

## *Insomnia*

He thinks about the water often: sitting in traffic; in a chair in his office; in bed with his wife, Jeanette, who is now asleep. Together they live the life of the city, Phoenix, where the smog blisters the horizon and the swimming pools are treated by experts. Byron, his brother-in-law, runs a pool cleaning business. Byron drives from home to home in his sky-blue pickup truck, *Byron's Pool Service*, measuring the pH, the need for chlorine and acid treatments. He has recently hired two graduates from Tempe, has bought each a truck and supplies; next year, he'll be hiring another, business is swell. The college graduates are tan and one of them, the blonde, deals cocaine.

"It's a great job for a kid," Byron said, earlier this afternoon in the driveway. He stood in the sun, his long arms resting on the roof of his truck. "You drive around a lot. You get to listen to the radio, get a tan. And get laid by all those lonesome housewives."

"That's a myth," Tom said.

"Myth my ass. Just ask old snowhead next time he comes by. Ask him if *he's* getting any."

"Drug dealers," Tom said. "It's not the same."

"Kids," Byron said. "Kids. You ask Jeanette sometime. Sometime when you're feeling lonesome. Kids these days—they're like bunnies. Like bunnies and monkeys," he said, wagging his finger. "I'll give 'em this, though. You can't call 'em lazy. They just ain't lazy."

“It’s the nature of the drug,” Tom said, and he knows Byron thinks he’s lazy. All accountants, according to Byron, are lazy. Ever since the calculator. Byron resents him his wife, Byron’s sister. At thirty she’s still a vision—all skin and hair, and now while she sleeps beside him, while Tom watches the clock, the luminous patterns which read 3:37, he thinks about Jeanette sitting outside in the sun, drinking her iced tea, reading a book and watching the pool man. The pool man is just a kid skimming orange blossoms across the surface of the water—the pole in his hand a sword. A foil, he thinks. The kind you have to point with to do any real damage.

Since the advent of the repeating rifle, nicotine, like other drugs, has become decreasingly popular. When he smoked he would handle his cigarette like a pointer—a hot, burning tip, punctuating the rhythm of his sentences and ideas. And while he still carries his cigarettes, he no longer smokes them: not for three months. To celebrate the event, 17 March, he picked Jeanette up at the library and drove to the airport. There they caught the first flight leaving for St. Louis.

To quit smoking he had to face his addiction. Whenever he felt the urge, the first shivers of nicotine withdrawal, he would put a cigarette in front of him. He would focus on the cigarette until the shiver passed and he began to think about something else. If he could think about something else, then he didn’t want a cigarette. Even at dinner, over his coffee, which he kept, and his Scotch, which he also kept—even then he would reach into his pocket and remove a cigarette, and set it before him, standing end-up. He became less conversational and more stoic. “No one,” he would argue, “wants to be an addict. You name me one who does. A drunk, a junkie—a Twinkie nut. I don’t care what he’s using, no one wants to be an addict,” and then he would stop talking, focus on his cigarette, a monument of self-discipline,

and feel stronger about himself than ever before. “Just one,” he might say. “Just one,” and by now he knew that he was beyond the danger of addiction, that addiction was something you need not be afraid of if you faced up to it. He was smart enough to know he didn’t want just one.

This is what he thought about on the plane, non-smoking, a window seat where he sat holding his wife’s hand. He had smoked a particular brand of cigarettes, one which advertised cowboys and wild horses; Jeanette told him for the first time in years he smelled really nice.

Once in St. Louis they rented a car, found a motel near the airport and bought a bottle of Jameson’s. It was, after all, St. Patty’s. They drank whiskey from plastic cups and watched television until he passed out. In the early morning, he woke to find Jeanette sitting on a vinyl chair, staring out the window. She sat watching the lights and the planes land, which he pictured as he closed his eyes, turning into his pillow, the planes falling into his mind—the edges blurred by the light on their wings.

“They’re so pretty,” she might have said.

In the morning, dressed, she did say, “I want to see the Arch.”

“I don’t want a cigarette.”

“Yes you do.”

