

FICTION



Sasha, Russia 2004

Wag's Revue is proud to award 'The Recital' by Lauren Lovett its Inaugural Prize in Short Fiction.

"I very much admire the authorial restraint, the consistency of voice, the slippage of narrative positioning, and the subdued way in which such an unsettling conclusion is dealt with. It's a terrific, haunting story."

-Will Litton, Fiction Editor

THE RECITAL

Lauren Lovett

pigeons have two legs, not four. you scribble out two of the legs before i see. i do not notice your mistake. i am busy colouring my fringe with green hi-lighter. i ask you if you think i should add some pink. you tell me that orange looks better with green. small dashes of orange. i take the orange out of your drawing hand and add it to my fringe. you take the brown. the darkest brown texta from the table and give your pigeon a nest to sit in. a nest to sit in and cover up his two bonus legs. i have finished my hairstyle and have moved onto my eyebrows.

you tell me that i look dumb with orange eyebrows. i tell you that your whole face looks dumb. you are not sure how to respond so you do not. you look at your picture and then you look at my picture to see which one is better. you have drawn a pigeon in a nest. i have drawn a mouse riding a pony while eating a donut. you decide that your picture is better because it is more like real life. my picture isn't like real life. you think it is dumb. dumb like my orange eyebrows.

your mother likes my eyebrows, she thinks they are hilarious. she laughs and hands me milk. she has given me your special cup. the fish cup that has the word 'aquarium' on it. you dip two tiny teddies into your cup of milk. i bite off my teddy's arms and push it under the milk's surface. i tell you that i like to drown the teddies before i eat them. you tell me that the textas are permanent and that my fringe and eyebrows will forever be highlighted. i bite off the head of a teddy and spit it at your face. it hits you in the eye. right in it. your eye hurts but you pretend that it doesn't.

joseph is sucking on a tennis ball. i take the ball from his mouth and throw it across the yard. joseph does not fetch it. you tell me that joseph knows tricks. you tell me that you canmake

him sit and make him fit into your doll pram. i say that putting your dog in a doll pram isn't a type of trick. i tell you about the trick that i can do with my dog. you haven't tried my trick before. i bend down and pat joseph on his face.

'i will show you on your dog.'

joseph just sits, sits on the grass and lets me try the trick. i tell you that it takes a little time to work. i move my fingers like i am playing a piano. i tap my fingers on the inside of joseph's hind leg. nothing happens. i tap my fingers faster.

'it works on your dog too,' i say as joseph's lipstick begins to show. i tap my fingers on your palm.

'you have to do it like this,' i say. you watch my pointer finger as i tap it on your palm. then you hold my fingers still and turn my hand over.

'like this?' you say as you tap your fingers on my palm. i tell you that you have to do it faster but that you are doing pretty well for a beginner.

you need to practice your technique on joseph to see if it works - to see if you're doing it right. you ask me if this is something that you're not supposed to do to pets. like how you're not supposed to pick up dogs by their hind legs and push them around like wheel barrows. you begin your piano recital because i assure you that this is different. it's not like the wheelbarrow thing. you are tapping. tapping just like i did. you are tapping joseph in the same place that i tapped but nothing happens. i say that maybe the trick only works when i do it. perhaps i have the lipstick touch. you stop tapping and ask me if i want you to teach me something. it isn't a trick to do with joseph. it's a dance. a fred schneider dance. i have never heard of the b-52s. you start singing 'rock lobster.' i don't know the song. not even when you add in the jellyfish and narwhal sounds. i think that your piranha impersonation is pathetic. you tuck your t-shirt into your track pants and pull your pants up until the waist band touches your nipples. you show me your best fred schneider dance. i tell you

that you look like an idiot. you tell me that your dad thinks that you are really good at dancing like fred schneider. i want to teach you the macarena but you already know how to do it.

you ask me if i want to try the finger trick on your guinea pigs. i pick up joseph's tennis ball. i would rather play donkey. you do not have a basketball hoop at your house so instead we use the washing basket as the target. only five turns in and i already have d o n k. you only have d o. that is because physical education is your best subject. physical education and japanese. you know how to sing the rainbow song in japanese without any help from your teacher. jared who is in your class can sing it better than you but you do not mind because jared looks like a japanese person.

the game is over because i have missed the washing basket six times. this means i have spelled out donkey. you get down on all fours to pretend that you are a donkey.

