

HEAD DOWN, EYES LOWERED, MOUTH OPEN

by

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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

Matthew Mathers is an aging game show host for the local scholastic competition, *In It to Win It*. Faced with the prospect of being replaced by a younger host to boost ratings, Matthew loses both his public and personal personas that were dependent upon this professional identity. The story follows the deterioration of Matthew's self perception and connection to reality as he struggles to understand who he is in the absence of a societal definition. To combat this loss, Matthew relies upon constructing new ways of organizing, engaging with, and reimagining the world. What he discovers is that his efforts to regain a strong sense of self through memory, experience, and story do not allow him to recapture knowable truths about either himself or the world he inhabits.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, James and Regina Wingard.

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I bleed when I shit. My life has not always been like this. I'm sure my life has not always been like this, but I'm having trouble remembering a time when it was not, the time before now. It's not just blood either, but pain in and around the sphincter. When I was a younger man I could eat and shit at regular intervals without worrying. The same goes with peeing now, too. The linoleum in my bathroom is cold on the bottom of my feet in the dark in the night when my prostate asks me to get up out of the comfort of my bed, out from under the warmth of my sheets, expensive sheets, high thread count, Egyptian cotton – *snug as a bug in a rug*, my mother would say – to trek from the master bedroom to the master bath. *Wake up*, my prostate knocks. I trudge to the bathroom with the beige and white tile that is masked by the dark of early morning or late evening so that there is no perception of color, only of the cold on my feet. Sometimes I'll hum a tune to remind myself I'm alive in a room. I don't like to wear socks to bed. I'd wear them, but the covers are too warm for socks so that if I do wear them to bed my feet sweat and I'll wake up with my prostate pressing on my bladder *and* sweaty feet, which would lead to two states of permanence rather than one permanent state, the prostate, and one impermanent state, cold feet. I choose the latter to the former as one plus one is more than one plus one half or one third or something smaller than the permanent unit. I leave the light off.

There's something about peeing in the dark that makes the whole experience more endurable than it would be otherwise. I don't want to have to look into the mirror. There's an old man in there. Stubble. Graying hair. I color it of course, wear nice clothes, but the eyes still sag. I wish I had taken a photo of my face with a close-up on the eyes once every year, every six months, week in order to mark the changes. If I had, I would make a flip book of my face and

study it every night in order to watch myself grow old. I'd look at the earlier photos and wonder what that person knew. I leave the light off and find that I am happier when I am able to pretend that I am not that man or, at least, I am happier not being stared at by someone so unrecognizable. Besides, peeing in the dark can be a fun challenge. My ex-wife used to ask me how I hit the bowl. She used to ask me this question when she woke up in the morning and wandered over to the bathroom to relieve herself and stepped in urine. She too slept sockless and the combination of the cold tile and the now cold urine, no matter how small the amount, didn't serve her disposition well. *Do you go in the dark?* she asked one time. I told her that's exactly what I did. I go in the dark and listen for the sound of successful contact with the water in the basin, a remarkably satisfying sound; think bow and arrow and a red and white striped target on a bale of hay. The sound the stream makes when it hits the target just right. The sound it makes when it hits too much vitreous china. Granted, the procedure is one of trial and error, made worse by drink. This was pointed out to me by my ex-wife who responded to the cold urine and cold floor by telling me *that I should just fucking*, her words not mine, *pee sitting down*. I had never dreamt that possible, but the idea so intrigued me that I sat down that very next night or early morning. From that moment on I am the man who pees sitting down. The plumbing was better when I first started. Now when I sit down in the dark with my pajamas and silk boxers down around my sockless ankles I drip out my night offerings. My pee used to come out as a geyser. Women used to comment on the voraciousness of the force and sound of my stream. I used to imagine myself as "Old Faithful." I remember one party in particular that took place in a hip loft where the bathroom was cordoned in the corner by two adjoining walls that didn't extend all the way to the twenty foot high wood-beamed ceilings. There was a woman I overheard commenting to her husband or boyfriend or date about the forcefulness of my stream. *It's so*

*loud*, the woman said. *Why doesn't yours sound like that?* The positive reinforcement regarding the power of my urinary discharge caused me to smile. Standing in a stranger's bathroom, isolated from the party, I marveled at my own power. Like the torrent of a mountain river that is engorged with the spring thaw only to dry out to a trickle during the heat of summer, my might has diminished. If that same forgotten woman stood outside the door now she'd be hard pressed to hear much of anything without pressing her ear tightly to the door and even then only droplets, faint reminders of the power once held that ring like questions asked to the void: Is this it? Is this it? *Is that it?* I ask my own member some nights as I plead with both prostate and bladder for just a little more so I can sleep till morning. If there are no atheists in a foxhole when the bombing starts then there are certainly no atheists in the bathroom in the middle of the night when one is left pleading with one's body to function at the base level. Tonight, a drop reluctantly falls and I'd laugh if I could just see the humor.

To begin, I did not love my ex-wife or any of the women I have been with. I am not sure I love myself for that matter. To begin again, my name is Matthew Mathers. I am a game show host.

My name is Mathew Mathers. I'm a game show host for a local high school scholastic challenge called *In It to Win It*. My name is Mathew Mathers. It's good to remind myself of this every now and again. It's important. I look out the window and say it to the world. *My name is Mathew Mathers*. I don't shout it but say it in a normal inside voice. Inside voice versus outside voice. This is one of the first lessons I remember being taught. You need to use your inside voice when you are in the house or classroom. Too loud. Too soft. There was this girl in grade school who had no inside voice. She was loud, very loud outside of class, but she only spoke in whispers to the teacher. *Speak up!* Maybe she didn't talk much at all and was uncomfortable

around others. Mrs. Jensen, our 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher, was always telling her to speak up, up, up. I don't recall her ever speaking up. It's important to speak up and enunciate. I tell this to the contestants on my show. Just before we go live I gather both teams around me on the sound stage. *Gather 'round.* I say. I tell them to enunciate. *Remember to speak up and enunciate your answers. This is important. Don't shout into the microphones or press your lips directly against the microphones. Speak in a normal voice, but enunciate. Understand?* I am a benefit to the community.

And don't think this is some rinky-dink operation. This is a state wide game show and the longest running scholastic competition in the country. I'm paid well, not to brag, and am somewhat of a local celebrity. I have a speaking fee and when the show's not in season, you can find me on the motivational lecture circuit. I'm in high demand. I'm also a sponsor for a number of different companies and products. I endorse them and am paid handsomely to do so.

*Whenever I'm in need of a new or used automobile, my first stop is Logan's Chrysler, Buick and Jeep dealers located on highway 31. Logan's deals on new and used automobiles are priced just right and the quality and service are second to none. They're the leading Chrysler, Buick and Jeep dealer in the tri-state area. But more importantly, they'll treat you like part of the family. So if you're in the market for a new or previously owned car or truck, make the smart decision and come on down to Logan's. Logan Automotives: the smart decision.*

*Smart decision.* I thought of that and pitched the idea to Logan, who thought it was great. *We are the "smart choice,"* he said. He liked the line so much he emblazoned it on t-shirts, coffee mugs, and calendars. I would have stuck with *decision*, but Logan was bent on *choice* and it's his car company; he pays the bills and all. Nevertheless, every time I see one of their

advertisements I flush with pride. He even had me record a couple of short TV and radio spots where I just say, “Logan Automotive: The Smart Choice.”

