

RAVES FOR *AMIDST TRAFFIC*

“Michel Sauret skillfully weaves a collection of twenty-two short stories, each an independent original creation brilliantly crafted into an interconnected melding of storylines... Sauret has created characters that elicit empathy, concern and hope in the midst of their anguish, and grief. These compelling stories will challenge you emotionally in a way that opens your heart... A unique collection of engaging symbolic poetic prose that challenges the reader to reflect on the potential impact one life (has) on another.”

-Reader Views

“An ambitious collection of interwoven short stories about negotiating Christian values in a corrupt, violent world... There are bright spots of quirky but straightforward storytelling, as with ‘The Problem With My Shoes,’ which delightfully begins: ‘I knew I was in trouble when my shoes started talking to me.’”

-Kirkus Reviews

“From an old man collecting drinking straws three at a time to a pair of Chicago drug addicts fairing poorly in their attempt to raise a child, nearly everyone involved in this collection of connected short stories cannot seem to shake the feeling that something bigger than themselves is going on... Readers interested in Christianity as it pertains to everyday people will find much to revel in.”

-IndieReader

“Yes, this is a 5 star book... It’s like a glimpse of what we see as opposed to what God sees. We see happy bits, sad bits, and bits of what doesn’t make sense at times, but God sees it all as blending to one creative story He’s putting together... Michel Sauret is a creative author, there’s no denying it, and this book shows that creativity in abundance... Read it. I can’t see how you’d be disappointed!”

-Christian Fiction Book Reviews

“Writer Michel Sauret is also a photographer, and the ability to capture brief yet rich instances applies to his fiction.”

-Pittsburgh City Paper

“A lot of twists and turns that keeps you reading story to story until the end.”

-Janet Shawgo, author of “Look for Me” series

AMIDST TRAFFIC



short
stories

Michel Sauret

AMIDST TRAFFIC



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Book design & publishing by
One Way Street Production,
Pittsburgh, PA

Cover photo by Matthew Kovalcik

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Cover art and book design by One Way Street Production

<http://www.onewaystreetproduction.com>

FIRST EDITION

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-0-9883784-0-7

Electronic book ISBN: 978-0-9883784-1-4

Categories:

FICTION - SHORT STORIES

FICTION - THEOLOGICAL

FICTION - LITERARY

FICTION - SUSPENSE

Printed in the United States of America

For Heather
My love, my life, my inspiration

CONTENTS

Three Straws	1
A Voice with Reason	23
Blessed Are the War People	33
Amidst Traffic	57
A Tin Can Mind	71
Return	81
Clouds in the Water	85
Lost in the Night	97
Midnight	111
Consumed	123
Duct Tape People	139
The Problem with My Shoes	163
Rolling Down the Mountain	181
Chase	199
The Staring Game	209
Gratitude	223
Black Coats at the Cheyenne Diner	241
Small Pleasures	259
The Follower	271
When the Knife Opened	283
Trailing	297
Author	301

A Word to the Reader

When I first published “Amidst Traffic” my goal was to write gritty and compelling stories that conveyed the depravity of the world in which we live. We live in a world full of fear, violence, rebellion and chaos. Christians have to somehow weigh in that reality into an equation that involves a Just and Sovereign God.

As an effort to display that depravity, many of my characters indulged in some pretty graphic language. I created scenes involving Soldiers in Iraq and bank robbers in the middle of a heist. In the process, F-bombs were dropped along with a few other choice words.

It was a struggle for me to publish the first edition with that type of language inside. I originally justified the decision by reasoning that this is how the world really is. This is how people really talk.

So I published the book, but I constantly battled with that

decision.

This book was always intended to be literary first (with passages of poetic prose and story endings that left you wondering or figuring things out for yourself), and Theological second. I think both Christians and Atheists struggle with the emotions conveyed in this book. We are all human, after all, and we all suffer human pains. I wanted this to be a book that could bring Christians and Atheists to the table and provoke a conversation. This is not a book that bashes Atheists or proclaims Christians victorious.

This book is meant to make the reader reflect on how we are all connected. Our pains touch one another, even among complete strangers. It's a book that is meant to strip down our pretenses and our defenses, and force us to face our inner struggles, our fears and our doubts.

Most of these stories were inspired by philosophical questions.

What is our conscience? Why are some people crazy? What does it mean to be grateful? Who is God? Why do some people choose not to believe in Him? Why is there violence if He truly exists? If He is sovereign, are we free?