“You’re right,” he said, flexing, reaching for the Tylenol. “I want to see the Arch.”

She had been raised in St. Louis. “When I was a kid,” she told him, “they were building the thing. To celebrate Jefferson. The Louisiana Purchase. They kept building it and every weekend we’d drive downtown to watch the progress. And then Dad got a job in Detroit, and we moved. They still hadn’t connected the top—it wasn’t complete. I want to see it complete,” she said, and he had promised someday they would, and now they were in St. Louis and this was something he was remembering: their vacation, on Oahu, the place of his birth. They had married in Phoenix and flown

across the ocean and set themselves up for two weeks in a condo which belonged to friends of his parents. Normally, the friends got three grand a month for it, but his parents knew people, it was a small island, and it was then, while treading water in the Pacific, that she told him about St. Louis, and the Arch she never saw complete, and the way when you looked up at the Arch it always looked the same. What was different, she explained, was the sky, and he felt himself drifting on the water, wondering what it would be like if the sky never changed, if only the things below it changed, like trees. Like plants and all those people who planted them and all this water.

Because he cannot sleep, and because he does not want to think about not sleeping, he decides it is time. He rises from the bed and walks through the dark halls of his house; in the kitchen, he reaches under the sink, where he knows there is a half-bottle of gin, a gallon of Chablis, and a full liter of Scotch. He bought the Scotch last weekend and it is still in its bag. He bought it at a liquor store downtown, off Van Buren, the type that caters to the hookers and johns—cheap beer, soda-pop wine. The whiskey bottles were covered with dust, behind the counter, where a man sat watching a television. Beneath the counter Tom knew the man had a gun, it was that kind of place, and the bottle is still dusty. He rinses it under the tap and locates a glass, his whiskey glass, the one with a picture of the Howard Coleman Library stenciled onto the glass. Once, before, when he used to worry about Jeanette worrying about his drinking, he had tried to quit: he had tried to face it the way he would later face his addiction to nicotine. He'd pour out a glass of beer, or Scotch, and set it down in front of him and stare at it. But while he stared at the glass, he would want what it held, and so he would drink it—smoothly and in one pleasant, lingering rush. Addiction, he reasoned, wasn't addiction when you wanted it. It was need.

In the mornings, Jeanette always took a swim. “You’ve got a problem,” she might tell him, someday, shaking the water from her hair. Maybe reaching for the towel.

“Really?”

Of course it’s all in the blood: a treasure to be passed down the genetic line, like blue eyes or hemophilia. In your weakest moments, something to be proud of. Usually, it begins at the elbows, a sudden, nervous little twitch, near the joints, really, on the inside—the tender part. From there it spreads equally up the biceps while the fingers grow nervous and clumsy and the brain, ever on the alert, begins to send signals elsewhere: the gut, the ankles—the hamstrings, even, which tighten up as if being choked: the way you lock in a drill bit, by choking it. By now the brain is foggy, its logic unpredictable, caught in the undertow of need. What once seemed clear is now less so. Your sentences become confused, *post hoc*, and what you’re thinking is what, simply, is going to stop you now from going through this one more time?

A swallow, you think. Just enough to swallow yourself full.

After clarity comes love. Sweet, feckless love. Eventually the flesh begins to soften, around the eyes at first, and then the mouth, into the neck and arms and flanks until, one morning over coffee and juice, you realize the flesh you have is not necessarily the flesh you want. Christmas last in Hawaii, with his parents and Jeanette, and Byron, who’d wanted to come along—“What kind of swimming pools they got over there?”—they’d shared a room with Byron, and one night, in bed, Tom had wanted his wife, Jeanette, and she had said, “No, Tom. Byron.”

“So?”

“So wait,” she said, sleepily. “Wait until morning.”