I am concerned with the bleeding from my sphincter and think of yelling for someone to come into the bathroom and inspect the color of my excrement, but there is no one there. I think it is crimson. My excrement blossoms when it hits the water in the basin like a flower or nuclear bomb. The resounding quality of my shit would be endless if it weren't for the bowl. There is no one I can tell who would find this interesting. Maybe in the end it is just the self with the body. I sit on the toilet and look out one of the two bathroom windows and wonder about the difference between bathroom and restroom and when it's customary to call a small closet like room with a wash basin and toilet one rather than the other.

I am a successful game show host, spokesperson and a bit of a celebrity. I've hosted the regional PBS telethon. This is not one of the minor telethon but the main pledge drive. I'm the guy in the tux standing next to the attractive blond. I'm a guy now who owns multiple tuxes. They're hanging in the master closet. I also take part in the celebrity golf outing that takes place during the week preceding the PGA event held at the local country club. It's quite a well known tournament. As a celebrity, I have, naturally, met other celebrities. I've entered the circle and have started to hobnob with other celebrities of equal or higher stature. Most celebrities are as kind as they are portrayed to be on TV. Funny, too. Most celebrities are. I am.

And my celebrity status only increases as I get closer to home. There's a ring of recognition forming the epicenter of my status in the city where the show is filmed. As you expand out from there, my status as a known celebrity figure decreases, but only slightly, like ripples in a pond. Because my work places me in the realm of high school students, there are smaller epicenters throughout the state. If you were go to your favorite small body of water and

pick up a stone, nothing too heavy, maybe six inches by three inches or eight inches by five inches or seven inches by etcetera, but certainly under a foot, and throw it into the small body of water, you would understand what I mean. The circles represent my popularity in a given geographic locale.

If we were playing Twenty Questions, and you were trying to guess the size of the rock I'm thinking about, it would be good to establish first if it, the rock, is smaller than a breadbox. Even though I doubt many people today can conceptualize the size and shape of a breadbox it is still acceptable as a size qualifier when trying to guess at Twenty Questions. First, the person guessing, the guesser, if he is playing with someone he knows well, will always guess an object or two the person who thinks of the object, the chooser, has selected in the past.

“Is it a truck?”

“No.”

“Is it a drawbridge?”

“No.”

After this, the guesser will try and establish the scope or parameters for the object he is trying to guess. The first question in this line of thought is usually, *Is it bigger than a breadbox?*

“Is it bigger than a breadbox?”

When my son was younger, around five, and he and his mother and I would go on car trips, we often played Twenty Questions as a way to pass the time. He was young at the time so his world of objects to choose from was limited. For example, he would not choose a bidet or a thermonuclear device. His world was limited to school, home, our car, TV, dogs, baseball cards and equipment, etcetera. His world was further narrowed when we told him that he couldn't choose people, anybody living.

“Like grandma?”

“Yes, like grandma. You can’t choose Grandma or Mom or me.”

“What about grandpa?” He asked.

“Grandpa’s not alive anymore, but no, you can’t choose him either.” I answered.

“Matthew.” His mother said.

“What about Nana and Papa?”

“They’re both alive. They have heartbeats. Your grandpa doesn’t have a heartbeat, but you still can’t choose him.”

“Matthew.” His mother said again.

I don’t think my boy understood anyway, but as parents we have to be specific and clear when both establishing rules for games and talking about death with our son. It’s important. Death, in fact, is a rule. If we look at life as a game, death is a major rule and plays a significant role in establishing who the players are and when the game is over. When it’s over is clear. I like to think when I die or just before I die three “X’s” will appear before my face and I will hear the buzzer sound. Who the players are is an interesting idea too, and very important for the game. For example, as much as people want to believe in ghosts or angels, the dead are out. You cannot sleep with or go on a date with the dead. If you do, you will lose points or go to jail or somehow be marginalized in the game. Trying to use the dead illegally can also be an act of cheating. Here, think of voter fraud or a story I heard about a grandson who didn’t report his grandfather’s death in order to continue cashing the social security checks.

Life is specific about its rules, the same way parents need to be with their children, which arose as a problem when my son and I played Twenty Questions. My son was the chooser and I was the guesser. I started with two objects he had selected in the past.

“Is it a TV?”

“No.”

“Is it a drawbridge?”

“No.”

“Is it bigger than a breadbox?”

“No.”

Now the game’s getting interesting. I’ve been able to remove two objects he’s selected in the past and locate the size of the object.

“Is it a baseball mitt?”

“No.”

“Ball?”

“No.”

“Bat?”

“No.”

These are the three objects my boy held dearest to his heart. Even though I didn’t play long past middle school, I taught my son the importance of breaking in a new glove by rubbing it down with leather oil, nestling a ball in the pocket to form the perfect baseball shape, wrapping the whole thing up with one of those industrial rubber bands that every house has a small collection of though no one is sure from where, then sticking the glove under his mattress to be slept on overnight so the necessary pressure of the light weight of a child could be applied.

“Is it your radio?”

“No.”

“Your stuffed bear?”

“No.”

“The books on the bookcase?”

“No.”

I’m worried now. The last two guesses were blind.

“Is it a gumball machine?”

“No.”

I broaden the scope. “Is it heavy?” “Yes.” Now we’re getting somewhere.

“Is it made of metal?”

“Yes.”

“Is it a dumbbell?” Shot in the dark.

“No.”

“Does it move?”

“I guess so.”

“You guess so?”

“Well, yes it moves.”

“On its own?”

He hesitates giving a response again. I felt myself losing patience with my son and he could tell this, too. But when you ask a simple question, it’s only natural that a person should be able to respond in a clear and coherent manner. “Um” is not clear and coherent. It is no way for a son to talk with his father.

“Yes, it can move.”

That doesn’t help me out. I’ve lost count of the number of questions I’ve asked already. I am defeated by a five year old.

“Is it a toy monkey playing the cymbals?”

“No.”

“Do we have it at the house?”

“No.”

“Do we own one?”

“No.”

I don't care anymore except for the fact that winning shouldn't come easily to a child.

“I give up, what is it?” After saying this, my boy's face lights up with the joy I hope he feels during all important moments in his life.

“It's a drawbridge.”

Cheater. My son is a cheater. A lying, conniving cheater. I lost count of the total number of questions I've asked, but each question, except for the last one, represents a lie my son told. He's just lied to his father somewhere in the vicinity of sixteen times.

I forget why I'm thinking about this. This was the first time my son lied or cheated (that I know of!) while playing a game, but not the last as it happened with more regularity after this. Maybe it is the reason for everything that's happened to us since. I wanted to hit him at that moment. His mother told me not to. Maybe this was the start of the end of our relationship.

The world loves Alex Trebec. I wonder if Alex is thinking about me while I am thinking about him. It would be nice if I could somehow know. Not just about Alex, but other people as well. Maybe someone in a foreign country is watching a broadcast of my game show right now. I think about my son. We haven't spoken in a number of years, but I take solace in genetics and that one day he too will bleed from the ass when he goes number two and then will think of me. I would like to be made aware of this moment so I can enjoy the causal connections that happen

in life. The string of people and happenings and time that lead to my only son, the flesh of my flesh and all that, sitting on a toilet thinking about his old man. Maybe he won't think about me then. Maybe he is more focused than I am. His old man. Me. Old and man. That's about the crux of it.