I think these are questions that everyone battles with in some form. It's only natural that we do so. Even when we stand at a point of conclusion, a point of certainty, we will always look back to the days when those questions troubled us.

But I realized that I was alienating fellow believers with language that was intentionally written to offend. How can you spark a conversation with someone if the language you use forces people not to listen?

So I asked myself, "Is the vulgar language really necessary? Is it vital? Would these stories cease to exist without it?"

I made efforts to rewrite dialogue and passages that would

portray a sense of vulgarity without actually being vulgar in doing so.

I slaughtered my own children, as they say in the creative writing world.

With that, I decided to release a Renewed Edition of “Amidst Traffic,” which is the one you’re holding in your hands right now. If you currently own the First Edition in paperback, and you simply find the language too offensive to get through, I would be happy to replace your copy with this edition. Just send an email to the address found in the copyright page, and we’ll replace your First Edition with the Renewed Edition.

My hope is that these stories can still come across authentic as a result of these changes. My hope is that the dialogue still rings true to the ear.

In today’s world of literary fiction there is already too much vulgarity, and I didn’t want to add to it unnecessarily. Unfortunately, nowadays, redemption found in novels and movies relies on worldly solutions to worldly problems. That’s like saying that gravity can help stop an avalanche. Not all of my characters get redeemed, unfortunately. But those who do get a chance to battle with deep, theological questions we too often dismiss in our society.

There are a lot of Christian themes underlying the stories in this collection, but I wouldn’t say these stories are like your typical Christian novels seen today. Much of my writing is dark and sobering.

This will seem unusual to those who are familiar with my photography, which is often very bright and colorful. In my photography, I’ve had the pleasure of capturing the happiness of children laughing and of brides and grooms committing their love

for one another in a covenant before God. Usually the images I produce with my wife, Heather, are bold with color and vibrant with energy.

Most of these stories are not so.

The majority of them are somber and complex.

They're intended to mirror the inner struggles we all battle with as human beings. Here is an opportunity to think, really think, about the world we live in.

Another theme found in this collection is that of voices we hear inside our heads.

Before you think that this author has gone crazy, I want to reassure you that I don't actually hear voices. Except, the stories we read in fiction books sometimes act like voices in our minds, especially for the author.

We all wonder where authors get their ideas. To be honest, we wonder that too, sometimes. There are moments when story ideas feel like they were whispered to me. It's hard to imagine they were always lodged in my brain from the beginning, from the day of my birth, only waiting to grow and mature so I could write them down and publish them.

The story, "A Tin Can Mind" addresses this question of inner voices and ponders their origin. If our mind is just a tin can, private and sealed off, then how do new ideas get inside?

I will admit that the "Duct Tape People" came to me while reading a newspaper article. Later that day, I was working at a pizzeria peeling garlic cloves when, suddenly, a vision for a scene came to me. From that, characters and dialogue erupted. Sometimes I was so afraid that I would forget those details, those words of dialogue, that I wrote down my thoughts on a napkin right then and there, before it all faded away.

How many times has that happened to you? Some great idea came to mind, and you thought you'd remember it later, except you couldn't. It was gone and you couldn't retrieve it again. This sense of urgency to save an idea before it fades away is reflected in the story, "Amidst Traffic."

That's how these stories were for me at times. Like I was in control of them, but only as a steward. At times I wanted my characters to do something, but as I wrote, they decided to do something else. Often, I expected to write a story with a specific ending, but that ending didn't happen. It changed on me. (That's why the metaphor unveiled in "Author" is not a perfect one. When talking about God and His sovereignty, our metaphors are often flawed. But still, I love that story.)

Soon, more stories spawned out of stories I had already written. Characters appeared again and again in my mind. Sometimes older. Sometimes a bit more mature. Sometimes a little more dangerous.

It was later I decided I wanted all of these stories to be interconnected. So I went back to writing. I changed or added details that would create a web.

In the end, I wouldn't say this collection is totally complete. There are still characters hanging out there. More stories need to be told. The web will likely spread as I write more fiction in the future. I've even thought about writing a whole novel about the "Duct Tape People." There is still a lot left to discover about the character named Adren Banner, for example, who is dark and mysterious, but also has a hero's heart.

I think the fact that this collection leaves off with these untied threads is a true representation of our own life.

In life, we constantly meet strangers who make an impact on

us in some way, and then we never see them again. We wonder about them, where these strangers have gone or disappeared to. We meet people we think will be in our lives forever, but they don't stay very long at all.

