

THE PARK

BY JACK BECKETT

August 2, 2004

So live that when thy summons comes to join that innumerable caravan which leads off to the silent halls of death, thy goeth not like a quarry slave scourged to the dungeon, but sustained and soothed with an unfaltering trust, approach the grave. Like one who wraps the draperies of his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams.

W. C. Bryant

It was a glorious morning full of promise. The desert stretched out in front of him like an infinite carpet, all gold and brown in the early sunlight, his footprints the only evidence of his presence. Life, all about him waking to the potential of another day's possibilities scurried about his feet.

John is a very young man, full of enthusiasm and wonder, eager to see, and taste the wonders of being alive. As the air filled his lungs he could smell the many subtle scents of the early morning desert. Dressed in white t-shirt and bleached out levis he was almost iridescent in the early light as he walked about aimlessly looking at everything that caught his eye, his mind blank and blissful as he examined first a flower and then a spider. All this wonder and beauty filled him with curiosity and a sense of piece.

As his eyes darted about, he searched the endless expanse of desert before him. What was it? There at the extreme range of his sight, was that something, he couldn't tell. As he walked towards it the shimmering ghostly object began to come into focus, yes it was something. Like the bones of some colossal dinosaur laid bare on the desert floor it stood crumbling and almost without form but unmistakable in the far distance the atrophied remains of an old amusement park.

His pace quickened as curiosity drew him towards the ethereal structure. The closer he got the larger the structure became until he was dwarfed by the immensity of the place. It appeared as a large pier covered with the decayed remains of sideshows, ticket booths and various wreckage once the source of fun and merriment, now silent, only the ever present wind dancing through the torn canvas and broken rides. The partially collapsed remains of an old rotting wood roller coaster bore stark witness to the long gone shrieks

and screams of people that rode it. Only half a Ferris wheel remained, frozen in time with only a rusted car or two swinging in the wind. Flapping canvas, the creek of boards under his feet as he walked was part of a symphony of sounds that filled his ears, and of course the ever present wind. He thought he could almost hear the sounds of people laughing but he must have been mistaken.

As he walked through this labyrinth of long quiet enchantment, he was overtaken in the gaze of a crumbling manikin clown women perched atop what must have been a fun house. Her hair was gone and the paint that once outlined her lips had peeled away, but her eyes seemed to follow him as he slowly walked by. He thought he heard her sigh but it must have been the ever-present wind.

He tried to imagine a time when an ocean enveloped this pier. This place must have been alive with the sights and sounds of people having fun, walking the boardwalk with anticipation and wonder, people taking rides, eating cotton candy, laughing- living. Now it's all crumbling, quiet and empty save for the penetrating eyes of the clown and ever-present wind.

His daydream was suddenly broken by the sound of banging in the distance. This was not the random sounds of wind and canvas, but the unmistakable sound of hammering. He was suddenly struck with the reality that he was not alone. Coming around the corner of a somewhat tilted and dilapidated marry-go-round, the sound of banging was matched by swearing and ranting, he had found the source of the noise, two small feet sticking out from under a portion of marry-go round. John reached down, tugged on the pant leg of the tiny legs and asked, "Can I help"?

All the banging and groaning stopped for a moment. What seemed an endless silence was interrupted by the words "Jesus Christ" and then more groaning and swearing as a small man emerged from beneath the wreckage. Dressed in a tattered sideshow barker's outfit looking as if it were as old as the park itself, bearded and disheveled the little man nervously pattered about throwing old planks and stashing odd tools into a tool box almost as big as he. What are you doing here? Where did you come from? Ya know I have things to do; I haven't time to deal with anyone. I'm on a tight schedule ya know Lots to do, lots to do. What are ya doin here? Where did ya come from? John, almost to himself, Out there. The old man still nervously throwing things is really not listening just talking wildly. Ya know, ya come here taken up my time ya need to understand I have a lot to do I'm working here. John asks, sheepishly what are you doing? The old man stops and for the first time looks John in the eye I'm restoring this park isn't it obvious. John looks around in total disbelief. You just getting started John remarks dryly, he can see the anger building in the old mans face, but before the old man can reply John asks, My name is John, what's yours? Murray, the old man reply's coldly. And if you want to know No I haven't just started, I have to work alone I get no help ya know. John replies, well I can help just what are you doing. Murray angrily says I'm trying to replace the auger bolt on the capstan. John says what? Murray jumps at him Help, what do you mean help your just a kid what the hell do you know anyway just stay out of my way that's all. Murray moves off muttering to himself, that's all I need some

kid trying to tell me- I know what I'm doing. As John watches, Murray begins to push the large rolling toolbox up a small incline. That's where things begin to go wrong. One wheel comes off the incline and the box, too much for Murray to handle, begins to topple. John rushes to assist Murray and they both manage to get the wheel back on the ramp. John exclaims, wow that was close. Murray, under his breath I could of done it alone happens all the time. Still the little guy is exhausted and sits on a headless marry-go-round horse. John sits next to him. What do you want to do here? John asks; this job looks impossible for one guy. The little old man looks off into the desert and more to himself than to John says what do you know about impossible I've been doing the impossible all my life, if you can dream it kid you can do it, can you dream, can ya. John tries to answer but Murray breaks him off. Look around ya this used to be a monument to dreams everyone who ever walked these boards had a dream, a hope for this place. Dreams are powerful kid, maybe the most powerful thing you will ever find. I know kid, I used to run the rides and rides are just dreams kid with a little reality thrown in. John wistfully, I've never been to a real park or taken a single ride, I bet this was a fun place once. Yea, and sad too, Murray injects. Without elaborating on his last statement Murray's face comes alive, his eyes twinkle, what da ya say kid, would ya like to take one? A ride I mean.

Without hesitation, Murray jumps up. Come on kid, your going to take your first ride. This will be great. Murray is back to his original form all energized and muttering. Ya know this is one of the first rides I ever built. I made it out of some old parts mostly the spook house and some odd stuff. They make their way through more wreckage until they are confronted by a large dark gapping hole in the side of a pile of rubble. Murray with a kind of pride exclaims, here we are. Where John asks, here Murray insists right through there as he points to the dark hole, I call it the first coming ride you'll love it.

Go ahead kid. John, a little hesitant but trusting Murray begins to walk into the hole stepping over some old timbers as he walks forward. Murray with a small snicker yells after him, remember ya gotta dream Kid that's the key, that's what makes it work.

John walks slowly into the darkness the entrance becomes a small point of light behind him. As he walks he begins to smell the scent of resin and candle wax. The faint glow of candles in the distance beckons him on. He can hear the distinct sound of an organ as it sounds the ominous chords of some ancient call to prayer. The darkness slowly gives way to reveal the vestibule of a church. His shadow, dancing on the walls, is ghostly in the candlelight. The music is louder now resonating through the floor and walls and apparently coming from behind the two large ornate doors closed in front of him. He pauses for a moment looks around and then slowly opens the big door just a crack.

What greets his eyes both startles and fascinates him. Dissonances of religious rights are being played out in front of his gaze. The music is now thunderous. He is transfixed as he views what appears to be every religious rite ever conducted. Nuns form a circle in the center of the church while Incan priests perform blood sacrifices in the far corner. Billy Graham preaches from a soapbox. Men in colorful robes spread incense as they parade from side to side. Orthodox Jewish rabbis in their black outfits seem to be

arguing in the corner. African witch doctors shake feathered sticks at one another. Tibetan monks spin prayer wheels while Buddhist priests do their thing. A large group of Muslims do their prayer ritual facing east and bowing. The organ music blends with African drums, Jewish shofars and spiritual music in a cacophony of intense rhythms.

The circle of nuns, with arms raised and glazed expressions seem to be expecting something. The general atmosphere is one of great expectancy. As John stands at the door totally absorbed in what he is seeing he can feel two hands slip under his arms. John turns in time to see two diminutive hooded monks, taking him by the arms, not menacing or freighting, but deliberately they escort him to a large staircase leading to the attic of the church. As they slowly begin to ascend the staircase the music seems to beat out a slow cadence as they plod forward. John catches a glimpse of his escorts; their faces buried in their hoods are expressionless and blissful as the trio climbs the stairs. Upon reaching the landing John and the two monks found themselves in the church's cavernous attic. Beams of light emanating from cracks in the roof illuminate the darkness. Huge timbers holding up the roof the size of trees crisscrossed in front of them. A catwalk just wide enough for the three of them stretched off into the darkness. The music could still be heard through the loosely fitting ceiling tiles. Slowly, methodically they moved forward. As John's eyes pierced the darkness he began to see a figure at the end of the catwalk. As the image became more distinct he was filled with a combination of wonder and laughter.