Outside the bathroom window is the world around my domain. It is dark and quiet out there. It is the middle of the night. I should invest in slippers. I could stock my walk-in closet with nothing but new pairs of brown-leather slippers with blue-plaid linings. I could wear a new pair each night. Thoughts like these make me think I'm going crazy, but in a mild sort of way. I am reminded of my sphincter. What happened to youth? I feel if I were reintroduced to my younger self again I would recognize the outside, but I'm not sure about the inner workings. The outside would be the easy part – physical attributes and all. Such and such a height, weight, hair color, shape and all the physical markings that would allow me to place the younger me at whatever stage of growth. *I remember you*, I'd tell my younger self. But the inside, what was going on behind the eyes, is a different story. Fire and all, the thing that drives the young, I'm not sure I'd remember that feeling. I remember there was something of something there. Certainly. Confusion and anger, I could get behind that. But I would be at a loss for the particulars and that seems to be what's at issue here. Certain past experiences stick out. There was the time I got a sliver in my finger. I don't remember where I got the sliver, but I remember the urgency in my mother's tone of voice and movements to remove the sliver. I was crying, yes, but that wasn't the issue. I remember she took out a needle from her sewing kit and grabbed a book of matches. She disinfected the needle by holding the silver point in the flame of a lit match. There was a slight crackle. She lit a second match to be on the safe side. The needle blackened at the tip. I don't remember my son ever having a sliver in his finger. Maybe he did

at one point and told his mother about it. Left the old man out of the process. You would think that she would have told me, but maybe it was an insignificant detail that day. Or maybe there just aren't as many slivers as there used to be, that whatever used to create the sliver, the thing the sliver slivered from, has been made better, from higher quality materials, plastic not wood, so that it tends to sliver less. It saddens me to think that when my son was younger he never experienced a sliver in his finger and the process a mother goes through, disinfecting the needle in match flame. I have not had a sliver in years and think our battles become more isolated with age. For example, there is no one outside my door to help me now.

The sun has moved higher into the sky.

I am Matthew Mathers.

“Enunciate. Be loud. Stand up straight and make your parents proud.” I tell this to each group of students just before we're about to begin taping.

I'm not sure when the pain started, when it crept up on me. Maybe it was an extra strenuous movement that started things. Maybe I'm dying from the inside out. This is how people die. Who dies from the outside in? Smokers? Sun worshippers? I've been both, quit years ago, but still find myself every now and again hitting a tanning salon and smoking a single cigarette. The rates diminish though. What about a car crash? Or suicide? I read in the paper about this couple who parked their car at the bottom of a hill on a blind curve. They were hit by a Mack truck that didn't see them until it was too late to stop. The elderly couple was killed instantly. The police investigated the wreckage and found a note penned by the couple stating that they had parked their Buick at the bottom of the hill in order to commit suicide. Fuck all if I were the driver of the truck, especially if it was an independently owned and operated vehicle. The point is that the couple may have died from the outside, but I'm sure their organs stopped

working. Maybe this is a chicken or an egg sort of question. Their organs turned into mush and stopped working, but if it weren't for the violent impact the couple would have been alright.

The sphincter, though, is the borderland for the internal and external. I thought the first painful movement was just an anomaly. Something I ate. A change in the weather. But the pain has persisted and increased in severity. I told myself to keep an eye on it and started inspecting after each wipe and that's how I noticed the blood, which, if I am to be honest, bothered me at first. It was a change, something new happening to my body. I wondered at the discolored piece of toilet paper that I held like the bud of a rose. I called my physician, but got the office manager.

"This is Matthew Mathers," I said.

"Yes, Mr. Mathers, how can I help you?"

I didn't think beforehand about what I should say. I don't like talking about my personal life and as a recognizable member of the community I'm hesitant for anything to be made public. I needed to be delicate and vague.

"I was looking to schedule an appointment with Dr. Morgan." Simple and to the point I thought.

"And for what reason?"

"General check-up," I said.

"Okay, how's three weeks from now sound?"

Like agony.

"Nothing sooner?" I inquired politely.

"Not unless there's a cancellation."

"Could Dr. Morgan just give me a call?"

“I’m sorry, but not with his current schedule. The best I could do is get you in here three weeks from now.”

I hung up the phone. Click. It’s a remarkable thing the type of control you have when you hang up on someone. There’s nothing they can do to stop you. Of course, they could call back, but then you just don’t have to answer the phone. I sometimes will open the phone book, select a name and number at random, call that person with some constructed story and then just hang up midway through the conversation. I have to disguise my voice now that I’m a known TV personality and often feel a great deal of sadness that I’ll never be able to dial one of those 1-900 numbers again.

The receptionist was persistent and called back a number of times.

“Hi, Mr. Mathers. We seem to have gotten cut off. Did you want me to go ahead and schedule that appointment for you?”

“Hi, this message is for Mr. Mathers. I’m calling from Dr. Morgan’s office about the check-up on the 15<sup>th</sup>. I’m holding the spot for you, but we’ll have to cancel your appointment if we don’t hear back in the next day or so.”

“Hello, Mr. Mathers. This is Dr. Morgan’s office again. I’m sorry to keep calling, but I’m going to have to cancel your appointment as we haven’t heard back. If you’d like to reschedule, please feel free to call back any time.”

In this room in the night, I try to feel connected to the world. I spend a lot of time in here.

I take inventory of the bathroom.

There are four rolls of two-ply white toilet paper in the cabinet beneath the sink and one on the dispenser next to the toilet.

There is a set of monogrammed towels.

There is a stand-up shower with glass sliding door, silver colored controls and a five setting shower head.

A claw-foot tub that sits below one of the two windows.

Two wash basins.

Two windows, as the bathroom rests in the corner of the house.

A beige bathmat.

A vanity mirror within an oak setting.

A toilet.

An off-white soap dispenser and toothbrush holder.

A toilet plunger with a long glass handle that is knobbed on top.

The rest of the house is something to behold, but doesn't really matter as my life has shrunk down to an existence within these walls. I play a game with myself where I close my eyes and try to picture the room exactly as it is: tub, shower, various shampoos and conditioners, body wash and loofah, toilet with yours truly on it, windows and novelty painting. I picture myself on the toilet with my pajama bottoms around my ankles, covering my bare feet.

The other night when I was sitting in the bathroom, like I am tonight and was the night before and the night before, I opened up the doors to the cabinet where cleaning supplies, cleansers, cloths, Vaseline, ointments, and backup shampoos and conditioners are stored. In the back, behind all of these other jars and bottles, behind an old white t-shirt of mine that was converted into a rag, was the rectangular bottle of my son's baseball glove oil. I could identify the bottle easily enough by its unique rectangular shape, metal body and plastic tip with a little red cap. I added it to my list of objects in the bathroom. We keep a lot of crap, I thought.

I think my life has become redundant.

I wake up in my bed. My ass hurts. I have to drain the lizard. I have no wife in the bed next to me. The other side of the bed has not been slept in. I try to remember the last time my son's mother and I fought. Did I say something inappropriate? Sometimes when we fought, I'd make what she called an annoying buzzing sound to let her know that she was wrong or what she said was wrong. The sound was like a metallic car horn; I gave her two quick toots. When this happened during the show the contestant usually frowned after hearing the sound or provided an *aw shucks* facial response. I remember something from my school days about Pavlov and dogs being held in the air and a sound and food or not food and something about drooling. My ex-wife's response was nothing like either the audience's response or the contestant's. When she said something that was wrong and I made the sound, she responded with increased hostility, which really had no place in an adult conversation so I buzzed her again. It were as if I was Road Runner and she was Wiley E. Coyote. In response to my buzz, she more emphatically laid out her reasoning for why she felt and responded the way she did. To be quite fair, my ex-wife's points were usually well thought out and ordered. If she was upset say about the garbage and why I hadn't taken it out the night before she'd keep her points to the trash bag in the kitchen, the bin out back and me. In contrast, if the roles were reversed, I would expand the argument. I addressed the overflowing trash bag in the kitchen, the bin out back, her, her mother's permanent dislike for me, her, my ex-wife's that is, disrespect for my occupation regardless of the fact that it put a roof over her head, quite a large roof I might add, and organic food on the table, as well as her trust issues with men because of her louse of a father who walked out on them when my ex-wife was a young girl. Sometimes, I'd bring up these points even if the roles weren't reversed, and if she didn't listen or objected to my observations I'd buzz her then.