Other times we meet strangers we think have their lives all figured out and put together. Then, as we look a little closer, we realize their lives are just like ours. We all have unraveled seams somewhere.

This collection has many unraveled seams.

It's intended to feel a little chaotic at times. It's intended to make you feel surrounded by the traffic of stories going in different directions. Sometimes the vehicles of these stories will collide. Sometimes they will miss each other by just a hair. Other times, they travel on different roads completely.

But they all have the same thing in common.

Each of them poses a human question. A question about our minds. About our existence. About human desires. About addictions and obsessions. About the poetry of language. About love. About fear. Even about God.

And hopefully, you, as the reader, can help answer these questions.

Just don't get lost in the midst of all the traffic.

Enjoy.

—Michel Sauret

Three Straws

The same dream kept coming for Eli, and it was terrible. The worst part about it was the faces of children who chased him through cobbled streets beneath dilapidated, stone-faced buildings of a foreign country. In the dream, he kept looking back over his shoulder as he ran. Their faces looked as if someone had taken a box cutter and carved at their lips, noses and eyelids. Tiny monstrous faces. Eyes wide and nostrils flared. Their cut-up lips revealed small, gnashing teeth.

They looked so much like his father's drawings.

Eli couldn't take another night of those faces. So he stood outside behind his trailer because he didn't know what else to do. He didn't want to go to sleep.

He stared at the dark forest for a while, but then he imagined those children hiding among the trees. So he looked up at the sky and stared a while longer at the stars. Time simply passed, but

eventually even in the sky he could connect the dots and see those carved-up stares.

“Oh my God,” he said, covering his face with his hands. “Let it stop.”

Impulsively, he hurried to the shed. He needed to put his hands on something. The first thing he saw was a shovel, so he grabbed it. He walked a few hundred feet into the open stretch of land behind his trailer and stabbed the dull blade into the earth.

It felt good.

The blade went in. The ground was soft. So he pulled out a chunk of dirt and stabbed the earth again. The soil was moist and easy to dig. A few more of these, he thought, and he would be okay. He just needed to work it out. He just needed to release whatever demons plagued his mind. If any alcohol had been in the house he might have washed those demons away with booze, but he rarely drank and there were no liquor stores open this late for miles. Living out in the countryside of Oklahoma relaxed him, but even out here he couldn't hide.

Don't think of it. Keep digging. Keep working.

He dug and flung chunks of dirt across his body and over his shoulder. He thought that after a few shovelfuls, the labor would make him exhausted. Then it would be okay to sleep. Maybe if his body ached, he would pass out from exhaustion and there would be no dreams. He didn't know how this worked, but that seemed right.

After an hour, he had only built up momentum. Now he was consumed in his digging. Sweat formed a paste with the dirt and glued to his skin from the neck down. It wasn't until three in the morning that the pains finally caught up to him. In a few hours he had to start his morning shift at the diner. He finally paused,

looked around and realized he had dug a hole as wide as a kiddie pool four feet into the ground.

“Good,” he said, although it wasn’t.

What would he do next; fill it back up?

“No,” he said, “Leave it.” He said this as though he needed to answer the question. *Maybe I’ll fill it later. It will give me something to do.*

He slept for two hours that morning and dreamed nothing.

The diner was a few miles from the Texas border. When he showed up for his shift, his muscles felt like knotted ropes of twine. He grabbed an apron, tied it around his waist and stood at the grill in the kitchen. Food orders came immediately. He didn’t realize how many muscles he used to simply grill breakfast orders until that moment. Pouring pancake mix with a ladle made his arm feel twisted against his will. Every step he took shot a flare of pain from his heels up.

He washed down a mix of pain pills he found in the first-aid kit and fueled his mind with coffee as the morning wore on. He regretted sleeping only two hours. In the midst of a breakfast rush, it became harder for him to focus on orders. Cynthia, one of the waitresses, had to send two plates back to him because the sausage was burnt on one and he forgot to include cheese in the omelet on the other.

“What in the hell’s wrong with you this morning, Eli?” she asked him. “This ain’t the time to be messin’ up orders. It is too damn busy right now, okay? I ain’t made tips since you came in, and haven’t stopped apologizing to customers since.”

After a week of this—mindless digging, no sleep, then com-

ing to work half-dazed, feeling broken and sore—the diner’s manager still had no heart to fire him. He was a good kid. Didn’t talk much, but up until now had always been a good worker.