And after a while he had fallen asleep. In the morning, he

walked on the beach in a t-shirt. Byron slept in and woke late to fix eggs. Jeanette went shopping with his mother for a swimsuit in Waikiki, and his father changed the oil in their rental car. But on the beach, in his t-shirt, while walking along the white sand, he came across a couple. The boy was in a wet suit, and the girl, a young girl with short blond hair, lay on her back, the top of her bikini curled loosely in her fist. She lay on her back and smiled up at Tom, as if to say *Morning, Dad*, and he had wanted to tell her to watch out. This was a public beach, the cops patrolled it with helicopters, but instead Tom had looked at the boy, his skin swollen with fine, perfect health, and of course the girl, and then Tom had walked on. He could feel the boy's eyes, following him, and he thought never again would a woman look at him the way he had wanted to look at her—in sweet, gentle admiration. He thought about Jeanette, telling him to wait. To wait until morning.

“You know what I think?” Byron said, later. They were sitting on the porch, drinking beer, watching the birds inside his father's pigeon coop. The coop had burned down once years ago. Neighbors said you could see them flaming, the birds, as they tried to beat out the fire. Some of them escaped into the sky.

“No. What,” Tom said.

“I think if a man wants to screw around on his wife, he should let her screw around, too.”

“You've never been married.”

“I think if a man screws around on his wife, it better be worthwhile. I've seen plenty of those housewives, let me tell you. They sit out there by the pool, wagging their tails. Loyal as God damn pups, Bud. Pups!”

“Never,” Tom said. “I've never cheated on Jeanette.”

“Meaning? Meaning what, Bud?”

“Meaning, why are we talking about this?”

Just then Tom's father came through the gate, holding a

fan belt, the knuckles of his right hand bloody and skinned. He stumbled through the gate, reached into the cooler for two beers, and stepped slowly into the house.

“If you ask me,” Byron said, pointing to Tom’s father, “I think you better start keeping an eye on your wife. I think your old man’s about half lit.”

His father had enjoyed the study of our American heritage and raised homing pigeons. Once his father snuck a dove on a plane and flew to the big island. There, he let the bird go, and by the time he arrived home, flying back on a plane, finding his car in the parking lot, driving over the Puli and arriving home late for supper, there she was, sitting on the coop, roosting. His father would tell the story often.

But now outside on his driveway, under the floodlights, it’s time for glory. The basketball is dense, in need of air, and after pumping the ball, filling the yellow-orange ball full of air, he’s ready to go. The ball in one hand, the drink in another, Tom forces the net. After the ball goes in, as planned, he turns to face the crowd which he can’t see for all the floodlights. Still, he hears it, and he knows it admires his finesse—this basketball player with the lovely wife, Jeanette.

“I had a good coach,” he’s telling the crowd. “The finest coach in college basketball today, Gene Tummings.” He turns to the crowd and waves, sipping from his drink. “Gene,” he says, nodding. “Gene, you taught me everything I know.”

His next shot from the free-throw line sails onto the roof; he can hear the ball rolling across the length of the house, and what Gene Tummings taught him, specifically, was how to run suicide sprints. Running those sprints had taught Tom how to measure his endurance, how to break through the barrier of pain into the promise of a second wind. Once into the second wind, that wind which emerged from all of

this pain, he was invincible. And Jeanette would watch him from the bleachers, running his sprints, and he would be oblivious, running.

“My wife,” he tells the crowd, smiling, pointing to where she might be seated. “She’s a vision.”

Now, setting down his drink on the free-throw line, he looks down the length of the driveway. The mailbox is a hundred yards, easy. As easy as making a dash, which he does, but along the way stumbles into his stride, sliding on his belly into a cholla. When he rises from the pavement he understands that his arm and cheek are full of needles. His belly is going to raspberry, and he can’t feel a thing.

“Wait,” Jeanette said, in bed with Byron just four feet away. “Wait until morning.”

Meaning, Tom thinks, that she knew in the morning Byron would be too caught up in his sleep to notice. Meaning, Tom thinks, that this is the voice of experience. And what he wants to know, here and now, standing in the doorway of their bedroom, watching his wife sleep—what he wants to know is where she learned to wait. Where, and with whom?