Her: That's not the point.

Me: Buzz buzz

Her: We're talking about the garbage.

Me: Buzz buzz

Her: Why must you always...

Me: Buzzzzzz

Her: I can't even...

Me: Buzz buzz buzz

Her: Just

Me: Buzzzzzz

Me: Buzzzzzz

Me: Buzzzzzz

The other thing I remember about Pavlov is that many of the dogs starved to death hanging in the air. He stopped feeding them, but they continued to drool.

I think there are two worlds: one inside and the other outside. Inside is a ten by twelve square-foot room. Outside is a bit more complicated. The houses themselves become The Neighbor's. Wood, stone, brick, plaster and glass arranged in a specific, self contained fashion and placed in a specific geographic area become The Johnson's, The Spelmans, the Smiths, The Joneses or The Gabriels. The houses, to think of them, become living breathing things with their own smells and sounds. My house has a smell too, but I don't know what it is, nor can I ever really know. My smell is unique, yet I spend my days trying to mask this unknowable smell. Clorox, all purpose cleaner, handy-wipes, dish detergent, room deodorizers and carpet shampoo are all incorporated to mask the smell. This is not to mention all of the personal shampoos and

soaps I use as well. In the bathroom alone, there are a multitude of cleaners: Windex (for glass), soap scum remover, all purpose stuff, bleach and two different types of room deodorizer in aerosol cans. I'm not sure why we have two, but I like the idea that we can erase all remnants of our physical existence using such products. From my position on the toilet, I pick up the two cans for inspection. In my left is *Summers Day*, which has a red top and a picture of a bucket with flowers inside resting in front of an old red tractor with the sun shining down behind it. In my right, I hold *Meadow Dew*, which is adorned with a picture of a green field with wild grasses and flowers. The can has a paisley top. I weigh both choices and try to sense whether one better represents myself. I have a sinking feeling that deep down I am a *Summers Day* but really want others to think of me as a *Meadow Dew*. I set down the red capped can and remove the top to the *Meadow Dew*. I hold the can out in front of me and press down briefly on the nozzle to get a quick spurt of the air freshener. I'm not entirely sure what a meadow dew is supposed to smell like and think of the scientist at the company who was charged with the task of imagining, constructing, then testing the *Meadow Dew*. I'm sure the process started with research into consumer preferences. Get a roomful of average Joes and plain Janes and ask them which smells they think best represent themselves. Fifteen men and women representing various socioeconomic backgrounds sit around a conference table while a marketing rep leads the group through a series of questions that were constructed by the rep's firm to ascertain individual preferences. The group is weighted 70-30 women to men as women are still considered to be the primary purchaser for household goods, which include the various assortment of cleaning products. They are provided coffee and donuts and are promised pizza at the end of the day. On one side of the room is a two-way mirror behind which sit the company team charged with producing the new scent. The marketing rep leads the group through a series of questions.

*The goal of today's exercises is to help a household products company design a new bathroom management fragrance that will be appealing to today's modern consumer. As representatives of said consumer group (I'd be flattered to identify myself as a modern consumer on the cutting edge of modern consumerdom) we'll be asking you all a series of questions that will help us understand individual preferences with respect to the home-life. No questions right now please. Pizza will be served when we break for the day. Of course, help yourself to as much coffee and as many donuts as you'd like. As I was saying, my role here is to help moderate the discussion and walk you through the questionnaire we've devised. The questions are all on a 1-5 scale: one being a very strong dislike and five being a very strong like, think love, you love it, and 3 being somewhere in the middle. Okay?*

*What I think is truly exciting about today is that we are here, today, collectively, as a group, to help create the new American bathroom smell. Think of it, the new American smell that your friends and family will have in their own homes. Approximately, to the best of your ability. An approximation or as best you can. Sure, fill up beforehand. Holiday spice is already in the works, but thank you for the suggestion. Ready? I'd like you to answer the following questions as best you can. Okay, let's get started.*

In the end *Meadow Dew* was selected as The New American Smell. It even states this on the front of the can. "Meadow Dew: The New American Smell." New smell, not new America. This is important. The smell needs to be different, but the America needs to stay the same. I close my eyes and try to feel whether the *Meadow Dew* smell propels me to an empty meadow in the early morning. I think of the scientist sitting in his lab, wearing his white lab coat, patiently waiting for the slip of paper to arrive that will inform him of what scent he will need to produce. He twiddles his thumbs. He surveys the room with all the various equipment and chemicals and

tells himself that he'll be able to construct anything in here that the company might want. Maybe the laboratory is five floors below the marketing room in some subterranean bunker. The scientist, isolated for weeks, subsists on steel-cut oatmeal and water to cleanse and purify both mind and body. The marketing upstairs is conducted by the rep. The scientist waits below. The company execs sit behind the two-way mirror. The consumer group completes the questionnaire and subsequent follow-ups. They eat pizza afterwards on paper plates. The plates become translucent after absorbing the grease from the pizza. The rep had purchased three types of pizza: cheese, vegetarian and pepperoni. The results are tallied. *Meadow Dew* is selected. The execs toast one another with champagne. Two of them, Stacey and Bob, are caught up in the elation and decide now is the time to begin the affair they've been dancing around for months. They fornicate in the supply closet. A Junior Executive is handed a piece of paper with the results of the consumer research and is charged with the task of informing the scientist. The man views this as an honor and is so excited he takes the stairs instead of the elevator. Later, at the dinner held in celebration of a good day at work, the Junior Executive will tell his wife that he was so excited that he took the five flights of stairs all the way down.

“Five flights is a lot.” She dutifully responds with just the right tinge of incredulity.

“I know.” The restaurant is their favorite.

The Junior Executive reaches the lab door and punches in the six digit security code. On the other side of the door, the scientist is pulled from his meditations on the future scent and greets the Junior Executive at the door. With the ceremonial air of knighting someone the Junior Executive hands the scientist the slip of paper. They nod to one another and the scientist sits down at his table. He opens the slip of paper. The only words written on it are *Meadow Dew*. The scientist closes his eyes and thinks of a meadow in the early morning.

My eyes are closed when I briefly tap the nozzle of the can and hope the smell will transport me to the same meadow. I look for the scientist wearing the white lab coat. I press the nozzle again. I hold the nozzle down and spray the mist. *Meadow Dew* clouds the room. My nostrils drip with *Meadow Dew*. I choke on the smell. I cough up from deep in my chest buried phlegm that drips with the synthetic potpourri. I'm suffocating. I fall from the toilet onto the cold floor. My pants are still around my ankles. I lay in the fetal position on my left side and hold the can in the air with my right hand, letting the mist that has yet to dissipate fall gently onto my face. I will bug-bomb my bathroom, house and neighborhood with the smell. My eyes are beginning to burn.

I crawl to the window and struggle to open it with one hand. I hope the smell will drift out the open window and into my neighbor's dreams. I fall back to the floor. I can taste the spray on my lips and tongue. I'm tempted to open my mouth and spray the can deep inside. The can begins to struggle and I sense an ending. I press harder with my index finger which is beginning to numb. I'm unsure if the color of my finger nail has whitened, as I am no longer able to open my eyes. The spray has found its way to my sphincter. It stings. The can offers up a few final spurts. I am in a meadow looking for the scientist. I am in a meadow. It is morning. The dewy grass is below my bare feet. I stand, looking at the rising sun. I am wearing my pajamas in a meadow. I am not wearing a coat. I am chilled by the air.

