather not say."

"But."

"Just as soon not."

There was a little four-panel window at the side of the garage, above the workbench. No one had cleaned it, perhaps ever, so that everything outside bent through grime, daylight included.

Tie stood with his arms crossed. "I've been reading about it," he said. "The war."

Elijah grunted.

"I just thought it would be good to know," Tie said, "the real story. Your story."

"Don't suppose there's a chance of dropping this one."

Tie shrugged. He was then an especially serious preteen boy, which his grandfather might have chalked up to circumstances. Elijah always said his grandson tumbled some rocky thing over and over in his head, trying to get the polish just right.

"I'm only going to tell you once," Elijah said. "Is this the time?"

So, this was the story that Elijah told him. He was born in in 1923 in a place called Wounded Bend, Minnesota, which, he said, Tie would not find on any map. The family farmed mostly wheat, and on days when lessons weren't held in a one-room schoolhouse, Elijah was called to sow or thresh, depending on the season. Until the war, of course, when Elijah's number came up and he was sent to Fort Snelling and vaccinated and eventually shipped overseas to fight the Germans. He was a tenderfoot member of an Army Airborne division pegged for assignment to be dropped into Normandy, behind the lines of the D-Day invasion, asked to act as a diversion and to hold a couple bridges, part of Operation Cobra. Like most of the parachute-operations of the war, this endeavor meant massive casualties before troops even hit the ground. Men would likely be dropped miles from the rally point; some would tangle in trees and hang there until Germans came along and used them for target practice. Elijah managed to land in the field of a dairy farm with some of his fellow airbornes, the cows mooing so loud the soldiers wondered if they should shoot them to shut them up. With the help of an ill-drawn map, they managed to make it up to a line near St. Lo, where Americans were taking it hard. They dug in as best they could and waited for the help they had been promised, a three-thousand plane bombing strike coming to blast the Krauts. But it was particularly cloudy that day, water vapor colluding with chance, and the first planes couldn't distinguish the American positions from the German. Elijah did his best to tunnel into the rocky terroir, first overcome with relief and then with horror, as the guns fired indiscriminately into American bodies, bullets not so much puncturing them as ripping them into parts. Elijah hid in a foxhole as all around him his friends went to pieces, some of them calling out for medics, as if they couldn't remember that they had been dropped behind enemy lines and hell's-length from any friendly hospital. Ribcages exploded, femurs dissembled. When eventually the waves of fighter planes passed, Elijah lay paralyzed to the terrors around him, the dying and their gurgling sounds and pointless calls for help. And then came the rumbling. The ground shook in advance of a second wave of planes. "Here they come," said someone not too far Elijah. "Here come the heavies." From the bombers came a storm of fire and incalculable death that made the initial strafing seem like an early-morning rain shower, like the ones Elijah had slept through back in Wounded Bend. Some reports said that a handful of U.S. troops started shooting back at the bombers, just as much of out of sheer rage as any chance at self-defense.

"Is that what you did?" Tie asked his grandfather. "Did you shoot back?"

"Course not," Elijah said. "Guy up in the plane was just doing his job. Same as me."

"But you probably wanted to shoot back."

"Truth be told, I don't think I fired off a single shot that day."

Tie asked about the rest of the war, then.

"I took enough shrapnel in that battle for them to put me up in the hospital for the balance of it. Never picked up a rifle again, but I'll tell you what, I learned everything a man needs to know about being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

TRANSCRIPT
OCT. 30 INTERVIEW W/ ERNESTINE BURDEN
1:01:33—1:03:04

DS: What's that supposed to mean? Wrong place, wrong time?

EB: You know how some people say that stupid thing, that everything happens for a reason. I think for Tie it was the opposite. Things happen, no reasons.

DS: It sounds like the Marks family wasn't totally pro-war, either.

EB: Who said they were pro-war?

DS: I just meant, Henny's letter gave me that impression. And Tie volunteering and everything.

EB: People aren't that simple, you know. Not when it comes to the war. It's never all one way.

DS: What do you mean?

EB: It's like, I don't know, this sense of obligation. Very serious obligation. People around here are ready to do what they believe is right. Sometimes that means fighting.

DS: Sometimes? Seems like all the time.

EB: Whose side are you on, anyway?

DS: Nobody's. Yours.