Most mornings she preferred to swim naked alone. And naturally Tom had not wanted to wait, and Jeanette had slid under the blanket, receiving him with considered affection. There she labored under the blanket and what he thought about, with Byron next door—next bed, actually . . . what he thought about was what she must look like, there beneath the blanket in the same room with her brother and her lover and all this experience. What he thought about was what this meant, this waiting for morning, which she might as well have done. And later, after Jeanette would rise from the covers, spooning him, later the next morning while Jeanette went into Waikiki looking for a new swimsuit, he would know that she was not going to talk about this. He knew she



was going to tuck it into the back of her mind, quietly, the same way she had tucked him into her mouth, waiting for him to either come or fall asleep.

Whence comes this experience? The needles in his face belong to the cholla which grows along the borders of his driveway. In the bathroom, with Jeanette's tweezers, he plucks the needles from his skin. The needles are barbed and he is careful not to break them, but even so they break, still under his skin, his hands large and uncooperative. The roots of these needles will remain lodged in his skin until they begin to fester; he will need to dab at the roots with turpentine, or nail polish, he can't remember which. On the beach, when you ran into a man-of-war, the most immediate cure was urea. You'd ask a friend to piss on you and now, after he takes a leak, he rubs at the blisters along his arm and face. He rubs his hand along the skin of his belly and picks out the small pieces of gravel; sooner or later, things are going to start beginning to hurt. Meanwhile, he stands here, in the doorway, watching his lovely wife sleep.

*Wait 'til tomorrow*, he's telling himself. *Wait.*

If Gene Tummings had been his father, instead of his coach, Tom might have become someone else, and vice versa. Because he cannot sleep, Jeanette must be sleeping with someone else. Tomorrow things are going to hurt like hell.

But he's sensible enough to know there's a way to put that off; he can't remember where he's put the basketball. The whiskey is on the kitchen table, where it belongs, and he grabs the bottle and glass and returns through the garage to his driveway. Because he can trace the first, faint stirrings of dawn, he decides to turn the floodlights off. The switch is located behind a rake, a three-foot-wide rake he uses Sunday mornings to groom the granite lawn, and when he reaches for the switch, the handle of the rake falls forward, striking him in the face. Pissed, he takes the rake and hurls it across the garage.

The rake bounces off the wall, landing on the hood of his car—a fully restored 1968 Pontiac station wagon. A family car with an enormous engine just beneath the painted hood. In the morning, he will have to check the paint for damage. Above him, propped on the beams of his garage, rests his stepladder.

After he thinks about the basketball long enough, maybe he'll remember where he's put it.

Love is for the timid and the damned; in Phoenix, the water becomes necessary, the whiskey supplies him with regret. What if he had reason to be someone else? His wife, he tells himself, is sleeping with someone else. This much is clear, the ladder is unsteady, his father never taught him how to dribble properly, and as he ascends, bottle in hand, he knows what he is doing. He is climbing onto the roof of his house. Once there, he realizes the need for furniture. He descends, removes a lawn chair from the porch and returns to the ladder, climbing once again. When he swings himself onto the rooftop, the chair swings with, disrupting his balance and swinging him full circle—the chair striking the ladder, the ladder falling slowly. When the ladder finally hits the ground, there is a loud, awkward noise, leaving Tom alone on his roof to consider recent events. Simply put, the ladder has fallen to the ground, and the tar paper is sticky with grit; his father never meant a thing to Gene Tummings; perhaps basketball could have been a way of life. He unfolds the chair by the air-conditioning unit and leans back into his chair. After a while he recognizes the basketball, across the roof, sitting in a puddle of stale water over their bedroom. Jeanette could possibly be sleeping with the pool boy, or maybe someone else he doesn't know. Usually she waits until morning when it is safe. Any minute, he thinks, looking into the sky. Any minute now and the sun is going to break.

In St. Louis, there on the lawn beneath the Arch, St. Patty's Day weekend, he thought never had he seen anything so

impossibly big. The ocean was big, but not as big as the sky. The Arch stretched across the sky and, looking up at it, he realized he was no longer looking up at anything. Rather, he was looking down at something larger than himself and his wife combined—the promise of good fortune, a homestead. Land for the taking and enough space for a man to milk his cow. Clearly the possibilities were enormous.