There at the end of the catwalk was a very large rotund character reminiscent of Old King Cole, or Jabba the Hut seated on a throne and dressed in opulent religious garb that would put the pope to shame. A large cylindrical hat and gold epaulets adorned his four hundred pound frame. The figure with scepter and orb in hand began chanting to the music. In front of this, bigger than life figure of a man, laid a large gaping hole through which John could see the craziness going on below. As John and the two monks came within range the man put down the scepter and began throwing holy water at John and reciting some Latin phrase over and over. E pluribus Unum he thought he heard. As this bombastic religious act continued, the two monks backed into the darkness leaving John there to dodge a continuous shower of holy water. Suddenly this giant wrinkled old man put down the holy water and retrieved a large musty old book from next to him. With practiced dexterity he opened it to some random page and began to mumble unintelligibly. At this, the two monks silently returned and John could feel a harness being slipped over his shoulders. A crude winch secured to the massive beams had been swung over so the monks could hoist John off his feet. The large man was still muttering as the two monks secured the big buckles that encircled John's waist. More bewildered than frightened John offered no protest. As John's feet left the floor the monks armed him over the hole. Feet dangling beneath him, John felt the last sprinkle of holy water as the monks began to lower him through the hole and into the church.

A giant, crashing and discordant organ chord sounded as John with bleached out Levis and white t-shirt appeared radiant as he was lowered from on high. The circle of nuns looking somehow relieved to see this white specter emerge through the clouds painted on the church ceiling. The music took on a triumphant tone as John slowly descended all

eyes transfixed on him.

Everything was going well with this masterful con job until suddenly John stopped descending. The monks were having trouble with the winch. The cable had gotten wound around the axle of the reel and was jammed. There only hope was to raise John a little and get the cable free. As the monks fiddled with the winch John could feel himself rise and fall with jerks and fits. The music loud and discordant seemed somehow to match his every move. A strange look of consternation overcame the assembled congregation.

Now even the rotund religious figure with his beads and cylindrical hat joined the task. Pulling and yanking on the cable they seemed almost panicking. John looked up just in time to see the orb and some other religious props fall just missing him and crashing to the floor whereupon they were retrieved and worshiped by this gullible and overly receptive audience. Then, as if like thunder a load cracking sound was heard. The main beam holding the winch arm was cracking. John felt all support fail and began to fall. The last thing he remembered as he passed the ring of nuns was the bewildered look on their faces. Crashing through the floor boards of the church, all the music stopped and silence once again surrounded him. He laid covered in wreckage motionless the darkness surrounding him. As he pushed the boards off of him he began to hear the telltale sound of the wind -the realization that he was again on the Amusement Park.

No longer the pristine boy in the white Levis and bleached out t-shirt. He was now a somewhat dusty and confused young man.

His head swimming from the experience, he found solace in the serenity of the park, the wind seemed somehow comforting now. He sat there for quite a long time trying to remember what Murray had told him about dreaming the dream but it all seemed pointless to him. Nothing made any sense. What was that ride supposed to mean how could anyone of conceived of that in the context of fun, or maybe it wasn't supposed to be fun at all.

His introspection was suddenly broken by a horrendous crash. A plume of dust was rising from behind some broken down structures behind him. It must have been Murray. John began to look for him. It didn't take very long. There was Murray, trapped in the remains of an old ticket booth like a rat in a trap. A portion of the frame holding up the sideshow had fallen trapping Murray in the booth. A large timber had become wedged against the door and Murray was not strong enough to open it. John stood their concealed behind Murray and waited until Murray was completely frustrated and tired from trying to extricate himself. Are you sure you don't need my help John asks. Murray realizing his solution is at hand shows a brief moment of relief but is quickly overtaken with anger. Get me out of here Murray exclaimed. John begins to struggle with the beam holding Murray. Hurry up will ya, Murray yelled. I've lost a lot a valuable time. What are ya waiting for get me out a here will ya for Christ sake. The beam gives way and the door to the booth swings open. Murray jumps out and immediately begins to fumble with an old rope tied to the timber that got him in the jam to begin with. This is your problem rite here kid this loop was too short. No that's your

problem Murray, John injects, but I have a problem with that “ride” you put me on, what was that all about? What do ya mean kid didn’t ya learn anything? Was I supposed to learn something? John replies. I only learned I can’t trust you, I guess. Murray stops fiddling with the rope and looks John in the eye. What does trust have to do with anything, it’s a ride kid, it’s got nothen to do wit trust. It’s like anything else, you go in there and ya do your thing and if it doesn’t work out well the hell wit it, ya know kid. John, a bit frustrated, what do you mean the hell with it – I got hammered in there, I didn’t learn anything what’s to learn anyway.

Murray, calmly now showing for the first time a real interest in John. Come on kid let’s sit for a while.

They walk to the boardwalk railing and sit looking out into the endless expanse of desert. Ya know kid rides are a little like life they just give ya a framework, they put ya somewhere it’s up to you to give em meaning for yourself. Now take dat ride, many people got a lot out of dat ride. Ya know kid the meaning of life dats a big question. Them people in there they try to unravel dat kind of stuff, ya can’t take dat lightly. That’s not what I saw, John injects, I saw a lot of fear, ignorance and deception. People being fooled into thinking I was something altogether different. What did those people want? John pleads. You, Murray replies, but you were too stupid to see dat. Ya have to admit things could a been much different if you would a understood what they wanted kid. People, kid, they just want it simple ya know- some things day aint simple, so we give em what they want. Dats what dis park is all about kid give em what da want. John, looking around reflectively, maybe the park is like it is because they don’t want it simple any more. Don’t kid yourself, dats the way they want it all right and I’m builden it da way I, Murray catches himself, they want it, you can bet on dat and when I’m finished they’ll be back and things will be the way they were when I was young like you. Murray is now somehow lost in his own reality. Murray comes down to earth in time to ask, hey kid will ya give me a hand over here? Sure John replies.

As they move off in the general direction of the fun house Murray resumes his rapid-fire stile, talking wildly about his great idea for the next ride. What da ya think of this kid. Murray gestures with his hands like some great director showing us the next shot. Boats, yea that’s the deal, we build a lot of boats and people can get in em and float around and have the feeling of a- well floating, how about dat. John, half listening half lost in thought, yes that might be nice. Ever had a boat kid, they’re great, da feeling of bein in control of ya own boat, nothen like that. Ya know there used to be a lot a boats around here once but the water went away and da boats with it. John offers up the obvious, so Murray how you intend to bring the water back. I don’t know kid I’ll figure dat out when we get to it, rite now we have other work to do.

For what seemed like hours John helped Murray with an assortment of things none of which made any sense to John but as the time slipped by a bond grew between them. This guy Murray was more complicated than John had ever imagined. He was funny and in a way sad but always intense. Murray never answered questions about his past but seemed to be focused on bringing back the past in some new way, always talking about when the people would return as if that was going to happen any minute. The intense

pace at which he worked seemed to be a sign of the peoples return. John knew this was doubtful but he went along with Murray because he didn't want to hurt him. He liked Murray in a lot of ways.

There work centered on a metal cage about six feet square with a sliding door. The cage fit through a hole cut in the boards of the pier and was suspended by a cable that ran off into a maze of wreckage.

Murray kicked over a block of wood; the cage began to swing suspended over the hole. There, Murray exclaimed, dat's it- finished. What's finished John asked? Dat ride their, Murray proclaimed, could be one of my best yet, I call it Empire. I'm sorry Murray I don't see anything just an old metal cage hanging there. You say this is a ride? Murray gives John a look of disgust, saved only for the most slow-witted. Kid, when ya going to learn. Use a little imagination, dream a little bit- this can be a ride and a dam good one. Ya know you just might take to this empire-building thing. It don't take as much brainpower as the last one. Want a give it a shot kid? Are ya ready for it? You just might take to it.

Reluctantly John steps into the cage and closes the door. Murray yanked on a big lever and the cage began to slowly descend through the gapping hole. John was off on another adventure.