Each autumn New Rome High School filled its gymnasium with a menagerie of folding tables and signage for its annual career and college day, the November 2000 version advertising opportunities for a new century. This was Tie's senior year. Nearby community colleges and regional technical schools sent emissaries with promotional ballcaps and keyrings, brochures by the handful to detail exciting educational options not too far from home. Only occasionally would one of the four-year universities send along a stack of pamphlets, much less a recruiter, so Principal Grissom usually set up an aspirational table at the end of the row to display the marketing materials he'd happened to pick up during his summer road trips across the rust belt: mailers from the University of Illinois, a cup of pens from the Purdue University Office of Admissions, a course catalog from Western Kentucky. Regardless of prestige, the colleges were given only the back third of the gym, the forecourt dominated by jobs that kept cars running and children fed and a community stumbling from one year to the next.

Tie was not much interested in either part of the gym. His future, he knew, would be decided that autumn on the field. Scouts from a couple of division-two schools had already shown up to watch him practice, and a few requested game film. Rumors circulated about an Eastern Illinois scout planning a late-season trip to New Rome, if the weather held out and the market for local recruits was as thin as some said. Tie had already taken both the SAT and the ACT, excelled on both, and his grades would buoy the average of any squad bringing him on, but he'd have to wait for his suitors before choosing a school. As for the vocational booths, there was little chance Henny Marks would stand to see her grandson spend his days with greasy fingernails or driving a milk truck, and so Tie only waved at the guys from the pipefitters' union as he walked past.

Although Tie's grandmother had forbidden him from ever so much as crossing the sidewalk in front of the Lee County Army Recruitment office, she held no sway over the staff sergeant assigned that day to New Rome High. As usual, the U.S. Army booth stretched twice as wide as its counterparts, dominating the end of its row. Tie saw its vivid posters of camouflaged men rappelling down a cliff face and preparing to jump from a helicopter. Rifles gleamed at their sides. Gain valuable skills and experience, the cut-lines said. Earn bonuses and move up the career ladder. Serve your country. There hadn't been a real war in years. This

was the time when the Army had stopped telling kids to Be All You Can Be and instead was trying out telling them they could be an Army of One.

Tie walked right up.

The recruiter stood as a sentinel over the table of brochures and applications and bumper stickers, his arms crossed in a camouflage jacket. Two rolls of fat colluded at the back of his shaved head. His posture suggested meanness, but Tie notice that the recruiter smelled like sandalwood aftershave, and before Tie could say hello to him, the recruiter struck out a hand lock-snap. When Tie shook that hand, the recruiter's grip seemed intended to test his toughness, to see if Tie would cry out or at least say something, which he most definitely wouldn't. "Can I tell you about the opportunities you have to serve your country?" the recruiter asked.

Of course he could, and Tie waited, nodding politely, still grasping hands, as the recruiter gave him the standard spiel about the Armed Service Vocational Aptitude Battery, delayed commitment operations, standards for physical fitness and eyesight, employment after service, paying for college, enlistment contracts. There was even something called the Buddy Program, so that if he found a friend willing to sign up for basic training, they could both get an extra enlistment bonus. The recruiter finally relinquished his hand to pick up one of the forms for Tie.

"Actually, I did have one question," Tie said. "Just something I've been reading about."

"Shoot."

"With Operation Infinite Reach, do you think the primary target might have been restricted to the Al-Shifa factory, or was it necessary to bomb the training camps, too?"

The recruiter put down the blank application. "What exactly are you asking me, son?"

"I just mean to say that the objective wasn't entirely clear. I'm sure you've heard people say the entire thing was just an attempt to draw news coverage away from Monica Lewinsky. But other people say it was retribution for the embassy bombings or for a strategic advantage that has to remain classified. As you probably know, there's no hard evidence that Al-Shifa actually manufactured chemical weapons, so that makes it seem more like it was a secondary target."

"Meaning what?"

"It also doesn't make sense to think that the training camps were the main goal because those missiles didn't actually kill Osama bin Laden. Destroyed a few buildings, sure, but not significant enemy personnel. If you read into it a little further, there are reports that some of the tomahawks didn't explode, and bin Laden sold them to the Chinese."

"Sure."

"I don't know if you saw bin Laden's message afterward. He said, 'The war has just begun. The Americans should now await the answer.' So, like I was asking—"

"Sounds like you want to talk above my pay grade," the recruiter said, meting out brochures to a pair of passersby. "What's your name?"

"Tiberius Marks."

"Bullshit."

"Honest to God."

The recruiter leaned forward a bit, almost smiled. "Okay, Tiberius Marks. I'll tell you one thing. You've got something between those ears. We could use a man like you."

