

Salt Water

by Eric Peterson

It was as if God took a handful of frozen glitter and threw it upon us—Libby was beautiful that night. And if you were to peer through the window of 867 Owlcreek Lane, you would have seen Peyton feverishly writing in the corner of a dark room lit only by a single candle on his desk. By now, the medicine was taking effect. He was shivering and scratching away at a composition notebook he'd picked up earlier that day, desperate to end his story. He was beginning to feel drowsy. The moon was shining brightly in his window. A dog's bark echoed in the night air.

“When he woke up, Peyton felt rejuvenated, as if his fifty years of labor in the coal mines had been wiped clean off. He looked briefly at his white bath towel, now smudged with the black, and contemplated throwing it out. He didn't. Rolling over, he realized the emptiness of the bed. He smelt coffee and bacon and heard muffled sizzling coming from downstairs. With a languid haste, he got to his feet, dressed, and descended to the kitchen.

“The bedroom was relatively empty. A bed, a night stand, and a dresser were all that inhabited the spacious, bright quarters. The couple had emptied it out recently of all but the bare essentials in preparation for a new coat of paint. Peyton was sick of the pure white interior and wanted to mark his retirement and newfound freedom with a sponge-painted dabble of deep red. His wife protested, however, noting that such a decision would render the house virtually impossible to sell in the market. After a long argument spanning nearly a week, an off-white cream color was settled upon. This was the color chosen to coat the entirety of their household in the coming weeks. Equally empty, as Peyton strolled toward the banister, the hallway was brightly lit by the sun shining through the windows, taped off around the edges. The hardwood floors creaked with age as he floated down.

“You know I'm trying to eat healthy now.”

“And you know we can't afford it on your severance.”

“Why eat if you can't eat right? Why live if you can't live right?”

“There you go again, waxing philosophy. Just eat your breakfast. You'll need the energy on the water today.”

“Peyton had forgotten about his long awaited fishing trip he'd been planning for some time. He wasn't an avid fisher by any means, but he still loved the ocean.

“How's the weather looking?”

“Clear skies. Not too hot, not too cold. Looks like no wind, either. You're bound to catch quite a bit today.”

“But in fact, Peyton wasn't going to fish for *fish*, he was going to fish for ideas. With a small fork in his right hand (he preferred small forks), as if holding a pencil, he sliced off a bit of his scrambled eggs, scooped it up, held it in the air for a moment and before he took a bite, replied,”

“Perfect.”

“Peyton finished his breakfast casually. He and his wife didn't exchange any further words. She was preoccupied with the morning news on the television on the kitchen counter. It was the only black object in the house. He, on the other hand, was lost in thought, as if his mind had wandered off to the southern hemisphere, to a small fishing village where there were no phones. He mumbled something to his wife about leaving early to get supplies, grabbed his keys off the counter, and was out the door.

“He couldn't have told you what route he took, to what store he drove, or even what color his maroon truck was, he was so lost in thought. Surely his fellow citizens would have

appreciated some forewarning. Their safety was no doubt in his hands that morning, though he did make it to the stationary store intact. He bought a small, black composition notebook on which he scribbled the title *Salt Water*. Before he left for the water he scratched a short prelude.”

“To be honest, I can’t quite put my finger on how I ended up here, on this raft, in this sea. Surely there have been times in your past when you were reading a textbook for school and some key phrase caught your mind’s attention, and although you continued to read the words on the page, your mind wandered to other topics based upon the phrase’s connotations to yourself. No more than a minute later, you’d find yourself at the end of the paragraph, and with nary an idea as to what you just read.

“My situation is similar to this, I believe. I’m unsure of how I arrived—what chain of thoughts caused my displacement. My problem, though, is that although I’ve become cognizant of this dilemma, I can’t seem to pull myself out of it. I’m reading not knowing, and thinking very well knowing, but not knowing how to return to knowing before. Who knows, maybe it’s a sign. Maybe it means something. Maybe I’m supposed to learn something, trapped on this raft, which would help me understand.

