

Peacocks

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One

Huddled at their usual table in the corner of the school library, Wall, Sabra and Joey replayed the details of Bryan Bentley's apparent suicide. It happened only yesterday and questions swirled around them like a haunted mist. The three seniors had been friends all through high school and now with graduation only a month away, the mysterious death of their classmate sent a shock wave of wonder through their inquisitive minds.

"You know what I think?" said Wall. "There must be a note somewhere. They just haven't found one yet. Or maybe," his eyes lit up behind his thick lenses as he pushed them back up onto the bridge of his nose. "maybe they found a note but they just don't want to disclose it."

"Not everybody leaves a note," Sabra said. "John Wolverbach didn't leave one."

"At least not one that they could read, you mean. I bet he left it on the seat beside him. The same place they found his—"

"Enough, Wall," Joey said. "You're always so bitter when you talk about John. He was our friend."

"Yes, and I'm sure he was thinking of us when he wrapped his lips around the business end of that elephant-gun. Do you think he thought about what buckshot would taste like before he put his tongue down the barrel?"

Sabra shook her head and made a face. "Not funny. You're not funny. Now stop it."

"Suicide is not a joking matter. I agree with you about that. What is funny though, is why he chose to shoot himself in the mall parking lot while sitting in his parent's car."

"That's simple. His car was in the shop," said Sabra. "and he needed to go for a drive first—to think about it."

"He's right though. Why end up in the mall parking lot? Why not some lonely gravel road overlooking a pond?" Joey said.

"Maybe he needed bullets."

"You're joking again."

"Sorry. Whatever the case, John didn't need a note. Everybody knows he was distraught about his break-up with Ellen Thorne."

Unconsciously, all three surveyed the students at other tables around them. Their voices lowered.

"It must be hard having that dark cloud following you around every waking Moment," said Sabra.

"And that must be all the time 'cause I hear she hasn't slept a wink since."

"Knock it off, you two," Joey said. "It's not her fault. John obviously had major problems. You can't convince me his only goal in life was to marry Ellen. Besides, people have to take responsibility for their own actions."

"Easy there, Joey. I'm not saying it's Ellen's fault," said Sabra. "She was just so close to the situation it must be difficult for her to go through a day without thinking about it."

Joey stared down at his hands clasped so tightly together that his fingernails were white. "I s'pose you're right. But still, it's not fair to bring up her name as though she had the power to stop him."

"Point well taken," said Sabra.

Wall's hair sprung up from his head like a thick patch of wild weeds. He raked his fingers through it. "Let's focus on our present case of madness, Bryan W. Bentley. I think we'll all agree that he was quiet, shy, and pretty much just kept to himself for as long as we've known him. Yes?"

Sabra and Joey both nodded in agreement.

"Not exactly a popular guy. No close friends that we know of, below average student," Wall continued, pushing back a finger for each example. "Mother died of... what was it?"

"Leukemia," Joey said.

"Leukemia. Right. He didn't live too far from you did he?"

"No, not too far. Just outside of Shueyville, past the cemetery."

Sabra's shiny fingernails ticked the tabletop one after the other. She said, "It's evident that he had a rough childhood, losing his mother at such a young age."

"That's an understatement," Joey said. "He was one of those kids that always got picked on."

"Didn't he hang around all the retards?" said Wall.

Joey rolled his eyes and shook his head. "He was in some 'Special-Ed' classes for a while. He wasn't dumb, though. Just a slow learner. By eighth grade he caught up with everybody."

"Let's not forget he served detention on a regular basis." Wall doodled with a pencil on his notebook, making a series of little spirals.

"Big deal," said Joey. "It was for minor things like coming in late or skipping class."

"All the same," said Wall, "our Mr. Bentley was a troubled individual."

Sabra folded her arms over the stack of books in front of her. "What about signals? They say everybody gives certain signs before they actually do it. That's what is so puzzling. If anything, we have every indication that his life was taking a good turn."

"Based on what evidence? How do we know what went on behind closed doors?" Wall exclaimed. The librarian strutted across the room turning a suspicious eye towards the table. They were often noisy, mostly due to Wall's outbursts.

"Well let's see. He had a good job, didn't he?" said Sabra.

"Part-time at the Sinclair station?"

"He liked working on cars," Joey said.

"Excuse me. Pumping gas and checking oil and washing windshields does not exactly constitute a mechanic," said Wall.