"Thank you."

"Tactical, that's what I mean. For today's wars. Can we talk a little informally? Not necessarily for the ears of your classmates?"

Most of Tie's classmates were still collecting college-logo pins and intermural sports schedules in branded tote bags. "Sure," Tie said. "If it wouldn't be a bother to you."

The recruiter pointed to the name printed across his pocket. "Staff Sergeant Murphy."

"Sir."

"New kind of war we're getting ready to fight. We need to be thinking long-term. Most guys in the service, they're not like me. Keep their eyes down and take orders. But I can see what's going on." Staff Sergeant Murphy leaned closer, eyeing the peripherals for eavesdroppers. "You know the old score. Us versus them. America against the commies. Upsetting the dictatorships. Helping the downtrodden. Keeping the world safe from Soviet influence. That was two decades ago. That was your daddy's war. It was my daddy's. Ours is a new one. Much bigger. Will make the old conflict look like a misunderstanding. You get what I'm saying?"

"I don't think I do," Tie said. "My father—"

"State actors. They used to run the show. Top-down, that was the rule. Helps you keep track of the winners and the losers. But now that's all done. Infinite Reach? That was just the sound of the race pistol firing. It's not America versus Afghanistan. It's America versus everyone else. Because it's not just economics. It's not about the redistribution of wealth or the freedom of the market or even human rights. It's sweet, pure belief. These people—"

One of Tie's classmates, a linebacker from the football team, had wandered in their direction. The recruiter frowned at him until he went away.

"These people," Staff Sergeant Murphy said, "are committed to belief. Certain kind of religion. A hundred different words to describe it. But what it boils down to is that they haven't got much to live for except for making us die. Facts, negotiations, law and order are all done

with. It'll be chaos now and chaos tomorrow, until either we are dead, or they are. That's the only thing they can believe in. That makes it impossible to fight them. Because with the old war there would be facts. Casualty numbers. Damage reports. Megatonnage of nuclear weapons in silos in Washington state. Those are deterrents to war, but only if you think facts matter. Now they don't. We can change the facts of the world, but how can you change what a man believes? Bomb the shit out of his factory and his camps? You think that changes anything about what he believes, except to make him believe it twice as much?"

Tie shook his head.

"Tactical thinking," the recruiter said, reaching again for the paper application. "That's what we need now. That or enough missiles to blast half the world into the stone age. Now, will you take an application?"

"My grandmother said I shouldn't."

Staff Sergeant Murphy laughed. "Just think about it, then. There might be hundred little Pearl Harbors from Montana to Manhattan. Not even this little town is safe. Who's going to keep granny safe, if not for you?"

TRANSCRIPT
OCT. 30 INTERVIEW W/ ERNESTINE BURDEN
1:17:18—1:20:34

DS: What kind of high school student asks about international warfare, anyway? You sure Tie didn't make up this story?

EB: Why would he?

DS: I don't know. Maybe as a way of explaining joining the army after 9/11? Sometimes memories are like that.

EB: Listen, don't use it for your article if you don't want to. You're the one who asked me to come talk about all this.

DS: You're right. I'm sorry. I just want to get this right.

EB: Trust me, if you'd met Tie, you'd know.

DS: Is that what you like about him?

EB: (pause) There are a lot of things I like about him.

DS: Such as?

EB: I mean, you know, he's very kind. And dependable. He has a way of

DS: Does he listen when you talk?

EB: What?

DS: Would you say he's a good listener?

EB: I don't see what that has to do with anything. I don't talk with him much lately, anyway. Not while he's

DS: So lucky to have someone who loves him as much as you do.

EB: Then I guess you have enough for the article?

DS: Maybe. But I'm curious. Did he ever explain why gave up the football scholarship to join the army?

EB: Well, that wasn't it. Not exactly.

DS: Then what, exactly?

EB: I guess I don't want that part in the paper.

DS: Why?

EB: (pause) I can't explain it without explaining it, you know?

DS: Maybe we can talk off the record. All you need to say is that this next part is off the record.

EB: All right.

DS: You need to actually say it.

EB: Like magic words or something? Okay. This next part is off the record.

The first time Tiberius Marks stepped onto a college campus was his first day as a stranger. He found the experience startling. This was late July 2001, Tie having exhausted the sliver of summer between high school graduation and the beginning of two-a-day practices for the Eastern Missouri College football team expecting his services.