The room is porcelain white and hospital clean with the strong smell of disinfectant lingering in the air. I see a woman sitting up on a gurney. Around the woman stands a doctor and a number of nurses all wearing their blue scrubs and surgical masks. The room fills with the hum, buzz and bleeps of the various machines that monitor her vital statistics. Sweat pours down the woman's forehead as the hospital staff soothes her with words of encouragement. During the

months leading up to her due date the woman dreamt of giving birth to some hideously deformed creature. The baby would have her eyes, but the rest of the body would be an amalgamation of all the men she's slept with in her life. Sometimes, she dreamt that the doctor would pull the child out of her, take one look at the lifeless form and tell her to thank her lucky stars that the child was stillborn. *He would have probably turned out to be a serial killer by the looks of him. Certainly looks to be deficient in the morals department, doesn't he?* they would say.

Her bare feet are wedged into the cold metal stirrups when they hand the woman her son. The pre birth has been wiped from his eyes, but part of her self is still smudged on his forehead, chin and right ear. The first word that comes to her mind is 'symmetrical'; the woman is looking for an equal amount of each extremity on either half of the child's body – no more, no less. She isn't sure if she could handle the disappointment of having a malformed child who would one day become a malformed adult who would need to be dependent upon her for everything. The mother understands that the umbilical cord has connected the two of them together during the pregnancy, and she hopes that this hasn't infected the child with any of her wickedness. As far as the mother can tell though, the baby is complete.

The mother thinks of all she would next be responsible for. I listen to her speak to the baby. *In such a little thing the world will inject such a great amount of knowledge. But I am your mother, she said, and at first this knowledge will filter through me and I will act as a filter of this world for you. I think I will teach you of the color blue. Pointing to the sky I will say blue, and you will say ba because your little mouth won't be able to purse your lips into the required oval shape. Blue I will say again because the sky is blue. For a while you will think everything is blue. Blue will be your mashed up peas that I feed you for dinner. Blue will be the spoon that holds your peas. Blue will even be the hunger itself down there in your belly. When*

*you are older you will have many words and use many words and will continue to gain many new experiences that require new words be put together in new ways to form new ideas and you will feel this newness somewhere deep inside and if you want to insist this place be called blue and this feeling be called blue as well, I will be okay with this because blue is as good a word as any to describe this place and the feeling of loss that that I fear you will one day experience and that I fear for you even now, even holding you now, even though you are so new. Maybe it is because the place you left you left empty and I will call this feeling of emptiness blue and I will hold you tighter to ward off that feeling. I will teach you the word blue and promise I won't care if you use this one word for everything. I am okay with this one word replacing everything. You will run around naked, pointing at the material things in the world and to each thing you will say blue and I will say good and tell you that you are so smart and you will smile and curl in upon yourself and laugh until your belly shakes. And in this way you will become king and lord over everything you see.*

The monitors to the right of the woman start to howl. Bleeps and boops, bells and whistles ring throughout the sterile room in a glorious symphony that signals the end. Face masks are ripped off and flung in all directions as the nurses scatter to and fro. The mother looks down at her child in order to reassure him that everything is going to be okay. The child morphs into a piglet and starts squealing at a deafening pitch. In the commotion someone pulls the now piglet from the mother's arms and quickly flees the room. The mother tries to get up, but is pushed back down and has a TV remote thrust into her hand. Next, a TV is carted into the room and set up on the adjacent wall as the last of the bleeping alarms is turned off. Someone has turned off the lights so now the only glow is the picture radiating from the screen. Of course, it

is a soft blue. In the doorway she catches the shadow of a nurse just before the nurse closes the door. The nurse turns around and addresses the mother.

*If you need anything else, just give us a buzz.*

When the woman turns on the TV there is an episode of *In It to Win It* just starting. She turns to me for the first time.

*Are you him?* She asks.

*Yes.* I say.

*How are you here if I see you on the screen?* She asks.

*It's a rebroadcast.*

*Will I like this one?*

*I think so.*

I wake a few hours later still on the on the floor clutching the now empty can of *Meadow Dew*. The smell from the spray permeates my body. I feel the cold floor and smack my lips together in order to revive my tongue. I say *ba*. My pajama pants are damp. I think I have peed myself. I am a grown man who has been baptized in *The New American Smell*. The vision of the woman stays with me. The dream stays with me and I wonder if the woman was my mother or ex-wife. The can of *Summer's Day* is still by the toilet and I am tempted to again fill the room to see what new vision this particular scent will provide, but think better of it as I am still recovering from the *Meadow Dew*. I am thankful to have had the wherewithal to open the window before passing out. Most of the spray has drifted outside, and the bathroom is once again a bearable place. I feel reborn and wait to understand the significance. I make a mental list of the things I must do now.

Get up.

Try to shit.

Change pajamas.

Get back into bed.

With this last item I think of the possibility of a change in direction.

Get up.

Try to shit.

Change pajamas.

Walk downstairs.

*Why bother?* I pull my pajamas up, shift my knees underneath me and peer outside the window. The sun is beginning to rise. There is no one to check on me. A car alarm sounds a few streets over. There is dew on the ground and the air seems to settle down over the neighborhood with a gray quality. This place must have been pretty when it was a farm. I have seen the sunrise before. It's colder now in the bathroom with the window open. I shiver a bit. The world is quiet. My shiver reverberates into the neighborhood. I think often now of when I was younger. I try to remember. It's funny what we remember.

The sun glows in the east as the pixilated fractals of the world outside my bathroom window turn translucent then fill with the orange and red hues of early morning. Imperceptible change though if I were to blink and let my eyes turn dark, then open them again – blink – then something beautiful. If there were a color scale, the color numbers would fall between 1.0 and 2.5: 1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 2.0, 2.0, 2.0, 1.7, 2.2. Fire and morning and I haven't stood on my feet or stretched my legs for a while. I'm sure I cannot feel my legs. The meadow beyond the Stravinskys' house is still damp.

I remember I am Matthew Mathers.

I remind myself that I am Matthew Mathers.

I remember the last show.

“Good Evening. I am Matthew Mathers and welcome to another exciting game of *In It to Win It*, the game show that pits the best and brightest minds from today’s high schools against each other.

“Today’s contest should be an exciting one as the reigning champs from Glenville High who look to continue their winning streak against the team from...I can’t read this. Who is this?” I looked up to the production assistant, Claire.

“Central Academy,” she said.

“...from Central Academy. We good here?”

“Yep. We’ll go ahead and put it on the teleprompter.”

It wasn’t my job to manage at such a level, but I got a kick out of people coming into the dressing room and handing me packets of information to approve. “Yes to the color. No to the size.” Claire came to rely upon my good sense as well.

I handed her back the cue cards and let my fingers lightly graze her hand. A reminder for her to consider what if. A bit on the tomboyish side, Claire was a youngish forty with short brown hair. I’ve always been attracted to intense women. It’s good to touch and I thought Claire felt so too. I caught a brief smile on her lips as I asked her to leave the dressing room door open on her way out. Blue pinstripe suit. Colorful tie with geometric shapes. Hair. Makeup. I loved the quiet rituals of my dressing room before heading out onto the sound stage.

“I am Matthew Mathers.”

My preshow ritual hadn't changed in years. Not that I got nervous anymore, I just liked the repetition. I found comfort in it. I reached into the drawer under the counter, pulled out a bottle and stole a quick drink.

"To your health." I said to the mirror.