As the cage begins to descend into the darkness beneath the pier John senses he is not alone. The lights come on, the cage jerks and John realizes he is in an elevator surrounded by people. There is a vigorous, up-beat jazz score coming from the speaker in the roof of the car. Everyone, dressed in business attire, seems focused and no one talks. The car stops, the doors open, some people get on some get off. A heated conversation is going on in the hallway in front of the elevator, but before John can here anything the doors close and the car descends. The music is blaring. The car stops again the doors open and we can see a man and women standing next to a water cooler the man has his hand on the gal's butt. She has a look of frustration on her face, the doors close again. This time the doors open and the sight of a man in a business suit just looking at the floor the doors remain open for a short time. The man, looking very dejected, simply stands there the doors close again. The elevator reaches the next floor and all occupants of the car rush out taking John with them. John finds himself in a very busy hallway people running up and down carrying files and artwork, looking very determined. A large sign reading McManus, Johns and Swartz Advertising emblazed on the glass doors confronts John as he is practically pushed through with the onrushing crowd. The jazz score, upbeat and intense, matches the level of the activity as the people run from meeting to meeting. John maneuvers himself to a corner so as not to be knocked down in the frenetic charge of people. John seems out of place in white t-shirt and Levis standing in the corner. This river of anxious employees doesn't seem to see him as they rush from place to place.

As John stands there dumbfounded by the high energy of the place he sees a fellow coming his way waving and shouting over the din of the music. John can't actually hear

what he is saying but he knows it is directed at him. Dressed in a three-piece suit and looking very frustrated, the man comes up to John and gestures wildly looking at his watch. John gets the feeling that he is somehow late and this is part of the man's frustration. Taking John by the arm, the man begins to pull John towards the large conference room. Just outside, the man stops takes a big breath and opens the door.

The conference room, crucible of the high-energy pitch, is tricked out with every amenity needed to display and support the "sale" and is overwhelming in its grandiosity. Seated at the end of a large opulent conference table is the client. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and weighing in at over three hundred pounds the guy seems totally bored. A stunningly beautiful woman in a business suit, designed to show off her body, hovers over him catering to his every whim. At the other end of the table in front of an easel is the quintessential Madison Avenue pitchman. Dressed in the uniform of Brooks Brothers and paisley tie, this guy is at a fever pitch, throwing pages of material in a desperate need to reach the client with anything to preserve the account. No matter what the account supervisor does the client only looks at his watch and is unmoved.

With the music mirroring the desperate and frenetic nature of the scene the account supervisor in mid pitch sees John and his assistant standing next to the conference room door. As nothing seems to be working the pitchman directs the client to John. Gesturing wildly, he shoves John up in front of the client pointing to John as if there is something new, unique and special in the young man in dusty white.

A look of fear and repressed hysteria fills the face of the pitchman. He is now frenetic, his tie askew, as the client farts and looks at his watch in total boredom, the sale is all but lost.

In a state of complete futility and frustration, and in a last ditch attempt to impress the client the pitchman throws John on the conference table, pulls a switchblade from his briefcase and sinks it into John's chest, cuts him open and rips out his heart and hands it to the client. John's bloody heart continues to beat in the pitchman's hand as the pain overcomes him. The client, barely amused, looks at his watch, shakes his head and as the music fades, leaves.

Slowly the sound of wind and flapping canvas intrudes on the cold black silence. John's eyes open and he's confronted with the mockingly opiated stare of the lipless woman adorning the dilapidated fun house. No longer the wild-eyed immature, adolescent, young man, John struggles to his feet. A large bloodstain over his heart the only visible reminder of the ordeal.

John staggers to the rail and looks over the endless expanse of desert. Thinking back over the events of the business ride he is confused and filled with self-doubt. Murray's words haunted his thoughts. *The ride is just the framework kid, its up to you to give it meaning.* How could he be given that meaning, after the entire gist was obvious? Greed, self-promotion, materialism, insincerity, shallowness that's all it was, he thought. Somehow though, he felt as if he had failed in some way.

These strange and complicated notions distanced him from the naive kid that wondered into the park. He sensed things could have been different had he just taken charge. Still he pondered what could he have done, what was expected of him. He was surprised to find himself wishing Murray would show up, he needed answers.

Over the top of the wind and canvas flapping stillness John thought he could hear a faint cry for help. Help me... Help me... Yes there it was, he did hear it. Help me... John frantically searched for the source of the cries. HELP ME!!! HELP ME DAMMIT... The cries are very loud, evidently Murray, but John can't see him. HELP ME. UP HERE YOU IDIOT. Perched on a rung of the broken down Ferris wheel is Murray. A pile of boxes used as a ladder had fallen and trapped Murray too far off the ground to be able to jump and there he was trapped. Get me down, Murray demands. Realizing he has Murray right where he wants him, John asks, about that business ride Murray. What kind of a mind could conceive of that, do you see what happened to me, gesturing to his blood stained shirt. What was that a test or something? Murray begins to laugh hysterically, a test yea that's what it was, a test and obviously you failed. Look kid everything is a test this right here is a test I'm testing to see if you can stop being an idiot and get me down from here. John persists, what were you thinking when you crafted that ride I mean that was brutal. Look at me; what the hell is this place. John for the first time feels anger building in himself, a new emotion for John. Calm down, you only have yourself to blame, face it kid you're just a wimpy bystander in life. A better man than you would have found that ride an opportunity, but not you; you're a victim aren't you. Listen kid get me down from here and we'll talk. Grudgingly, John begins to build the pyramid of boxes back so Murray can get down. As Murray climbs down he continually mutters about wasting time and having to deal with an adolescent malcontent.

After the grumbling and perilous descent, Murray takes John by the arm and literally pushes him to a box and they both sit down. Murray, taking on a more fatherly tone and with a true sense of concern, looks John in the eye. Kid, you got to find some guts, you must learn to be a fighter. The park can bring ya to your knees if ya let it. Listen to me now, I was like you when I was young, wandered around in a daze most of the time. I understand ya know, you don't want to hurt anyone, you want to be a nice guy, but that doesn't work kid. People they tear ya apart. Ya got to be able to look inside yourself and find your passion and have the guts to go get it and if dat means ya gotta hurt people so be it. What's important to you son? What da ya care about? John, under his breath, I don't know.

Now tell me Murray asks, what happened in there? John begins to recount the events of the business ride but in the retelling John begins to see he was just a bystander. How do you do it Murray? How do you know what to do and why you do it, I'm so confused. Murray, with an uncharacteristic sensitivity and caring Murray says Just let it come out kid. It's in there. Don't think about it. Just let it come out. You'll make mistakes a lot of

dem, but don't not try. It's like an unconscious thing kid driven by what you want in life and something called honor. That's a kind of complicated thing, you'll understand someday. There is a saying in the airplane business *If ya crash one, ya gotta take one up right away*. Ya can't hide here kid. You always gotta put yourself out there. Let it happen ya know. Don't be afraid. Murray leaps from the box. Come on, ya can't stop now ya just getting the hang of it.

Murray with customary exuberance begins to pull John in the direction of the tunnel of love.

Amazingly, John had not noticed the large swan shaped car perched on two inclined tracks, maybe because the swan was old and in need of paint. The swan's forlorn eyes staring into a litter strewn tunnel once replete with hearts, angles and all the trashy visual metaphors of love lay empty and somehow waiting for the next pair of star crossed lovers to arrive. Murray invites John to climb into the car and get ready for the ride of his life. John, gun shy by now, looks questioningly at Murray. You know I've already lost my heart in the last ride what do I have to loose. Listen kid, you have enough heart left, but believe me, in affairs of the heart you need your brain. John, somewhat resigned now and with a glimmer of humor, climbs aboard the swan throws a last look at Murray and yells cut her loose Murray. Murray, knowing more than he relates about what awaits John pulls the wedge from under the wheels. The grotesque creature begins to move slowly down the track. Gaining momentum with every heart beet, the massive swan disappears into the tunnel with a whoosh.

John sees nothing but blackness and the rush of wind. He begins to see what looks like dash lights and the head of the swan has been replaced with the hood ornament of a 1982 Buick. John is in a car. The radio is beginning to play the strains of Tchicofsky's Romeo and Juliet overture. The early morning light reveals the endless expanse of a salt flat, like the surreal top of a pool table; John is driving east into the rising sun.

As the music builds, John glances a look into the rear view mirror. What was that, far off behind him, a plume of dust? Could it be another car? John slows down and begins to make a large circular path waiting for the mysterious car to catch up. John begins to make out what appears to be a 1987 Plymouth behind him. John pulls aside to allow the car to come along side and he sees a very plain looking girl driving. She is looking straight ahead and doesn't notice John, or at least doesn't acknowledge him. He watches her for quite a while as the music builds. They exchange a glance as they drive. She is trying not to encourage him and continues to look straight ahead.