That morning, Tie had coaxed his coughing old pickup into a parking lot adjoining the school's football stadium, its yellow slab walls and towering press box resembling a castle risen from the surrounding lowlands. Tie was unsure of how to get into the stadium, but just after he climbed from the truck, a man shouted to him from behind a section of chain link separating the parking lot and field. "Hey you," he yelled. "Move it along."

The guy's gut stretched a college-branded polo as he rattled the fence to get Tie's attention, and before Tie could ask him where he might find the locker room, the man pointed a finger and said, "This's a closed practice. You can't just come around here."

Unsure of what else to do, Tie approached with his hands in surrender, told the man his name.

"Well, that's two and a half mouthfuls," the man said, "but doesn't mean much to me."

"I'm here for practice," Tie managed. "My first day."

"You're late, then," the man said, tapping the face of his wristwatch with a pair of heavy fingers. "And you're going to need a helmet."

As it turned out, the fence-rattler was Kenny Votch, coach of the offensive line and punt coverage team, and maybe because of the way Tie had balked at the fence line that day, or maybe because of no reason at all, Votch decided Tie would best serve the team by being made an example, Votch often leaning into the offensive guards' earholes to tell them to look for number 43 and fucking bury him every chance they got. Tie wore 43.

But first Tie needed a helmet. Votch directed him to a locker room, where another man, this one with his chest sunk behind his own white polo, sized him up for a jersey and pads. The equipment manager was named Jim Sullivan, but everyone called him Slimy. Tie was handed a jock, shoulder pads, white gloves, pants with thigh and knee pads, a neck roll, elbow pads, cleats and a mouth guard. He turned down the offer of a cup. “Chafes,” he said. “Can’t move in it.”

“Suit yourself,” Slimy said, tossing the unused cup into a basin

And so Tie armored himself in the eerily empty locker room, the rest of the team already dispersed outside. Slimy rustled up the 43 jersey, told him Tie didn’t have to keep that number if he didn’t want to, and handed him a used helmet, the scratches and paint scars left behind after another boy’s battles.

Once on the field, Tie submitted himself to the screams of another assistant coach, shits ungiven about whether Tie had some fancy scholarship or not. Then he was ordered to get to some wind sprints while the rest of the team looked on. He was going to be made an example, sure. The coach waited for him to assume one sideline before he blew his whistle, Tie running as fast as he could to the other sideline, where the whistle blew for him to turn and do it again, and again, and again. The horizontal slash of grass its own reassurance, Tie kept his head down and tried to burn across the turf. He generated a minor wind. For a moment he felt as if he could run all the way to the ocean, and then as if he could not take another step, but he did anyway. When the coach ceased with his whistle and told him he could quit, Tie wheeled and started one more time across the width of the field.

Coach Votch told him to spare them the fucking heroics, and Tie’s new teammates, drenched in sweat and dangling helmets at their sides, grunted their assent.

His defiant victory lap finished, Tie removed his helmet at the sideline and vomited, Henny’s going-away breakfast of scrambled eggs and thick-cut bacon splattering onto his new cleats.

The rest of that first practice lent Tie no mercy. In contact drills his new teammates hit harder than the high school boys he’d played before, one gargantuan offensive tackle blindsiding him so that his ears popped for minutes afterward. Another kneed him so hard in the groin his breath abandoned him, Slimy’s offer of a cup adding insult. These college players not only ran into him, they ran through him. Tie was unprepared for exactly how fast they moved. After one snap a bowling-ball in a 32 jersey ran right toward him and with one shimmy left Tie on his knees, reaching weakly for the running back’s ankle. On those few plays when Tie did manage to attempt a tackle on his target, he found that college players didn’t go

politely to the dirt the way they had in small-school ball. One knock from number 32 landed Tie so hard on his tailbone that he was sure he'd shit his pants.

When the rest of the team was sent to the showers, the head coach called Tie over to his director's chair, positioned under the little bit of shade afforded by a college-branded umbrella. Coach Bob McGovern was the longest-tenured coach in the Missouri Valley, famous for resisting any new schemes, training regimens or strategies that, in his wisdom, lost out every time to good, old-fashioned brutality. Coach Mac stood a few inches over five feet, his white hair thinning at top, his voice oddly soft, a dictator in the guise of a grandfather. He spent most of the practice session sitting in the director's chair, yelling so many insults that the players couldn't be sure which of their lazy asses he intended to kick next.

"Marks," he said, "you look like you showed up expecting a pillow fight. You sure you're in the right place?"