The show's been on the air for 22 years and runs weeknights during the school year, minus national, state, or religious holidays like Yom Kippur, Thanksgiving, Labor Day. It started local, only encompassing the schools in one county, twelve high schools, and took off from there. Okay, to be honest, I was the second host of the longest running high school scholastic game show of its kind. The first host was Niles Bartlett, the weatherman for Channel Seven, the local ABC affiliate. I was the weekend anchor at the time when they came to me and asked if I wanted to step in for Niles.

"What's wrong with Niles?" I asked.

"He's a wreck. You heard about his wife. (I had. She had recently left him.) He's been hitting the sauce pretty good," said the Executive Producer at the time, Bob Stanfield, Stanny. *Best goddamn second baseman the company softball team ever had.* We played in a co-ed slow pitch soft ball league for years and Niles had the farthest range of anyone.

Hitting the sauce. No one hits the sauce anymore. I think Niles was the last of a dying breed.

Question: Who was the first game show host for *In It to Win It*?

Question and answer. Question and answer. There was an elegant simplicity to my responsibilities and the circularly complete task of asking and answering a question. There's a lot of information out there and the questions required contestants to sift through the breadth and

scope of the possible information, to cull what's meaningful or true, and to organize it into a neat and orderly package.

Answer: Niles Bartlett.

The questions asked on the show also allow the students, parents and audience alike to understand what's important in the world. History, science, math, social studies. It's all important, and it's all fair game. If it wasn't referenced in a question or set of questions, then there was a good chance that it was not important; or was important previously, but not now; or will be important in the future, but was not important currently; or could be understood to be something that contains potential importance, possible future importance, but, again, no current importance. Do you understand? *Oh, I'm sorry, that's incorrect.* With an incorrect answer, the question automatically transfers to the other four-person team. These are high school students, so the rules allow them to confer on answers for twenty seconds before having to respond. To make sure it's not a free-for-all, except during lightening rounds when teams are given only five seconds and any member may answer the question, the team members selected a person to be representative of that team.

“Good evening, folks. I'm your host Matthew Mathers and welcome to another exciting edition of *In It to Win It*. Tonight's contest pits the powerhouse team from Glenville High who look to continue their winning streak against the team from Central Academy.”

The sound stage moved out of the local ABC Seven to the main ABC affiliate about a decade ago once the popularity of the show increased, necessitating a higher production quality. There's a sound stage where the host's stand and team podiums were set up. A multitude of clear and colored lights hung from scaffolding overhead to brighten the stage. Three cameras set on dollies were used to film the action and there were four microphone stands on each table as

well as one attached to the host's podium for audio. Facing the stage was a 200 person theater seating for a live studio audience, which was filled to capacity most nights, sound proofed walls, the various cables and cords for power, a floor to ceiling dark curtain that's incorporated into the set design and a backstage area. Past all this were two green rooms where the competing teams got ready and my own personal dressing room.

On the night of my last show the Executive Producer, Jack Granger, and two trailing suits walked in and told me they had a few ideas for the show.

I'm Matthew Mathers, host of *In It to Win It* the number one nationally rated scholastic game show of its kind.

"Matthew," Jack said. "You remember Lou Davidson and Reid Pollack?"

"Yes, of course. We played in the same foursome at the charity tournament last spring."

Incompetents, the both of them. I was fairly certain they were both cheaters as well.

"We wanted to take a few minutes to discuss the show. You have a minute or two?"

"The show's about to start Jack. Can this wait until after?"

"We won't take but a minute."

"Great. I've got a few ideas, too." I said. Like one: Get out. Two: Never come back.

I love people who think they know something about television. Television and education seem to be the two things everyone knows something about. They think, *Hey, I watch a lot of TV, or Hey, I went to school when I was younger. 180 days a year. I know what's what.* When, in reality, nobody knows much of anything.

Question: What was the number one rated scholastic game show of its kind?

The show made money. No one thought it would, but it did and that gave me a sort of gravitas around the set.

“We’d love to hear them. One of the ideas we’ve been tossing around was the idea of moving you to Executive Producer for the show.”

“Sounds good. Would that give me more leeway with scheduling, questions, operations, what?”

“Well, what we’re thinking is to move you to Assistant Producer and bring in some new talent to host. Try out a new direction. You’ve had a great run with the show. I mean, it’s amazing what you’ve been able to do.”

“Lightning in a bottle. My wife and I tune in every night. We just love it.” Reid and Lou added (though I’m not sure which one’s which).

“I’m out? You’re trying to push me out?”

“Not out. Up. We want to move you up and slide someone else in under you. You’d have total control of the show, but we’d like to give someone else a shot. There’s a new weekend anchor we’re thinking we could groom as your replacement. ABC loves him, but he’s sitting behind Sally and Jacob and you know those two aren’t going anywhere.”

“Institutions.” Reid or Lou again.

“We’re afraid we’ll lose Lance. Now, there’s no guarantee he’d be good or as good as you, so we’ll try it out on an interim basis first.”

I knew the anchor they were talking about. I’ve watched him a few times on Saturday and Sunday night. Overly sprayed tan. Generically handsome Ken doll. He brings no depth to the news. No insights. No soul. I decided to tell Jack exactly what he could do with the idea.

*Suck my nuts, Pee Wee. You can take your idea and shove it where the sun don’t shine. You plebe. You’re a cheap suit. You’re pus that drips from a picked scab.*” Jack was thirty-five, in the prime of his career and climbing quickly. ABC had him marked as someone who might

take over national one day. *“I’m certain your mother doesn’t love you. And you think you know this show, know what the people want? The people want me, not surfer Ken who knows this community about as well as Ken and Barbie know how to fornicate. Now, get out of here before I decide to fuck your wife.*

I have slept with a number of women in the tri-state area. It started years ago, but picked up during my son’s childhood when the show started to take off. I remember my boy’s birth and my ex-wife’s response to the pregnancy. She was excited. Lamaze classes. Dr. Spock. I think about how I’m supposed to hold onto these memories. Where do these memories reside? How do they relate to one another? Are they weighted equally? Should I feel bad that my son’s birth pops up the same time I think about fucking Jack’s wife or fucking Jack professionally? My son’s mother didn’t appreciate the adultery and decided not to be part of the audience anymore. That’s okay. These things happen. I wasn’t cold hearted. I was just a realist. I worked with high school kids who had young mothers and old mothers. I was a public figure and can’t tell you how many times a woman approached me at a bar or fundraiser gala and asked me, *Aren’t you Matthew Mathers, the host of that game show?* It always started off innocently enough.

I never slept with Jack’s wife, though. Nor did I tell him I was going to. When he said they were thinking of going in a different direction, I took stock of myself in the mirror. This has been a habit of mine since I was younger. Everybody has their own small ceremonies; mine is to look at myself in the mirror. I tried to do this in an objective way. Matthew Mathers. About to be former game show host. Slightly balding. A pinstriped gray suit. More than a few extra pounds around the belly. I have a son somewhere. I have an ex-wife. Neither of them have I spoken to in years. Through the chubbier cheeks I saw the handsome youth that persuaded, elegantly, with class, Darcy Dunlap to get in the back seat of the car with him when

they were only sixteen years old. It was my father's Buick with bench seating. How can this be the man who slept with Darcy "Double D" Dunlap? Old DD Dunlap. Nobody believed me when I told them about it.

*We're thinking of going in a new direction.* I held on to the word *thinking* like it was a life preserver thrown to me in the middle of the ocean. Thinking is not doing. I am in the middle of the ocean. DD Dunlap has just gone under, but Jack has thrown me a life preserver. Thinking is not doing.

"Jack. You know I'm on the team. I'm a team player."

"That's great. And to be clear, this isn't an indictment of your performance, even though the numbers are down. It's an opportunity for you to be a lasting part of the show."

