

The Book of Catches

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One

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At the last minute, Sonny Sikes decided to dump the gift in the bathroom off the hospital lobby. When his sister Nora had given him the brass Certified Crazy Person key chain for his sixteenth birthday, he thought it was corny. For four years, he used it only out of a sense of obligation and carried it hidden, like a concealed weapon, during visits to the Fillmore Hospital. Sonny had learned not to take any chances.

Once, while visiting Uncle Percy there, Sonny noticed a copy of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* on his nightstand book dog-eared on "The Frog Prince." He couldn't help saying something. "Starting a second childhood at 52?"

Percy grabbed the book out of Sonny's hand. "What? Only children and crazy people read fairy tales? Is that what you mean?"

"I was just kidding."

"There's a lot of important stuff in here."

"It was just a joke."

His uncle pointed to the door. "Time for you to go. Now. Go."

Sonny quickly checked the hallway leading to his uncle's ward, and then slipped off to a bathroom stall to remove the brass fob. The piece of metal was too heavy to flush, so he threw it in the trash. The brass seemed to glow at the bottom of the wastebasket, and as Sonny reached in to cover it with some wads of paper towel, the door opened.

"Find anything good?"

Sonny's hand shot out of the trash. "Hey, Uncle Percy! How's it going?"

"Don't be embarrassed. Nothing wrong with a little garbage picking," Percy said and joined his nephew at the basket.

"It's empty: I just checked." Sonny turned on a faucet to wash his hands. "Nice outfit."

For reasons beyond Sonny, Nora had made sure Percy was the Fillmore's best-dressed patient. In a stylish mix of L.L. Bean and Hugo Boss, he looked like a bank executive relaxing on a Sunday afternoon. Today he wore blue polyester pants and a paper-thin yellow short-sleeved dress shirt missing the two bottom buttons. With his dark hair parted against the grain, he looked like a retired rodeo clown.

"Traveling clothes," he explained. "Hey, look!" Percy fished the key chain out of the trash and read it out loud. He snickered and handed it to his nephew. "Doesn't apply to me. You keep it."

A series of bright hallways led to Percy's ward, a dorm-style series of two-room suites with connecting bathrooms. Sonny hated the walk to his uncle's room at the far end of the hall. He hated the other patients and how they peeked expectantly out of their rooms. Today he had made sure to arrive during exercise time when the patients pattered around the back lawn, feeding birds and pelting squirrels with acorns.

"I can still make it to the archivist's house if we hurry," Sonny said.

Percy slapped his nephew on the arm and shushed him with a finger to the lips.

"Ow. What?"

"Not here."

The head nurse, Ms. Kingbot, buzzed the door release, letting them into the ward. Sonny liked her. She looked like Santa's wife, pink cheeks and gray curls, but had the acidic charm of a

greasy-spoon waitress. Percy flashed her the evil eye and grumbled something under his breath as he passed her desk and headed to his room. In a perfect world, Sonny pictured Kingbot and his uncle squabbling about the trustworthiness of Dan Rather over TV dinners and lemonade.

Kingbot smiled at Sonny. "I think we need to up his voltage."

"I thought it was the amps."

She handed him a clipboard with release forms. "At the X, and he's out of my hair."

"Till Wednesday night," Sonny reminded her, and then nervously bent to sign the sheets. He felt Kingbot's stare warm the top of his head and convinced himself that she had read the lies in the pores of his scalp.

"When's your cousin's funeral?"

He let parts of the itinerary come out in chunks, as if half-remembered and tentative, not an invented statement: "Um, her wake is, uh, Monday afternoon. We fly into Portland that morning and out the next day."

"Hmm." Kingbot said absently and separated the original from the four carbon copies.

Percy ambled up to the nurse's desk with an abused brown suitcase.

"Am I checked out?" he muttered, adding, "I feel like a library book."

"How long you been saving that one?" Kingbot asked.

"Since I got here," he answered and squeezed past Sonny to the exit.

"Write when you find work," she called out after buzzing him through.

Percy half-waved without looking back, and Sonny quickly followed. A breeze lifted the front of Percy's shirt as they stepped into the parking lot. He tucked the two flapping ends into the front his pants.

Sonny glanced up at the hospital. "Got everything?"

"Yup."

Percy twisted in his seat to watch the hospital disappear behind a group of trees as they drove away.

"How does it feel?" Sonny asked.

"You ever quit a job? Just walk away with no notice?"

Sonny had never worked a proper job. "I know what you mean."

"It feels like I just quit a dozen jobs," Percy said, "but I guess this is more like being AWOL... Anyway, now what about the archivist's house?" he asked.

"I can still get in there before he gets home from work—if we hurry."

Percy opened the glove compartment and found a Zippo lighter. He flicked it to life over and over, each time killing the flame by closing the lid with his thumb. "Tomorrow."

"You need to stop, let me know," Sonny said and patted him on the leg.

"Don't worry about the seat. I'm diapered."

They merged onto the state highway leading north from Bloomington. Percy continued to play with the Zippo. He let the flame burn until the smell of lighter fluid filled the car. He blew it out and took a deep sniff.

"So, how's the record business?" Percy asked.

"It's business."

Percy picked up a coffee can full of cassettes. "Is *August Spies* on any of these? Play me something."

Sonny opened his window a few inches. Percy clearly loved the idea that his nephew ran a record label called Sinister Records, but he couldn't understand why the bands were never on the radio. He had memorized group names and terrorized the local disk jockeys until the hospital

revoked his phone privileges: “You don’t have any 54–40 or Fight!? What kind of outfit you running there?”