“Nevertheless, I am here, and I am moving. The sea is calm. No winds blow upon it, and no waves rock me back and forth. It is as flat and as calm as a resting glass of wine, but as reflective as a mirror. It is uniformly a lighter blue, much like the color of the sea one sees in tourist ads. The air is neither bitter nor pure, though the sea is so salted that I fear taking a drink. The sun burns me not, though it keeps me warm. No storm passes me. Land rarely makes its appearance on the horizon, and even if it did, I have no means of paddling to it. There are no artificial sources of light, and so the night is filled with stars, nodding.

“You must be thinking my time spent here is a bore, but you are incorrect, for I am not

alone. Yes, I am alone, on my raft, but I am not alone on the sea. It would be ignorant to think that I am the only one lost at sea.

“I am unsure of when I first became cognizant, when I became self-aware. My realization developed much like the memory of a child. It’s entirely possible that I was floating for some time before I became aware of it. And although I cannot pinpoint the exact moment in time of the beginning of my journey, I am able to recall one event which took me from floating to floating with direction.

“I saw, coming toward me, another raft. Because there is no point of reference other than my raft and his raft, I cannot be sure of whether I was moving toward him, or he was moving toward me, or if either of us were stationary, but from my frame of reference, he was sailing toward me. He arrived lazily, neither rushing, nor dragging, though I suppose he had no control over it. When we were within shouting distance, I saw that he glanced at me briefly and looked at me with curious eyes, but did not speak.

“It should be expected that I was anxious. I did not know what to do. Was I to talk to him? Was I to throw myself overboard and swim to him? Was he to do either? Was it proper for me to return the glance? How many manners I must have ignored in this strange world.

“Before I could react, I noticed that the man had looked back down at his raft. He began whistling a song. The melody was familiar, nothing special about it, but surely memorable. It had a haunting quality to it—it would never leave me. The vastness and openness of the sea allowed for the sound to be carried to me unaltered. There was no sound to mix with it, and there was no object impeding its movement toward me. It was pure, it rang True to me. I had lost awareness, and all that was left was the sound. And although his whistling produced only higher pitches which my ear could pick up, I somehow felt it within me, like one feels the lowest

basses at an orchestral performance, or when one feels a strong emotion. The melody echoed through me.

“When I regained awareness, the man’s raft had already passed behind me, but the melody remained within me. I had it committed to a form of memory, not quite memory itself, but something similar to instinct. Muscle memory of sorts. This was the beginning.

“Looking back on it, it was actually pretty surreal. I wouldn’t consider myself a musician, nor would I consider myself an avid fan of music, especially of just a melody being whistled, and yet something about it struck me. I cannot recall any other details about the man or his raft.

“I cannot even begin to describe for you the melody. I could perhaps show you a chart of how it would look written out, or perhaps I could describe for you the pitches it cycles through, however doing so would not bring it justice. You would not be able to recognize the beauty of it. Instead, I may focus entirely on the beauty of it, and perhaps describe it to you through metaphor or simile. I could use diction or any literary device to attempt to provide you with an understanding of the melody and its power, however I could not—not merely due to my lack of proficiency in this field, but also because, although you would have a clear understanding of the power of the melody, you would not have the melody itself, and even the power is open to interpretation.

“However long after the beginning I thought about the melody, I am unsure. I can measure days by when light transitions to darkness, but I can’t always remember. Nevertheless, time passed.

“I was staring at my hands, much like I imagine one does after one has killed someone for the first time. Why? I don’t know. Maybe out of the surrealism of the situation. I had to stare

at something, and my hands were likely just the most convenient thing. I noticed that they're big, at least in comparison to my arms. You can see the outline of bone toward the wrists. The fingers are long and slender, and they show wear. The tips are calloused. I moved my hands about as I stared, them in the foreground while the background changed, although the changing backgrounds were merely changing shades of blue. My eyes focused on my hands, but my mind was focused on the sea. It was at this point that I noticed the second raft approaching.

“As he came close enough that I could identify his face, I stood up and waved in his direction. He too stood up, and threw me a rope, which I tied to my raft. I supposed it to be the custom. He tightened his end and in no time, our rafts were attached.

“I was unsure of what to do. I wasn't sure of what to speak, or of what actions to take. I was lost. But the man waved me over to his raft and gave me a flask of drinking water. I wasn't particularly thirsty, but I accepted. It was rather strange, actually. The man didn't introduce himself, and didn't ask for introductions in return. I took a drink. I didn't ask him anything, but he immediately began to speak.