‘eh oh’ you say in your best donkey voice.

i show you my finger, my rude finger. you get up and dust off your knees. i want to change the game to elephant or chicken because the word donkey is too short. you tell me that it wouldn't be any different if the game were called chicken because the word donkey and the word chicken each have the same number of letters. you think this because you forget that chicken has the letter ‘c’ in it. i tell you that you are wrong. you have still forgotten about the ‘c’ and start to argue with me. you want to keep arguing until i admit that i am wrong. but i have had enough. i couldn't be bothered arguing with you. once you slapped me in the face during an argument. you did this because i wouldn't agree that the song went ‘this hand is your hand.’ the reason i didn't agree with you was because the words to the song are actually ‘this land is your land.’ your slap made my face pinker than bubble-o bill's face.

i want to play something else. you tell me that you can teach me to dance like fred schneider. i do not want to. you tell me

that you can try and wash the orange off of my eyebrows. i do not want that either. you hold the tennis ball in your hand and think. the tennis ball is warm and moist from being in joseph's mouth.

'we could do a wedding,' you suggest. 'not with us but with my guinea pigs. i've got two girl ones and one boy one so we can even have a bridesmaid.'

i like your idea. i am at the guinea pig hutch turning the guinea pigs over to find the husband. you tell me that the fat one is the boy. herbert. you called him herbert because you think herbert sounds like a fat man's name. i take off my socks. they are black. i put herbert into one of my black socks.

'voila tuxedo!'

you pretend that you are not impressed. you pretend because you are jealous that you did not come up with the sock tuxedo idea. the wedding is a success. herbert looks handsome in his tuxedo pouch and carmen looks very elegant in her flower patterned gown a la scotch paper towel. after the reciting of the vowels i undress the groom and the bride and push their newly married bodies together. carmen is squirming. you tell me to be careful not to squish carmen's insides. i think that carmen likes the squishing. carmen and herbert are loving each other. you take carmen out of the squish love and put her in her hutch. you do this because you think that i am wrong. you think that carmen does not like the marital squishing.

i put my socks on. my right sock is covered in herbert hair. i do not mind. i am not allergic to guinea pigs. i am only allergic to cats. you want to play hide and seek. i think that hide and seek is a baby game but i play with you because i am nice. you want to count first. that is ok with me because i prefer to hide. you say the word 'elephant' between the numbers, the numbers that you count. you do this because it takes exactly one second to say elephant. you do this to ensure that i have enough time to hide. i hide underneath the upturned washing basket. i hide like a turtle in its shell.

'nineteen elephant twenty.'

you turn around. you see me straight away. you see me because the washing basket has gaps in it, gaps that my purple jumper pokes through. i ask for another turn at hiding. i tell you that the first one is always a practice, a practice for the real hide. you let me hide again even though you do not believe in practice hides. you let me hide again because you like being the seeker.

'one elephant two.'

i want to hide in a really good spot, a spot that you will never find me in.

'two elephant three.'

i lay down next to joseph. he gets up and walks away. i am exposed.

'eight elephant nine.'

i am running out of time. everywhere is crap.

'thirteen elephant fourteen.'

i open your shed. the door handle squeaks as i turn it. i quickly shut the door behind me. i hope that you have not heard the squeak.

'seventeen elephant eighteen.'

i stand behind the fridge, the fridge in your shed.

'eighteen elephant nineteen.'

i open the fridge to get a quick drink. there aren't any drinks in your fridge. your fridge is empty and warm. your fridge must be broken.