"The numbers are down?"

"They have been for a while." Lou Reid jumped in.

"How down?"

"Down enough, but that's not the point. The show will go on." Lou this time, I thought.

"The show will be fine, we just think it's time for you to let loose the reins and allow someone else to steer for a while. With your guidance of course," Jack said.

*Of course.*

Question: Which former host of America's number one game show for scholastic competition brought in a sawed-off shotgun and took everybody with him?

I looked at the three of them standing there and me in my green leather, high-back chair. The make-up lights reflected in the mirror and added more life to that scene than the one I was experiencing. I watched as Matthew in the mirror stood with quiet dignity and grace and explained to the three suits what was actually going down.

“The show is fine, and if the numbers are down then it’s just a normal part of the ebb and flow process of taste and timing. It’s not me or any one thing. What I am though is a public face for the network. I reach almost a national level. I also reach the kids. The little robots with their parents pushing them in a direction to be the smartest. I reach them. This show provides them with an outlet and an opportunity to be both above and a part of the community. And this, in turn, allows me to be part of the community. Again, I’m the face, but I’m only allowed to be the face because I reach those kids. But the community sees it. I can’t tell you how many invites I get to host this, sponsor that, be a part of a thing in order to protect the thing that’s in danger of not surviving. I’ll show you the invites. I’ll show you the fan mail.”

Not a half bad little speech, I thought. Somewhere during the course of watching Matthew in the mirror say these things I realized I was Matthew in the mirror and that I was saying these things to Jack, Reid and Lou. Not bad, I thought. I held up pretty well. That little fleck of spittle that sometime forms on my bottom lip when I’m angry had not made an appearance. My ex-wife hated that fleck and kept a diligent look out for its appearance. *Thar she blows*. It would set her off every time. Had she been in the room and keeping score of the conversation, she would have given Matthew in the mirror high marks for composure, dignity, poise and clarity.

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Then what? What do I need to do? Or, what do you think Lance brings to the table?”

“Matthew, Lance is what the station wants.”

“But he’s not what the people want.”

“They’ll want what we offer. What we provide. He’s young, hungry and capable. We need to offer him this so that he’ll stay and the show, quite frankly, needs a little shake up.

“The show doesn’t need a shake up.”

Cue ex-wife, *Thar she blows*. I wanted to reach out to Matthew in the mirror and take part in the conversation that was happening. I wanted to calm him down with soothing words of encouragement and remind him that he was speaking with the decision-makers in this situation and that he needed to cajole them, not push them away.

“The show needs me,” I said.

That certainly wasn’t the way to go. It might be the lights, but desperation rang clear here. Don’t be desperate. I felt like I was in a theater watching a horror movie. Like the other audience members, I knew the monster was hiding in the dark behind the closet door. The teenaged couple walking in don’t know this, but there was nothing the audience could do to warn them of the situation

*Don’t open the door. Don’t open that door.* Nothing. They open it. They always open it.

“The show doesn’t need you, Matthew.”

Team player. If I looked in the mirror then, I would have seen a man dressed like a sunflower. I’m a team player. Let’s deal with the practicalities.

“When is this going to happen?”

“Sooner than later, but there are still a few issues that need to be ironed out. We need to set up a contract with Lance’s people and then your own contract that will transition you into an Assistant Producer role. Standard OPs.”

Standard Operating Procedure. Jack loved military lingo, corporate lingo and any kind of lingo that made it seem as if he’s doing something other than what he’s doing.

“What kind of compensation am I looking at?”

“Don’t worry about that now. Focus on your other activities.”

“Jack, I’m going to worry about that now. I’ve got sponsorships and speaking engagements, but I only get those because I’m a popular game show host. A popular game show Assistant Producer just doesn’t have the same appeal. Lance is young, but I’m youngish or at least not dithering and old. I’ve got a home. I’ve got expenses. I need to hear you talk about guarantees. I need to hear you say the word guarantee.”

My house. My condo in Florida. My son who I don’t speak to but have given monthly checks to for years now, his mother and her attorneys. I think I’m also dying from the inside out. I sat back down, stared into the mirror, looking for empathy in Jack’s eyes.

“Matthew, we’ll work this out. I guarantee you we’ll work this out. You’ve been good to the show and, in turn, the show’s been good to you and will continue to be so. What’s wrong with just understanding this? That’s your guarantee.”

“I’ve been good to the show? I am the show.” I said it this time. I had to say it because, well, it was true. I was the show. There was a team involved who orchestrated the surroundings, sets things up, but I was the name and the face. Nobody needed to see behind the curtains because I stood out in front of them and the audience wanted it this way.

“Don’t get all sanctimonious on me.”

“Sanctimonious? That’s a big word, Jack.”

“Jack’s just trying to help you out here.” Lou or Reid said.

“We’re trying to look out for you,” Reid or Lou followed.

“How, by taking away my show?”

“Do you want us to be honest, Matthew?” Jack said, staring at me in the mirror.

“Can you?”

Yes you can. No you can't. I know you are, but what am I? Our suits were too big for our bodies and my dressing room chair enveloped my body. We've never grown out of being children. I seemed to remember a similar conversation when I was younger. It was over a bat, ball, cards, candy. I don't really remember. Maybe I wanted to pitch during kick ball. It's weird. Life's become the inverse of childhood. When you're a child playing childhood games, no one ever wants to be it. *Tag, you're it.* Then you spend the rest of the time trying not to be it. *How do I get out of this as quickly as I can?* The answer was always easy. Pick on the slow kid, the one with the lazy eye who had bad peripheral vision and a natural blind spot, someone's little sister, the fat kid. Hell, if you were it too long, you just up and quit. *I'm not playing anymore and I'm taking my ball, glove, bat, cards with me.* Somewhere along the way the rules changed. Be the fastest, smartest, funniest. Doesn't matter what it is, just be it. Well, I was it. And who does Jack think he is to say that I'm not it anymore. It's my ball, Jack. He couldn't just take the show away from me. He couldn't just take the show and go home.

"You can't just take it away from me." I said.

"Everyone's already on board."

"Bullshit."

"It's done."

"I'll go above your head."

"Be my guest. Go anywhere you like. If you want me to be honest, Matthew, you should know that this victim, woe-is-me, ageism, longtime friend card you're thinking about pulling isn't going to fly, won't fly. You're not innocent."

I saw what Jack was about to say coming a mile away. *Say it, Jack,* I thought. *Say indiscretions.*

“Quite frankly, we’re tired of covering up your indiscretions. We’re tired of pretending that your squeaky clean image is real.”

Thank you, Jack.

“Let’s get it all on the table then,” I said. Be clear, enunciate.

Question: These were the supposed indiscretions Matthew Mathers engaged in?

“How do I put this, Matthew? Your taste for young women and alcohol is a problem. It’s the reason we’re looking to put you in the booth.”

“What did I do?”

“She was a high school student.”

“She graduated. She was eighteen.”

“She was a contestant.” Jack said.

“She was a *former* contestant and quite a charming woman. In fact, one of the most charming women I’ve ever met. So what’s the problem here? I didn’t leave her barefoot and pregnant. She wasn’t found locked in my car. I introduced her to wisdom and she reintroduced me to youth.”

“Oh, so your motives were to educate and enlighten? I’m sorry to imply that your actions were nefarious in the least or anything other than on the up and up. But you’re allowed to stay in that mindset because you’re focused solely on action and never on reaction or consequence.”

“What consequences?” I said.

“The girl’s mother.”

“Who cares about her? She can say what she wants.”

“She did. And what she said was how devastated her daughter was by an older man who took advantage of her little girl.”

