

Sunday, October 17, 11:25 PM

Eyes burn as the cool water rushes down, washing away the sweat of the day. Chest brown with blood cracks like flat earth baked in the sun, picked up and ferried down grout lines stained blue and green with copper, now the color of rust, finally pooling at my feet. Mind starts wandering back to all that led me here. Then ...

"Oh my God!" I cry out. "I forgot to feed the fish before I left!" My voice pitched with anticipation, I grab for the faucet. A quick rub down, towel to my head and torso, and I'm off to count my friends – my *real* friends.

Luckily, they're all still alive. Can't say the same for Mrs. Susan Carlton of Petersborough, New Hampshire. I just watched what's left of her spiral down my drain. I feel inspired. Grabbing wine, bottle and glass, and adjourning to my thoughts, I enthusiastically scrawl a few words down on some paper and it's off to bed. Tomorrow brings a new day. It's Monday. I have a job to go back to.

Monday, October 18, 6:48 AM

Too early. Much too early. I appreciate sleep more than most and every time I lose it, it's like losing a close friend. I have very few close friends ... none who are human except perhaps one.

"Oh gritty butt-sex! We're out of ice cream." A young girl wanders her delicate hands through my freezer. She is demure, the epitome of all that is innocent and pure ... until she opens her mouth or you get to know her.

"We're not out; I just put it behind the box of French bread pizza."

"Well, why the fuck did you do that? Trying to starve your own child?" her words fling from her foul tongue with a kind of playful sarcasm.

"You're not my child. Hell, I wonder if anyone would ever call you their daughter. So, how was your night?"

"Well, let's see ..." She pulls out a wad of cash obviously bigger than anything I'd ever carry and she starts counting.

"Three-hundred forty-two dollars and eighteen cents, not bad for a night!" She smiles with accomplishment.

"Two dollars and eighteen cent? How did you manage that?"

"I was tired so I offered a guy outside Dunkin' Donuts a five dollar hand job if he would buy me a cup of Joe. I got a latte!"

Heather is a child, at least by account of her age, but she is older than anyone else who lived the same number of years. A vagrant and a whore, I met her last year when she was just turning twelve. She tried to pick me up in Boston. Instead of taking her proposition, I suggested she come back to Connecticut with me. Her words were something along the lines of, "You don't look like you can afford that."

I figured I could offer her a new life, get her back into school and off the streets. I figured with a stable home she could get back some of her lost childhood. I

figured wrong. She comes home every morning around five or six, tons of money and stories even I feel dirty after hearing.

I can't complain much, though. She lives her life and I live mine. I guess if she was home when I got back last night, I would have had a lot of explaining to do. So it's best we keep our different schedules and as long as the police don't come here looking for her ... or me ... everything will be fine.

Friday, October 22, 5:23 PM

Eight hours of anything can drive a man insane. Five days of it in a row is torture. I sit in a cubicle, that part I like—something about putting up walls. The phone rings, something's wrong, I fix it; the phone rings, something's wrong, I fix it; rinse and repeat. Everything is simple. People just find a way of complicating it so much that it becomes difficult. Some guy just called me and said he did the same thing ten times and it didn't work once. So why do it ten times? I will never understand. When I started this line of work, someone said, "We deal with the what, sometimes the how, but never the why." There is solace to be found in that statement. The comfort of ignorance wins again!

The funny thing is, like most people, you tell them to talk you through the way they are doing something, and all of a sudden it works. Why people block things is beyond me, so I just block people, and why we have to do menial things to stretch life out over a longer period of time makes no sense to me either, but it's done. Paycheck in pocket and I'm off to the bar. I know that's how I got into this whole mess, but it's the only way to forget about the mess I'm in. Plus, without the cubicle walls to surround me, I need something to keep the people out. Sometimes, the easiest place to hide is on a stage in the spotlight, an anonymous face before the masses.

Friday, October 22, 10:12 PM EST

It's late. I make my way to the bar. That same piece of paper I so intently scrawled upon earlier in the week wallowing in the depths of the front pocket of my jeans. All of my deepest feelings, burnt, yet still raw from last weekend's ordeal, bled out in black ink. I know there are going to be people here speaking their souls. I don't have one, but I like the art—the irony.