John, in an attempt to get her attention begins to wave and make silly faces. She is still looking straight ahead and completely insensible to his antics. John begins to steer the car with his teeth while flapping his arms as if trying to fly. She continues to avoid his obvious frolics and continues to stare ahead. John is determined to get her attention and drives in ever widening circles swooping in on her on occasion and making faces. On one such close approach he can see a small smile begin to curl on her lips. He is reaching

her. The music is continuing to build. He is now using the windshield wipers, lights, electrical windows even the trunk release to communicate with her. As the trunk flies open and papers begin to blow out she can't restrain herself and is now obviously laughing hysterically. She begins to steer her car with her teeth and flap her arms, John responds with a big smile. The two cars are only a few feet apart as the antics continue. As John sneaks a look ahead, he looks back in time to see the girl remove her bandana and shake out a head of beautiful red hair. John no longer sees a plain girl in a 1987 Plymouth, but a gorgeous red headed woman in a fire engine red Ferrari looking longing at him from only a few feet away. John begins to feel a weird and wonderful feeling come over him. An unexpected set of feelings he had never felt before somehow centered on the person in the other car, a person he really doesn't even know.

Conversely as she looks at him he appears in a Rolls Royce, dressed in a five thousand dollar Brooks Brothers suit, the picture of achievement and responsibility the perfect alpha male.

The two cars hurtle off into the endless early morning expanse of salt flat, the music building. John, looking pensively at her, mouths the words *I love you*, not really knowing the true meaning of the term but reflexively using it because it seemed to express his feelings best. When she returns the words *I love you too* he is gripped with the most intense feeling of well being he had ever felt. He needs to reach her; the music's romantic intensity matches his own pounding heart beat. Their eyes remain locked in a trance like gaze as the cars move closer and closer. Now touching. Now crashing. In the heat of the moment there is nothing but the need to reach each other. The music now at its peak reflects the passion of the feelings they both feel. Nothing, certainly not the welfare of the automobiles, matters just the need to reach what John feels is the ultimate expression of the thoughts within him.

Metal bending, glass smashing, parts flying- nothing matters just the burning need to touch and experience the exquisite goal of being with this beautiful creature. Suddenly as if in a dream the tire on the Ferrari blows and the car is spinning out of control. Round and round it goes in a cloud of dust. John skids to a stop and as the dust clears he can see her standing next to the car in a vision of stabbing beauty with her red hair flowing. John begins to run towards her. She is just standing there, the wind blowing through her hair. He has never seen anything he wanted more, and she is no more than a hundred yards away. As he runs he can slowly make out two black lines crossing his path. Railroad tracks, and as if in a bad dream, a train looming in the distance. The race is on. Can he make it across the tracks before the train separates them once again? No. Just as he approaches the tracks the train rushes past. He can see her between the cars as if in some stroboscopic nightmare. As the spaces between the cars gives him brief glimpses she begins to age, slowly at first but as the train continues with no end in sight she gets older and older and older. When the train at long last passes he is confronted with an aged old lady in a tattered dress. She slowly turns and returns to her 1987 Plymouth leaving John standing alone in the desert salt flats. As John turns he can see the pilings of the mighty Park behind him and he knows the ride that held so much promise was over and again he had failed.

It was a dejected man that climbed the stairs to the Amusement Park, not the kid that started this most confusing and tragic ride. The wind wafting about the torn canvas seemed to reinforce his aloneness. This adventure had scarred him more than anything up to now. How could he cope with this empty feeling? The memory of this beautiful woman remained etched in his mind. What could have been? John went over every detail of the experience, what could he have done differently? Murray's words rang in his mind "take charge". He tried he thought but the outcome was still failure in his view.

John began to make his way back to the broken swan, maybe he could take the ride again do something differently. He had to try. The swan was there where he left it perched ready for another trip. This time he would know what to expect he would be able to change the outcome. John climbed into the seat staring down the dark tunnel; he began to shift his weight trying to get the swan to roll down the incline. Instead the swan began to tip spilling him onto the rotted wooden deck of the park. This grotesque face of the swan mockingly looking at him as he lay there.

You can't take the ride again John, came a voice from behind him. There stood Murray, half obscured in wreckage carrying an old pot of paint with a two-inch paintbrush in his hand, a picture of uselessness and futility. You can't take the ride again Murray repeated. You do what you do and you must live with the result. Why Murray why John asked. If a guy sees what he is doing wrong why can't he have a chance to fix it. I understand the rides now I can see the possibility to influence them just as you said, but believe me when I tell you I tried. Things just didn't work out. I thought I did everything I could to make it work. She was so lovely Murray. Yes I bet she was. Murray responds with a strange knowing and bittersweet edge in his voice as if he had been there in some distant time and place. I really loved her you know, John explains as if there was some purpose in the comment but mainly just talking about it gave John a strange way to connect with the experience and in doing so gained a degree of relief.

Love, Murray explodes what the hell do you know about love kid? Love is only an illusion can't you see that. It makes ya think one woman is different than another. Murray breaks into a prolonged agitated diatribe of cynical and misogynistic significance.

Somehow this was not the time for this John's heart was broken and the pain was only amplified by the ranting of this disgruntled little man. I gotta get out of here, John explodes. You're just a sick little fuck do you know that? You take everything and trivialize it maybe if you had found someone you wouldn't be stranded in a crumbling old park alone with your twisted dreams and opinions. I hate you Murray you lousy little bastard. John storms off with Murray following. You got some hell of a nerve kid just because some bitch blows ya off you take it out on me. You're nothing kid, just a weak, useless, worthless little prick who can't really do anything rite. You'll never amount to shit. John desperately wants to escape this critical attack he begins to run but Murray is chasing him yelling. You'll never amount to anything shithead. You failed at everything you've done and you will always fail because you just don't have it kid you stupid worthless asshole. Shot after shot John hears everything and actually takes it to heart.

Every one of Murray's comments feels like a knife in his stomach layered over his pain like some kind of cruel torture. As John rounds a corner into a tight corridor of junk and wreckage he notices a brightly colored door. In desperation John reaches for the knob and yanks on the door. Murray yells don't John don't go in there. Please Kid don't. John allows Murray to catch up. Murray out of breath, don't go in their kid please. Why Murray what do you care is it the death ride or something, if it is you'll be rid of me then. You can go back to your precious work. It is, sort of, Murray replies with more sincerity than Murray has ever shown. That's not a ride anyone should go on kid it's definitely not for you. I don't have the stuff, rite Murray, you said it yourself I'm a stupid worthless asshole rite Murray. With tears streaming down his face, John opens the door, goes inside and slams the door in Murray's face.

He appears to be in some old partially destroyed men's room, the stalls are dilapidated and the stench is gagging. There are profane messages written everywhere and the floor is covered with trash. He can barely hear heavy metal music playing somewhere but its origin is not obvious. As he looks around, he can imagine the place when it was in use men coming in here urinating, combing their hair and discussing the fate of the ladies they have brought to the park. The seedy nature of the place was titillating.

There is a grotesque fascination in the minutest corners of trash. Like an archeologist he begins investigating the scribbling on the walls. He is gripped with the notion that man's nature and life's truest meaning is somehow contained in the basest of things. It's in the trash that one learns of the true nature of men. All the shrines, flags, statues and monuments don't tell the true story, they're only a lofty sociological white wash of the truth he thought, but here in this obscure corner, in this most unguarded of moments, in the stench and graffiti was the real truth and it made him feel good somehow. He began to feel that his life, up to this time uneventful and mediocre as it was, was not a failure really but just a life like anyone's and it was the trash that was telling him that, not some elevated, lofty philosophy but the lessons in the crap. The idea tickled him for a moment.