Holding his helmet at the end of a sore arm, Tie tried to apologize for his lateness, but the coach interrupted him. "Marks, I don't give a damn about that. You know what I care about? I care about you knowing every bit of that playbook. Not tomorrow. Yesterday. We've seen the tape. We've seen you can move. But I tell you what makes it hard for you small-town guys. The mental. The question is whether you've got it between the ears. Do you have it, Marks?"

"Am I supposed to have a playbook?" Tie asked.

"You dumb son of a bitch."

Slimy was summoned to get him a playbook and, if possible, a clue.

So that first night away from New Rome was not a night at all, because Tie skipped the sunset and the dark hours before dawn to memorize the defensive scheme. He would have no sleep, nor mercy, nor regret. Instead he studied his playbook by lamplight, lying on a dorm bed not much more than a cot with ratty sheets, his brawny roommate snoring like a rheumy old hound.

By the time the sun had risen Tie could have recreated every inch of the binder's contents from memory. He could describe not only his position at strong safety but the responsibilities of all ten of his teammates. The geometry of the playbook, all its angles and vectors, unfolded before Tie even as he rolled from his bed, pissed in the communal bathroom down the hall, scooped water into his mouth. He came to know the scheme like a geography, no, more: he had begun to understand the playbook on a theological level. The zone blitzes and line stunts and two-deep alignments, they descended from a higher power, they flattened the world, everything in perfect equilibrium. He not only knew the playbook, but by the time he pulled on his 43 jersey and cleats again, he believed in it.

They hit him harder on his second day. And even harder the day after that.

So it went for the remainder of the summer, Coach Votch dispensing attaboys to any blocker capable of introducing 43 to the dirt from whence he came. In the stifling July afternoons their bodies pounded against one another until they were all sick with violence and dog tired. The two-a-days preceded the college's semester by more than a month, and after the close of the afternoon session so many of the players retreated to the dark cool softness of the dormitory that they would barely take note of the empty gray buildings where knowledge was supposedly made.

Tie would shower in ice-cold water and probe bruised spots of his body, wondering more than once if he'd cracked a rib, the way it killed him to sneeze, and he'd lace up his shoes and head out exploring. Tie wandered the empty halls, noticing only a handful of harried professors bent over their desks. He walked back and forth past vacant lecture theaters. He sat in the empty seats. He shot pool alone at the student center and did his best to get lost in dim corners of the old library. All the time Tie wondered if this was life outside of New Rome, buildings erected for crowds of students that might never come.

But eventually they came, as they always did. By the first week of classes, Tie had assumed a starting position on the team's defense, even Coach Votch admitting that Tie played better than the stupid sonsabitches they usually suited up. Tie had settled into a routine that, if not making him happy, at least had its comforts. There were some teammates that would take meals with him. He called home nightly to Henny, who never said much but told him she'd write soon. His roommate, Olson Tuckworthy, was a pig-farmer's kid from a crusted corner of Iowa. Olson tolerated Tie's presence but wasn't eager to pal around. The three-hundred-pounder desperately believed that he'd receive a scholarship offer from what he called a "real school," once he got enough good tape. Tie supported him in this delusion, partly because he had a tough time imagining anyone enduring a full four years under Coach Mac's thumb.

The flock of returning students threatened any standing Tie might have gained. The college's broad grassy spaces were in a blink overrun by frisbee games and stacks of books with mystifying titles. The hallways that had seemed so cool and quiet would occasionally erupt with the rush of foot traffic, more people than Tie had ever seen in one place. He had just become accustomed to the braggadocio and surly temperaments of the other football players, and now he confronted whole new classes of college boys: the ones with shaggy hair and ironic T-shirts, the ones who wore suits and ties class to represent this group or that, the ones who raised their hands to speak in front of a four-hundred-person lecture hall. None of these types seemed to care for Tie. And then there were the women: those who dressed in sorority-approved sweatpants and thick mascara, those who toyed with half-smoked cigarettes while

telling Tie that he really ought to get his head around what the patriarchy was doing to him, those who invited him to study for exams he didn't even know were scheduled. It seemed as if everyone understood things he couldn't, or at least they pretended to understand. Do you have it between the ears, Marks? The world spun about him.

The registrar set Tie up with a standard slate of classes, albeit with a remedial section of college algebra because it wasn't clear what New Rome had been teaching. Tie had tried to point out his perfect sub-scores on standardized tests taken the year before, but the counselor assured him most football players preferred to take things slow, especially at first. In his math class and his American history course and his introduction to biology, he was bored nearly to the point of suffering, having read all the textbooks one Sunday. When he tried to explain this all to Henny, she told him that his mother had felt the same way in her first semester.