“It’s so big,” Jeanette said. “It’s bigger than I remembered.”

The air was brisk, washing over the Arch and the shape it described. They stood on a large, dead lawn, and Jeanette shivered inside her coat.

“A veritable wonder of the world,” he said, taking her arm. “Let’s go inside.”

Inside, underground, with the lawn overhead, and the sky above that, they talked to a woman about tourist attractions—a newly constructed mall, the local riverboat rides. The woman asked if they were on their honeymoon.

“No.”

“You’re so young. And pretty,” she said. “You really should go up inside. You can see the whole city!”

Tom wondered if the woman had ever been on a honeymoon; he felt like a tourist, and realized that he was. A visitor in a foreign land. The Louisiana Purchase, which Tom knew Jefferson had been allowed to make because Napoleon had got his ass kicked in Santo Domingo. Napoleon was on another continent, no longer a threat. His navy locked in ice. A long time ago, before he began training doves, Tom’s father had undertaken a correspondence course entitled *Our American Heritage*. His father had often encouraged Tom to learn from the past and to help him study.

Waiting in line, Tom thought about his father, and cigarettes, his head racing while Jeanette read to him from the brochures. The air was hot and still, museum air, and Tom pretended not to listen. Growing up in Oahu, Tom had

learned to hate the tourists. He watched a family from Arkansas, or Missouri, standing before them: three overfed children shoving each other, sucking on their Cokes, their parents standing stiffly, equally overfed and uncomfortable. He wondered what type of car it was that they might drive.

“So why?” Jeanette said.

“Why what?”

“Why now—’68. Why build the thing now?”

In 1968 Tom was watching television and learning to surf. His father was in another detox unit, on the mainland, someplace near Portland, and Tom was made responsible for taking care of the birds; his mother was afraid of lice and she wanted to go back to school. She wanted to protest the Vietnam war, expand her horizons. For the very first time Tom realized that maybe she wanted to leave him.

“It’s a symbol,” he said to Jeanette. “It makes the future seem bigger than it is.”

Tom watched a man standing by an ashtray across the room light up. The man took a drag from his cigarette and, exhaling, blew the smoke away and up into the ceiling.

“You know,” Jeanette said, taking his arm and kissing him, briefly, on the neck. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Just don’t leave me,” he said. “Promise.”

If he hadn’t played basketball in college, taught himself to slam-dunk, Jeanette might have never fallen in love with him. He holds the basketball on his lap, watching the sun rise, thinking the basketball is round and in about the same shape as the world. If it weren’t for gravity, he’d keep slipping off, and when he holds the ball up to his finger, he thinks maybe he can still make it spin. He can make the ball spin and balance on the point of his finger, only when he does so, when he gives the ball a spin, it doesn’t stay in place. He takes another drink, reaching instinctively for a cigarette. He has a pack of cigarettes in his tool box, on the

shelf over the washer-dryer, but even now, were he there, standing in front of the washing machine and looking at his cigarettes, even now he knows he wouldn't smoke one. He has too great a discipline; smoke is a matter of the will. Jeanette, who's sleeping with someone else, is proud of him. The sun is filling up the space on his roof and now, when he spins the basketball on the tip of his finger, the ball remains: facing him, spinning, turning him giddy with relief. He still hasn't lost his touch.

Before his father returned home from the mainland, Tom slipped outside. It was night, and late, and still very warm. He slipped into the backyard in his shorts, all white and lit up by the Hawaiian moon; he slipped into the coop and rearranged the straw. Then he took a match and set the birds aflame. To this day, it remains secret, this source of unexpected fire in his childhood backyard. His father came home later, sober, and wept for days. Sometimes Tom wishes he could tell someone. Sometimes, when he cannot sleep, he stays up thinking about other things he's done. Maybe Jeanette wants to tell him what she's done?