Sonny put a taped copy of Sinister’s latest batch of seven-inch singles in the car’s cassette player and rewound to something he thought Percy might like. A sped-up, raucous version of “Mack the Knife” filled the car.

“There something wrong with the tape?” Percy asked when the song ended.

“No.”

“Sounds like they’re underwater or something.”

“It was recorded at a party.”

“They might have a hit if they got a producer.”

“Maybe.”

Percy’s frown deepened, and he held the Zippo against the air vent to cool it off. Sonny turned off the stereo when the second song finished.

“Is it all like that?” Percy asked.

“Like what?” Sonny knew what Percy meant, but wanted to hear him explain it.

“You know...fuzzy.”

“Some of it.”

“Guess if you’re making money.”

“I’m not doing it for the money.”

“It must be fun then.”

Sonny wasn’t sure it was fun. The novelty of running Sinister Records had worn off long ago, revealing a shipping and receiving job. Requests for records with enclosed checks or money orders arrived at a post office box. A company in Oklahoma pressed master tapes from bands into vinyl ranging from traditional black to colorful rainbow spews. Sonny printed the sleeve art, mostly post-punk collages or variations on corporate logos, at the Kinko’s in South Bend and spent hours stuffing them with records. Driving into Chicago and Indianapolis to see bands was still exciting, but lately everything began to sound the same, a throbbing din turning in on itself without a dominant characteristic or instrument willing to assume command.

Percy played with the vanity mirror, trying to find the exact point the light clicked on and off. These moments spooked Sonny because he shared the same squirrely curiosity with inane things. He thought about chromosome damage, genetic material, and heredity.

Sonny and Percy pushed through West Central Indiana, a flat belly of the nation’s breadbasket that never looked more desolate than in the early spring before the planting. The few trees that lined I-421 had sprouted leaves, adding flecks of green to the sea of brown. Sonny thought a mushroom cloud squatting on the horizon would complete the scene. They passed a weatherworn John Birch Society “USA Out of the UN” billboard. It marked the beginning of the only fun part of the drive for Sonny—John Birch sign to grain elevator—The Dead Zone.

He pushed the scan button on the car stereo, and the digital display logged through the possible FM stations. It started at 88.1, ran past 107.9, and looped back to the beginning without catching on a frequency. Whenever he crossed the few miles of silence until 103.7 out of Monon kicked in, Sonny liked to make the sensation linger, lift his foot off the gas, and go forward on the car’s inertia.

But not this time. Sonny felt the full weight of the place, its silence no longer an anomaly, but a trap or punishment. He firmly pushed the gas pedal to the floor. The grain elevator, dwarfed by the sky, stood several field-lengths ahead, and Sonny shifted his glance between it and the radio.

Percy braced himself with the armrest and checked the road behind them. “Cop?”
“Just trying to make some time,” Sonny said tersely, then pointed to the digital display.
“Look, it’s a radio-free zone.”

Percy watched the green numbers roll dimly by and cocked his head to look up at the sky, as if expecting a giant shield to be hovering above them. They sped past the grain elevator, then by an upended brown Christmas tree speckled with tinsel. The number 103.7 scrolled up on the radio like a missing combination and released a news brief about the continued deliberation of the jury in the Rodney King trial, then moved on to Credence Clearwater Revival. As John Fogerty sang about people with silver spoons and star-spangled eyes, Percy rocked back and forth with the music and fumbled for the volume knob.

The grain elevator and the zone beyond it slowly receded, and Sonny wiped his hands on his pants. He found himself matching Percy as he sang *it ain’t me, it ain’t me*.

Nora Sikes studied the two poplar trees in the center of the circular driveway for storm damage. The top of the older tree had snapped during last night’s gale, and the broken limbs locked with the rest of the tree like hairbrush bristles jammed together. Buds brightened the gray branches like small green flames. If it had happened a week from now, she might never have seen it. The line of spring moved at a rate of seven miles a day, already passing through her corner of northwest Indiana, maybe on the leading edge of last night’s storm. Another couple of hours to spare and she could finish the job with the ladder and the yet-to-be-used hacksaw, tug the snag loose with a rope, drag the entire mess to the fire pit behind the house, and spare her Uncle Percy the trouble of pointing it out when he arrived in a few short hours.

Percy’s notes covered the refrigerator—requests and assignments followed to the letter without a thank-you or good job. Not a word about the numbing hours of transcribing interview tapes while her schoolwork sat neglected, risking trouble with the law, or finding sources for pounds of organically grown grapes and apples, whole coffee beans—green and roasts, buying a cast-iron fruit juicer and water distiller, and some spooky-sounding potion mail-ordered from Germany called *Carnivora*. He’d probably see the crippled tree and have something to say about it.

Nora wasn’t sure what to do about feeding Percy. Dinner was his last meal before he was to start an anti-cancer diet of some type. Nora wondered if Percy expected her and Sonny to partake in his new diet regimen. She wasn’t a fan of pesticides, but she didn’t like the shelf-life of the university co-op’s organic apples, which withered as soon as they got to the car. Raw milk scared her. Didn’t pasteurization save lives? Did free-range chickens make for happier fried chicken?

For years Nora wouldn’t cook for anyone but herself. She refused to take up her mother’s apron and play the long-suffering matriarch holding the family together with rib-sticking food. Nora hypothesized that her mom’s drive to cook for a more appreciative audience had led her into catering. Bigger pots, more mouths to feed; she seemed happiest those last months when the demand in Kansas City for her stuffed artichoke hearts left her booked solid and Nora’s dad had to quit his blue collar job to help her out.