“When I was little, and my parents made me brush my teeth,” he said slowly, as if thinking about each word he used. “I would look into the mirror. And I wouldn't see anything. ...And when I started to grow up, I would look in the mirror to get my hair straight, and I wouldn't see anything. And when I grew up, I would straighten my tie in front of it, and I wouldn't see anything. I didn't know anyone. I was alone.”

“He paused for a moment. I felt obligated to say something. I was unsure of what he meant. I needed clarification. I took another drink.

“But I met someone. And I looked at him. I looked into him. And I saw something. And I met another, and I looked at her, and I saw something else. And this continued. Until I

knew many people, and I was no longer alone.”

“As I sat there, my attention was focused entirely on him, for there was nothing else to catch my attention, and I remained silent. He didn’t look at me, he looked at his feet. He didn’t move. I grew thirstier, and took another gulp.

“Then I thought about how this might be the same for everyone else. And I wondered how much I cast, how much I shined. What did I shine? Did I shine love? Did I shine hate? Did I shine honesty? Did others? And if they shine on me, do I reflect it? And if I shine on them, do they reflect it? What of proximity? Where does honesty come from? What is the original source of radiance? From where does what we shine come?”

“He paused for a moment, and he looked up. I was staring at him, not unlike a cat, and I remained silent. He looked back down and began to twiddle his thumbs. He began, again.

“And I considered this for a long time, through the seasons. Through the years. And I continued to shine, and I continued to see something, and others continued likewise. And I continued to consider. Then, I finally realized that this matter was so large, that I needed others to help me see it. To see the other side of it. To see around its corners. It shined on me, but only part of it, and I was missing much of its radiance. But by this time, I had come to realize that all that was left was my raft, and my own two feet, and the open ocean.”

“I closed my flask, my thirst quenched, and I returned the flask to its owner. I boarded my raft and untied the rope, and we slowly drifted apart. I looked back at him as he drifted away, but he only looked at his feet. He did not smile, but he did not frown. We didn’t exchange any words. Daylight slowly began to fade.

“I had experienced before, during the beginning, that strange and surreal feeling of understanding, but an understanding which lacks comprehension—which lacks articulation.

However, the experience was still unfamiliar to me, and it continued to reverberate within me, only stronger, in both its strength and its alien nature. It was discomfiting. I did not want to feel it. It ached in my chest, and my instinct was to sleep in order to shake the feeling; night would fall soon anyway, and I would likely awake refreshed and feeling rejuvenated. However, I was unable to sleep. Perhaps the stars were too bright, perhaps the sea too disconcertingly calm, or perhaps I had too much on my mind, but in any case, I was unable to sleep. Though the night passed without a wink of shuteye, the sun greeted me in the morning, and I felt just as I had before. Neither refreshed nor exhausted. I felt that same dull ache. I felt no hunger. I was thirsty.

“If it weren’t for my raft, and the sun, I would probably be frightened by the vastness of the sea. Picture yourself floating around in space with no ship in sight, and no object in your general vicinity. Picture the darkness of space and the merciless light of the stars. Picture everything around you looking the same, and everything appearing far and equidistant from you. Picture yourself being overwhelmed and panicked by the infinite loneliness—by your distance from anything remotely human. But now, picture yourself in a space suit, and behind a visor. Imagine the warmth it brings you. Imagine the oxygen it carries for you. Imagine how it hugs against your body. You are no longer panicked. You have a tangible point of reference. This is my raft. This is my comfort.

“You may be thinking that my eye-sight is wonderful, able to see people approaching from a distance on the horizon, but you would be wrong. I am surrounded by sea, and engulfed by the sky. Horizontally and linearly dividing the two is the horizon, and any break in this linearity is easily distinguished by anyone with even a mild ability to see change.

“The individual I met next was an exception. She spoke at length. She spoke with a

subtle casualness. She spoke in such casualness and at such a length that I felt that, afterward, I had known her for all of my life. Her voice was soft, so much so, in fact, that if we were to speak in any other setting—near a waterfall, for example—her voice would drown. And despite this softness, a wisdom shined its way through, a firmness shined its way through, and an urgency shined its way through.