"Really?" he'd asked her over the phone.

"Well, sure," Henny said, "but she was the smartest person to ever live in New Rome. Everyone knows that. Until you. Now it's you."

The only trouble was his English composition class, where he couldn't quite get a handle on the instructor, who wasn't a real professor at all but a graduate student who always turned up a few minutes late, and once, not at all. The graduate student wore untucked, coffee-stained flannel and never learned the students' names, even though there were only a couple dozen of them crammed in the classroom with its creaking window frames. The graduate student delivered lectures switching senselessly between a description of an essay they were supposed to write and his garbled views on something he called American ethnoimperial domination. Once, one of Tie's classmates raised her hand and asked, "I'm sorry, what are we talking about?"

And the graduate student threw up his hands and half-shouted, pointing at her. "That's it," he said. "That's exactly it. What *are* we talking about?"

Another student, another time: "Should we double-space our essays?"

The graduate student nodded in deep consideration. He pulled at the sleeves of his lumberjack get-up. "The convention of double-spacing dates back to—when? Does anyone know when? I mean, think about the logic. It's like, we have you print this stuff out, to go from digital to physical media. We want it formatted so that some teacher or editor or authority figure or whatever can put their comments on it. So, the physical is really overriding the digital in this case. Do you realize the QWERTY keyboard was designed to slow down typists so that typewriters wouldn't jam? But for some reason we're still using it today. The powers that be, trying to maintain the status quo."

The student then turned to Tie. “Hey, man. Do you know what he’s saying? How many spaces we’re supposed to have?” Do you have it, Marks, between the ears?

The tradition in those days was for the major football teams to open their seasons with an exhibition against a small school like Tie’s. “These guys we play Saturday,” Coach Mac told them, “bigger and faster and stronger than just about any human being you’ve ever seen, and they will put your face in the mud, and they will grind that dirt between your teeth, so that your mom and your dad and that little girlfriend of yours can get a good look at you. And if you want to let them, that’s on you.”

“This is my chance,” said Olson, Tie’s brawny roommate. “I’ll at least get some tape against a real D-I school.”

Tie nodded to him as they sat on their bunks, looking again at their playbooks, Tie just pretending.

“You should think about that,” Olson said. “I’ve seen you out there. You can hit, man. You can get around. They like that. A scout could see you.”

A scout had seen him, Tie wanted to say. That’s how he’d ended up here, in a musty dorm room with the three-hundred-pound Iowan and his knuckles sore and such a case of homesickness that a passing cloud might break his heart.

And that week, after getting an essay back from the graduate student, a mess of red ink across it like slashes of blood, Tie decided to hang around after class to figure exactly where he’d gone wrong. The graduate student told him to take a seat there at the big desk, on the same side, so they could look at the paper together, so, as the graduate explained, they could get beyond the teacher-student dichotomy. Sitting that close Tie could smell sourness of clove cigarettes caught in the graduate student’s beard. “Look here,” the graduate student said, pointing at the essay spread like a desiccated butterfly before them. “What were you going for here? It’s all claim, claim, claim. Where’s the argument going? Where’s your support?”

“I just thought—”

“Unsubstantiated,” the graduate student said. “You can’t just keep repeating your opinions without finding some proof for them.”

“Well, when I—”

“That’s the problem with the world today. You know that, don’t you, Tim? That everyone is so enamored of their own opinions that they can’t tell the difference between an unsubstantiated claim and good, hard fact. It’s false consciousness.”

“It’s Tie.”

“What?”

“How do you tell the difference,” Tie asked, “between claim and fact? What is it?”

The graduate student was going to say something but then leaned back in his chair. He tugged at his flannel. “I see what you’re doing here, Tim,” he said. “Very clever.”

Minutes later Tie walked away from the classroom, bloody essay in hand, not sure exactly what it was he was doing there, no matter what the graduate student had said. He passed by a statue of the university’s illustrious founder without looking up. A girl he didn’t recognize waved to him, and he didn’t bother to smile in reply. If he breathed too hard, then it seemed like he definitely cracked that rib.

Tie went back to his room, where his roommate sat watching softcore pornography and lifting free weights in alternating curls. Olson grunted at Tie’s presence but didn’t say anything, and Tie let himself fall back onto the undersized dorm mattress. His eyes followed the lazy rotations of the ceiling fan, installed decades before and apparently not cleaned since. Something wandered out at the edge of his mind. Something from the playbook maybe, lost now.