If there's a hell I know, it's this life on earth ... we all just passing time until we die. How pathetic is that? Grand! Grand ... if you can feel happy. I lost that a long time ago. So now I just bide my time, fall into habits that aren't too destructive, except the drinking, and try to make these people feel something I never will.

A few drinks and thirty or so minutes later, I'm walking through the crowd of street kids, academics, college grads, and those who think they will be college grads but will end up working in a dive like this. I've listened to chicks that think they're going to be the next Emily Dickenson and women who've really brought me back, if for but a moment. I've heard men who've spent too much time by the

fireside and boys who burn deep inside, but have no fucking clue what makes for good art. It's all pretty much what I suspected.

Now it's my turn to take the stage. All they see is a black leather jacket and a guy who could pass for Jesus. It's late enough for the young ones to be slurring their pathetic come-ons and the old ones to be repeating stories they told earlier this evening. I grab the mic.

Saturday, October 16, 4:34 PM EST

I'm sitting in a hick bar in New Hampshire, somewhere off 101, right in the middle of the state. I ordered fries twenty minutes ago and still playfully dip them in mayo and catsup. Every now and again I salt them, as if their already over-salted state could be improved upon.

"Why catsup and not ketchup," I wonder, way too enigmatically for the subject matter. It must be a brand thing, like Popsicle or Band-Aid. I've been here a half an hour now and the coffee's going to make me get up sooner rather than later. Most diners have silver edging around their tables. It's so 50's, but what are you going to do? These places exist as a link to some alternate reality we usually stumble upon around four in the morning when we're drunk and hungry. There must be some written law and mathematical algorithm to determine that odd curve of the benches. They're all the same. They were obviously designed for people with asses much larger than mine. Somehow I seem to be missing the spillover, just slipping back into oblivion, ever scooting forward to reach for my coffee. All this is to keep my mind busy while I wait.

I've been eyeing this waitress for a while. She's noticed. She'll come get me when she's off. Not because I'm good looking enough, not because I'm doing anything special, but because I look like an easy mark. I'm what she needs – at least she'll think I am.

"Hi. You're not really my section, but I wondered if you needed a warmer on that coffee?"

Wow. Her words fall like butter melting on a biscuit. She's said that same thing before. Many a man has slipped in the oil of this well greased tongue. I'm not the first; I know that.

"Please."

I look down, trying to be shy; knowing she's seen me looking at her. I don't want to appear too aggressive; she might not be looking for a fight. She's probably just looking for a low key, simple guy; someone she can take advantage of and walk away. The tension builds. Am I waiting for her to pour the coffee? I look up, my gaze creeping out from beneath my eyelids. I don't know if I let this last too long. She speaks. Good. She needs to break the ice. She doesn't want to blow this. It's obvious strangers don't come by here very often.

"So, ah, new to town?"

She needs a stranger, someone passing through who won't be noticed when they're gone.

"Well, just up for a few days. Foliage. I like taking pictures." I motion to my expensive camera, one that someone dressed much nicer than I would carry. I see the price tag flash in her eyes. Maybe she can get more from me than she thought. That's *exactly* what I want her to think.

She's attractive, in her thirties, maybe a kid or two, but she holds it well. Athletic calves come from this type of work. She's been waiting tables her whole life ... and it shows. Still, she wouldn't be passed up lightly. I'm sure, in this small town, she hasn't. Her voice drops. She doesn't want the people around to hear. "There's a place not far from here. If you sit on the hill just before sunset, the colors are spectacular. I used to go there when I was a kid. Haven't been in a long time, though."

Well, there's the opening. She isn't making it hard for me to make the next move, but here comes my waitress ... Marge.

She's been doing this a lot longer, maybe fifty years. She is tread-worn, roughed up, beat down, and is NOT showing her happy-face right now. I just drop my eyes and let it play out. Plus, I'm trying not to smile too wide over the way this girl said ... what was it? Oh, yes ...