“As before, few formalities were exchanged. Or perhaps all of the usual formalities were exchanged; I suppose I should start assimilating myself to this new perspective. A line was thrown over and tension was placed upon it until both rafts met, forming the raft proper. Being the exception she was, she introduced herself and we exchanged pleasantries. Eventually, though, like the first day, the dialogue turned to a monologue. A memoir. And my thirst grew.

“She did not speak chronologically, but there was an order to her thoughts which I cannot transcribe. She began with her youth.

“When I was in grade school, I remember my older brother had injured himself very badly. I didn’t know it at the time, but he had fallen off his bike and cracked his head wide open. My mother told me there was blood everywhere, but I didn’t see any of it. In fact, I wasn’t told it was all that bad an injury until I was about his age when it happened. The only reason I remember the whole thing was because of the smell of the emergency room. It smelt like how airports smell. It smelt like how bus stations smell. It was unusual, and it was unfamiliar. It was the smell of transience.”

“Likely because of her introduction, I got up the courage to put in a question. I asked her why she thought she remembers it.

“It was a smell which became familiar to me.”

“She paused and gave a light sigh, and looked up at me. “It’s not a smell they’d use for a

perfume or a lotion, I'll give you that much."

"After a brief, silence, she began again. "When I was off to University, I found myself both awed by my newfound independence and frightened of it. I went from dismally unemployed to drastically over-employed in less than two days. I was a student by day, model by evening, and security guard by night. As a model, I was inadequate. I can't stare into the cyclopean eye of the camera without feeling a vague sense of fight-or-flight. I can't act normally on command. As a security guard, I was uneasy. I spent most of my shift anxiously reading, constantly worrying that I should be doing something less personally satisfying."

"She drew her legs closer to her and hugged them, staring, like a musician stares, off in one direction, at nothing in particular. She had a light smile on her face, like an elderly old man, nostalgic of the good old days, but it slowly faded.

"I remember, I used to eat this candy bar. It was a limited edition. I'd eat one everyday. ...No, I didn't just eat it. I had a ritual. I broke off a small piece of its outer chocolate, exposing stratified layers of sugar-geology. I would delicately remove the upper layer with my front teeth, and then devour it neatly, then the next layer, and the next, and the next. With cool dry fingers and a surgeon's attention to detail, you could eat the entire thing and not once have to wash your hands. Though eventually, the bar's limited nature kicked in. I went to the store and bought the remaining five bars, took them home, and ate them one by one, following my method with care. The first delighted me so, and compelled me to eat another. The second delighted me. The third was too sweet and left me thirsty. By the fifth, no taste remained, save a bitter saltiness."

"That was the saddest day of my life. That was the last time I had one of those candy bars. And it was a bitter ordeal."

"After that," she said, "I would have trouble deciding what to eat at lunch. I would

wander around campus, wondering what would be good, keeping in consideration lines, prices, cravings, and time. It was like a system of equations problem with four variables. I was never much for math. And I wandered around for so long with so many possibilities and consequences and I grew so exhausted and malnourished that I simply died.”

“She paused again and put her chin to her knees and balled up very tightly. She was not smiling. I waved her canteen in her direction. She took it and drank from it and returned it. She began to smile again.

“Sometime after that, I remember I was about to take a shower. I noticed a little spider stuck in the tub. I looked down at her, and she looked up at me. I decided to play Mother Nature—to play natural selection. I took her out of the tub and placed her on the wall, near some webs. I often wonder if she was aware of my power, if she was frightened by it, if she was grateful for it. I wondered if she’d name her children after me, all ten-thousand of them.”

“She went on. She spoke about how she would walk from room to room while on the telephone, to change the scenery based on how the conversation was going. She spoke about how, when she wrote speeches, she would write near pages of phrases in parentheses, and skip over them when she spoke. She spoke about her fluency in incompetence. She spoke about her throat.

“And like it tended, time kicked in, and the sun began to melt into that horizontal line of reflection. If you think the most beautiful thing in the world is a sunset behind mountains or a sunset behind a quaint little farm, you’re mistaken. On this sea, there are no clouds, and there is no pollution in the air to cause the sky to glow orange. No, the sunset is pure. It’s the same sunset the ancient Greeks would have seen. Because the water is so calm and reflective, I tend to imagine the sun as having a twin. They part in the morning, only to meet again in the evening.