From his bed Tie watched a single piece of dust falling from the blade of the fan, seesawing through the stale air of the dorm room, coming to rest on his chest, a lonely speck of the essence of the world. He used a fingertip to lift the mote from the front of his shirt. Do you have it between the ears, Marks? He looked at the little piece of dirt at the end of his finger, stared at it for so long that Olson called to him. “Hey, you concussed or something?”

But Tie didn’t answer. Instead he rose from the bed and left the room, never to return.

TRANSCRIPT
OCT. 30 INTERVIEW W/ ERNESTINE BURDEN
1:43:22—1:57:04

DS: I don’t understand. He had already dropped out of college?

EB: He was back here. An impossible situation. He couldn’t stay, and he couldn’t go back to college. Tie told me one time he’d rather have them think he was dead than to ever go back and admit that he’d quit them. So, he enlisted, and that was it.

DS: But you were saying earlier, he served his time, and he could have been discharged. But he signed up again?

EB: More than that. We'd only been dating a few weeks. It was going well, I thought. I was on my way back to school, and he offered to drive me. And along the way he told me that he'd taken all the tests for SOPC and that he'd be headed to Fort Bragg for training.

DS: S-O-

EB: Special Forces. He'd picked up Farsi in his spare time. I mean, who does that?

DS: But you didn't want him going back.

EB: Like I said, we'd only been dating a few months. Who was I to say?

DS: Did he tell you why he would sign up again?

EB: (pause) He—it's complicated.

DS: Yeah.

EB: He tried to telling me about this place in Iraq. It started with an N, I don't remember. Tie wasn't there, but he knew some people who were. Apparently someone in a convoy took a wrong turn and led a bunch of Marines into a bad part of town. And then the maps were screwed up, and they ended up in a spot that American planes were supposed to bomb. Tie said 18 of our guys died. He told me that after that, he didn't really believe in the war anymore.

DS: Then why go?

EB: The war was going to happen whether he believed in it or not.

DS: And that was enough for you?

EB: Well, I was mad. We finished the drive, and that night we fought. Or I tried to fight. You can't fight with someone who won't fight back. He was totally committed. Or totally resigned.

DS: Don't take this the wrong way, but it sounds like he didn't give you much of a choice.

EB: Could we turn off the recorder?

DS: The recorder?

EB: Only for this part. It's just… personal.

DS: (pause) You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to.

EB: Please.

DS: One second. There's a pause button on this thing somewhere. (A beep.) There, it's off now.

EB: Okay. So, yeah. This kind of weird thing happened. Something I've never really told anyone about before. I was upset at Tie for a while, and I yelled at him. And I cried. And because of the way he is, he just kind of sat there nodding on the couch. Eventually my roommate showed up, and the whole thing was so embarrassing, and so I took Tie back to my bedroom so that we could keep talking or whatever. He was ready to move on to the next steps. Ready to make plans for how we were going to deal with the distance, stay together and all that. I think I said something like, don't you realize that when guys leave for that long, the girlfriend always cheats on him? It was like a threat or something, I don't know. But he just looked at me and said, yeah, he knew that happens, but he knew it wouldn't happen to us.

DS: Has that ever happened? Cheating, I mean.

EB: No. I'm not the type.

DS: So, you two just made plans for his going away.

EB: More than that. He told me we should get engaged.

DS: He asked you to marry him? That night?

EB: He told me we should get engaged. And, I don't know, it seemed like we had to do it to keep things together. And at that point, I didn't realize how it would be. I thought we'd be able

to talk on the phone, or at least on the computer or something. But during training, they keep them cut off, pretty much. And it turned out Tie liked that kind of thing quite a bit. Not mixing home and away, I guess. But I didn't know that, then. I think at that point I was just kind of exhausted by him. I was just happy we weren't breaking up. I was trying to sell myself on the whole idea.

DS: That's normal, I think.

EB: You don't think I'm, I don't know, weak or something?

DS: Not for a minute.

EB: Well, okay. So that was more or less the end of the fight, maybe an hour after it began. He was going away and we were getting married someday, however that would make sense. And then this weird thing happened.

DS: What?

EB: (pause) Well, this isn't the sort of thing you tell people.

DS: It's between you and me.

EB: Okay. So, we went out and had a little dinner and we were mending fences, celebrating maybe. We got back to my place, and it was late, and so it made sense for him to spend the night. And, well, you know, we were in the mood to make up.