As he kicked through the refuse he thought he could hear women giggling. He opened the stall nearest the back of the restroom and the music got louder. Through a small hole over the toilet he could hear people laughing and music. He began to tear at the hole making it bigger. With every chunk of plaster he ripped away the sounds got louder. There was a party going on in there he thought. At the point he enlarged the hole big enough to crawl through he stuck in his head. It was dark, the music was now deafening. There were certainly people in there. He could feel them. Fighting his way through the hole, he found himself in the middle of a rave party, people everywhere; their proximity was both comforting and disconcerting. The heat and noise, passing itself off as music, pressed in on him. Waves of people like currents in a human ocean pushed him toward the bar as if it were some distant beach. Soon he was sipping some brightly colored beverage and being bewildered by the exotic array of human variants undulating before him. Two exotic giggling young girls with purple and green hair run up to him and grabbed his arm pulling him into this mass of humanity. Communication is impossible. Everything is visual. He began to feel the effects of the drink and could feel himself syncing with the music. One of the girls offered him a purple pill and he washed it down

unthinkingly. His fear began to slip away. Dancing wildly to the thunderous beat he began to feel as if he belonged, a strangely good feeling. A strange tattooed black man with a funny smile caught his eye. He was watching John, smiling and staring not menacing but strangely inviting. From time to time people would come up to this fellow and they would laugh and the Black man would hand them something then they would dance away into the sea of humanity that was the dance floor. John could feel the pill kick in. All the action seemed more intense. It felt good, he felt connected somehow. He moved closer to the smiling black man. The tattooed man reached out for John and brought him close to him whispering something he really didn't hear but John pretended to. John managed to look "hip" he thought as the man pointed to a line of powder and a rolled up one hundred dollar bill. John had seen others doing this thing and trying not to look stupid ingested the powder up his nose. The stinging effect of the chemical was immediate and it felt great. He new he was going to like this as the room spun around and around. The girl with the blue hair was back with another brightly colored drink. He wolfed that down too. The black man then took John by the arm and they moved to a table in what looked like an alcove in the back of the club. The music was defining as the ocean of people banged against each other.

John felt good, really good better than he had ever felt. Finally he was going to amount to something and it had nothing to do with Murray. He had found his own way. He had friends. The black man laid out more lines, which John did up promptly. The music drummed him into numbness as the two girls returned with more drinks.

Time seemed to be somehow suspended, there was no sense of future or past; He was part of this ocean of undulating humanity like a cell is part of a body. As he peered into the vacant faces of the people around him he began to feel strangely alone. The black man, the girls, all those faces around him seemed distant from that corner of reality that was him. The more he consumed the more alone he felt. He was suddenly gripped with this need to distance himself from that self awareness. If only he could consume enough to extinguish that awful sense of self, this empty hollow feeling that he new had always been there. He knew it could only be silenced by more and more and more of something, anything. So on it went, boos, coke, crack, pot, needles, mushrooms, sex, LSD, anything he was up for it. He knew he was up for anything, anything but that one dreaded notion, that one anti-drug that was self awareness. In all the dizzying euphoria, speaking louder than the defining music was this perception of self loathing. He could not be alone with it, so he searched the vacant faces and the hollow smiles of the girls looking for anything that would keep him from looking at the one thing he never wanted to confront, himself. He new he could keep it at bay as long as there were drugs and the black dude seemed to have an unending supply.

So there it was, laid out in front of him, the struggle, and the fight. This contest pitted chemicals against a persistent gnawing germ of a feeling, based more on emotion than reason, the feeling he was alone with only this cold unaltered steady state of self that no amount of mind altering drugs could completely erase mockingly operating under everything telling him that he was no dam good. What did Murray say *you're nothing kid, just a weak, useless, worthless little prick who can't really do anything rite.* John

new there would be a terrible price to pay.

The black dude was back with some new potion, bright orange this time, always accompanied by the wide insincere grin that promised some new high. John was going for it. Nothing would stop him now there was no bodily orifice through which he was unprepared to shove a new chemical. He marveled at the ingenuity used in the administration of these things. This time the orange powder was dissolved in warm water and placed in an eyedropper and dropped into the eye. The preparation of the dropper was like some sacrament with all the ceremony of some high religious order. John didn't care just get it done and bring on more. Wow that hurt, a stinging pain shot through his face numbing his whole head. The black man stood there expecting a reaction from John. It was all John could do to give him the thumbs up signal and ask for more. The guy began to prepare more with the same meticulous care and concern. The music continued its deafening roar pushing out any chance of communication, not that any was needed.

John was a swim with euphoria, people's faces seemed to move in and out like some kind of grotesque fish bowl, and the continuous mind numbing music, the lyrics of which were completely unintelligible, kept up its interminable pounding somehow matching his heart beat. He needed more dope. Where was that black guy when you needed him? He had to find him. Searching madly through a sea of mindless faces John could not find this spreader of pleasure and pain. He was now racked with pain, nothing was more important than finding him and getting more drugs. Even these two multicolored hair girls were not important anymore. Their interest in John now gone, they danced off into the ocean of faceless people leaving John to his misery. He had to connect and get more drugs. He could feel the sensation of well being the drugs induced began to fade more and more with every beat of the monotonous defining music, leaving him with nothing but anguish, pain and above all loneliness, terrible loneliness. The futile search went on until John sank to his knees in exhaustion. People simply stepped over him. His need for drugs so overwhelming now, he scraped up the dirt from the floor and snorted it up. There on the table rite in front of him was someone's line of coke. The person was intently talking with some other guy and not paying any attention. It was John's chance; he quickly put his finger into the small pile of white powder and stuck it into his nose. The guy did not even notice. The second time he tried to steal a hit, the fellow did see him, wheeling around and catching John in the side of his head with a smashing blow that sent John sprawling back into a corner. How this could happen, John thought, how could he be brought this on himself. He lay there blood running down his cheek. How could this seem so rite just a little while ago, or was it just a little while ago. Time seemed not to exist any more.

At the height of his misery and pain something very strange happened, a kind of calmness came over him. He seemed to put all the pain, misery and the defining music in another place as if he were outside himself. He must get out of that place, he thought. He must find that hole he came in through and get out before he was lost forever. Fuelled by this moment of clarity, John struggled to his feet. Moving with a purpose now, John began his search for the hole he had torn through the restroom wall. But that was going to be

no easy task as the room had no real dimension, like a school of fish in an endless ocean the people danced in a shapeless mass. John thought if he just walked straight ahead he would find the edge of this mass of nauseating humanity and maybe find the way out. Pushing endlessly through the crowd, John began to think he was trapped in a maze of his own doing. John realized he had brought this on himself. Could he just as easily work his way out? Could it be that simple? Was it just a mind game after all? He turned and to his amazement he could see a bright light just a slight distance from him. He began to walk towards it. As he approached the light he could see it was the jagged hole he had torn through the stall. To his amazement he saw a small childlike wrinkled hand reaching through the hole as if to pull him out. It was Murray.

As he grasped the little hand, he was filled with a sense of strength and purpose. This was his only chance to deliver himself from this self-imposed mental prison, this set of golden handcuffs he had crafted. Driven by his need to survive and the notion that if this were not his last chance to save himself then he would not get another chance. He wasn't about to squander it. Pulling, tugging... first his leg then his arm slowly his entire body was almost out. The music a faint rumbling now, the wind and the creaking canvas a comfort to him as he pulled himself out of the hole he had gotten himself in. Come on kid let's get out of here, Murray's words, the sound of his voice was now a great source of consolation he never dreamed possible. As they made their way through the trash of the old abandoned rest room, John caught a glimpse of himself in a cracked mirror on the wall. His reflection was that of a drawn and tired older man, his eyes did not dwell on this image the significance was lost to him, he just wanted out.

Murray and John just walked and said nothing to each other, the wind and creaking of the park was soothing to them both. Murray broke the silence first. That was close John, a tone of genuine concern in his voice. People disappear in there and never come back. John, more to himself than to Murray, Yea I can understand that. John began to open up to Murray. I'm so ashamed of myself, how weak of me to buy into that. Murray interrupts him, you might not believe this, but as time goes on you might come to believe this was your finest hour. How can you say that Murray, from my view it was all about self-absorption, self-indulgence and weakness. Yes it was maybe but most don't survive it. You did. Admit it you finally took charge and actually ran your life, possibly it took a life or death challenge to do it, but you did. You know kid, as one gets older you look back more than ahead and it's those times that that dark experience will come clear to you. You might find it was the best thing you ever did. John just looked at Murray not knowing what he was saying and thinking Murray couldn't understand what went on in there. Murray stops him, I know all you feel now is guilt and shame and relief, but when you think about there's a lesson in it for you. Just think about the pleasure. John can't believe his ears Pleasure what are you talking about that was painful. Not completely, think about it. You know it was dangerous. You know it might of killed you, but have you ever felt so good before? You were forced to abandon your pleasure for life and what is life anyway its accomplishment isn't it kid. You thought there at the last moment you had not made your contribution yet, wasn't that the deal kid, think about it. You want to express yourself don't you kid. What does this say about you? John just thinks about what a close call he has just had, but cannot see what Murray is driving at. Murray

continues, without accomplishment life is nothing. All my life I've been trying to change things. This park for example my dream is to see people back here again and that won't happen until I change the place from what it was to what I think it should be. John under his breathe. That's going to be quite a job. Murray now with a full head of steam, I think you're now ready for the ride of your life kid. John with a little reservation, No I don't think so I'm off rides for a while. Murray jumps in, Never say that John. You're here to take the rides. John seems to sense a tone in Murray's voice that sends a chill through his body as if this whole thing was not just a concurrent accident but ordained in some way. John quickly dismissed this notion and asked, Ok Murray I should trust you, after all the last ride I blundered into myself. Murray, with a strange look in his eye, speaks up, yes kid you must trust me, I know what I'm doing here not you, obviously. Murray had resumed his old sarcasm and John was somehow comfortable with that.