And during the night, they turn their backs and rest.

“She had stopped talking and had lain down, keeping her balled position. I too laid down, and perhaps eventually I fell asleep. I can’t be certain.

“The only light at night is that of the stars, not nearly enough to be able to see any more than a few feet in front of me. Sometime in the night, she had gone, for when the sun left his twin the next morning, her raft wasn’t to be found. Her canteen remained.

“I remembered back to the song from before, and the melody played in my head. It didn’t make me feel as it did when it was whistled to me. I tried whistling it, and though it may have been because I’m not much of a whistler, I did not feel the same way as I did then. It was disappointing. It was almost as sad as her last five candy bars. It was almost as sad as the smell of transience. It was almost as sad as space is lonely. Maybe it was just as sad.

“Some time later, I looked behind me and noticed that I was moving. Of course, I have no point of reference to determine this with absolute certainty; however I did observe that I was producing a small, but visible wake. I had a direction. The raft lost its symmetry. I now had a forward to look to.

“It was after this realization that two new things happened: the first being the first sighting of land, the second being the first time seeing two figures on the horizon simultaneously. The event seemed significant at the time. Firsts tend to be this way.

“When I reached the general vicinity of the man (I like to think of it as lunar insertion), I saw that he was stationary, and that he was looking toward the island. This island, I have to admit, was a very ugly island. And I do realize that this is a strange thing to call an island, of all things. There are a number of other adjectives I could have used to describe it for you, all of them more suited to objects like islands, but truly, the only word which justifies the island is

ugly. It stuck out like a thorn in that horizontal line. It had curves, but not like those of a slender woman. No, it had the curves of an obese man who lives in his parents' basement, whose clothes are stained with sweat, whose time is spent not at a job or with a friend, but in front of the television. Alone.

“And yet, the man stared with mouth agape. He was awe-inspired, dumbfounded. In fact, if I hadn't splashed the water a bit to attract his attention, he likely wouldn't have noticed me. He threw me the line, but did not tighten it; he left this up to me, as he looked up toward the peak of the island. It took me a great deal of work to finally form the raft proper.

“If I were a guest, I must admit, he was not being a very good host. He did not offer me water. He did not speak with me. He did not look at me. He was infatuated with this island, this awful island. After an unbearable silence, I finally looked up toward the man looking up toward the peak, when my focus suddenly shifted to the peak as well. I can't quite bring to words what I saw then and there, but my view of the island did change quite suddenly. Although it was some distance away, I noticed numerous distinct features. As when one looks at mountains from afar, its color was distorted to a shade of blue, however this blue was so vivid and so distinctive, that the contrast created was something for the ages. Its shapely figure no longer lingered in my mind, and instead, I focused on its symmetry. I focused on its intricate detail. I focused on its exceptional quality. Who was I to judge such an island without getting to know its sophistications?

“It was at this time that the man spoke, still staring at the peak. “I was having troubles at the time. School wasn't going well. Work wasn't going well. I had very few friends, and most of them were in similar situations to me. So, I went to the bench on campus which I passed frequently. It was chilly outside; it was fall. The leaves were on the ground, and they were

lonely. I wrote messages on a few of them, to whom, I'm not sure (maybe they were to God). But as I was sitting there, watching the trees die, I suddenly noticed the beauty of it all. The tree directly across from me had already reached its peak of golden brown, and had begun balding. But on that chilly autumn day, I looked that tree straight in the eyes. I looked it up and down. And I put it to memory. I could describe for you every detail of that tree. Every twist of every branch and every hue of every leaf is locked away in my memory. And if we were to play an association game in which I would say to you "autumn tree," you might say "beauty," but you wouldn't even know the half of it. No, you don't know True beauty. When I say it, you think of a brown twig with red paper atop it, but it's much more than that. It would take a million lifetimes to describe perfectly."

"I stopped for a moment, and tried to imagine a tree as perfect as he likely saw, but I could not. The details escaped me. I took another look at the island, and took a drink from my flask. I offered some to the man, but he refused it. He merely continued staring at the island, his raft stationary.