'nineteen elephant twenty. ready or not here i come. here i come into the shed.'

you must have heard the door handle squeak. you are coming. i panic and crawl inside the fridge. i sit inside and close the fridge door.

you are in the shed. you pull the string. it turns on your shed light. you cannot see me. you look in the cupboard where your mum stores the christmas decorations. i am not in there. you look behind the totem tennis and the lawnmower. i am not there

either. you call out my name. you say that you can see me. you are lying. you want to trick me so i come out of my hiding spot. i do not come out. you look behind the big bag of potting mix that smells like death. i am not there. you pull the string to turn the light off. you shut the shed door behind you. you do this because you give up. you do this because you think that i am not in the shed. you go inside to look for me. you check behind the couch and behind the curtain. you check underneath your bed and in the pantry. i am not there. joseph is next to you. he is licking your leg. you tell him to sit. you reach in between his legs and practice. you tap in the same spot that i tapped. you tap in the same way that i tapped. nothing happens. you give up. you give up on tapping and you give up on looking for me.

your mother wants to know if i would like to stay for tea. you tell her that i do not want to. you tell her that you think i must have gone home. you tell her that i must have gone home because i didn't want to play anymore. your mother says she is cooking chicken - in schnitzel form. she has made enough for you and for me. you help your mum dip the chicken bits in the egg. you like the feeling of raw egg. you imagine that raw egg feels the same as ghost buster slime. you are good at helping your mum. you hold a piece of chicken, eggy chicken. your mum takes it from your hands and dips it into the bowl of bread crumbs. you ask your mum how to spell the word chicken. she spells the word out for you in lower case sounds, little letter sounds. you count the letters on your egg dipped fingers. seven. you count the letters of donkey in your head. six. you were wrong in thinking that the word chicken and the word donkey each had the same number of letters. you feel bad for arguing with me. you plan to say sorry next time you see me. say sorry and tell me that you were wrong.

ARTIFICIAL LIGHT

Raleigh Holliday

The oppressive Captain Murphy—human host of ‘Murphy’s Puppet Pirate Hour,’ and a staunch method actor—had it written somewhere in his contract that all the lady puppets in the Sea Wench Choir were to bat eyes at him as he arrived on set each morning. He was also known to cavort inappropriately with the puppets backstage, advancing on them with the lusty, drunken aggression and general lack of couth befitting his onscreen character.

One morning, the puppet Sissy Slimbitches, Queen of the Wenches and light of my life, had had enough. “Bat your eyes at this,” she said, and she doused Murphy in a shower of homemade napalm—nothing more than frozen orange juice concentrate soaked in gasoline. The icy, gelatinous fluid splattered across the front of Murphy’s frock and dribbled down his lace jabot. His shoulders leapt in an elaborate shiver just as Sissy pressed the lit match to his collar.

For a moment, it appeared as if Murphy couldn’t register the sudden shift from wet chill to fire, and he shivered once more as the flames ignited. Staring into Sissy’s vast acrylic eyeballs, he seemed, more than anything, puzzled to find his reflection therein burst afire—as if it were some kind of illusion, some trickery of TV magic. It wasn’t until his wig began to sizzle and stink that he ran screaming into the waterfall on set, which was made mostly of felt, cellophane, and Styrofoam. It, too, erupted into flames, and soon Murphy and his entire set were reduced to ash.

To his credit, he never once dropped character, even when facing death. “Ye mutinous puppet whore!” he hollered at Sissy. “Ye’ll be worth fuck-all without me at yer helm!” It was sweet irony to watch Murphy, a sham seaman, drown under his own phony molten polystyrene waterfall. But the sweeter irony was

that Captain Murphy's program was sponsored by the very same orange juice concentrate with which Sissy concocted her napalm.

I'm fairly certain these circumstances are ironic. Irony is goddamned confusing, but I've always wanted to say 'the sweet irony of it was...' and be right about it, and be the person that tasted that sweetness without consequences. I think I am that person, finally, because I have just declared it here for the immortal annals—I, the boy behind the camera, capturing those glorious fireworks on film, so that Captain Murphy may die in my sitting room every afternoon.

As for Sissy, my eventual bride, she tasted the sweetness, but with all the consequences—convicted of murder and arson in the first, and sentenced to fifty years as lead inmate on the show 'Puppet Prison.' After the inevitable cancellation of the 'Pirate Hour,' I had no other option than to apply as a cameraman for the prison series. I watched on as Sissy suffered unspeakable torment at the hands of the human prison guard players for having immolated such a beloved puppeteering icon as Captain Murphy. I knew the violations were even worse off camera than on. "Stop this incessant travesty!" I have often imagined Sissy shrieking at her backstage assailants. She has never spoken to me of the details, and I was only ever allowed to witness those tortures intended for my lens, so imagination is the last tool I'm left with. I often find myself having to speak for her: "There are no cameras to record this violence, no looming microphones, no artificial light!" I say in my cartoonish imitation of Sissy's voice.