"What difference does it make? Bryan was a gear-head, that's all."

White sunlight shone through the windows of the library illuminating dust that hovered in the air. Sabra gnawed on her pencil and gazed out at the plush lawn of the school grounds beyond which lay the tilled soil of a farmer's field. "What about the fact that he was going to graduate in a month?"

"That might count as a reason for offing yourself, if you ask me," said Wall.

"Maybe he just got tired. He might have had problems... you know, with his father, or something." Joey wanted desperately to break the ice.

"You know something we don't?" Wall leaned across the table and stared into Joey's face. He had sensed Joey acting a little strange, but wasn't sure.

Joey retreated. "I'm just saying it's a possibility." He picked at a scab on his knuckle.

Wall had a fascination with suicide. He kept a chronicle of people in the area and abroad who had killed themselves, and how they had done it. Everyday, he scoured the newspapers looking for stories, which were added into his scrapbook. He even had a special section devoted to people who had attempted suicide unsuccessfully, and their methods. Joey was a little unnerved by this.

"He did have a steady girlfriend," Sabra pointed out.

"Right. Diane Pavlicek. Sweet girl. They seemed like a good match," Wall said. "But we can only surmise. Does anyone know what their relationship meant to each of them? I mean, were they serious about each other?" The spirals he doodled got smaller and smaller.

"Diane said everything was going just fine between them. They even planned to go to the senior prom together. Can you imagine Bryan Bentley in a tux?" said Sabra.

Wall's head nodded and his eyes became little slits, the way they always did when he was tackling a problem. "Diane was out of town last week visiting relatives on Easter break. And they had written each other letters, you said?"

"Yes. Diane showed me the letter she got from Bryan," said Sabra. "It was quite touching actually. Very sincere, though nothing out of the ordinary. Just 'I love you and miss you,' that sort of thing. Though there was one odd line." She closed her eyes and tapped a finger on her temple. "Can't quite remember it, word for word, but it was something about birds."

"Birds?" Joey said louder than necessary, sitting upright in his chair.

"Yeah. I don't know. Some strange analogy about a bird. Why?"

"No reason, just curious. Did it say what kind of bird?"

"Look, I was there to console Diane, not to analyze Bryan's love letter to her. That's all it was. There was nothing in it that gave me the impression that he was going to kill himself."

Sabra and Wall looked inquisitively at Joey, whose face had become noticeably flushed. He ran his sleeve across his face wiping away the moisture from his forehead. Jesus, Joey thought. He felt the weight of what he did know about Bryan Bentley bearing down on him. But instead of making it easier for him to tell them, Wall and Sabra were making it harder. He had only tried to help Bryan, but in doing so had become involved in a complicated scenario. They wouldn't understand. Joey feared the ridicule and cynical analysis Wall would impose on him, and Sabra also might misinterpret his actions. I can't tell them, he thought. Not yet. Nobody knows why he did it. There's still a chance I had nothing to do with the situation. I'll wait a few days, till this whole thing gets sorted out.

Wall broke the short silence. "So Diane reads the letter, thinks everything is wonderful, comes back to school the day after Easter and hears the delightful news that her boyfriend has just killed himself that very morning." He took off his glasses and began cleaning them on his flannel shirt. "Not only was it strange to begin with, it gets even less clear the more details we hear."

The three of them shook their heads in unison. Joey was still picking at the scab on his hand. He peeled it back causing a droplet of blood to emerge. "Birds," he muttered unconsciously under his breath.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing," said Joey. The bell rang.

Sabra

"Oh my dear God. To think of that poor girl," my Mom said. And she kept saying it over and over again. From the time I got home from school to the time I went to bed and even after that I heard her voice in my sleep. She questioned me like a detective would about what had happened. She asked the same questions six different ways, having me repeat what I'd heard from start to finish. It was a brutal interrogation. Then she summarized and gave me her theories. I didn't ask to hear them, but I nodded in acquiescence. In between, her piercing tone repeated: "That poor child. That sweet, innocent, thing."

I was as upset and shocked as anyone that day. I'm sure she was worried about me, but it seemed she needed someone to talk to more than I did. I needed some quiet time to sort everything out. Mom wanted to go over every detail again and again and again. It was like she was stoking a fire that was already too hot to begin with and didn't mind burning her

fingers. I don't know whether she expected to find an answer in my exasperated retelling of Bryan's suicide or if she just wanted to revel in the feeling that at least it was someone else's child and not hers. This was not therapy for me, however. I wanted everything to settle down to where I could break it up piece by piece, come to terms with it layer by layer. Mom forced it on me like a cake the neighbor lady baked. No matter how close I was to throwing-up, I had to eat a portion to be polite.