DS: I think I get what you're saying.

EB: But so, we were doing it. And things were fine. And they kept being fine. And then they kept being fine. And then they kept being fine. Things were just going to keep being fine until one of us gave up. If you get what I'm saying.

DS: Not really.

EB: I mean, it was like four or five hours we were at it, by the time I checked the clock.

DS: Oh.

EB: And to be perfectly honest, I was just tired and done and wanted to go to sleep. But not Tie.

DS: Okay.

EB: He was just, I don't know, like, possessed or something. Just wanted to keep going and going.

DS: Like, he was hurting you?

EB: Not hurting. I was okay with all of it. It's just that it seemed like, well, to be honest with you, he wasn't going to ever finish.

DS: Oh.

EB: Which is totally fine or whatever, but he wanted to keep going and going. Not to finish. Just to keep going, like we could keep doing that forever.

DS: I don't know what to say.

EB: Eventually I told him I had class in the morning. Or I guess I had class in a few hours at that point. And then he said okay, and he was just standing at the window, looking out at the sunrise or whatever, and that's the last thing I remember before I fell asleep. I was convinced he'd never have stopped.

DS: I'm going to turn the recorder back on now, if you don't mind.

EB: Okay.

DS: (A beep.) This is a taped interview with Ernestine Burden. Saturday, October 30. It is, hold on, 3:27 in the afternoon.

EB: I can't believe we've been talking this long.

DS: Yeah, it's going to take me forever to transcribe, but that's okay.

EB: I'm sure you can just skip over all the bad parts.

DS: Let's see, where were we? You and Tie had just gotten engaged, I guess. I'll say in the article that it was a whirlwind romance and you couldn't see him off again without a promise.

EB: That sounds, I don't know, fake.

DS: But it works for the article, right?

EB: Sure. I guess. But

DS: What's the plan for you and Tie now?

EB: We talked it over, a lot, before he left on this last deployment. His contract would be up again in another year. The idea was that he would leave the service then. And it would be the beginning of a school year, so he would join me wherever I got a teaching job.

DS: And before then?

EB: We spent a few weeks together after I graduated college. It was nice, you know, since we'd only seen each other a few times that year, while he was on leave. I agreed to stay in New Rome. I told him I'd look after Henny when he was deployed. We knew that with these special forces deployments, it would be hard to tell when he'd come home. And there would be likely no way to talk regularly, which we haven't. We would plan a wedding for after he got back.

DS: How's that going? Planning the wedding?"

EB: (pause) I'm sure we'll get to it eventually. We both expected to be able to talk more during this mission. But so far, we haven't.

DS: That's the ring? (shuffling noises) What about the last time you saw him?

EB: We had a dinner at Henny's place.

DS: And he was excited about the idea of the wedding then?

EB: He was ready to elope that night. He was talking about becoming interstate truckers or sailing to Newfoundland or something.

DS: Was he serious?

EB: Couldn't have been.

DS: But he didn't want to be deployed again, either.

EB: I wouldn't say that.

DS: What would you say?

EB: I'd say he has his doubts, but he never told anyone except me. He said one time that he thought there wasn't actually any way to win the war. He said that we were just pouring money and men into it, not to win, but just so it would seem like it was legitimate in the first place.

DS: Was he thinking about deserting?

EB: Never. He's committed to seeing the thing through. He talked about how he wanted to save his guys, the ones doing the actual fighting. Even the soldiers on the other side, I think, he wants to save them, too. Wants to keep everyone alive until the war runs its course.

DS: But in the meantime, what if something happens?

EB: What do you mean?

DS: You know.

EB: (pause) Sometimes you hear about those awful videos. The ones they make when they capture a soldier or a reporter or whatever. Ever since the crash the other night, I can't get the picture out of my head. Anything but that. I can't stop thinking what if

DS: That won't happen.

EB: And then for the rest of my life I would have to live with that picture in my head. And I'd have to keep pretending like it was okay, like I was proud of Tie or thought that there was some greater good in it, and everyone looking at me my whole life, expecting me to say just that.

DS: Maybe we should put all of this in the article, then.

EB: No.

DS: At least you wouldn't have to carry these secrets around. Maybe people won't like it, the messiness of real life, but we ought to just tell everyone the truth. The whole imperfect truth about Tie.

EB: Promise me that you'll never do that.

DS: I can turn off the recorder now.

EB: Promise that

END TRANSCRIPT