"I untied the line and was on my way no sooner than lunar insertion had begun. As my raft drifted forward, I looked back and saw the man, still staring at the island (the fool stares at the hand which points to the sky). Then I looked back at the island, and saw the same ugly island which I had seen on my way.

"The way the man viewed beauty struck me, and I struggled to find a way to do the same with the song. What I had felt in the beginning was surely as powerful as what the man had felt on that park bench that day in the fall, but somehow, I could not come to rectify this feeling. And the feeling itself was beginning to fade into a memory of its own. It's difficult trying to recreate a feeling when you're beginning to be unsure of how exactly the feeling felt in the first

place. It was a dilemma. It was troubling. It consumed me, and would have likely be the end of me if it weren't for those soon to come.

“By now, I was running on low, soon on empty. My canteen was down to nearly its last drop, and my thirst had become insatiable. It was like a drug. The more I drank, the thirstier I became. There was a dryness in my mouth. Never before in my life had I craved even a drop of fresh water (I was so used to soft drinks). To my luck, a figure appeared on the horizon.. Everyone thus far had been kind enough to offer me water; perhaps this figure would do the same.

“As he approached, I saw a man, who sat cross-legged staring at nothing in particular. He was dazed. He was disheveled. He looked rugged and worn. But nonetheless, he did toss me the line, weakly, and I boarded.

“This man, I must admit, was a funny man. He swayed, and rocked back and forth. He appeared dizzy. He acted as a man would if he were to have lost his glasses. But he also acted as a man would if he had taken more than his share of medicine, or a man who had fallen and bumped his head. He would open his eyes widely, and he would focus them on something, and he would smile, eerily, and then return to his state of dulled senses. He rubbed his legs and rocked back and forth. He only spoke in questions.

“When he finally did speak, he asked a most peculiar question. “The sea, why must she be so green,” he asked with genuine curiosity.

“I paused for a moment, and I simply replied, “But the sea, she is not green.”

“His dazed smile turned into a mild frown, and he jerked his jaw to the side; a nervous twitch, I assumed.

“He then asked, but with more force, an equally peculiar question. “And the sun, why

does she bring darkness?”

“I simply replied, “But the sun, she does not bring darkness.”

“The man’s frown grew deeper and his eyes grew redder. He appeared frustrated, though I could not be certain. He then asked, with even more force, “But is it not true that staring into her will blind you, will bring you darkness?”

“She does not bring darkness,” I replied. I could sense the tension now. He looked at me with fiery eyes, though he still did not move from his place.

“He tried one more question, “The stars, why do they reflect from the depths of the sea onto the sky?”

“But they do not,” I replied. “They reside only above us.”

“At this, he could no longer contain himself. He lashed at me, very bluntly, and very briefly. He yelled, and it would have likely been able to have been heard for miles around, “Why do you not answer my questions?”

“His voice did not echo, but I paused as if to listen for it. I replied quietly, and a bit shaken, “But, I do.”

“We remained silent for quite awhile after this. I didn’t wish to end on such a sour note, and the man didn’t appear as though he wished for me to leave. He continued to stare at nothing in particular. I remembered I was running low on water, and asked him if I could, as politely as possible, partake of him some water. With only the movement of his body forward, arms outstretched, carrying his canteen, he handed me the water, moving back to his original position with just the same slowness as when handing me the water.

I had a quick taste before I began to fill my canteen, and was surprised to taste the bitterness of the sea. Had this man been drinking salt water all this time? Had he been

dehydrating himself? Had he grown thirsty just as I, and out of desperation turned to the sea? And after his first taste, did he grow, because of the bitterness of the sea, thirstier and thirstier like a drug addict?

“It dawned upon me how easily it would be to confuse one who thirsts for fresh water and one who thirsts because of salt water. I capped his canteen and handed it back to him. He nodded to me, and went back to staring at nothing in particular. I returned to my raft and untied his, and soon enough, we were off in separate directions.

“The next man I met was a ghost. I do not recall his coming or his passing, and I remember little of him. He was a sensible man. He spoke, but I did not reply. I may have dreamt our exchange, however I am unsure. It was night. He had boarded my raft.