My schoolbooks were spread out in front of me at the kitchen table. I tried to make that night just as routine as every other school-night—me doing my homework while Mom busied herself cleaning up after dinner—but it was hopeless. Even without Mom ranting about what a tragedy it was and all, my brain didn't have the ability to absorb or calculate anything. Bryan Bentley became the '*x*' in my algebra problems: an equation I couldn't figure to begin with. The whole incident popped in front of me like a flashbulb on a camera and no matter how much I blinked, the spots were still there. I blinked and saw Bryan Bentley lying down under his truck in the driveway, his head comfortably resting beneath the tailpipe. I blinked and saw his younger sister walking up the long driveway after missing the school bus.

The teachers all tried to act normal, as though nothing happened. They walked around restive and agitated, with solemn, pale faces. All of them so obviously tried to conceal, protect us from what we would inevitably find out anyway. In fact, it was something we learned the details of each hour as the day went on. The whole school, no—probably the whole town and several surrounding towns were buzzing with the news of Bryan's death. Suicide has a way of breaking up talk about the weather. A guy that most people would have tripped over before they noticed him, suddenly had become very popular, and a martyr to boot. How and why I'm still not sure I fully understand. Quite possibly he symbolized someone who had escaped the confines of this small, midwestern farm town. Kids our age always wondered whether they would ever get out of here. Bryan had found a way. I guess death has a certain romanticism attached to it that appeals to young minds. Minds which distort cowardly acts like this into bravery or honor. It's Shakespeare's fault. All those bloody endings.

I remember after the abortion, feeling so sick and depressed that I flirted with the thought of killing myself. I had been so sure that getting an abortion was the right thing to do, there was never any doubt or hesitation. I lay in bed that night, knotted in my sheets, fighting the pain and trying to block out the scenes of what I imagined happened to my body, though I didn't actually see. It's funny how your mind will sometimes construct an image even if you

don't want it too. The harder I tried, the less I was able to forget that ache inside me where now there was nothing but regret. I was poisoned with bitterness for life and felt like dying because I hated myself for getting into that mess in the first place, for what I did, what I had to do. I knew beforehand that my decision would have its consequences of guilt. I accepted that, but had never anticipated how hard it would be having to shoulder the burden all by myself. I couldn't tell Mom. And Todd was no support. I thought in a few days I could get on with my life. Instead I looked in the mirror and decided that I couldn't stand the sight of myself anymore. My yellow skin made me look like a waxy corpse already. I had a comforting thought that putting a fist through my reflection—grinding the broken crystals into my knuckles—would make me feel better. Yes, I want to bleed, want to die. I would rather that, than go on feeling like this. There were plenty of pills in the medicine cabinet, I was sure the right assortment liberally washed down with vodka would do the trick.

Then I thought of Wall and his scrapbook. I would be in it now, pasted alongside all the others. I had to smile, and it felt good. I pictured him—scissors in hand, tongue out, hair in a state of perpetual disorder—being careful to cut out the articles just so, staying on the borders. No, no matter what happens, I don't want to be a statistic in Wall's chronicle. Goofy and cynical as he is, I love that nut. I thought of sweet, shy, Joey too. Hands buried in his overalls pockets while he waited for me after school. Though he stopped waiting after I started going out with Todd. Joey hated him. I should've listened when he told me what an ass he thought Todd was. It's a little weird that I never get along with girls as well as I do with Wall and Joey. What a dichotomy. Wall—so aptly named since he builds up a big enough one around himself. And Joey—who goes so far out of his way to help people, yet seems to think that everybody sees that as a sign of weakness.

I told Mom about how Bryan never had many close friends, and that he was sort of an enigma to begin with, so there was no reason to believe we were ever going to find out why he did it. His girlfriend Diane couldn't tell us very much, and she was probably the closest person to him besides his little sister, Sharla. Diane said the whole family had trouble dealing with the death of Mrs. Bentley, and it was Sharla whom Bryan took especial care to try and comfort. Bryan's father though, was a strange, aloof, man and Bryan loved him, but according to her they had a difficult time getting along. Sharla was all he really had of a family. And because of his somewhat mixed-up dad, I think he felt Sharla was his responsibility.