Instead she asked him, “Would it help to put you on night shift, honey? You’ll have to work the counter, too, and you won’t get no sleep until the morning risers come in, but it’s ‘tween that and lettin’ you go.”

“I’ll switch,” he said, and although his voice was a whisper, his eyes were desperate with relief. *Anything to work through the night*, he thought. *Anything to avoid the faces*.

Eli wasn’t good with people. He could never get a hang of the small talk the other waitresses mastered so effortlessly. Most of the truckers who came through told stories of drunken hitchhikers, cross dressers and visitor centers no one should ever visit after dark. Eli listened, nodded on and served their midnight breakfast orders.

“Y’ain’t gonna make no tips if all you do is bob that noggin’ of yours. Gotta converse with the fellas,” Rosie, the manager, whispered in Eli’s ear as he grilled some hash.

“Not worried about tips all the much. ‘Need just enough to get through.”

It was true. He didn’t need much. The land he lived on was paid for. So was the trailer. He had no girlfriend. No hobbies. No other desires. Wasn’t a boy with many complexities. Just lived by himself in a single-wide big enough to feel like he was sleeping inside a box. The land was his after his father passed on.

At one point he had wanted to go to Bible college and become a preacher just like his daddy. But those felt like boyish thoughts

now. He was twenty-two, and somehow that made him feel very old.

“Alright then,” she said.

But then a man walked in with a strange aura about him. There was a tenderness to the man’s walk. A careful step, as if he didn’t want to disturb the air around him. He was an older gentleman with a glow to his face that provoked a feeling of friendliness in Eli. It was a strange, strange sensation.

“How are you doing young man?” he asked, but sounded as though he actually expected an answer.

“I’m quite fine, sir.”

The old man’s face held lines, but his eyes didn’t sag.

“I’ll take your finest roast. Straight black,” he said.

Eli rushed to fill him a cup, wondering if this oil-resembling crud would satisfy the man. He brought over the mug, felt the need to introduce himself, but instead found the man joking around with Rosie, asking about the kids, complimenting her new hairdo.

Eli waited a while to see if the opportunity came up to interject. *What in the hell’s wrong with you, man? He’s just some guy old enough to be your daddy’s father. Just some customer with stories as any other.*

The man might have been seventy, but he made gestures with his hands and spoke like he had the energy of a man half his age. He had a gentleman’s face, that of someone who might never utter an insult at anyone. He wore a small red rose was pinned to his vest, like a corsage.

“Will there be anything else, Sir?” Eli asked after refilling his third coffee.

“Sure is. Could I kindly have three straws?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Straws. Three of them, please.”

“Three?”

The man nodded.

“Straws?”

Nodded again.

“What for?”

“Just three straws, and I’ll be on my way.”

So he grabbed the straws and handed them to the man.

The man nodded, smiled and went on his way.

The sun rose during Eli’s drive home. He expected to walk into his house dog-tired, fall into his bed, and succumb to a dreamless sleep. But his bones were restless. His body ached from a full week of digging, but now the shovel called him.

“No more dreams,” he said. So he went on digging. By now the hole was six feet deep and as large as a full-sized swimming pool. The dirt was piled all around, and he had to fling it higher and higher each time just to get it out of the hole. But after a half-dozen shovelfuls he was done. His body was torn. He tried climbing out, but his hands were blistered and he couldn’t grip anything solid. There wasn’t enough strength left to even pull himself out.

He crawled his way to the shaded side of the hole and sat with his back against the dirt wall. He saw what he’d done as if seeing it for the first time. This hole. It consumed him now. It was all around him, and he knew it would only grow. He felt like crying. But even that required more energy than he had left.

Daddy would kill you if he saw what you done here, he thought.

But daddy was already dead. His body buried at the cemetery in Hope, a little town twenty minutes east of this hole. And here

Eli was. Digging a hole on his father's plot. His father might have made a sermon out of this. There was very little his father said outside of the pulpit. And even outside, he spoke as though he had a point to make.

"We can't save our own selves, son." He had said this with a bedtime story smile. As if Eli was supposed to find joy in the statement. He listened and watched his father die.

"Sometimes, things go unfinished. Because it's not up to us to finish them." His father's eyes looked up, watching for God. Those words would be his last sermon. An hour later, he died. A man of faith—even through the affair, abandoned by his own wife—always faith.