Because when he cannot sleep, she must be sleeping with someone else. Wait, she said. *Wait until morning*. In the morning they rode up through the tunnel of the Arch with the family from Kentucky. The family wasn't from Arkansas or Missouri after all. The family talked nervously in the small space of their car, and Tom had to duck to keep from bumping his head against the low ceiling. He sat silently as the family talked on and the car shifted, corresponding to the angle of their ascent, keeping them level. Next year, the family was going to go to Florida; they'd been planning the trip for years, since the birth of Jimmy Roy, who was too young yet to come along. Jimmy Roy was at home with their in-laws, and back in Phoenix, Byron was taking care of Tom and Jeanette's pool.

Jeanette was smiling at the couple, being polite. "I grew up here," she was saying. "But I've never really seen it."

"That's a shame," said the woman. "That's a real pretty shame."

Briefly, the man reminded Tom of his father. They had the same faces, and Tom realized the man was a drunk. You could see it in his eyes, and he wondered if the woman knew. He wondered if she'd leave him if she knew.

Once at the top, they followed a narrow metal stairway leading to the center of the Arch: the observation room. It was the last section to be installed, the final piece of architecture Jeanette had never seen. And now they were here, all together, standing in its center—an integral part of the construction and design. The metal floor was carpeted, and they could feel the wind buffeting the walls of the Arch. The floor was unsteady and they found themselves leaning uncertainly against a window, looking out over the western frontier, industrialized and full of smoke. They leaned into the view and rested the weight of their bodies against the vibrating monument.

"What I said," Tom said. "Down there. That's not what I meant."

"Tom," said Jeanette, "I'm not going to leave you."

"What I meant was, if you want to leave me, then I want you to. I mean I want you to do what you want."

"I love you."

And standing there, leaning against the window, he knew it was going to be dangerous. Here, where there were no longer any Indians or buffalo. Here where there was only the future and all the wrong ways you could turn, wandering through that space reserved especially for you while you went looking for a river, hoping the water clean. Avoiding disease. It was a place you had to travel into all alone, West, where the land was big enough for a man to get drunk for a living. And if you kept living long enough, the land eventu-

ally turned to water. The history you knew you were going to have to go through—even without a lover, or a wife, it was enough to keep a man up at night.

“I feel like I’m falling,” he had said. “I feel like I’m falling and I don’t know where I’m going to land.”

“It’s so pretty,” she said, taking his hand. “It really is pretty, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” he said.

“This is the part,” she said. “Where I’m standing. This is the part I never saw.”

Basketball is a team sport, five men on the court; today a woman is even free to join them; without a coach, you may as well be without a team, which you always are. Alone and on the court, who is there left to judge? By seven, though he doesn’t know what time it is, he knows he’s in control. He knows things are right and going to be okay. Okay, he tells himself. Everything’s going to be okay.

From the roof he sees Jeanette walking through the sliding glass door of their bedroom. She is walking through the door carrying a red towel, preparing to take her morning swim. Each morning she does this before even brushing her teeth; something more than merely habit, he thinks. The way things wake you up like that. Jeanette is walking over the deck, up to the ledge of their pool.

Tom stands and says, “Morning.”

“Tom?”

“Nice view, from up here.”

“You scared me! What are you doing?”

“I’m watching you. That’s what I’m doing. Best to wait until morning, so that’s what I’m doing. And watching, of course.”

“Come down,” she says. “Come on down from there.”

“You’re beautiful,” he says, and looking at his wife, by the pool, he feels an unexpected relief. She loves him. Some people just don’t know any better, and looking at her here in

the still early dawn, everything is inexplicably clear. He is a man, standing over the roof of his house, looking at his wife, and the pool they have built together. The pool is blue as the sky and full of clean water, and he wonders why he never thought of doing this before. He holds the ball up and lofts it into the pool, where it lands dead center, waiting to be recovered.

“Watch,” he says, removing his shorts. After, he almost stands perfectly still, eyeing the distance.

Jeanette lets go the towel and lifts up her arms. “The ladder, Tom. Wait.”

“Watch,” he says, and looking at the water below, he knows there’s no going back. There’s only going gracefully and following through.

“Tom!”

“No wait,” he says. “This’ll be good.”