After thinking it over, I agreed with Mom. Bryan was dead, and that was a tragedy. But her main concern was for the living. Mom's voice clinked in the same pitch as the tumblers she

put in the cupboard. "That poor, sweet, child. First her mother, now her brother and so young. Dear God, it's almost too much to bear."

The flashbulb ignited again. I blinked and blinked, but all I could see was little Sharla, finding her brother under the truck, engine running. It was a cool spring morning. She climbed into the cab where it was warm and just kept honking the horn until someone came. Beep, beep, beep.

Wall

Goddamn him to hell. Let him burn, together with his sack lunch of cheese and cracker snacks. I know how bad it can be to eat the school's slop. Every kid knows. Still, it seemed incredible that for as long as I knew Bryan, he never came to the cafeteria without that same little brown paper bag in his hand. It had a cloth-like quality to it from being crumpled up day after day. He walked with his head down, lanky arms swinging wild, following his short stride in clumsy unison—placing each foot carefully as though he was a bird approaching a crumb in the middle of a paved street. He sat by himself and flipped through some comic books while he ate. The meal never varied. A half-pint of chocolate milk washed down two pieces of buttered white bread, each coated with a thin layer of sugar. There was usually a limp, bruised banana and a few generic sandwich cookies crumbled up in a baggy. At last, out would come the bright orange cracker and cheese snacks. You'd think he'd save the cookies for last. Not Bentley. The highlight of his lunch consisted in savoring twin rectangular saltines, stuck together with a thin layer of pasty cheddar. That's madness in itself. I bet when he ordered dinner at the truck stop he had them bring the chocolate cake first, before the meal. He probably carried around those neon snack-pack squares wherever he went, and broke 'em out for dessert. Maybe that's why he went and lost it. A steady diet of those and I might consider sucking up the exhaust from a tail pipe too.

The question I have is how all these people decide on the methods they use to end their pained existence. Frankly, I think most are not sincere about the undertaking of such a task, simply because of the poor execution displayed in numerous instances. Sleeping pills never work. It takes too long to do the job, and someone is always around to find the troubled soul in time to have their stomach pumped. How rude.

Though she slashed both wrists, Prudence Kelchen obviously wasn't very sincere. Had she made the cuts vertically from palm to shoulder as well as crossways, there would have been no time for anyone to rescue her.

Even guns are prone to misfire in the hands of untrained individuals. I can picture Sheldon Mchugh getting good and drunk, trying to summon up all his nerve to pull the trigger—finally squeezing it only to hear a heavy, dull, click reverberate through the room. Since he had sweat out all the alcohol and knew he'd have to get drunk all over again, he copped out and decided to chalk it up to 'divine intervention.' Bullshit. He should've let me load that pistol.

Even when they do go off, guns don't always work. Pat Dudley's case is a prime example. After carefully placing the barrel of a rifle under his chin, he only managed to blow off his jaw and a sizable portion of his cheekbone. His teeth were scattered about on the floor like loose change. He must have looked ghastly. If I had stumbled on him, I might have finished the job. Instead they put him back together—piece by agonizing piece—during which Pat's will to live obviously returned, since he joked with the plastic surgeon to square-up his pointed chin a little.

My scrapbook is fat—full of stories like these. And now it lays open to the freshly pasted newspaper clipping titled: 'Troubled Teen Ends Life.' Bryan's tragic story just entertaining enough to keep people from reading the funnies first. The poor son of a bitch didn't even get his picture in the paper.

I can already foresee how the wonder-white bread students in charge of the yearbook will handle this. If Bryan had been popular, they would make a big fuss about how sad it was that this could have happened and we should all learn from it and be more conscious of those around us in need of help. Instead though it is alphabetically incorrect, they will bury him towards the back of the book and perhaps write: 'in memory of,' under his picture. And it's true. People **will** remember him, not at all for the way he lived, but the way he died. Death is far more intriguing for those of us who haven't experienced it.