And yet those words had echoed such faithlessness in his son's mind. Where was there to go but down if you could neither save yourself nor finish business before dying?

And this is what all those years of faith had produced: a trailer, three acres of land and a divorce. His mother had pushed for the split when Eli was twelve, when he still held dreams of becoming his father, becoming a preacher. She said faith and God had turned Eli's father too rigid. Eli's father said her loss of faith had turned her loose, like the chaff in the wind, swept off her feet by some stranger blowing through town.

Eli had pieced together the story of the affair only in bits through the years. His mother had wanted to travel the world. She was brash and unsatisfied. Meanwhile God had kept his father anchored here in Oklahoma. The affair was brief, but it was enough to take away his mother. Father spoke very little of it, and Eli could never understand how a woman might leave her twelve-year-old son behind like that.

The last thing she said to her husband before leaving for good

was, “You will leave your boy nothing but demons.” She said this as though she meant to protect Eli from his father’s God-fearing superstitions.

After she left, Father mourned, “Even God’s children must suffer, son.”

In the end, Eli inherited everything his father’s faith had gained. The old man, who had devoted his entire life to Almighty God, received this scrap of land in return. Eli had desires for college, for another life, but how could he abandon everything his father’s faith had produced?

When his father died, less than a year ago, Eli went to the church to gather his belongings and discovered his father’s journals. An entire bookshelf filled with notebooks, dating back years, pages filled with drafted sermons and reflections on biblical passages. He read hours worth of eloquent essays about man’s need for Christ and God’s glory. He read his father in a way he appeared only in front of the pulpit. In a way he rarely appeared in everyday life. Emotional. Charged. Passionate.

Eli went back ten years in the journals.

The pages following his mother leaving were filled with scribbles and hurried drawings. Occasionally a few comprehensible lines made it onto the pages. Phrases like, “The snake came into the garden and took away my fruit. I never had a chance to eat or taste the full serving of life.” The scribbling became worse with each page. Drawings crept into the corners. Deformed human figures devouring their own limbs. Two dogs fighting over a puddle of vomit. There were so many pages of violence. Violence that never came through in his father’s tone of voice or touch.

The worst images were the children prying out of the darkness with knife carvings across their features. Those were the most ter-

rifying. It made Eli wonder if the violence inside his father was getting to be too much. He wondered if his father had ever wanted to enact those carvings on Eli's twelve-year-old face: the only thing left in the old man's life. God had taken everything else. Why not destroy the only thing left?

He took the journals home and paged through them for days. That's when the demon children began chasing Eli through his dreams.

And only now he'd found a way to stop them. Or at least escape them. Through digging. Digging to save himself. And his heart told him his father was wrong. If you couldn't save yourself, then who could? Who else had the right to do so?

Surely not some god impaled to a wooden plank. Not a god who was so afraid of death that sweat had poured out of him as blood. Only Eli could. From his dreams. From his demons. From this life.

He lay there inside the hole, eyelids flickering from fatigue. Today was Saturday. He had the next day off, so he went to sleep, worrying only the children would be there once he closed his eyes.

They weren't.

He woke every few hours, checked his watch, looked up around the edges of the wall to make sure he was still alone, and nodded back to sleep. When Sunday finally came, after several odd patches of sleep, he was still in the hole. He hadn't gone to church since his father's last sermon, and today would not be the day he started again.

Dear God. Too damn sore.

He wasn't sure if that was meant to be a prayer, an apology or some absent-minded thought.

He remained sitting for several minutes, and his mind drift-

ed to the man and the three straws. He thought for a while why someone might need those three straws. The mystery amused him, however trivial it might have been.

I'll ask him next time I see him.

Just then, he had a moment of fear that maybe that man wasn't a regular. That maybe he was never going to come back to that diner again.

He'll be back. He knows Rosie.

This thought calmed him, and he was able to sleep again.

He eventually made it to his bed and slept through most of Sunday, his day of rest, and thankfully, those children never came. Maybe he had beaten them. Maybe he had found the cure. Work yourself to near death, and you're safe. It almost sounded reasonable. In fact, it was the most reasonable thing he could think of.

Monday night, Eli returned to work. As he had hoped, the man came in, ordering eggs over easy with toast and downing several cups of black coffee. When the man asked for the check, Eli returned with three straws in his hand.

"Would you mind, sir, telling me what these are for?"

The man looked up at him from the stool, bright eyed, and smiled.