Spectaculah!

"Oh, you got his coffee?" Marge gives that territorial look that all waitresses give when another of their kind is circling one of their tables. Marge's pot was full, my girl's almost empty. Sue, her name tag read.

"Oh, you got a fresh one, why don't you fill him up. I gotta count tips and my drawer. Leaving early. Gotta run some errands. Kids are with my mom, so I gotta use *my* time *my* way."

She's quick, I give her that, but I know how long she's really been doing this.

"No, thank you. I think I'll just pay the bill." My money comes out and I hand her a five and three ones for a four dollar meal. She smiles—if you could call it that. The forty year old mascara doesn't allow for much facial movement. She's working late, I can tell by the lack of new stains on her uniform. She certainly isn't graceful enough to keep herself clean, nor does she care enough to try. I hit the bathroom on the way out, quick, so as not to miss Suzy when she leaves. Meandering slowly, as if I'm surveying the lack of interesting terrain, I make my way across the parking lot to my car. Open the trunk, grab my atlas, pretend to look at the map, and I wait. It won't take long.

A minute later ... here she comes.

"You think you could show me how to get there?" I hold up the map. She's sauntering over here as if she had something to swish. She tries, though. She tries.

"Sure, what's your name?"

"Jeff." I don't look like a Jeff, but then again, who the hell knows what a Jeff looks like, anyways? I look down at her name tag, then up, red-faced, and she smiles. She'd undone a few buttons since ending her shift.

“Well, Jeff, I’m Sue. Why don't you just follow me? It’s on my way.” The smile goes from her lips to her eyes. You would think she just pulled a prize trout from the lake. She turns, slinging her purse over her shoulder. She knows I'll follow. I played this right.

Hopping in my car, we don’t go more than seven or eight miles down before we take a right and head up a hill. Her Fiesta hasn't been washed in a while and the red paint only shows through beige where the dirt and road fodder have been scuffed off. The acrid smell of calipers and motor oil burning makes me wonder if she'll make it up the hill. Around the back and into a well worn dirt parking lot, she turns off her car and sashays over to me. Even from the front, she has little to shake. I grab my camera and lock up. I bet she used to bring the high school boys up here fifteen years ago, maybe even a prom date or two. Who knows what excuse worked on her mom to make her think daughter was going to lay on the ground under a different apple tree? I wasn’t concerned. I’m right where I want to be. Sometimes, these people, I mean things, are far too easy.

“It’s almost sunset. Come on. I’ll show you the path.”

She reaches for my arm and I give it. She makes this like we are processing through a wedding. Small animals scurry away, a cardinal perches above, and this is all starting to look like snow-fucking-white – without the snow.

It didn’t take much to get the small talk going. Where you from? What do you do? She was an inquisitive one. At her age, it pays to be thorough. She probably made all too many mistakes in her past for not keeping her eyes open. She’s only been this way for a little while, though. I can tell. It’s the small town work ethic that’s kept her alive. She does what she has to.

She walks ahead, her apron off and I notice how short the skirt really is – or was it hiked? She’s in good shape; it's not just her calves. The ring not on her finger tells me she’s probably been divorced a time or two. Or maybe it’s in the glove compartment. It really doesn’t matter.

We walk through trees to an opening on the side of the hill. The expanse is breathtaking. Maybe she brought me up here so I could see something so beautiful that she wouldn't have to feel the guilt for what she really took me up here for. Maybe she has a heart. I wouldn't know; I don't have anything to compare that to – anymore.

Reds, yellows, browns, and greens, show the beauty of death in dying. The symbolism is not lost on me ... or her. Autumn was always my favorite season. I gasp the appropriate, “Wow!” and lift my camera.

I snapped six nice shots of the landscape before I turned the camera on her. She was ready. She didn’t even try to act coy. She’s already got me and she knows it. I can just sit back and let her take control. It's a nice break from the day to day of my life.

“Isn’t it amazing how beautiful all of this is? As the fires of life die out in all the splendor summer brought to bear upon us, the grandest finale is autumn’s last fading ember.”