Nora’s parents had rented black tuxedos with silver ties and cummerbunds for the night of the Marriott Hotel Grand Opening Party. Nora bought them stiff white chef’s hats that looked like geysers. With TV dinners on TV trays in front of the television, she and her brother watched their parents leave. The silver cummerbunds helped Nora identify their bodies the next morning

in the makeshift tent morgue set up in the hotel parking lot. Vibrations from dancing had weakened the building's structure and caused the balconies lining the main lobby to collapse. The rescue workers organized the corpses two to a parking spot, and she found her parents three spaces apart, twisted and bloodied in clothes that needed to be returned by 5:00 p.m. that afternoon.

Nora gathered her hair back in a ponytail and began to set the kitchen table.

The court made Nora her parents' sole beneficiary, but she refused to bear the burden of money decisions because the law considered her brother Sonny too young and Uncle Percy too crazy. Nora's control was in name only. Each of them had equal say over the millions in lawsuit and insurance policy dollars. Early on, everyone agreed that each person be allowed to spend a large wad of cash on anything they saw fit.

Sonny, only 14 at the time, took \$5,000 and founded Sinister Records. Sonny sounded very much the reedy-voiced 14-year-old, so Nora helped him by making calls for Sinister. She didn't listen to the music, so Sonny made a sheet with quick descriptions of each band and their singles to give to record-store buyers and college radio DJs. The descriptions read like algebra equations:

Das Table - Pillpopping 7" = 2nd LP Dag Nasty + UK Class of 76
Crack Spackle + Blizzard Boy (split 7") = X (-Exene) > The Zero Boys

Nora had a knack for memorizing the names and references. With the web of associations on the list, she could hold extended bull sessions without ever listening to a single song. Talking bands was like flirting in another language. The overtones were the same; only the words differed.

Nora thought the company was a passing phase, a combination of puberty-inspired angst and grief-driven anger, but Sonny proved her wrong. Sinister celebrated its five-year anniversary the previous fall with an all-day blowout called Sinisterstock. Bands played on the back porch to a yard full of underage kids whacked on keg beer and nitrous oxide. Dead whip-its still ricocheted off the blades of the lawnmower.

Percy's choice was obvious. It was the first and last thing he said every time Nora and Sonny had visited him at the state hospital in Denver, his home of many years: "Get me the fuck out of here!"

"I mean right now, tonight," he hissed across the dayroom table when they agreed on the money splurge. "Bribe money and a car outside—that's all I need. It's 695 miles to Mexico. I'll drive the first shift."

Instead of springing him, Nora researched private psychiatric hospitals and arranged Percy's transfer from Denver to the Fillmore Institute in Bloomington, Indiana. Door to door, the asylum was a three-hour drive from Nunny Catch, the site of Nora's big purchase—the house her mother and uncle had grown up in.

It was originally the manor house of a local farm family. Interstate construction in the early 1950s had chopped it away from the farmland like a four-lane guillotine. The farmer found it easier to move than to drive his equipment three miles to the nearest overpass. Before her parents' funeral in Nunny Catch, Nora knew the house only through yellowed photographs. She wanted to see it to give context to her mother's stories, tether them to a fixed place, and see what existed beyond the borders of the Kodak paper.

Nora and Sonny visited the immense three-story house at dusk on the day of the burial. They stared through the tree branches at the faded sunburst design on the front-door gable, speculated on the view from the captain's walk, counted the cars up on blocks in the yard, and left. As they drove away, Nora was unable to imagine returning to Kansas City and a boxy fifth-floor apartment seven blocks away from the nearest stand of trees. She revisited the house late that night. From the cornfield across the street, she studied the windows and door, trying to picture the rooms and place birthday parties, prom night poses, and Christmas mornings. Before she and Sonny left town the next morning, Nora put a note in the mailbox with her name, phone number, and an offer to buy the house for \$125,000. By the time she and Sonny drove back to Kansas City, three messages were awaiting them on the answering machine.

Nora wondered if Percy would want to sit facing the picture window overlooking the backyard or not and felt proprietary. Five years of living there, and she still hit the wrong light switch when going into the basement. And she sometimes struggled to recognize her room during the opening seconds of the day.

Later, when taking classes at Northern Indiana University in historic preservation, Nora learned the building was a clash of different styles: too misshapen and particular to be of historical interest unless someone were doing a retrospective on architectural crossbreeding. She had read books on remodeling and learned the anatomy of old houses and words like bargeboard, chamfer, entasis. The time she spent scraping off the smoke-yellowed wallpaper and stripping paint from walnut molding felt cheap compared to the sheer emotional heft of Percy's childhood. Still, this didn't stop Nora from overcompensating.

Nora decided on a meal for everyone—grilled skinless chicken and white asparagus, mashed potatoes with their skins, and a yogurt-fruit mixture for dessert. She set the frozen chicken to defrost in the microwave and scrubbed clean nine red potatoes. The steady hum of highway traffic drifted through the window as she gathered the rotting apples in a dishcloth and carried them up to the captain's walk. The view wasn't nearly as impressive as she had thought it would be that first day. From the ground, it looked like a guard's turret lording over the county, but there wasn't much to see: a sprawling cornfield, a distant radio relay tower above the tangle of treetops that ringed the yard, a glimpse of interstate peeking out through a small gap in the trees. The broken poplar branch looked like a half-bent corn tassel.