"I'm building something," he said, the charm all there, wrapped up in those words. "But that's all I'll say about that tonight. Good night, young man." And he took off.

Eli tried for a while to think what a man could build with straws. Nothing reasonable came to mind. Some kind of sculpture, maybe. Like an animal. A small ship, perhaps. Three straws at a time.

When Rosie came to him with an order, he grabbed her wrist to get her attention. She jumped.

“My dear heaven, honey, why’d you grab me like that?”

“Just wanted to ask something.”

Steam lifted up to their faces from the grill. She said nothing, expecting him to say something and then finally, “Well?”

“The man with the straws...”

“*Who?*”

“The guy I just served. Do you know him?”

She looked at him with amusement in her eyes. She cocked her hip and drew in closer, a sign Eli had come to learn of a woman who senses the opportunity for gossip.

“You mean Charles? The old charmer?” she asked.

“Him, yes. Does he always ask for straws?”

“Oh yeah. Three, every time.”

“What does he do with them?”

“Oh I’ve never been able to get him to tell me that. I stopped asking after a while, and I usually don’t serve him anyway. I just go up and talk to him ‘cuz he’s a sweet man and knows a lot about the world.”

“He told me he’s building something with them.”

“He *told* you that?”

Eli nodded.

“Like what?”

“Wouldn’t say.”

“What could he build with straws?”

“I don’t know. What would you build with straws if you could?” he asked.

She thought about it for a while. Her eyes spaced out for a short moment and then returned to him.

“I would build a giant butterfly,” she said. “Or maybe a playhouse for my lil’ ones to run around in.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said.

She seemed offended by this.

“Okay, so what would *you* build?”

“I don’t have a clue.”

“There then.” There was sass in her tone. “My butterfly ain’t so dumb after all.”

“Can you imagine doing it only three straws at a time?”

At that, she responded with silence. And he knew what she felt in that moment, because he felt it too. It wasn’t sadness. Not quite. But it was very close. It was more like anxiety, but a slow one, without all the rush and the panic. A quiet, slow sense of anxiety. Like counting a jar of sand grains, knowing you will lose count and start over again and again before ever reaching the bottom.

Three straws at a time.

Whatever it was Charles was building, he would never finish it at that pace. The man was old. The thought of him never finishing felt... heavy. He felt it in his chest.

“Honey?” Rosie said. The word called him out of his thoughts.

“Yes?”

“Your eggs are burning.”

“Oh,” he said.

But neither moved. They both stood there for a minute longer.

That morning after work, Eli lay in his bed thinking of drinking straws, and all the things you could build with them. His sense of imagination wasn’t good. So instead, he kept picturing piles and piles of white straws with pink stripes and bendable necks.

They kept multiplying in his mind, which was okay. Even that was better than the children. But then, there it was. That's all it took. Just the word brought their faces back, and their teeth were sharp, exposed behind their chewed, cut-up lips.

He burst out of his bed. He hurried out to his backyard, where the hole was now as big as a basement. It could have devoured his small little trailer, it was so big.

He didn't have it in him to keep digging. The strength wasn't there. But he had to. It was the only thing that would stop him from imagining the faces. So he dug. Slowly. Pacing himself.

"Could I stop at three?" he asked. He didn't know who he was asking, but the question was valid. Could he shovel three scoops at a time and stop?

He tried. Stabbed, scooped and flung the clump of dirt over his shoulder. Stabbed, scooped and flung. Stabbed, scooped, flung.

Eli stood there, his hands clutching the shovel's handle. He tried to calm his breathing, his nerves, but now he felt as though the piles of dirt might fall over him and bury him there.

I can't stop. I can't do it.

So he went on until the pain was too much, which was better than anxiety, and the hole grew deeper. Which was fine, because this would eventually kill him. He would never finish the hole. He would die before he would see the bottom.

What the hell are you digging anyway? What is your purpose? What will you do with all this dirt?

He knew those questions. They were all false. Even if he did come up with a purpose to his digging, he would always know it for the lie it was. He was digging because he was digging. He was digging because he wanted the faces to stop. There wasn't a larger scope, a deeper meaning to this work. There was no redemption at

the end of this act. He would just have to keep going. This wasn't an obsession. It was consumption. He wondered how long before he tore a muscle.

I hope not long.

Why he prayed for this harm, he had no clue. But he welcomed whatever physical pain came of this. He invited it. Begged it to come.

Only the rising of the sun came, and he finally reached the point of exhaustion that would bring him through sleep: in one end and out the other, without any trail of cut-up children's faces in between.