She looks at me funny, head cocked like a dog attempting to make sense of human-speak. "So – you a poet, or something? That was really cool ... what you said."

I snap another shot of her. This time, she looks almost exposed. Not everyone I meet actually has a thread of humanity left in them. I tend to cherish the times I have with those who at least know they did something wrong. Then again, who's to say what's right and what's wrong. It's just a feeling, after all.

"Come on." I hold out my arm and she walks back to me. Wrapped in the comfort of someone who will appreciate her right up until the end, she rests in my arms as the sun descends the sky.

Just then, as the white glow is swallowed by the far away horizon, a red warmth gently cascades hill to hill, engulfing the trees before us. The crisp edge of a slight breeze is buffed soft by the color itself as the direct light no longer makes its way to us. Everything is orange. Her face, my hand, our lips ... we kiss. How perfect, I could not have asked for anything more. It isn't long before she takes my hand and leads me to her car, takes my hand and leads me to her door, takes my hand and leads me to her bed.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

This is where the fun begins.

If there's one thing her type wants, it's fire. She throws me into the wall, her mouth now gnawing ravenously at my flesh. In a moment, my clothes lay in a pile between the bed and the dresser. Now on my back, I reach for her hair. Grabbing firmly, I pull her up to eye-level. Her nails gouge my chest then slice to the side. Blood. Her eyes glimmer. Her mouth waters. She is on it like a dog to fresh meat, licking and slurping, her tongue now thick and foamy with crimson. Sitting back, the curves of her body echo off walls in the candle light. She reaches for the nightstand and opens the drawer. Without breaking eye contact, her nimble fingers procure a glint of silver. A razor. The blade slides across her lower lip, down to her naval, then up to where a purple nipple stands constant vigil over my body, wielding a two-inch metal bar for defense. Her teeth sink deep into that same lip. She cuts. In the orange glow of Pumpkin Spice and Ocean Breeze, a pairing of scents unspeakably immiscible, only blackness slides down. She reaches for me, holding my head to her breast like she was coddling an infant. I nurse like baby ... a child of the devil himself, lapping the salty ooze, suckling the wound.

She makes her move. Mouths now locked in a sticky, sanguine embrace, she draws from me. I give her more than she asks for, more than she needs. She can't tell that there's nothing behind what she siphons off of me. In moments, I lie faking sleep while she checks my wallet. An hour later, she's sending me out the door with a fake cell number and an excuse about the kids coming home. It's probably true. I got what I came for. So did she.

Thanks to her, I know where I'm going to spend the night. I pull my car back up to that same spot, off the road and back behind some trees. You would have to really be looking to find it. I don't want anyone showing up. That could put a crimp in my plans.

I fall asleep fast. Dreams don't really happen anymore. There's only the same twisted pain of daytime, followed me into the night. I'll be up at sunrise.

Sunday, October 17, 6:22 AM EST

Great, now I have to waste a day. I'll find some hiking to do. There's got to be more around here than this one hill. It doesn't take me long to find breakfast, diners are the only business beside antiques and firewood around here. I settle into a scenic overlook and sit. I sit for hours, just dealing with the pain. It seems the more it hurts, the faster time passes, but no matter how much it fades, it's always there. I'm slipping – slipping away. How long do I really have? I don't know. Until He comes, I guess.

Sunday, October 17, 6:00 PM EST

I meet her in the parking lot. She's antsy, nervous. She tries to make up excuses, but I say, "One more time, let's just go up to the hill."

She caves. She wants this as much as I do. She looks toward the diner as she gets in her car. Nobody's watching. Nobody cares.

We speed down the road, then up the path to the vista. She knows no one will come up here. The town is just too old to give a damn about the simple things in life. They just get older, talk about what's gone wrong with them last, a hip, arthritis, an old friend who died. I guess 'depressing' is the word for it.

She and I hit the parking lot in a cloud of dust. We don't hesitate. We both know what's going to happen, and we just let ourselves go through the motions.

Moving in unison, shirts first, pants, then everything else, we undress each other with violent despair. This time, foreplay is not on the table. We move right to thrusting and grinding, and just as she leans into me, a familiar glint of steel catches her eye.