Contrary to what everyone believes, suicide is no joke to me. Every Saturday my grandfather used to take me for a burger and a milkshake. When I was thirteen he blew out his brains. Why, no one knows or will ever know. I guess that's one of the reasons that I started this whole compilation of articles on suicides and attempted suicides in the first place. There was no fault in grandfather's method. He fired a magnum through a pillow into his forehead. I guess the pillow was to establish a comfort zone between him and the cold steel. The .357 left little room for error. There must have been a cloud of feathers like snow, floating softly down around his body long after it slumped lifeless off the chair onto the floor. Though I heard there were some feathers stuck to the walls and ceiling. After a night

of quiet reading—I think it was Conrad; *Victory*, ironically enough—in the library of his house, he made his fateful decision. My grandfather was a successful and happy man who never once backed down from doing whatever it took for him to be that way. So why, then? Tell me how a man can kill himself out of the blue, leaving no note, giving no indication, not a clue, nothing—*nothing* for those who have to (literally) pick up the pieces. There *must* be some reason, goddamn it. I'll never know.

I do have to give Bryan points for originality. Most people who choose to die from exhaust fumes fuss around in a garage with tape and vacuum cleaner hoses. But was he sincere about what he was doing? Because sincerity is definitely an issue in most cases of suicide. The sincere succeed. Take Hemingway for instance. It took him a few tries, but his mind was made up. He was afraid of suffering. Doesn't everyone agree it's best to put the old dog to sleep rather than let him spend his final days slowly dying? The same as a wounded soldier who begs for a bullet of peace in lieu of a bandage. I don't have a problem with that. It's just that folks give up too easily. Maybe their pain is sincere, but I think most people misjudge their ability to bear it.

Old Albert Ziskovski was sure he couldn't bear to live anymore, and everyone knows what a hard life that toothless, old codger has endured. But after he tripped and broke his nose on one of the railroad ties where he was about to lie down, he decided he could bear it a little longer.

However, I was not convinced of Bentley's sincerity. Christ, they found that goddamned sack lunch of his, cracker snacks and all, in the truck along with his other schoolbooks. I mean, I've heard of people settling their debts and writing letters just before. Hell, that Quentin character of Faulkner's even straightened up his belongings and brushed his teeth. Yet why pack a lunch when you know by noon you'll be on ice downtown? They'll even have taken down the yellow police tape from around where your body had lain, by then.

No. No matter what scenario Sabra, Joey and I conjured up, none of them seemed to fit. That is until about a week later when Joey strolled into the library at the usual time, dropped his books on the table and sat down in the chair as though he was thrust there by the hand of God, from the ceiling. Sabra and I looked at each other, then back at him.

"What's up with you?" I said.

"Guys, I'm really sorry. There are some things I think you should know that I haven't had the courage to tell until now."

We all leaned in close together and Joey continued in a soft, tired voice.

"I spent some time with Bryan Bentley just two days before he committed suicide."

The pipe organs of a hundred churches played dramatic chords in my head.

Joey

You can hear the peacocks every morning at the same hour, crying out in a sad and beautiful song that echoes through the valley all the way to our house a quarter-mile away. That was the first clue we had that something was wrong. My father and I sat at the breakfast table that Saturday, listening, but not hearing anything. I had only one bowl of cereal, and dad only one cup of coffee before we decided it was too strange, and drove to the barn to see what was the matter.

The open door of the peacock's pen swung back and forth in the wind. My father and I stood there watching it with our hands in our pockets wondering what had happened. We raised exotic birds on our farm for many years. Everything from chickens that laid green eggs and pheasants all colors of the rainbow, to plain old ducks and geese. Every year they have a bird show in town and it was there that my father procured four peacocks, a pair of males and females, the latter commonly referred to as peahens. We kept the couples in separate pens, and one pair of them were missing. The other two birds were hiding in their wooden shelter, too scared to come out.

There was really no question of their escape since the cage door and latch remained sound and there were no holes in the wire. Either someone opened it and let them out, or they were stolen. The birds are quite large and require space in which to thrive, therefore the cages we built for them spanned a wide area. They were visible from the road and it was not uncommon for passers by to stop alongside and view the splendor of the males' glorious train of feathers. When spread out like a giant fan, the indigo spots ringed in striped gold and violet lace, seem like a hundred glaring, angry eyes. "Someone took a fancy to them," my father said, "and decided to help themselves." I was especially disappointed since I had paid for two of these myself. I really had no interest in any of the other birds my dad owned.

Dad studied the dirt driveway for unfamiliar tire-tracks, then said, "Peacocks are not a bird you can hide away in your backyard. Don't make good eatin' either. I reckon they'll turn up before long." He was right. Not quite a week later Bryan Bentley's father called, saying he had the birds. When my father told me I was astonished. "Why on earth would he..."