For several days, Charles didn't come to the diner. Eli feared that maybe the man had died after all, his project unfinished. Who would find it first? Would the police searching his house pause to observe his masterwork in the making, or would they rush through, pick up the body and send him to the nearest morgue?

Then Charles did come in one night. At the end of the man's meal, Eli brought the check and a whole box full of straws.

"What's this?" the man asked.

"You've been gone."

"What is this?" He sounded alarmed.

"Your straws."

"I need only three."

"But you've been gone. You missed four days."

The man chuckled at this. It was obviously a nice gesture, that the young man showed both concern and a willingness to help.

"This diner is not the only place where I get my straws, you know?"

“Why don’t you just buy them? They’re not expensive.”

“Well then, if your establishment regrets handing out straws for free to their customers, I can go somewhere else. I always pay for my meal, and I don’t cause a fuss.”

“No, listen, that’s not what I’m saying. Here’s a whole box of them. You can have them. You can have them all. Take them.” He wanted to push the box into the man’s chest.

Truckers and other customers stirred at this—took a look at the counter where the two men argued over straw—and then returned to their midnight breakfasts.

“It’s not about that,” Charles said.

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about building something.”

“Okay. Then here. *Build*. Build with these.”

“I have to pace myself or—” he caught himself, stopped, breathed through his nostrils and finally pressed a thumb to his lips as if to prevent himself from saying more.

“Or what?”

“Don’t you have some orders to make?”

“No.”

“Then refill my cup, would you?”

Eli looked down. The black liquid came up to the brim of the mug.

“It’s cold,” Charles said, with a sort of forced kindness.

“Fine then.”

Eli went back into the kitchen, dumped the coffee, came back out and refilled the cup. He set the coffee down on the counter and exhaled deeply. He lowered himself with his elbows on the countertop, fists under his chin. Eyes level with the other man.

“You’re pacing yourself, aren’t you?” he asked.

“I am.” Charles managed a bright smile at this, but it was dishonest.

“Why?”

“I have my reasons.”

“How? How can you do it? How can you stop at three every day?”

“I just know I have to. When you get to be my age, you learn a little about self control. You become friends with patience. When you’re young, like you, there is none of that. Everything is here. Everything has to be now. Even here, miles away from big city living. It’s like you think you can solve everything just by...” He couldn’t find the words to finish.

“Digging,” Eli said.

“Digging?”

“That’s what I’m doing. I dig. I have to down a bottle of pain-killers just to pour you a damn coffee. And there’s no rest for me. There ain’t no pacing.”

Saying all of this—it felt a lot like a confession.

“What are you digging for, young man?” Charles asked.

“What is it you’re building, old man?”

Charles didn’t say anything. He just stared at his coffee while stirring it with a spoon, even though there was no sugar or anything inside to stir.

“It’s a sculpture.” the old man said without looking up. “But I can’t say more.”

“I’m digging a hole. But I can’t say more, either,” Eli said, finding spite in his own tone.

“It’s nothing,” Charles said.

“It’s gotta be something. Else you wouldn’t be building it.”

Charles didn’t respond. He placed exact change on the table

for the bill, picked three straws out of the box and walked out.

For another month, Charles came in every night. His original glow was back. His charm. His wit with the waitresses. “You old flirt,” they called him. By then, Eli had finally managed a schedule of digging that would probably kill him before the year’s end. It’s what he wanted. By then he had managed to see a doctor and receive a stronger prescription for the pain. Took three a day even though he was supposed to take only two. Originally the labor had helped put muscle onto his frame, but now he was beginning to wear out his own body. His skin became pale from all the pain and all the medicine. On the nights that Charles came in, they didn’t talk. The old man went on flirting and Eli continued to fill his coffee.

That was it for a while, until finally one night, on Good Friday, Eli saw an old man at the counter with his head low and his clothes wrinkled.

“Can I get something started for you, sir?” Eli asked.

When the man lifted his face, it took Eli a long moment to recognize him. He looked at least eighty. The lines underneath his eyes as deep as slits in the earth. His shirt’s collar looked as though someone had clenched it in a fist.

“Charles?” he asked.

They stared into one another’s eyes.

“Are you alright?”

The old man didn’t say anything. A shiver shook him, but then he composed himself. There was a young teenage couple in the far corner of the diner, and three men in black business coats chatting in one booth. Rosie took orders and refilled drinks. None of them

paid any attention to them.