“We stared out behind the raft. By now, a fairly sizable wake made us able to distinguish forward from backward. The man had a cigarette whose fumes I could not smell, but whose light I could sense. On the background of a thousand starry, yellow dots, red is easy to pick out.

“I remember very little from the encounter. I remember nothing but what I saw and what I heard. I remember my ears felt compressed, like I had just stepped off a plane. I remember everything sounded distant and echoed. I remember all that I saw were the thousands of stars and his red star, and the thousands of echoes they made across the sea. And I remember what he said.

“When you look off and see where the starry sky cedes itself to the surface of the sea, does your wake deform and warp their echoes, as it does for me?”

“I looked off at the horizon, that horizontal line of reflection, and I saw that the stars did shine equally brightly on each side, like one would imagine in space, but as he had implied in his question, I did notice my wake, and how it distorted the sky’s reflection. The ripples caused by

my movement caused distortions in the echo. He spoke no more than these words and I would have guessed he would have gone had I not seen the red star.

“Peyton jerked awake. Where was he? Where did his beige truck go? Where did his composition notebook go? Had he been dreaming? He was unsure.

“He was cold. He missed his wife. Maybe he missed talking with the candy bar girl.

“On the horizon, the sun was beginning to rise, and it slowly dawned upon him that he was on his raft. Perhaps he'd gone to the dock and cast off and forgotten to bring along his notebook.

“He'd been lost in thought when he began writing, and now he was lost on the sea, or perhaps he'd lost his mind. He wasn't sure what to do. He was alone.”

The notebook made a soft piff as the cover closed.

“What do you think of it, chief?”

“Hard to say. Nut job writes himself into a story, then does this. I've never seen anything like it.”

The snow on the ground had turned to a gray slush and smelt of car exhaust; there were marked tire tracks in the neighborhood street and ice had formed where melting runoff had become trapped along the gutter. It was dark as the two men got out of their car. The night air echoed with doors shut behind them. A dog barked off in the background.

“Any relatives or friends?”

“No. Fact, we wouldn't've heard about it, except for someone jogging through the neighborhood tonight.”

“So this obviously wasn't an autobiography.”

“Well, there's *some* truth to it. He *did* just retire from the coal mines.”

“Are we in touch with the guys up there? Maybe they could give us some insight into this thing.”

“We left 'em a message, but no one was in. It's Christmas, y'know.”

“Yeah.”

The two men made light tracks in the unshoveled walkway leading to the porch. On the house were the numbers 867, large and gold. Chief had the black composition notebook held fast under his arm. The two men talked genially of their holidays.

“Heard you and yours are expecting soon.”

“Yep. Number three. They're saying it'll be a girl. Maybe the boys'll look out for her.”

“Yeah, or maybe they'll stick gum in her hair and call her names. I know that's what I did.”

“You would, chief. You would.”

The breath rose from their mouths as they spoke. A faint odor came upon them as they approached the door. The men ascended the old wooden stairs, walking unflinchingly over the ice and creaking. They pulled open the door as the smell intensified.

In the corner of the room was a single spent candle on a small, wooden desk. An orange medicine bottle was left ajar, its white cap nowhere to be found. Maybe it had rolled onto the floor. Pills were scattered across the table except for a small rectangular area where the notebook had clearly been extracted earlier. Chief returned it to its rightful place among the pills.

“No struggle. The pen's still in his hand.”

“Did it himself, then?”

“Open and shut case.”

“So why'd he do it? Who was he writing to?”

“I don't know.”

Chief pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his coat pocket, hit it against his left palm a few times and extracted a single stick from the small box. He looked at it for a moment before he put it to his lips and lit it with a simple, red Bic butane lighter.

“I just don't know.”

He made his way out the door and descended the stairs with a slight skip. Smoke rose up to the stars as he looked up at them, peaking through the clouds. The moon was nowhere in sight.

“Let's go, Rookie. My wife's got turkey in the oven. Don't wanna keep her waiting.”

Through the open door, Rookie was pensive and bewildered, but quickly shrugged it off. He hopped over Peyton's lifeless body and, out of habit, whispered *Merry Christmas* as he closed it behind him. A new snow began to flutter down from the clouds above. It would be a white Christmas, this year.