The only detail I do know—because of the way Sissy now stares at me in bed, ragged and emotionless—is that at some point in the solitary confinement of the props closet, she broke off the aluminum rod affixed to her left elbow, fashioned it into a shank, and turned it on herself. She plunged the weapon deep into the back of her head, destroying the wire rig that controlled all her facial expressions.

I love her still, knowing she will never again smirk seductively, never flash her perfect fiberglass teeth, never swivel her glistening marbled irises toward me with sultry welcome, and wink, even once—her thick painted lashes flapping with the celerity of a hummingbird's wing. Sometimes I fool myself into seeing her blink at me from across the dinner table, but I know these movements are now confined to the reruns of the 'Pirate Hour.' At night, when Sissy is asleep upstairs, I sneak down to savor the old footage. I watch those enormous purple eyelids batting at the camera, through the lens, the screen, straight to me—the boy behind it all.

I do not ask her whether it was worth it—the fifty years—to have seen Murphy scramble under the flaming OJ napalm. To have heard him wail with horror and rage until his larynx combusted. To know he looked upon the world with infantile terror as his fleshy eyeballs melted in the citrus-scented blaze. Above all, to have witnessed that moment of sublime realization—which I have relished again and again on film—when I swear Murphy understood, just before his death, the sweet irony of his being immolated by the very product that funded his charade. Watch the tape: prostrate, smoldering under molten polystyrene, Murphy lifts his blackened head to see, in the distance, Sissy still holding the canister she dumped on him. He has time enough still to read its label, to take in its meaning. And though it's inaudible—because his throat is already scorched bare—if you look closely, you can see it: he begins to laugh. He begins to glow.

I do not ask Sissy if it was worth it—I, a mere boy behind a camera, capturing that gruesome footage, which was afterwards used in court to convict Sissy. I do not ask her because for me there were no fifty years confined. No violent, lustful men awaiting me in each dark corner of the penitentiary set. No Captain breathing liquor down my back in a dressing room. No human hands reaching deep into my skull to drop a hood over my eyes.

MOURNING JIMMY CROOKS

Robert Meixner

Jimmy Crooks, five days dead and sober at last, lay screwed into a cherry wood casket in the cargo bay of his brother, Ray's, luxury motor home. Directly above him Jimmy Jr., known to everyone as Sonny, sprawled on the sofa, his arms stretched out along the leather cushions. He peered through half-closed eyes at his aunt, Abby, who was reading a magazine in the chair across from him. Sonny was thinking she looked very good indeed in a short black sheath that showed a lot of leg.

Abby was Ray's third wife, half Ray's age and some dozen years older than Sonny. She was a compact woman, with a coppery tumble of hair that fell down her back to the place where her hips hinged to her spine. Her fashion sense, if not exactly disreputable, seemed always just a little too sexy for the occasion. Not that Sonny minded. The sight of her had been a welcome diversion at Jimmy's funeral.

Right now Sonny was busy imagining what it would be like to be alone with her in the motor home. To smoke the fat joint he had rolled up in a piece of tin foil in his pocket and knock back a couple of Lone Stars. Then take her into the bedroom and peel her out of that black dress. Grab her by the ass and mash his mouth down on hers.

Abby looked up from her magazine and smiled at him. She'd be into it, Sonny thought. Being married to an old codger like Ray must leave her wanting. Everybody in the family figured she'd married Ray for the money. There wasn't much else a woman like that could see in a washed up old truck dealer with two heart attacks already under his belt. Sonny closed his eyes and focused on sending her a signal, a mental picture of the two of them making love under the mirrored ceiling with the fan spinning slow circles over his back.

The CB radio crackled up front, snapping Sonny out of his daydream. It was Nana Rose calling from her white Cadillac. She and Sonny's Aunt Ruby were following the bus from the memorial service in Waco up to Ray's place in Arkansas where they were going to bury Jimmy.