Murray took John by the arm and began to drag him off in the direction of the concert hall, or what might have been the concert hall, the structure was all but collapsed now and looked unsafe. Remnants of the place called up visions of the days when band music must of emanated from this structure. Located at the end of the boardwalk now littered with junk and artifacts of the park called up visions when children laughed and people idled by the curious side shows. The concert hall occupied a prominent position in the design of the park, a fitting structure for the ride-of-his-life as Murray had referred to it.

Dwarfed by the size of the place, the two just stood for a moment and pondered the long silent music that surely must have come from this old building. John, greatly impressed by the sheer size of the place, asked Murray did you have a hand in this? John, I have a hand in everything. John looked at him strangely and with a tone of real reverence said I'm impressed.

After a long moment Murray said well kid now's your chance. Right through there kid. Murray gestured towards a large gaping hole in the front of the structure, John could see the old ticket booths and the doors leading to the dance floor. Fortified with a newly gained swagger he proceeded towards the large hole, not knowing what to expect but knowing he was far better able to deal with it now than ever before.

John made his way through the large gapping hole in the ramshackle structure and climbed over wreckage into the body of the edifice. What confronted John was a cavernous ornate dance hall, light streamed through broken windows and spilled across the vacant dance floor which looked large enough to support five hundred people but nothing was there except an occasional piece of wrecked filigree, broken furniture and off course the dirt which covered the whole park. There was something that struck John louder than anything else, that was the silence, save for the ever-present wind that blew through the cracks and rattled the crumbling boards that made up what was left of the bandstand. Every ride so far had its music and this one was strangely quiet. Only the eco of his foot steps as he wandered across the endless dance floor. He recalled the nature of rides past where everything came to him and basically hit him in the face as it were. Here nothing.

As John pushed through the wreckage and walked around the yawning open dance floor he thought he could hear the sound of people shuffling, but it was obviously the wind. Dirt and sand covered everything. He walked up onto the bandstand and stood looking out over the gapping open dance floor. He thought of all the performers that entertained from there. Looking out on what must have been an acre of humanity. Now all empty and silent, he wondered when this ride would start and what was expected of him. He wished it would begin because he was ready he had paid his duos and he thought he could handle anything after all what could be any greater a test than he had already faced, but still nothing. He waited sitting on the edge of the bandstand banging on the front of the stand with his feet just waiting. He thought for a moment of looking for Murray but decided to stay, after all this was supposed to be a ride and he was never let down in the past.

After what seemed like forever he thought something had gone wrong and decided to look for Murray and tell him things were not right, nothing was happening. As he jumped to his feet from the front edge of the bandstand something caught his eye. There in the trash of the bandstand, sticking out from under a music stand that had fallen over was the neck of a violin. He climbed the small stairway back to the bandstand and retrieved the broken instrument. Covered with dirt and unstrung, with the frog bent, it looked pretty bad. He walked out to a broken table and chair sitting near by and began to survey the damage. He thought he could fix the thing, more out of boredom than anything else. With an old rag he cleaned the dirt away and began to restring the violin. He straightened the frog and restringed the strings. Plucking the strings a couple of times, he was amazed that the violin had been so easy to fix. He left the instrument on the table. As he went back to the bandstand to look for the bow; after all he imagined the violin player would not have just left only the violin, there must be a bow there some place. As he walked over to the steps he thought he could hear footsteps other than his. It must have been the strange acoustics in the hall he thought. Yes, there was the bow just where he thought it was going to be and none the worst for ware either. As he walked back to the table where the violin laid, he was sure he could here someone or something moving through the wreckage behind him. He stopped and listened. But all was quiet. He went back to his work. When he thought he had gotten the instrument finished he put it to his chin and drew the bow across the strings. A grotesque scratching sound emanated from the thing. He didn't expect much more as he was not a violin player and there was nothing like the sound a violin made when played by a beginner. The sound could make ones skin crawl.

What he was not prepared for, however, was the crashing sound from behind him. John spun around in time to see what shocked and frightened him to the sole of his being. There standing in front of him was... well, himself. It was Him, another John, but very different. Dressed the same, looking the same, but this John was crude without any self-control or the ability to communicate. The "other" John just grunted, grabbed the violin and through it across the dance floor. In shock, John braced himself, but the crude John just hobbled off into a corner and sat down. John, in total shock, was not able to understand what had just happened. Hay, who are you. What the hell do you want, John shouted. but the "other" John just sat there. The "other" John, the crude, uncontrollable

and twisted John, with eyes vacant and staring ahead seemed quiet enough now. John made his way to where the violin had landed and retrieved the instrument. Without taking his eyes off his doppelganger, John made his way back to the table where he had fixed the violin and began to survey the damage. The violin had not sustained any damage really just a little scuffed maybe. As John checked the instrument over, he could see his look-alike out of the corner of his eye just slumped there in the half-light of the ballroom floor.

He put the violin to his chin once again and drew the bow across the strings. He was amazed at the fact that the sound was not that scratching noise, but a real note clear and succinct. He tried again, yes a note-- with a little vibrato even. At the sound of the violin John's double seemed to come to life again. This crude double of John's, walking vaguely like Frankenstein, came for the violin again. John gave ground and the double grabbed the violin again and flung it across the room and just as before went promptly back to his spot on the floor and went back into repose. John, now more irritated than frightened, went again to the place the violin had landed and picked it up. The frog had been bent again and the strings were loose but it was not broken. This time, John found a place on top of some boxes that he thought he could avoid the onslaught of this strange distorted mirror image. He fashioned a way to support the frog, re-tuned the violin and began to play again. This time the violin seemed to come alive in his hand, real music. John could see the crude, course; rough "other" John as he begins to stir. John positioned himself in such a way as to barricade himself from the assault of this creature that looks like himself. Clawing at the boxes with all the fury of a deranged madman the other John attempts to topple John. All the while, John is actually playing the violin. Not just playing but getting better with every draw of the bow. As the music continues the creature gets more and more enraged as if the mere act of playing is what is irritating him. John is pushing boxes down on top of this monstrous creature, but as long as he continues to play he continues the pursuit.

John can no longer play and avoid the offensive. He is finally pushed to the floor by this crude mirror image creature. Scrambling to avoid the attack, he is suddenly gripped with a strange awareness. This is not some random creature that happens to resemble John this "is" John. This is the part of John that is working against his success, the inept, maladroit, clumsy part of himself. If John is to achieve anything he must battle this ham-fisted, lumbering part of his own personality. This is the battle he has been waiting for his whole life. Everything he lost in his life was because he was afraid to confront this twisted part of his own character. Filled with rage at his own incompetence, and clumsiness he begins to fight back kicking and punching he begins to battle himself.

This is a fight to the death. A struggle to determine which John will emerge victorious the refined and intellectual John or the vulgar and common John. It all comes down to how badly he wants it. This is mostly an even fight at first, both combatants alternating advantage but as the tussling continues John begins to overcome his base nature biting scratching punching anything to overcome this part of himself that is somehow made live so he can see it. He remembers always the love ride. The one thing he really wanted lost to him because of this creature and his inability to express himself.

He is now hysterically hitting this alter ego with the leg of a chair, violently destroying this thing once and for all. Exhausted and with the last gasp of his strength he hammers home the last shot to this all too familiar creature's head.

John, exhausted, slowly stands and staggers backwards bumping against the table on which the violin lays. John picks up the instrument and the bow, puts it to his cheek and begins to play. John plays with all the virtuosity and technique of a master violinist. Having proven his ability to himself he puts down the violin and looks in the direction of the large hole through which he entered and begins to leave. The hole now looking like an artist entrance tunnel with the sound of a large audience somewhere at the end, John walks triumphantly into the light.

Running now, John emerges onto the park an older and, he thought, wiser man. He is consumed with self-confidence. He can't wait to find Murray and tell him of his accomplishments. His gate now a walk, he begins to reflect on the past and the manner in which he dealt with the other rides, the love ride mostly he could still see the beautiful young women in his mind it could have been so different had he only had the assurance and self trust he felt now.