"Mmm, you remembered." She looks so happy, so content. She knows what she wants and she knows she's going to get it. Oh, is she going to get it.

There's no resistance. I slide the edge up her side, around the curve of her breast where last night's cut has already faded into a taut areola, as, slowly, I put the blade to her neck. It was too late when she realized how deep I cut.

My fingers slide into the gaping gash, slippery and warm. Hands flailing, she scratches, punches, anything she can do to try to escape, but I keep the wound open. Even with just one jugular cut, she bleeds out quick.

For me, it's back to the car for the fire starter logs and some lighter fluid. I've got to have at least twenty of the logs in the trunk. Let's hear it for BJ's! The way they melt does things to a body that gasoline just can't touch.

I walk away naked, my clothes burning in the evening bonfire of her body. It's time to go home; I've got work in the morning.
The drive back to Connecticut will take almost three hours. I plug in my iPod; it's set to random. Ben Folds begins the drive ...

*Good morning, son
I am a bird
Wearing a brown polyester shirt*

It's a sweet song. I need that. Norah Jones follows, then some Ani DiFranco. I just never know what's going to come next.

Friday, October 22, 10:54 PM EST
"The Whisper and the Lie"

*I whisper once to warn the woman who wishes for the prize
The would-be worldly worshiper of what she can't realize
Who welcomed weathered wonderment without a watchful eye
Whilst witchery was whittling another loathsome lie*

*And where we wander wants to wonder underneath its breath
Just why we walk the way we walk upon our way to death
And waves of weirdness waft around the workings of our minds
But it's worth the while to wait for wisdom to wash away the blinds*

*And where and why and what we will, will words ever arise
To win the well-timed wedding of the wild and the wise
And will we all withstand the whirlwind that whips across the land
The wicked watchman weaves the well-planned wanderlust of man
The wicked watchman weaves the well-planned wanderlust of man*

I knew they'd get a kick out of that. The simple alliteration makes it easy for the drunk to understand something cool is happening, even if they don't know I just told them I killed a girl. They fill their mouths with burnt flesh dipped in hot sauce, not unlike my exquisite muse's fiery end, and wash it down with the bitter truth of wasted lives.

Afterward, I sell copies of my poetry, just papers stapled together, for three dollars a piece; a poet's way of busking. Some young kids always buy. The older crowd glances sideways as if having the audacity to ply my wares were so far below them. They know it was just kids stuff, but Harper-Collins ain't gonna pay me for it, so a man's gotta do what he's gotta do to make a buck. I've got that small town work ethic, too.

An old guy comes out of the crowd, professor type, mid sixties, gray all over, even his eyes. He's been coming for a while; buys every time. Somehow, I don't

think he ever came for the poetry. Some people are transparent, but this guy reads like balsamic and motor oil. He's a resource, though. He has his uses.

"Three dollars."

"You deserve more."

He slides me a five as an envelope changes hands under the passed papers. He comes closer.

"I can get you some real cash for that, you know?"

I give him two dollars change.

"And *you* know I don't take anything in return. Just tell me who they are, where they are, and *what* they are. If it meets my criteria, I'll take the job. By the way, how did you find out about her? She's probably never left that little hick town."

"Her husband, if you can believe that. He's from Mississippi. Said she had a demon inside her."

"Pretty close." I quip "He gonna miss her?"

"He asked for her to be 'cleansed from this earth,' if you know what I mean." His words are dry, unfeeling – like mine.

"You know who turned her?" Not like it matters, but I have to ask. Stop the source and cure the problem, wiping out the symptom just cleans up the mess someone else left behind.

"The Drifter."

A name that sits in the back of my mind bores through delicate gray matter and a sharp pain behind my eye makes me squint. *The Drifter*. He got that handle from moving town to town, sucking all but the life out of women, leaving them so empty the only choice they have is to follow his lead. They are dead inside, nothing but an empty shell. To this, I can relate. But they are now succubi; they will never be fully human again. To that end, they must die.

The man folds himself back into the crowd. It's as if he was never here.