Nora stabbed each apple on different black iron spikes of the walk's rail, making a line. One by one, she plunked them off, throwing them as hard as she could toward the patch of interstate spot. She hoped for the impossible: she hoped the apples would bounce into the tailpipes of cars and trucks, cause them to stall, and stop the noise she could hear, even in her sleep.

The apples landed just beyond the tree line, yards and yards short of her goal.

I know his name. Don Hickey walked the aisles of Osco Drug, glowing inside with secret knowledge. I know his name. I know his address. I know his phone number. He allowed this knowledge to tumble in his mind and marveled at how ordinary the words sounded. Nothing but letters and numbers—he had used them all on a daily basis. How much time, money, and heartache had it cost to find the correct order? He paused in the stationery aisle, pulled a scrap of paper from his gray vest, and pressed it to his chest. He chanted the information under his breath: “Steven Allen Turks, 52170 Maple Road, Nunny Catch, Indiana, 555-3283.” He checked the paper and smiled. It matched.

Steven Allen Turks. Like an assassin...James Earl Ray...Lee Harvey Oswald...Mark David Chapman...

Hickey felt the power of the secret well up again as he watched a father and son pick through the hula poppers. They wanted the information, just as anyone who had touched a fishing rod in the past two decades wanted it. Hickey realized he could give them the name and it would mean nothing. Question and answer could pass through the same synapses and never connect, but if they did meet up, the little towhead's blue eyes would bug out and the father would drop his Peterbilt hat. A swell of civic pride would hit them. Dave the Fisherman lived in their town.

Hickey felt partially responsible for creating what he called "The Cult of Dave." In the mid-1970s, a young man going only by the name of Dave appeared on the fishing tournament circuit, won a series of stunning victories, and then disappeared. Hickey wrote a tongue-in-cheek article for the Bass Times, comparing the missing fisherman to chess savant Bobby Fischer. The Associated Press picked up and syndicated the piece throughout the country, and the Dave stories began. Anglers in ice fishing shacks and bait shops from Utah to the Ukraine had tales of Dave to tell. In rented summer cabins and family fishing shacks, parents lulled their children to sleep with the story of Cruel Sam, his fabled plastic purple worm that had caught the only fish in a 100-acre man-made lake in ten minutes. He piloted a private jet to fishing spots all over the world in his ongoing quest to catch one of every kind of fish on the planet. Of the Dave stories, only this one had a shred of truth. Since the late 1970s, somebody reputed to be Dave did seem to be targeting rare and endangered fish. The calling cards periodically appeared throughout the world—trashed hotel rooms littered with fish entrails and the genus name of his conquests painted on the walls with the fervor of revolutionary slogans: *Hucho hucho. Percina tanas. Cottus gobio.*

Though intrigued by the explosion of mythology around Dave, Hickey was after the real thing, the kid who had walked away from Lake Pontchartrain with \$12,000 and was never seen again. The last-known photo of Dave, taken shortly after his final victory, seemed to anticipate his disappearance. It showed him—lanky, dishrag blonde hair, angular face, bent nose—with a string of catfish in front of a large crowd of anglers, his eyes frozen in a trapped animal's stare.

Hickey wondered if the man in front of him knew Steve. *Steve. Mind if I call you Steve?* It seemed hard not to know everyone in a town like Nunny Catch. He moved to the camera section and picked out three rolls of 35mm 200 speed Kodak Ultra Gold that he didn't need. His vest already bulged with black canisters of film and his bag had even more. He bought film when he was nervous and pens when he couldn't write. Hickey paused in front of a full-length mirror. He knew he had let himself go a bit, but hadn't realized how far until now. The bulk he had been carrying since high school had blossomed into full-blown obesity. He sucked in his stomach and checked his profile. Forty-two going on sixty-two, he thought. A spinner on his fishing hat caught the glare of the overhead lights and twinkled in the mirror.

The father and son fishermen stood in front of him in the checkout lane. Hickey slid in close to soak them in. He thought his daughter Patricia might be the same age as the boy, but he wasn't sure. When the father patted down a cowlick on the back of his son's head, Hickey felt like crying.

Hickey had given his wife, Mary, everything she wanted in the divorce settlement and agreed to pay for corrective surgery on Patricia's cleft palate, and the financial strain forced him to freelance. He lived in a motel in Bakersfield with a hot plate, coffeemaker, and Smith-Corona typewriter; wrote copy for bass boat and trolling motor catalogues during the day; and reviewed

fishing equipment and videos at night. Still, he had slipped behind in child support and alimony payments. When Hickey found himself in the ridiculous position of being threatened by thugs from his daughter's oral surgeon, he moved to Florida without leaving a forwarding address.

Steven Allen Turks. The thought of the name kicked him out of his trance and sent him through the checkout lane. The film set him back \$12, but Hickey didn't worry about the cost. For once in his life, money was not a problem. His new job as a full-time angling correspondent for the tabloid news show *America Today* was picking up the tab. The \$800 a week plus an expense account pulled Hickey out of debt and back on Dave's trail, but there were other priorities.

Hickey mailed a postcard to his old house trailer, then a letter. Both came back like the song, *Return to Sender*. He called his old neighbor Vernon. Mary and Patricia were gone a year, maybe a year and a half. Mary had a boyfriend, maybe a new husband. Northern California, maybe Oregon. Vague details from people who didn't want to be found. Vernon asked if he could have the hibachi they had left by the picnic tables.