Eli didn't know what to do. He felt a panic in his chest seeing this man who had been so upbeat and charming become so sullen. He had an urge to hide him, as though he was afraid of anyone seeing him like this.

"Do you need to talk?" Eli asked.

"I don't know what I need. Want to grab me a coffee?"

Eli did and brought it back.

Charles grabbed three packets of sugar, ripped them open, and let the grains fall into the liquid. Then he grabbed a small handful of creamers, peeled the lids and poured them in. This was the first time Eli had seen him put anything in his coffee.

"I like it sweet today," he said looking up, and smiled. All of the lines around his eyes wrinkled when he did.

"Yeah. No problem."

"Are you still digging, Eli?"

Eli didn't answer. He simply stared at the man. His body was so worn he looked like a boy made of straw.

"I've had dreams," Eli said, as if trying to explain something unspoken.

Charles smacked his lips, took a long sip of his coffee and brought the mug back down without a sound. Eli kept trying to find some form of smile on that face. It was there somewhere. The man's eyes were aged, but they were still sharp.

"We all have dreams, Eli."

"No. Mine are terrible."

"No more terrible than any others." Did he look like he wanted to cry? He blinked, and the moisture in his eyes was gone.

"We can't save ourselves, you know?" Charles said.

"My father said that."

“I think your father was right.”

“But we can try,” Eli said.

“No. That’s a lie. We *can’t* try.”

“What about the straws?” Eli asked. And with that question, a small realization came to him. Charles had been pushing something away with the straws, too. Perhaps not dreams, but something of his own.

“It’s finished.”

Finished, Eli thought.

Eli had hoped he might hear that word some day come out of the old man’s lips. *Finished*. But he had expected it to sound glorious and full of accomplishment. Instead, it pained him. Even through all the painkillers. The pain of that word found a way to touch him.

“Can’t you add onto it? Can’t you add more straws?”

“I could, but it wouldn’t be any less finished if I kept going.”

“So you’re done? You’re just going to abandon it?”

“You don’t add any more words at the end of a story when it’s over. It ends when it ends. Painful or not. Adding more straws would just add to the pain.”

“You don’t know pain,” Eli said. He wanted to show this man his prescription bottle with the infinite refills he planned on acquiring. However many refills it took him to finish digging the hole. However many it took to kill him. *That* was pain. He could barely get out of bed some days because of that pain.

“I really thought I would die before I would see it finished,” Charles said. There was longing in his voice now, like a man speaking of a road trip across country. “I really thought I would escape...” before finishing the sentence, Charles brought both hands to his eyes and rubbed them with his fingertips, as if to

force back an image.

He feigned a yawn.

“Boy, I’m tired,” he said.

“You can still escape. We both can.”

Charles raised a hand and touched Eli on the shoulder. There was tenderness in that gesture, but there was a shock in that touch. A tiny jolt. The young man stood there, staring at the old. And he knew this man would die soon. Maybe even tonight. And Eli would be left to his digging. He didn’t know what else to say to the man. He didn’t know what else to give him. He wanted to say, *I’m sorry*. He wanted to say, *I tried. I tried to help you and help myself*.

They stared at one another until Eli couldn’t bear looking at him anymore. He was so damn old. Eli wanted to squeeze the sorrow out of the man. He wanted to grab him and shake him and tell him no. Tell him he hadn’t tried hard enough.

He opened his mouth to say something. Stopped and closed it again.

Eli turned away. He went back to the kitchen, and grabbed an opened box of straws.

He stood over the garbage can with a pair of scissors in one hand. *Snip*. He cut one of the straws in half. Then in half again. Then once more. He breathed and stared at the little piece of tube left in his hand. He cut it again, feeling the plastic squeeze between the blades. Charles wouldn’t need them anymore. How much hope had he placed in these?

He cut a second straw. Then a third. Smaller and smaller until he found himself holding a tiny ring between his fingers. He put down the scissors and held up the circle of straw to the light. He looked through it as if through a window. As if through a hole. In

one end and out the other. On the other side of the hole, on the other side of the kitchen, he saw the back door. He brought the hole down. A couple of orders hung along the track above the grill. He would go home early tonight, he decided. He would finish those orders, throw away the box of straws and go home. He pictured himself ripping his father's journal and letting the pages flurry and fall into the hole.

Then. Maybe. Perhaps. He might have enough strength left to dump the dirt back in.