All too soon the silence of the park and the omnipresent wind overcame him and he was lost in thought, musing about the life that lay ahead and about his newfound ability to exert himself. He began to think if someday he too could design a ride or two, after all what rite did Murray have to keep that power to himself. Who elected Murray to author the park? He John... had enough knowledge and depth to fashion an experience or two.

Yea... and where was that old fart anyway. No sooner than the thought crossed his mind than he heard a resounding bang at the other end of the park, it sounded like a gunshot. Oh my god, he thought, Murray has finally gotten in over his head and would need John to bail him out again or worse he had accidentally shot himself, a concept that both titillated and saddened him. John realized he had very complicated notions about Murray, love and hate both mingled in a jumble of feelings he really couldn't sort out at that moment. All he could do was run in the general direction of the shot.

Rounding a collapsed portion of merry-go-round, he saw Murray with an old rifle in his arms and a funny smile on his face. Hi ya kid, how you getting along. John relieved interrupts, what the hell are YOU doing with that gun Murray, are you nuts. Hell no, I just finished this here shooting gallery, look. Beyond Murray was the crudest of targets, mostly broken, but with an occasional target out of the Second World War, with Evil Japanese squinty faces and Germans with swastikas on their helmets. Here give it a try Murray asks. No, listen Murray about that last ride it was very impactful like nothing I have ever done it changed my life I'm not the same guy anymore I can play the violin. Murray looks John intently in the face and in a quiet unequivocal manner unusual for Murray says, yes John you are the same guy.

No No Murray I'm not the same guy anymore at all. I sort of know what you've been

saying all along. I've been weak and afraid actually but that ride it changed everything I overcame my weakness and actually achieved something I can play a violin for gods sake and I'm good. John, on a roll now continues, I don't know how you could have even liked me actually I was so inadequate and powerless. You know, the way I feel now I would like to go back and do all the rides again just to show you I'm a new guy. John doesn't allow Murray to say anything just paces up and down talking. People are funny really they need to express themselves just like you said Murray. Looking back I hated myself. People who don't try to achieve anything are well just no good actually, just worthless. I regret all the time I wasted being a creep Murray not demanding more or trying something in life. People who don't achieve anything have nothing to live for and, as a matter of fact, shouldn't be allowed to live. Not live John? Murray injects. No Life is for people who try, not the weak and powerless Murray; I have no sympathy for the weak.

With a funny and knowing twinkle in his eye, Murray says, Well Kid your going to love this shooting gallery then, here give it a try Kid... unless your too weak and afraid off course.

Realizing Murray was taunting him, John speaks up. What are you talking about weak give me that gun. Murray hands the weapon to John with mock hesitation. John pulls the gun to him and begins to sight down the barrel towards one of the only clay plates left in tact slowly he squeezes the trigger. A loud bang and unexpected recoil knocks John to the ground. John bangs his head on the knurly timbers that make up the floor of the park and is knocked dizzy for a moment.

Recovering his senses John, with gun still in hand stands up to find he is no longer in the Park but is surrounded by large concrete walls. Marshal music with rhythmic drumming can be heard everywhere about him. John has found himself in a large bunker overlooking the ocean. Everywhere about him are solders from every period of conflict from the cave man with a club to the high-tech solder of the future all scurrying about with all seriousness and in obvious preparation, preparation for war.

An air of anticipation and urgency surrounds everything that is going on. Solders from every period in man's history are marching by or working on various elements of the defenses. As John wonders amongst the assembled troops he feels, not only the seriousness of the moment, but also something he can't put his finger on, a sense of anticipation and expectation not of impending gloom but of excitement and a strange delight pervades the assembled men. John can't help but notice a marine looking at himself in front of a mirror, fitting hand grenades to his vest in a manner that is reminiscent of a young man primping before a big date. All the while, marshal music with all its heroic and dramatic symbolism blasts forth.

John senses an agenda here in which the real motives for violence are hidden inside the preparation. The meaning is not what is ostensible. War seems always to be couched in necessity, the need to defend ones life or territory but this is different somehow there is no apparent invading army, no threat that John can see. John is intrigued with the many

divergent periods that are represented. Those soldiers present represent all wars in which man has participated. The commonality, however, is the fear and excitement that has attended events such as these over man's lifetime. As John walks amongst the assembled army he is acknowledged and welcomed as long as he carries the gun the universal icon of his acceptability. Just another gun as it were. All machinations of peace are just not appropriate here, these events are past all that. Peace is the stuff of pacifists and weaklings and there are no weaklings here, just heroes and those who are about to die.

But still, where is this enemy, where is the threat? John cannot but imagine some equal and opposite army doing all "their" preparation somewhere out there hidden. Some other army, motivated by their fear and perceived need, that will make itself known in some horrible way and justify all this preparation. He is suddenly gripped with the realization that he might be called upon to actually kill someone; this is a horrible thought and causes John some pause. All the triumvirate music, flags, and glory mongering to a large degree disguises this gruesome fact and produces a euphoria of heroics in which soldiers see themselves covered in laurel leaves and not blood.

How will he know this enemy when he sees them? Will they be dressed differently? Will they be carrying a different flag, speaking a different language, worshipping a different God? All he did know was that they were most likely just men like him dragged into this bloody business by someone else, talked into defending some other flag for reasons they could never really understand. What was very clear though was that fear, hate, and survival drove most men in war, not some lofty notions born of fancy rhetoric. People, unfortunately have more bullets than brains

The erosion of voice is the build-up of war. Silence no longer supports prayers, but lives inside the open mouths of the dead.

As John ascends a metal stairway to the top of the embankment he sees a large figure of a man, resplendent with medals and decorations looking very much like general Pershing newly polished. Scanning the horizon with a pair of field glasses, the general frequently shouts orders to an aid, which would then render a snappy salute and yell in a field telephone, the whole thing would be comic if it were not for the seriousness of the enterprise. John too scans the horizon and sees nothing, no invading army just an endless expanse of ocean. John can, all too well, feel this internally generated passion of the moment building to a fever pitch. How long can this tension be sustained without an apparent enemy?

A short distance away located in a slight depression of the bunker stands a medieval catapult. Two knights, dressed in black and blue oddly, are engaged in excited rhetoric and seem confused over the amount of tension built up in the restraints. A large boulder rests in the sling and the system seems primed and cocked for action. There is some confusion as to which knight has the last word on the subject. One Knight, the blue knight, begins to push on the Black Knight to emphasize his point. One Knight loses his balance and falls against the mechanism that holds the catapult arm.

With a whoosh and a slam the device fires, sending a stone the size of a man's head flying in the direction of the general. A stunned expression covers the faces of the knights as the boulder hits the general in the back and sends him flying over the embankment and into the weeds that cover the face of the bunker. More embarrassed than hurt, the general

covered with stickers and dirt struggles up the face of the bunker. Outraged, with his broken field glasses still hanging from his neck, he grabs a flamethrower from a GI standing nearby and incinerates the two Knights and the contraption. At the sight of the flamethrower, a machine gun position some meters back opens up and sprays the beach indiscriminately with fifty-caliber fire. John watching from the top of the stairway realizes this senseless act is an accidental trigger that will set off a conflagration of supper proportions tries to find some cover. John runs down the stairs just as an explosion takes off the landing he was just standing on. He pushes through a maze of frantic soldiers. Mostly confused and not knowing where the invaders are coming from everyone begins to fire in all directions.

What ensues is a horrific battle with no real enemy. Fear, frustration and intense preparation have given way to a battle for self-preservation. John finds a crack in the wall of the bunker just large enough for one person. Pushing himself with all his might into this crack, John tries to distance himself from this blood bath taking place in front of his eyes. From this position he can see people being dismembered and slaughtered with varying degrees of efficiency. Either with a crude ax or laser the horror in the eye of those being dispatched is the same. The smell of burnt flesh and the sound of trumpets are mixed into a symphony of death, revulsion, shock and nausea.

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of
blood; Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;
And thinly drawn with famishing for
flesh.

W. OWEN

Out of this nauseating, butchery and chaos. No one, save the very lucky, survive. John believes he can escape by being invisible, by remaining motionless and staying out of the fight he can gain a kind of anonymity. He pushes himself tighter against the cold concrete wall watching and waiting for the inevitable end to this orgy of death. Indistinguishable at first, just another body in the sea of warriors a small man dressed in a tan uniform turns and as if in a dreadful dream the two make eye contact. This is the squinty-eyed Japanese man from the shooting gallery. My God he sees me, John thinks. This little man with a gun taller than he begins to rush toward John. He lowers the bayonet and with a blood curdling scream runs at John. As the frightening little man, bayonet lowered at John's chest rushes blindly towards him, John feels panic and in a strange way he can think very clearly, he can see many of the things he recognizes as elements of his life playing out in his mind. That beautiful girl from the love ride keeps appearing in his thoughts. Strange, John thinks, with precious little time left in his life these are the things that are running in his mind.