His big lead on Dave came at a flea market in Santa Maria. Among the bootleg videotapes, remaindered novels, and paste jewelry, Hickey came across something odd: boxes of imitation "Cruel Sam" purple worms. Tons of fly-by-night equipment companies had cashed in on Dave's fame, but this was different. These were worms made by Headon, the world's oldest and most venerable lure manufacturer.

Companies had been trying to woo Dave into sponsorship for years, none more aggressively than Headon. In a move Hickey referred to in an article as "marketing as saturation bombing," Headon sent the Dave Fan Club 10,000 free "Cruel Sam" worms to distribute to its members. The club condemned Headon, who, in turn, fired their director of marketing and destroyed the bogus worms, yet here they were lined up by the row on a card table. Somebody had lied.

Hickey went at the paper trail from both directions. The vendor selling the worms bought his merchandise from a supplier working out of a post office box in Rock Island, Illinois. The address of Dave's fan club was another post office box in Davenport, Iowa, a mere drive across the river. None of the names from the fan club newsletter masthead matched the supplier's board of directors, or appeared in either city's phone books. He hit pay dirt with a few calls to a fishing buddy at the U.S. Postal Service. The same person had opened both post office boxes: Steven Allen Turks of Nunny Catch, Indiana. Another string pull got him an Indiana DMV photo. Hickey almost jumped out of his skin when the fax came through. The hair was shorter and thicker, the face lined with an extra layer of fat, but the nose, septum deviated to the left, was the same. That was 36 hours ago, and since then, Hickey hadn't slept.

Hickey walked across the parking lot to his brown, mid-sized rental car with a brand name he couldn't remember. He loosened his vest, took his Canon out of his camera bag, and sat with his legs outside the car. The metal felt warm and heavy as he switched to a telephoto lens. He wasn't sure how to approach Dave, so he decided to watch him for a few days to wait for a good moment. Hickey fired off three quick shots of the glowing Osco Drug sign after loading the film—a ritual. (He took three pictures at the start of every roll of film.) A shoebox stuffed with these photos sat in a closet at his Los Angeles apartment. Someday he wanted to publish them as an expensive coffee table book. He had already picked out the name: *The First Three*.

Stan Towlesi sat on the floor of the TV room and leaned against the white sectional couch so he could use the coffee table as a desk. A viciously marked-up draft of his master's thesis lay strewn in front of him partially covered by grease-soaked paper plates, frozen burrito wrappers, a calculator, and dog-eared *Gideon's Bible*. He pressed Rewind on the VCR remote. While he waited for *Friday the 13th: Part V* to eject, Stan thought about the saying "Six Ways from Sunday". He liked the sing-songy way the A's and S's played off one another. The phrase was part of the advice his thesis Committee Head, Dr. Minott, had given him during their last meeting. The tentative title of Stan's dissertation was *Thank God It's Friday: Jason Voorhees as an Everyman Figure*. He wanted to go beyond the stale academic dreck written about the series—the Lacanian claptrap about weapons as phallic symbols, the hockey mask representing alienation, Jason's indestructibility as a mutated example of the resiliency of the American worker—and into the deeper subtext. He was trying to work out the numerological parallels between the number of victims in each movie and certain chapters and verses in the Old and New Testaments, but kept getting bogged down.

One afternoon while watching *Who's the Boss?* he noticed a trend in American situation comedies of portraying Italian-American males as freeloaders. Working out a lineage running from The Fonz on *Happy Days* through Schneider on *One Day at a Time* straight up to Charles on *Charles in Charge*, Stan jotted down a quick research proposal he hoped to use instead of the Jason topic.

The two men met in Dr. Minott's cluttered office. Stacks of lunch pails, unopened boxes of action figures, and board games reached the ceiling and teetered dangerously close to collapsing. The gray-haired professor of Popular Culture poured two glasses of pre-formula change Coke from his private stock and listened to Stan's impassioned pitch for his new thesis, which had the working title: *A WOP in the House: The Protestant Work Ethic and Italians in American Sitcoms*.

Dr. Minott was anything but receptive. "You know what this means, don't you?" he asked, studying the *How to Stuff a Wild Bikini* movie poster on the back of his door as if it hadn't been there for the past decade.

"I know," Stan nodded. "It's very late in the game to switch horses and all, but I'm really on top of this subject. It'll practically write itself."

"Thirteen hours of death and violence."

"Excuse me?"

"Because of you I sat through eight movies' worth of stabbings, beatings, and strangulations," he said, "just to be able to help with your thesis. You know how many killings that is?"

"Around 77, if you count..."

"I'm an old man," Minott explained. "Children can handle watching thousands of murders, but not me. You have to make every killing matter at my age. Now you're telling me I sat through all that mayhem for nothing." He shook his head. "Unacceptable."

As Stan sulked out of the room, Minott gave him some advice: "Take what you have so far and rip it up six ways from Sunday," he advised in a father-like tone. "Get a fresh perspective. Those sitcoms aren't going anywhere. Remember, that's the wonderful thing these days. Nothing ever goes off the air."