"You want to handle this?" Dad said.

I pulled into the driveway of Bryan's small, plain-looking home. The lawn was full of overgrown weeds. White paint was peeling off the side of the house; shards of it lay on the front porch. My stomach fluttered nervously when I rang the bell. Bryan's downcast face answered the door. He motioned me to come in. We walked silently through the house to a door, which led into the garage. The peacocks were there, roosting on one of the low rafters. "Bryan," I said, "for the life of me I can't figure out why you would want these birds. I mean, if you had an interest in raising some I could—"

"My sister," he said, flatly. "I stole them for my sister. We drive past your farm a lot. Just to look. She liked to drive past every day. She didn't ask for them. She doesn't ask for much of anything. Ever since our mother died..." he broke off, lost in an unpleasant memory.

"But you can't just steal things that don't belong to you." I said. "You're lucky my dad didn't catch you. He'd a sent you home with plenty of lead in your back pocket."

"I know. I made a mistake," Bryan said softly. He rubbed his hands together anxiously. "It's just that—there's nothing I wouldn't do to make her happy. When Mom died the last thing she said to me was, 'take care of your sister.' She means the world to me. But since then, since we lost ma I mean, she just ain't been right. I guess I'll just try anything to make her happy and to get her mind off of missing Mom."

"Even if it means breaking the law?" I asked, already feeling a bit sympathetic. He made a face as if indeed he had to steal again, he would. It was clear to me that while he knew he had done wrong, the consequences were not nearly as important as his aim. In his mind he had been appointed his sister's guardian. To protect her and ensure her happiness he would stop at nothing. I felt the fact that he had taken such a drastic and unorthodox measure as this was a sign that he was failing. "Certainly there are other ways..." I began as he intently stared down at his sneakers. A door slammed somewhere in the house. Bryan's head spun around, and he walked back in the house. I shut the garage door behind me and followed.

In the center of a greasy ill-kept kitchen stood a squat, thin-lipped man, who I assumed was Bryan's father. Bryan seemed to be explaining something to him as he stood looking straight at me with venomous, black eyes. They were like hard, shiny marbles accented by two bushy brows pointed into triangular shapes above them. His bald pate stuck up through the furry dark hair around his ears. He seemed poised and tense, eager for confrontation. With one hand he nudged his son aside and took a few steps toward me. "He doesn't think, this

one," he said, thumbing over his shoulder at Bryan. "And he can't keep his nose out of anything." His voice hissed like a viper.

"It's all right," I said. "The important thing is that—"

"Those goddamned birds make a hell of a racket in the morning, not to mention the mess they make of everything." I got the feeling had they not disturbed him, he wouldn't have called. He suddenly turned back on Bryan. "One of these days you'll learn. Someday you'll stick your head where it don't belong and it'll get kicked in." He smacked the side of Bryan's face angrily, and I noticed for the first time a faded black tattoo on his forearm. It was an insignia of an anchor, attached to a thick-linked winding chain. Bryan pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat down, holding his cheek, hot from his father's blow. The bald man circled him as though he was about to strike again, then steamed out of the room.

Bryan looked up at me. "He's not usually like this. Just mad that's all. He keeps some of his fancy camera equipment in the garage. The birds must have messed on it."

I stood there uneasily wondering what to do. Coming down the carpeted staircase I saw bare feet stepping slowly, one delicate hand gripping the railing. A young girl came into view. She was thin and tall and had a pretty little button nose. Ebony, tangled hair flowed down in her face. She pushed it back from her eyes and I met her troubled, wondering gaze. An off white, oversize T-shirt came down past her knees. She was fearful, and attempted to hide behind her hand as it repeatedly swept the hair from her face. The expression on her face was bitter and confused. Her darting eyes searched the room for something comforting and familiar, then gave up and seemed to glaze over. The glassy stare revealed deep anguish and suffering—hardened, yellow, orbs, dried of their tears. She sat down on the last few steps as if she was afraid to go any further. I looked at Bryan who still seemed to be shrugging off the blow his father gave him, then sat down across from him. "Bryan, listen. You've got a job, when you have the money you'll pay me for the peacocks. Until then I'll help you build a proper cage for them, the garage just won't do." I could hardly believe I was saying it, but something struck me in such a way that I couldn't just walk out of that house and never look back. His eyes brightened tentatively, as though at first he didn't believe me, then he half-smiled, showing a mass of crooked, stained teeth that resembled wooden pegs on a cribbage board.