"Ray?" the speaker crackled again.

Ray pulled the mike from its clip and held it to the side of his mouth. "Yes, Mama."

"It's getting warm out. Jimmy ain't gonna get too hot down there underneath the bus, is he?"

"No, Mama."

"I know it ain't air conditioned. I don't want my boy to be hot down there."

"He's dead, Mama."

"Don't you sass me, Ray. We gonna bury my baby boy. Least you could do is show a little respect."

"I know, Mama. I'm sorry, Mama. Jimmy won't be too hot, Mama."

"And slow down. It's bad enough poor Jimmy's roasting in that casket. No reason you got to bounce him over every pothole in Oklahoma at seventy miles an hour. You slow down to fifty."

"But Mama, the speed limit's sixty-five."

"That don't matter. This here's a funeral procession, not no damn stock car race."

Sonny watched his uncle tap the brake, coast for a few seconds, then reset the cruise control. Ray's white head bobbed up and down with the motion of the pneumatic seat. Outside, the Oklahoma landscape streamed by the windows on either side. Sonny closed his eyes again and tried to recapture the vision of himself and Abby in the bedroom, but it was gone, replaced by an expanse of dust and dry grass that seemed to go on forever—the perfect backdrop for their sad little parade.

Sonny hadn't been able to muster much feeling about his dad's dying, not past thinking that he wouldn't wish being sealed up in

a wooden box on anybody. They'd never gotten along as father and son, and Sonny couldn't remember ever not being afraid of Jimmy. He'd learned early to stay out of Jimmy's way, to make himself invisible, to flatten himself against the nearest surface and slide out of Jimmy's reach like mercury. This was the quality he had taken with him when he had moved out of the house, the sum total of life lessons passed from father to son: to always go unnoticed. Sonny hadn't fared well, not even compared to his own dim expectations. He had discovered early on that even jail time was an improvement over his childhood.

Sonny got up off the sofa and stretched. Abby looked up, smiled again, and went back to her magazine. Sonny wandered back to the bathroom and slid the pocket door closed. The other side of the bathroom opened to the bedroom. He walked around the cross-wise bed to the built-in chest of drawers along the back wall. He opened several drawers and came finally to a neat array of satiny panties, jewel-toned, lace trimmed, laid out like candy in a box. He pulled out a dark red pair and pressed them to his face.

Back in the bathroom he sat on the toilet and spread the briefs across his knees. He got the foil packet out of his coat pocket and opened it on the vanity. He licked the joint and lit it. Three deep tokes later he stubbed it out on the foil, and leaned his head back against the wall, feeling the first bleary effects roil to the top of his head:

He was ten years old. The family was on an outing at a lake somewhere. He was paddling around in an inner tube, wavelets lapping at his ankles, the sun warming his face. There was a splash nearby. Jimmy was on the shore chunking rocks and clods of dirt at him, laughing. Sonny tried to paddle away, not wanting to get stung by a rock, but also not wanting to get too far from the safety of the little beach. Finally Jimmy had thrown his empty beer bottle. It bounced off the side of the inner tube and into the water, staring at Sonny through its vacant eye.

Sonny thought about another hit off the joint, but decided against it. He wrapped its remains in the foil, stuffed the panties into the right-hand pocket of his suit jacket, and ambled back to the front of the coach. Ray turned and gave him an accusing look.

“Goddam, son. Thought maybe you fell in,” he said.

Sonny settled back into the sofa without a reply.

When they got to U.S. 44 and headed east toward Fort Smith, Ray got Abby to drive. He did this by getting up and walking back toward the kitchen, leaving the coach to drive itself until Abby slid in behind the wheel. Sonny was impressed with how coolly she handled this, swinging in there and taking the wheel like it happened all the time. Probably it did, he thought.

“You want a cold drink, Hon?” Ray yelled above the road noise.

“Sure, Sweetie.”

“Sonny, come back here. Get your auntie a cola, will ya? I’m gonna take me a little nap in the back.”