Stan stopped the tape and watched Jason stick a road flare in the mouth of a young hoodlum, dutifully adding to the body count. No matter how he played with the totals, the phone number of the girl who had stopped over yesterday kept appearing. She had come to the house to answer an

ad that Stan had put in the newspaper for his landlord and housemate, Steve. In exchange for very cheap rent, Stan took care of the house and ran errands while Steve was out of town. Before his last business trip, Steve had asked Stan to get rid of a stove in the basement. He put an ad in the *Nunny Catch Herald* with the address, but not the phone number, as per Steve's orders:

FOR SALE - Stove
Good Condition, \$100
205 Radcliffe Circle
10AM-6PM only

Two weeks went by without a single bite until yesterday. Stan was watching *Part I* when the doorbell rang. He paused the tape, went to the door, opened it, and fell in love. A girl stood in the doorway dressed in a white sweat suit with her long red hair pulled back in a tight bow.

"Hi! I saw your ad in the paper..."

Stan fumbled for a word, any word, but managed only to grunt and wave her inside. He caught himself studying the curves of the sweat suit as she breezed into the foyer.

She smiled seductively at him. "So, where's the..."

"Stove! Yeah, um, downstairs." He led her through the house and into the basement. The stove, clean except for a layer of dust, sat in the corner next to a dead-bolted door. Stan started his sales pitch, pointing out its different features.

The girl laughed and put her hand on Stan's arm: "I'm sorry. I made a mistake."

"What?"

"I was looking for something else."

She handed a piece of newspaper to Stan. It read:

FOR SALE - Stove
Good Condition, \$100
205 Radcliffe Circle
10AM-6PM only

Stan gave it back to her. "I guess that's why you're the first person to stop by," he laughed. "I never thought about checking the paper to see if it was right or not. Weird."

The girl smiled again, the toothy oblong smile of someone who has recently had braces removed. "It is weird, isn't it?" she said.

"Yeah, weird," Stan added for lack of anything else to say.

An uncomfortable pause settled over them.

"Oh well, sorry to have bothered you," the girl said and started up the stairs.

Stan followed her. "No problem. What was your name?"

"Nora Sikes."

"I'm Stan," he offered awkwardly.

They stood by the front door. Nora grabbed Stan's hand and shook it. "Really nice meeting you, Stan." She stepped one foot out the door, and Stan felt his window of opportunity sliding shut.

"Uh, Nora, wait. Can I ask you something?"

Nora tilted her head around and looked at him. "Ask away."

"You came here looking for a stove. What the heck is that?"

She leaned against the doorjamb. “A type of frog from Brazil. I didn’t really think you had one, but I had to check,” she explained, shrugging. “Long story.”

Stan’s heart switched gears, and he felt a dull ache in his arms. “Maybe you could tell me about it sometime maybe,” he stammered and arched his shoulders slightly.

The girl stared at him for a long moment. “Sure.”

They exchanged numbers, and Stan watched her walk to her white Land Rover and drive away. Since then, it was impossible to revamp his thesis beyond ripping it six ways from Sunday and leaving it in frayed chunks around the living room. Stan knew it was hopeless when he put Nora’s seven digits in the calculator’s memory just in case he lost his address book, the phone list next to the telephone, the original scrap of paper he had scribbled it on, and his mind.

Steve’s basset hound, Caligula, sloped into the room and deposited himself at his feet. Stan rubbed the dog’s belly with his left foot. He couldn’t remember for certain how the phrase went: Six Ways from Sunday or to Sunday. Was it *intensive purposes* or *intents and purposes*? Say your peace or piece? He felt the same feeling of fraudulency that hit whenever he thought about graduate school. The sensation passed, as it always did, and Stan decided to call Nora later that day. On the screen, Jason fell out of a barn loft onto a sheet of metal spikes.

Percy Foster studied the tree line along I-94 for a glimpse of the captain’s walk. When he was ten, he tied a flag of red bandannas to the wrought-iron rail, and during drives home, trying to be the first person to spot them became a family contest, with the winner choosing the television shows for the night. To give himself an advantage, Percy sneaked out to the highway and stuck a wooden paint stirrer in the stubble grass median to signal where the bandannas peeked through the trees.

The bandannas were gone in Nora’s pictures of the house. She had kept him abreast with the renovations as if he were a client—paint samples, color schemes, and photographs from different angles tracing her progress. Nora had a sharp eye for the work, but Percy found it difficult to share her enthusiasm. He carried the house with him; it never changed.

However, one change impressed Percy as they pulled up to the house. He toed the black asphalt as if he were testing water temperature before stepping out of the car.

“You know how long your grandmother begged for a new driveway? Years.” Percy said, surveying the paved half-circle. Pointing at the entrances, he added, “Both sides always had these massive puddles that never dried up. Dad always bitched about the cost and how much it’d jack up the property tax. How much did this cost?”

“I don’t know. It was paved when we moved in,” Sonny said, kicking a stone into the grass.

Percy gave Nora a long hug in the foyer and let his hands run along the walls. He trusted his body memory, closing his eyes and finding his way through touch alone. Room to room, his fingers searched for the familiar grooves in the woodwork, the deep arcing gouge in the doorway between the family room and hallway from when his father had dropped a filing cabinet, the four round dimples in the banister he had made with a ball-peen hammer one afternoon for no reason whatsoever. Lines on the molding of the bathroom door with initials and dates marked his growth, and that of his sister Faith, through the years. Percy pressed his back against the wood and placed a finger to where his head met the doorway. He had shrunk three inches, somehow.

Percy tested the double bed in his old room. When he heard the rubber sheets crinkle under the comforter, he realized his bedwetting career had come full circle. Staring down was the

familiar saucer-shaped light fixture surfaced with an impressionistic map of the world and more care given to the face of the West Wind than to the shape of the continents. A plaster field of rough lines and grooves covered the ceiling. Over the years, words written in the ceiling's moonscape of squibs had revealed themselves to Percy. Even now, ALARM, FLOWER, FELON, and STRIKE stood out in the plaster's ridges and valleys as if they were spelled in neon.