"You don't have to do this," he said.

"I know I don't. We'll put the cage far enough in your backyard so that they don't bother

your dad. And this way..." I looked at the girl on the steps.

"Sharla," Bryan said. "Her name is Sharla. She don't talk much. She has a speech impediment, otherwise she'd say hello."

"Well, this way Sharla can see the peacocks every day if she wants."

We started building the cages the next day. My father thought I was crazy for doing it but he didn't try to change my mind. We had plenty of extra wire and wood, so I drove it over there in my truck. His backyard was quite large, and we found an ample clearing in the trees behind his house. I had taken the peacocks home the day before and put them temporarily back in their own cages. Bryan started making holes for the fence with a post-hole digger and I started nailing together a small wooden shelter and 2x4's for the frame. We worked silently for about three hours, until Bryan hit something solid with the shovel, and couldn't seem to dig it out. There were rocks scattered about the yard, but as I looked down the shallow shaft it appeared to be some sort of small metal case. I reached down and cut my hand trying to pull it out. It was a black strongbox, not very large, and it didn't look as though it had been buried very long. After unearthing it we tried to open the latch but it was padlocked shut. Sharla had appeared through the trees at just that Moment and when she saw what we were doing she stopped cold. Bryan turned to her. "Hey, Sharl, look what we found. Hidden treasure," he said walking over to her with the box in his hand. She backed up slowly as Bryan advanced and her face tensed up in alarm. Then she turned and ran. "Jesus, wonder what's got into her?" He stood there puzzled for a minute. I got the feeling maybe we should just forget it but Bryan insisted on us going to get a hacksaw in order to open the lock. "Maybe there's money or jewels in it," he said.

Soon we were sawing away at it in the garage. We had cut most of the way through the lock when Bryan's father pulled up in the driveway and saw us through the open door. He walked over, already looking annoyed. "Look what we found, Dad," Bryan said, holding up the strongbox. I saw then a fierce look of rage and surprise in his father's face that I'll never forget. It was so sudden and so furious that the both of us nearly fell over backwards from our squatting positions just looking up at him. He lunged forward and in one motion grabbed the box out of Bryan's hand.

"What have I told you time and time again about keeping your hands off of things that don't belong to you?" his father said. His voice was controlled but obviously this was the calm before the storm. He held the box in both hands and was standing over Bryan and me. I couldn't bear to look at his face so my eyes rested on the anchor and chain tattoo. "I have

raised a goddamned thief. A meddling, nosy, boy who can't keep to himself." The voice increased in volume and violence. "Do you want to know what's in this box? Do you really want to know? I'll bet you do." Bryan slowly began to stand but before he did, the box crashed down on his head with a muffled clang, and sent him sprawling to the garage floor. He stayed there, hands covering his head, eyes shut and teeth clenched in pain. His father walked to the door of the house then turned and looked at me. "I don't ever want to see you or any of your goddamned birds around here again. Do you understand me?" I nodded. He disappeared into the house with the box.

"He's really not a bad man," Bryan was saying through his tears. "Really he's not. He's just been mixed-up since Mom died."

I could hardly believe Bryan was still making excuses for his dad. I grabbed his arm to help him but he didn't want to get up. "Bryan, anything I can do for you, you just let me know. Okay?" I was scared and wanted to leave, but I had to let him know that I meant it. "I'll do whatever I can to help, I promise. Just let me know." I left him on the floor of the garage, hands on his head, head between his knees, but as I backed out of the driveway, I saw him walking around in circles with the shovel in his hand like a gravedigger pondering where the next hole should be.

Two

In the corner of the library, Wall and Sabra sat awestruck and silent. Wall's fingers strummed the rings of his spiral notebook, and he noticed the librarian looking over toward them as though the silence was a welcome change for her.

"So you befriended Mr. Bentley, had all this juicy information from which we could've subscribed a million other theories, and you're just telling us all this now?" said Wall. "I had a suspicion you were holding out. Why the secrecy?"

"Lay off him, Wall. Joey's not like that and you know it. This is serious, not just something to gossip about for fun," Sabra said.