In the last few feet, as death in the form of a cold blade is now only a few feet away, he remembers the gun in his hand. There was no agonizing internal thought process wherein John evaluated the consequences of this action. He simply shot the grizzly little man in the forehead.

The momentum of the blade continuing in John's direction, however, could not be stopped with a bullet and found its mark in John's left forearm. A wave of pain mixed with relief swept over him as his consciousness, along with the drum music, soldiers screaming and the smell of war left him. He was unsure of many things at that moment, but of one thing he was confident, he would never play the violin again.

Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned, Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred. Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared With piteous recognition in fixed eyes, Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless. And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall. By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.

W. OWEN

He came around in a hospital bed with the sound of a boom box playing rock and roll. The nurse was giving him a bath. He could feel her gentle hands gliding over his cheek. She combed his hair and slowly raised a mirror to show him his face. He was dumbfounded at the image he saw in the mirror. An old man looked back at him from the looking glass. It looked like him, but what had happened he wondered? Life had happened and it left him, as with many people, ultimately old and to a small extent bitter.

A boom box began to play western music and the real meaning of the place began to make itself known. He was in a veteran's hospital surrounded by crippled and damaged people. He came to realize he was being warehoused along with a large number of vets with every sort of affliction of body and mind. Why, he asked himself, did he end up old and in a place like this; there should have been so much more. It was Murray's fault he thought. What were, after all, his options? He could only deal with what was put in front of him. However, what haunted him more than anything was that he had been given opportunities and completely misplayed them. His mind naturally went to the sight of that beautiful girl he had fallen in love with, as she grew old between the cars of the train. Why did that have to happen? It would have been so easy to take that ride to another place. He could have done that. How could he have been so timid?

The pain of old age, John thought hurts more from the things one hasn't done in life than from anything physical and John was feeling a great deal of pain. He thought if he ever saw that little bastard Murray he would change everything. He would go back...but that seemed so long ago now, and anyway maybe that whole amusement park thing was some kind of dream and he would never have a chance to tell Murray what he was thinking.

It became obvious to John That Murray was gaming him by appearing to be the gate keeper and all the time Murray was trying to keep John from taking over the authorship of the park and changing things more along the lines of what John thought appropriate. After all, he too had ideas for the park. All the time spent on Murray's rides left precious little time to achieve ones objectives in life John thought.

If he could only get back to that park, why he would wrestle the place away from Murray

and build a paradise for people to really come back for, not Murray's old and stale concepts reflected in the rides Murray felt strongly about. As the hillbilly music droned on, John felt as if he might never see Murray or the park again. He spent a great deal of time thinking about Murray. John was very conflicted, alternately loving and then hating Murray

Playbills placed around the facility indicated there was to be a show in the dining room after dinner and everyone was expected to attend. John never liked to join the other old guys at affairs such as these, as John was not generally in the mood for getting together with other people. The sight of the Japanese Soldier dieing at his hand haunted his every idle moment. Tonight, however, was somehow different the sound of twanging heartbreak western music had started to drive him silly and maybe a little entertainment would be a good change. There was to be a clown.

Ordinarily, John hated clowns. The whole clown thing left him cold. The idea of such an overt claim to one's attention, the big red nose etc. John found them somehow freighting, but tonight well it was better than that dammed boom box and the western music.

John arrived in the wreck room around 8:00 as the sign read and he found the place filled with the usual assortment of old vets that are always there. The clowns were into their routine hitting and tormenting each other. Squirting water from the same old lapel flower. John saw irony in a bunch of old warriors laughing at this cartoon violence with utter disconnect.

As John stared at the clowns endless prate falls he began to have his attention drawn to the smallest of the clowns. There was something about the little guy. He began to think if he were to remove the large nose and take off the wig he might look a lot like- "NO"- could it be, Murray. John's excitement grew with every move of the little clown. John was sure the little bastard was looking just at him. John marveled at the physical dexterity of that old man. Soon the clowns wheeled out a large cannon and began to load Murray into it. They opened the double doors and aimed the canon out into the yard and pulled the lanyard. A large k-boom, much smoke, and the little guy was gone.

John fought through a gauntlet of wheel chairs, walkers and IV bottles to a door leading out to the backyard and Murray. He stopped and took a long look at the assembled ranks of crippled warriors, humbled by time and craft to this last roll call. Needles and drugs their weapons now. John knew he didn't belong there. There must be more to life than this. From the beginning he knew he was to accomplish something important. Murray must be training him for this grand challenge, John believed. He removed his damaged arm from the sling that hung around his neck, turned and resolutely walked through the door and on to the rotting planks of the Amusement Park.

John felt as if he had returned home from some Crusade. The crumbling sideshows and tattered canvas were somehow comforting to him now. That lonely emptiness he felt when he first found the Park was not with him now. Waite a minute, he thought where's Murray. He had to find him. After considering the flight path and trajectory of Murray

when last seen, John paced off the distance he felt was appropriate and sure enough there were two tiny legs sticking out of a faded backdrop showing the picture of a large breasted woman with the title "The Great Velma tells all". From John's angle it appeared Murray was stuck in Miss Velma's cleavage.

Murray began to yell, John, John get me down for Christ sake. John was transfixed at the sight of Miss Velma's opiated glower with two frantically wiggling legs stuck in her chest. John quickly found a ladder and preformed Murray's cleavage extraction. The two old men finally exhausted but together say nothing just listen to the sound of the wind in the canvas and the creek of the lumber beneath there feet.

After a while John broke the silence. Murray, why man, what were you thinking? Don't you know what these rides become after you concoct them. I know you Murray and I don't believe you intended this to happen. John shows Murray the shriveled arm and dashed hopes all a result of the damage done in the name of amusement. I really don't want to talk about that though because I know what you will say, I could have done things differently I could have been a great leader. Well Murray I'm not a great anything any more and I want to stop trying. Things just don't work out for me in this life. Come on John stop the pity crap will ya Murray jumps in. Maybe I went a little overboard with the war thing, especially the cannon bit at the end, but it could have worked out if you had found the key. You know something Murray I will never find the key, for me the key will remain always hidden. Ya know I can't believe I'm listening to this stuff from you John. You will find your way John I believe that. You sell yourself too short John you are a special guy really. Thanks Murray but I know the truth. Tell me Murray are there any rides from which there is no return? A strange look crosses Murray's face as he replies; well yes there might be one. It's been here from before me actually. I know it works, but I've never taken it. Tell you the truth I'm frightened of it. Where is it John asks? It's been here all the time right under your nose. The two old men begin to walk in the direction of the roller coaster.

John can here the sound of coaster wheels approaching as the two old guys slowly walk. I'm tired Murray John blurts out. I'm really tired and I need to take that ride that takes all the pain away. Do you understand Murray? Ya I think I do. The two men walk in silence for a while. You know John I know nothing about this one and I can't protect you. Protect me-- could you have ever saved me? You forget that drug thing already Murray scolds. Well, I'll give you that one Murray but I want to take that ride the one that doesn't return. The sounds of the coaster wheels are louder now and the two men are approaching the platform where the car will stop. John knows what he must do. The car, black and rusted with age pulls up in front of the two old pals. Why don't you re-think this thing John there is no good reason why you gotta jump into that car when you don't know what is going to happen. It could take you to Hell for all we know. That would be a hot ride now would it not Murray. I can't talk you out of this foolish thing Murray pleads. No Murray, it is time to go. And with that, John throws Murray into the car and pulls down the restraint bar sending the car up the first incline. Murray standing up in the car screaming at John, what have you done, you killed me you bastard. John covers his face as his eyes fill with tears the car crests the grade and John can hear the whoosh as

the car goes over the top silencing Murray's protests and leaving John to ponder the fate of the Park.

With renewed vigor and excitement John makes his way to the spot where the swan had stopped, bringing the love ride to an unfortunate end. This was to be the first ride he would change. There a short distance from the Park was the swan, keeled over in the desert right where he had abandoned it. John feverishly erected the swan and crawled beneath it to attach it to the track. The vision of that beautiful girl burned in his memory.

His concentration was suddenly broken by an untimely tug on his pant leg and the words Can I help? There as if by some ordained reality stood another young man all in white and waiting to take a ride.

THE END