Sonny popped two sodas and brought one to Abby. He set it in the drink holder in her arm rest. Abby was intent on the road ahead, both hands on the wheel. Sonny fixed the curve of her neck in the cross-hairs of a dopey stare. With Ray napping in the back and Abby stuck behind the wheel, there were new possibilities. He was glad now he’d taken some hits off the joint. He was feeling just right. He dropped his left hand onto her shoulder, and reached with his right toward the stereo controls.

“Say, Abs, how ‘bout some tunes?” he asked.

“What?”

“Music, Abs. How ‘bout I turn the radio on?”

“You’ll wake Ray up.” She said. “And don’t call me Abs. I hate that.”

“Okay, Abby. I just thought it’d be nice to set the mood a little.”

She swiped his hand off her shoulder. “Set the mood for what—the gravesite?”

“No, I don’t know,” Sonny said. He moved to the passenger side of the coach, parked himself sideways in his seat, and took a swig of soda. “Just a little conversation I guess. A good lookin’ woman like you must be starvin’ for a friendly chat with somebody closer to her own age.”

“A friendly chat? Is that what you call it? You know your old man used to pull this same shit. Soon as Ray was out of sight he’d want to get a little ‘friendly chat’ going.”

“Don’t lay that on me, Abby. I ain’t my old man.”

“Well, you’re startin’ to act like him, if you ask me.”

“Actin’ like him would be gettin’ drunk and slappin’ somebody around. That ain’t me.”

“Well I guess we each knew him in our own way,” she said.

Abby concentrated on her driving. Sonny sipped his soda and stared out the window at the dun prairie.

“I hope you ain’t sore,” he said.

She turned to him. She shook her head. “Go ahead and find some music if you want,” she said. “Just keep it low.”

The radio was in the dash on the driver’s side of the coach. Sonny had to get out of his seat to get at it. He knelt on one knee and braced himself against the edge of Abby’s seat. She shifted slightly to make room for him. He watched her hand on the wheel while he adjusted the tuner. The dark red polish was chipped on her thumbnail. A fat gold chain hung from her wrist. He was suddenly conscious of her perfume, peppery and sweet with a slightly sour undertone. It reminded him of the flower boxes on Nana Rose’s front porch.

Abby turned the wheel to miss some obstruction on the roadway. Sonny lost his balance. He was thrown into her seat and reached out to steady himself. His hand found her bare leg between her knee and the hem of her dress. She looked down at his hand. Sonny jerked it away, but the memory of her flesh

nestled in his palm like a living thing. He resisted the temptation to look at it.

“Sorry,” he said.

He tuned in a country station. Some weepy old song with a lot of peddle steel was playing. Sonny left it, and started for his seat.

“You want to drive?” Abby asked

“The bus?”

“Yes, the bus, silly. Sure. It’s easy. Just slide in here.” She stood up and moved to her right. Sonny slid around her, brushed her hip, sat down and took the wheel.

They crossed into Arkansas, leaving the interstate on the other side of Fort Smith to head north. The countryside began to roll and build like a running sea. The trees grew more dense and green. Some had started to turn and dotted the hillsides with occasional gold or red foliage, shimmering in the early afternoon sun. Abby chatted easily about their place in the Ozarks. About her garden and the birds that came there. About the view. It would be a good place to be buried, she said, even for someone like Jimmy who wouldn’t appreciate it.

An hour later they were near the end of the trip. The roads had narrowed, and Sonny had to concentrate to keep the bus off the shoulder. Abby had tilted back her seat, and was dozing, her mouth open slightly.

Sonny had been to Ray’s several times when he was younger. He wasn’t sure he remembered the way, but didn’t want to wake Abby to ask either. He wanted to come off as competent, to reach over and pat her on the knee when they got there, and watch her stir awake. When he passed a hand-lettered sign pointing the way to Tiny’s Saddle Shop, he realized he’d missed the turn to Ray’s. There was no way to turn the bus around on the narrow road. He checked the rear-view monitor for the Caddy. It was right behind him. He could see Nana Rose and Ruby’s faces, nearly identical behind matching sunglasses. He switched off

the CB just in case Nana Rose had noticed him miss the turn. She probably thought Ray was still driving, but he didn't want her to call to see what was up. Didn't want her to wake everyone up and have a big conversation about it. He'd just take the next turn and double back.