Nora and Sonny set out grilled chicken, white asparagus, and mashed potatoes. Percy lingered on the threshold and watched them, Nora filling a carafe with purified water and Sonny stabbing a spoon into the potatoes. Just as Percy took a step back, Nora spotted him. "Food's on," she said, smiling and waving him in.

Percy pretended to study the backyard and let Sonny and Nora sit first. Between mouthfuls of food, Nora and Sonny related the day's events peppered with not-so-gentle ribbing and in-jokes about everything from her cooking ability to his dropping out of high school. Percy said nothing and laughed in all of the right places. The jesting between them felt natural but heightened to Percy, as if he served as a conduit. He had seen this before. It was his initiation, and he jumped in at the first chance.

"This is a good last meal," Percy said. "I'll be thinking about this chicken when living on grapes and water." He chuckled: "Last time I did that, at least it was wine."

Nora laughed. "By the way, what the heck is Carnivora?"

"It came then," Percy said, surprised. "Well, that changes the diet a bit."

"Sounds like it's made of ground-up carnies," Sonny said.

"Close. Extract of Venus' Flytrap plants." Nora and Sonny grimaced. "I know," he said, "but you dilute it with water, so it can't be so bad."

"Well, just don't start eating flies," Sonny said.

"So you were able to get the coffee, the grinds, distiller, and all that? Was it hard to find?"

"It's been interesting," Nora admitted. "The equipment was easy, but Nunny Catch isn't exactly a bastion of food variety. The couple who runs the food co-op by the university pointed me toward some hippie farmers over by Valparaiso. Their grapes are good, but the apples suck."

"Well, thanks for doing the legwork and all of this. You're too good to me," Percy said, then added haltingly, "*Usted es demasiado bueno.*"

"*Excelente!*" Sonny said, clapping. "*Muy bueno, Señor Percy.*"

"Shut up, Sonny," Nora said. "How is the studying going?"

"Poorly," Percy said. He took a long drink of water. "I'm still translating from English in my head. I'm not thinking in Spanish yet."

"Maybe we need to eat more in Spanish," Sonny suggested. "Free-range burritos."

The banter went on throughout the meal, and Percy slowly understood he had misread the undercurrent of the conversation. This was a dance that skirted their questions and misgivings. Out of fear of being overheard, even on the stone paths of the hospital grounds, they had communicated by passing small notes and never uttered a word about a possible cure for his prostate cancer. Sonny obviously loved the new covert aspect of the hospital visits. With a deadly seriousness, he slid carefully folded responses to Percy's inquiries into his palm as they shook hands. However, Nora simply went through the motions, bored as a temp worker in a sleepy office.

Sonny excused himself, and Percy carried the silverware, plates, and glasses to the dishwasher. "Old busboy trick," he told Nora.

Nora pulled a slip of newspaper clipping from under a bright pink letter “O” refrigerator magnet. “Did I show you this?”

It was a classified ad with the word STOVE misprinted to read STUVE. Percy laughed, “Well, this should save us some time.”

Nora laughed. “You should be proud of me: I went there just in case. You know, five percent chance and all,” she said, adding a reference to Percy’s favorite maxim.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” Percy asked.

“What, that there’s a five percent chance of anything? I’m not sure. When you think about it, though, it means there’s a 95 percent chance of nothing,” she pointed out.

Percy chuckled. “And the water glass is half empty, right?”

“No,” she smiled. “With that, the real problem is: Who the fuck drank my water?”

Percy dutifully laughed, but knew where it came from. “Then why’d you check out that ad?” he asked.

Nora paused with a hand on the refrigerator door handle. “I guess because five percent is better than nothing. Nothing gets pretty boring.”

“Sure as hell does,” Percy agreed.

A discomforting silence followed, and Nora avoided eye contact as they finished cleaning up the kitchen.

After wiping the counter, Percy tossed a dishrag into the sink. “You’re a lot like your mother,” he said quietly.

“That’s a little easy, don’t you think?”

“Always a guessing game with you two,” he explained, smiling.

Nora crossed her arms and leaned against the counter. A psychiatrist Percy once had would have called it negative body language.

“And why do you think that is?” she asked.

Percy gazed thoughtfully out the window, then turned back toward his niece. “I don’t know, really. Your father could never figure it out—that’s for sure.” He chuckled and cocked his mouth to one side. “You know, they turned it into a game of Hot and Cold: ‘Honey, are you mad because I forgot to pick up milk?’ ‘Lukewarm.’ ‘Is it your birthday?’ ‘Chilly.’ He got to be pretty good at it.”

“Mom told me once that most men need to be house-trained.” She lifted herself onto the counter. “That’s what the game was about: training.”

Percy didn’t like the conversation’s turn. “You going to be ready to go tomorrow if need be?”

“I’m on top of it.” Nora responded, avoiding his eyes. “I’ve got some things to finish up. All of your equipment is in the pantry.” As she was leaving, she slipped off the counter and cupped his shoulder with her hand.

Percy cut the plastic tape sealing the new items with a butter knife. The water-distilling system, coffee and grain grinders, and food processor looked good, but he realized that the automatic coffeemaker wouldn’t work. Too much plastic. It needed to be a large enamel or glass-lined cooking pot. Percy knew he hadn’t been clear in his instructions. The two glass gallon-milk bottles from Rouse Brothers Dairy brought back memories. He wondered if, while growing up, he’d carried them into the house from the station wagon, then back to Furman’s Grocery when six bottles filled out the slots in the dairy’s wooden crate. Percy filled a large pot to sanitize the bottles and set up the water distiller. He needed at least three gallons ready for tomorrow morning.