Joey hadn't looked at either of them since he had sat down. "I didn't feel comfortable talking about him before. All this hit me kind of hard. I didn't know what to do or say about it." said Joey. "I was praying that the peacock incident had nothing to do with his suicide. I was wrong. You'll forgive me when I tell you what has unfolded since then."

"You mean there's more?" said Sabra.

"Much more, I'm afraid. The hole gets deeper and uglier."

"You're killing me," Wall said. "Spill it."

"Brace yourselves," said Joey taking a deep breath. "A couple of days after the suicide, I received a small package in the mail from Bryan, posted on the very day he laid down by the tailpipe of his Ford and ended his life."

"No way. You're can't be serious," Sabra said. There was a pause. "Oh God, are you serious?" She squirmed in her chair.

Wall pulled his glasses off of his face, and looked on intently at Joey. "Sweet mother of mercy. What was in it?"

"Bryan evidently made it a mission of his to find out what was in that strongbox that frightened his sister so much."

"What the hell was in the package? Damn you, speak up!"

"There were pictures. A lot of them. Of her."

"Of *her*? Of who? The girl? His sister?"

Joey nodded sadly.

"So what. Pictures. What kind of pictures?"

"You don't want me to describe them." The look on Joey's face told a grim nauseating story that played itself out in the minds of Wall and Sabra.

"No, not that. You can't mean... Jesus Christ. Jesus H. Christ," said Wall.

"No. No. I can't believe this." Sabra's hand covered her mouth, while she stared wide-eyed.

"There was one piece of paper among the photos with two words on it. 'Save her,'" said Joey. "I took the whole package down to the sheriff's office right away. Mr. Bentley was arrested on Friday, directly after Bryan's funeral."

"God Almighty."

"Harsh. How did they know it was him?" said Wall.

"The tattoo. The anchor and chain tattoo. You could see it in some of them."

"Bulls-eye," said Wall. "So much for the fancy camera equipment."

"This is too much. I think I'm going to be sick," said Sabra.

The air was heavy with portent. It hung about them like a stench.

"Well, we can surmise a few things from these facts," said Wall. "Bryan was obviously torn between the father he wanted acceptance from and the sister he had tried to protect and take care of as his mother's dying wish. When he saw how miserably he failed..."

"Where's the girl?" said Sabra. "What happened to the girl?"

"She's been taken in by her aunt, who lives out of state."

"This is all wrong. That demon will rot in hell. But he should be the one killing himself," said Sabra. "It's frightening to believe that people like that roam the earth. What kind of a sick and twisted mind could do such a thing?"

"Odd that he would bury the evidence rather than destroy it."

"But are we sure it was the father that buried it?" said Wall. "After all, the girl obviously knew the contents of that strongbox."

"Good point. No. He didn't want it destroyed. He could have done that anytime. He just wanted it locked up and hidden away," Joey said.

"Away from his thieving son's hands. His son who happened so ironically, so coincidentally to stumble upon it anyway."

"My guess is that he waited until his father left for work Monday morning, then began searching the house for the contents of that strongbox. The shock of his discovery put him over the edge," said Joey.

"Bryan took a spontaneous course of action. He posted the package of photos to you since he felt you would know what to do with them, taking no time to scribble more than two words on a yellow sticky-pad. Finally ending his life in the quickest, most painless way he knew," Wall said. "Of course, these are assumptions, but all the pieces seem to fit."

"There's still so much we'll never know."

"I don't think I want to know any more. I've heard enough," said Sabra. She stacked up her

books in a neat pile.

Joey sat exhausted, slumping in his seat.

Wall held his glasses out in front of him and looked into the lenses as though they were a crystal ball.

"So the child pornographer goes to jail, Sharla goes to Kansas, and Bryan goes to Oakwood," said Wall. "And all because of Joey's peacocks."

"Are you trying to make a joke, Wall? 'Cause I'm not laughing," said Joey.

"No. That's not a joke. Suicide is not a joking matter."

"You know, Joey, you really did a good thing getting involved the way you did," said Sabra.

"I wish I felt good about it. It's just that so much damage has already been done. And somehow these derelicts always seem to get out of jail."

"Don't sweat it, Joey. It's over. Let it go," said Sabra.

"Not going to be easy to do that. Especially hearing those peacocks every morning, calling out in that mournful tone over and over again as a chilling reminder."

Joey closed his eyes and tried to drive away the echoes of their cries which had served as both a siren of doom and a beacon of salvation.

j. Wilford