In a quarter mile he slowed, flipped on the turn signal, and checked on the Caddy again. He cranked the bus around a hard right onto a recently paved road. The black tarmac wound smooth as ribbon over the low hills. Sonny was feeling good. He had mastered the bus, mastered the situation. He glanced over at Abby again as they crested a hill. One day he'd have a woman like her. Who knew? If Ray had himself a stroke or something and died -- if Sonny played his cards just right -- maybe he'd have Abby herself. When he looked back at the road his heart stopped.

The road dropped several hundred feet into a narrow valley, a ravine really. A short, rusty bridge spanned a small creek at the bottom. Then the road climbed straight back out. From Sonny's angle, looking down, it seemed impossible. They were going to plunge down the hill picking up speed, bottom out on the bridge, and if the bridge held, run smack into the cliff that was the other side of the ravine. That's what it looked like. It couldn't be though. It had to be an optical illusion. Somehow they'd got a paving machine up and down that road. It would be okay. He'd just take it easy. It just couldn't be as steep as it looked.

He stabbed the brakes a couple of times on the way down. It wasn't too bad really. The bus flattened heavily at the bottom, bobbed over the bridge, and started to climb out. Looking up from the bottom Sonny realized his real problem was going to be getting back to the top. He should have been accelerating down the hill, gaining the momentum they'd need to get back out of the ravine, not riding the brakes like a candy ass. Now it was too late.

He pressed the gas pedal to the floor. The engine grumbled and surged as the coach started up the grade, climbing steadily at first, but then starting to slow. Sonny gripped the wheel, lifting and pushing on the rim, as if he could drag them up the hill by force of will. Still the bus slowed. He looked over at Abby again, wanting help, wishing for some kind of connection to relieve the panic bubbling up in his chest. She stirred in her seat, stretching, but not quite coming awake.

In his heart Sonny felt the dead weight of his dad's casket like an anchor, holding them back. The bus slowed, stopped. The top of the hill was scant yards away.

Sonny felt a hot tear run down the side of his nose. The bus started to roll backwards. Sonny vaguely heard a horn blowing, somewhere in the distant past, Jimmy wanting him to hurry up and get in the car, tapping on the horn at first and then leaning on it. Sonny jolted back to reality. Nana Rose. He checked the monitor. Saw the two women in the Caddy their mouths open yelling at him. Heard the crunch as the bus nudged the car backwards.

Abby had come to. "The brakes," she screamed. "Hit the brakes."

"What?" Everything registered in slow motion. He looked over at her. Her eyes were as wide as he'd ever seen them.

"The brakes," she screamed again.

"Oh, okay." He looked down to find the pedal, pressed on it with his left foot. The bus veered slightly, but did not slow. In the monitor he saw the Caddy skitter sideways off the road. It bounced backwards across the ditch as the coach passed it, Nana Rose and Ruby's heads bouncing independently inside. Sonny pulled on the wheel, leveraging all his weight onto the brake pedal. Plates and silverware clanged in the cabinets. They were gaining speed, drifting to the left side of the road. Sonny steered right, trying to keep the coach centered, but overcorrected. The rear wheels plowed through the loamy shoulder. A glass crashed in the kitchen sink.

“Shit,” Sonny said.

“Shit,” Abby squealed.

“Shit,” Uncle Ray roared from the back.

The rear wheels bit into the dirt on the far side of the drainage ditch sending the front end sliding around to the right in a wide arc, spewing gravel and dirt. The coach tipped over and crashed onto its right side, sliding down the hill half on and half off the road. Sonny was flung out of his seat, landing in Abby’s lap with his head wedged between her legs. The grinding shriek of steel on asphalt tore at Sonny’s ears and then, gradually, lapsed into an ominous quiet, choked in a cloud of dust and smoke.

“Shit,” Ray said, quietly this time.

Sonny opened his eyes to the expanse of thigh he had been dreaming about all day. He felt Abby pushing at the top of his head, then slapping at him.

“Get off me, Sonny.”

“Jeez, Abby, lighten up would you.” Sonny said, pulling himself free, trying to clear his head.

“You were hurting me.”