As the water boiled, Percy explored the rest of the house in soft steps. Sonny used the master bedroom as his office. The wall space not dominated by floor-to-ceiling cinder blocks and wooden board shelves was papered with band flyers. On a small bookcase stuffed in a corner, Percy discovered a piece of his past: a hardcover copy of a novel called *The Book of Catches* with a piece of paper taped over the cover which read:

I-Ching – The Book of Catches

Instructions

Close your eyes and place book between legs. (Do NOT drop in toilet!)
Remove book after ten seconds and open to a random page. Read the first line you see. (The VERY FIRST line. Do not cheat!)
Close book and replace on shelf.
Do normal toilet business, and meditate on the meaning of your line.

Suggestions

If a name appears in your line, replace it with your name. Replace any pronouns with I. If two or more names appear, replace them with the names of friends, loved ones, or enemies.

TO BE USED ONCE A DAY!

Nora and Sonny's father, Doug, had invented the *I-Ching –The Book of Catches*. Doug tossed his I-Ching fortune every morning, but he theorized that since the I-Ching's text had been designed for fortune divination, its use subverted the randomness with an underpinning of order. Only a text created for a totally different purpose could obtain true randomness. Among a stack of books Doug found in a library book sale grab bag sat *The Book of Catches*. No one in the house had ever heard of the book or Juna Shaughnessy before, but Doug christened it the new text. I-Ching's sticks and coins didn't mesh with the structure of the new text, so Doug replaced them with the bathroom determinant because, in his words, "The mind is more lucid and open during the transitory state of dumping excess waste."

Percy never had the heart to point out the flaws of Doug's theory, like the fact that people tended to randomly flip to the center section of any book when asked to pick a line and that the older a book, the more likely binding breaks caused it to open to some pages more often than others.

Percy ran his finger down the crescent-shaped spine and, somewhat amazed, realized that he had never read the novel, which seemed to be murder mystery set in 1930s England. At Doug and Faith's house, where *The Book of Catches* had become a vital bathroom item, second only to toilet paper, the idea was almost sacrilegious. He went to his room, lay on the bed, and turned to the first chapter.

At dusk, Sonny gently shook Percy awake. "You have pillow face," he said as Percy sat up and ran a hand through his hair. The thumb of Percy's other hand still held his place in the book, a few pages in. "You wanted to go into town, right?" Sonny asked.

"Shit. I had some bottles on the stove," Percy said, quickly standing.

"Nora's taking care of them."

Percy sleepily followed Sonny to the car. A pasty, metallic film covered his teeth. His throat was bone dry, and he worked his tongue around his mouth and thought of oysters, hoping to muster some saliva. On the drive into Nunny Catch, Percy opened the car window. The night smelled of freshly turned earth, even inside the city limits. Sonny parked under the lights of a large building with Osco Drugs blazing across the front. It looked like a spaceship.

“Welcome to the cultural center of Nunny Catch,” Sonny said.

“Where the hell did this come from?” Percy wondered, trying to remember the roads they had taken.

“Hell.”

Percy used the dark and abandoned Dogs and Suds drive-in across the street to orient himself.

“This used to be a bowling alley here,” Percy decided. “Three games for a buck on Wednesdays.” Being in Nunny Catch again opened a new area of memories, none of them very memorable or special, just small-town adolescent bullshit. “You ever hang eggs?” he asked.

Sonny, heading into the store, glanced back at his uncle and stopped. “What?”

“Hang eggs. What you do is paint an egg black and hang it from an overpass.” He spooled out imaginary string. “You get a friend at the bottom to make sure they’re at windshield level and find a good hiding place. People think they’ve hit the biggest fucking bug in the world.”

“Kids still do that. They call it car sliming,” Sonny said. “Did you want to get something?”

“Diapers. Nora got the wrong kind. I didn’t want to bother her about it. And a big pot and a hot plate.”

“We have one at home,” Sonny said.

“I saw it. Can’t be metal. It has to be enamel or glass-lined.”

A large gray mound of snow in a far corner of the parking lot reminded Percy of *The Blob*. He angled away from Sonny, hopped over the steady stream of bilge water bleeding out and climbed over a winter’s worth of snow, grease, and malt liquor bottles to look at the town. If the skyline measured activity like a cartogram, Nunny Catch was dead. He saw Sonny step into the automatic door’s sensor range and look back. Within seconds, his nephew was dodging cars through the lot toward the oily mound. Percy watched distastefully as the slush sucked at his nephew’s feet as he climbed.

“When I was your age, I was climbing mountains. You can’t even make it up a snow drift.”

Sonny fell halfway up and, soaked and covered with grime, barely managed to claw his way to the top. He stood next to his uncle, who was dry except for the cuffs of his pants.

“Nice view. You should put up a summer home here,” Sonny commented.

The halogen lights gave the lot a yellow cast. On the dark side of the building Percy saw a car’s dome light flicker on and off. A short, portly man in a fishing hat and gray vest stepped into light and aimed a telephoto lens in the direction of the mound.

“That didn’t take them long,” Percy said, pointing to the edge of the building. “Smile for the camera.”

Percy rabbit-eared Sonny as the man lowered his camera, slipped into his car, and disappeared around the back of the store.