Ray came crawling up along the cabinets and over the chairs, sputtering all the way. The door was buried in the dirt, and they had to push the broken glass out of the windshield to climb out. Nana Rose and Ruby were standing outside the bus ringing their hands and wailing.

“My poor Jimmy,” Nana Rose cried.

“Mama, Jimmy is dead,” Ray said.

“My poor, poor Jimmy, busted up under a bus. Lord have mercy,” she said.

“Mama,” Ray started. “Aw, hell. Just forget it.” He threw up his hands and turned on Abby. “What the hell were you thinking about, coming this way? You gone crazy? You see what you done to my motorhome?”

“But...” Sonny started to protest.

“I don’t know, hon,” Abby was saying. “I guess I was a little tired, but we were so close to home I didn’t want to wake you up. I kind of drifted off in my mind you know, and missed the turn.”

“But...” Sonny started again. Abby shot him a look.

“God damn, Abby, how’d you think we was going to make it up that hill? Would you look at what you done to my motorhome?”

“I know, hon. I’m sorry. I was just tired is all.”

“Would you quit yappin’ about your precious motorhome, Ray,” Nana Rose snapped. “My poor Jimmy’s crushed under that useless heap a scrap iron. Ain’t you got no respect for the dead?”

“That’s the point, Mama. Jimmy’s dead. He’s been dead five days now. It ain’t weighin’ on his mind none whether he’s buried under my motorhome or under a pile of dirt.”

Ray went back in the bus. “I’m gonna find the cell phone,” he muttered. “Get a tow truck out here.”

Nana Rose and Ruby walked around the bus looking for a place where they could see underneath it. Sonny wandered away from the wreckage, back to the tree line, just wanting to get away from everyone, wanting to figure out how come Abby let Ray think she was driving. Wondering if maybe, somehow, he had connected with her, made some kind of impression on her. Abby came over to him. They stood together surveying the scene.

Sonny had to say something. “Thanks for fadin’ the heat with Ray for me. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, I did, Sonny. I had to because you are an ignorant little creep who couldn’t look out for himself if his life depended on it, which it probably does right now. If Ray finds out you did this, he will kill you dead. Me...he’ll be pissed off for a couple of days, but he’ll get over it.”

Sonny flushed at the insult. “Ignorant creep? What are you riled at me for, Abby? It was an accident. It could’ve happened to anybody.”

Abby didn’t say anything. She leveled an accusing finger at his coat pocket. Looking down where she was pointing, Sonny flushed again. Red satin peeked out from behind the torn flap. He covered the pocket with his hand and looked around to find his uncle. Had Ray seen? Ray was standing at the front of the overturned bus, gesturing wildly as he talked on the cell phone. Sonny stuck his hand into the torn pocket, rolled the panties into a tight ball and offered them to Abby.

She recoiled, looking at the wadded fabric as if he were trying to hand her a slug. “You keep ‘em,” she said. “Call them a souvenir of the occasion. One thing’s certain. I’ll never wear ‘em again.”

It took two big tow trucks to get Ray’s bus out of the ditch. When they finally tipped it upright and pried the cargo bay door open, they found Jimmy’s coffin had splintered on one end and the lid had come off. Nana Rose collapsed in tears. Ruby and Abby tried to console her while Ray walked along the scraped up side of his coach, brushing grass and dirt from the seams and rivets.

Sonny crawled into the bay and peered over the rim of the coffin at his dad’s body. Jimmy was jammed up into a corner and his neck was bent, but other than that he looked okay. It was just like him to come out of this unscathed, Sonny thought. There never seemed to be any consequences for Jimmy. Except for dying of course, but everyone had to do that sooner or later. Sonny took the bundled panties out of his own torn pocket and carefully stuffed them into the breast pocket of Jimmy’s funeral suit. He half expected the shiny fabric to flash like the gumball lights on a squad car. Instead it looked like it belonged there, a muted wine-colored pocket square against the black worsted fabric.

Jimmy looked harmless in repose. His pallid face offered no contrast to the pale blue pleats of the coffin's interior. He was not reproachful, not hateful, not angry or even stupidly drunk. He was not any of the things he had been in life, but just like Ray had said, five days dead and nothing on his mind.