“Took advantage? It was mutual.”

“That’s not what she felt.”

“Well, that’s too bad, but I can’t control or be concerned with the mother’s feelings. Her feelings are her feelings, misguided and corrupted as they are.” I thought about this for a second. Have you ever wondered whether something you said was true or only true to you? What is my role in controlling other people’s feelings? No, she felt how she felt. Interpersonal connections are based on feelings, but the feelings bubble and percolate internally. I noticed Jack was waving his hands for emphasis. The light from the mirror caught the glint of his wedding ring.

“Well, her feelings cost the station a good deal of money. We had to pay for her feelings to remain hers and hers alone.”

“Whose feelings, the mother’s or her daughter’s?”

“The mother’s, the girl’s, both. They were both upset, but the mother wanted retribution.”

“For what?” I was incredulous, but still convinced that the mother was running the show.

“Laws were broken.”

“Laws broken? Jack, I can’t help it if you were taken for a ride by the girl’s mother. It was your decision, not mine, to give in to the demands of a woman who was clearly out to make a buck at her daughter’s expense.

“We’ve talked about this. We’ve talked about your public image and what it means to the show. The show needs you to be a father figure, a stately gentleman who is a molder of minds.”

“I am those things, Jack.” I said.

“No, you’re not, Matthew. You’re not even a two-bit game show host; you were a weekend fill in with a career going nowhere until you lucked into this position. You ask questions from a teleprompter. You can read. That’s it. And if the ratings weren’t so high, we probably would have had this conversation a while ago.”

“See,” I said swiveling around in my chair to look Jack in the eye. “It’s all about money and ratings, ratings and money. I’m a good guy if the show’s doing well, but as soon as the ratings dip, I become a cancer that needs to be cut free.” I was proud of this metaphor and swiveled back around to watch Jack flail about in the mirror. Stuff that in your pipe, Jack.

“Cancer, I like that. You are a cancer feeding off of the show. But the problem is your cancer has spread beyond the show. The show’s thin and dying because of you. There’s only a show because of sponsors and you’ve done a good job of driving them away.”

“Who? Ted’s Sports and Outdoors? That issue was settled. I sent a letter of apology, at your insistence if you remember, that resolved the issue.”

“Resolved nothing. You sent a carefully worded letter of apology because you were drunk, grabbed his wife and made a general spectacle of yourself at the grand opening of the new store.”

“First, she’s his second wife. Second, she came on to me.”

“You’re a drunk.”

“Third, it’s all about profit margins again.”

“Of course it is. This isn’t news. This is the way it is.”

“Well, did we lose them as a sponsor?”

“No.”

“All right then.” I felt that I was winning the conversation and Jack felt it too.

“Because it was smoothed over. You wrote a letter of apology because we told you to. It was smoothed over because we took the time to explain away your actions. There’s no more explaining. We’re not waiting for a next letter. You’re out, Matthew.”

“I’m the show.”

“You keep telling yourself that. Lance is in. You’re out. It’s been decided. Pick up the phone and talk to whoever you want to talk to, whoever you think can help. But the situation is you’re out. Now, you get to decide how. Behind door number one is the Assistant Producer title and a cush job for a few years. Behind door number two is a very public firing and announcement to your fans.”

Jack gestured to Lou and Reid in some subsonic way. The two were already out the door as he turned to leave.

“Do your show and take the night to think about it. Sleep on it.”

“What’s the timeframe for making a decision?” I asked.

“Soon.”

Jack was gone and I was left to search for a reason to say why I’ve won. I was having trouble trying to think of one.

Question: Who were the two former hosts of the most successful game show of its kind?

*I am Matthew Mathers.*

From over my shoulder a black spot passed and I thought for an instant that there was some kind of animal in the room. I’ve had this type of sensation before. It started when I was a kid. The spot passed again, and I realized Claire’s silhouette was blocking the light from the hallway. She was afraid to come in. I’m sure she heard the conversation between Jack and me. The end had already started. The creeping through doorways. The politeness. The sensitivity. I

went from successful game show host to invalid during the course of a conversation. There will be moments when I walk into a room and the conversation going on will stop, the remnants of dialogue scattering like frightened chickens.

“Come in, dammit.”

Claire peeked her head from around the door frame and walked into the room.

“You heard, I take it,” I said.

She gestured with a shrug that looked more like an acknowledgement rather than an affirmation. She felt frustrated by the situation. Okay, Okay. She waited to see how I’d respond and whether or not I was going to freak out. There was a power in those around you thinking you might flip out at any moment. It might be sick, but I enjoyed, given the givens, given the circumstances, Claire’s response. There was dual power there. First, there was the power of the unexpected in that, as I’ve said, Claire was unsure how to respond. Second, there was room for magnanimity. A magnanimous gesture on my part would not only subvert her expectations and relieve the tension swimming in the room, but the relief she felt would pull her closer to me, enabling her to become the first member of my camp. What I needed to do was draw a line in the sand and ask the crew where they stood. *Are you with Jack and his suit cronies or are you with me, the man you’ve known and loved for years?* It started there in the room with Claire and though my first response was to snap at her, that could be forgiven as I was a man and have committed my working life if not life-life to the show and just had the proverbial rug pulled out from underneath me so given the circumstances, given the givens, a small snap should be expected, if not completely understood, as no snap would have demonstrated a lack of emotion, which would really have reflected a lack of caring. I cared. I snapped because I cared and Claire understood this. She was the Production Manager for the last seven years. She held back at the

door to give me space and herself time to regain her composure. I needed to understand that I wasn't the only one affected by the decision and that now was the time for a magnanimous response to alleviate her concerns, recognize her emotions and reward her for her patience and loyalty. Ease in. Start slow. We were both wounded animals looking to sniff each other and begin again.

"I'm sorry, come in."

Good, I thought. Start with an olive branch.

"How much of my conversation with Jack did you hear?"

I watched Claire in the mirror. She again didn't say anything but shrugged her shoulders and raised her hand slightly to signal that she'd heard all, or most, or enough of the conversation to know what the situation was. And what's more, she's simpatico. She'll be a confidant. She wanted to take the first step, gingerly, over the line in the sand.

"I see. I'm sorry you had to hear it," I said.

Again she shrugged. This time with a head tilt. *No, Matthew. I'm sorry Jack put you, put all of us into this situation. His response wasn't fair. His response was out of line.*

"I want you to know," I began. I wanted to finish her thoughts for her. "I want you to know that I think Jack was out of line and that I've committed myself to this show over the years and think I, and this show, deserve more. I hope I've treated you and the rest of the staff better than he lets on because, and here's the God's honest truth, I'm only the show as much as you and the rest of the staff are the show. We're a team. We do this together. We're in it together."

Nice. I lowered my eyelids and held it for a three count while I fought the urge to look at Claire's response in the mirror. I would not look at Claire. I counted to three and then made it six. Six beats was sufficient. Three beats was insufficient. This was a solemn occasion and

needed to be marked with reverence. It was interesting how the root response to tragedy, difficulty or uncertainty, depending on the severity of the situation, is all a matter of degrees. A colleague's dog or grandmother passing away requires a three beat head nod and silence followed by a one-two head shake to start the old engines again. Upon hearing of the loss of someone else's parent or sibling, you first give the stunned head bow lowering of the eyes combo, five beat silent response and follow this up with the mouth agape one-two-three head shake. Any such combination of the head shake, nod, mouth open/closed, eyes open/closed worked for any given situation.

Head down, lowered eyes: I'm sorry your dog died.

Lowered eyes, open mouth: I can't believe your grandmother passed, she was still young.

Head shake, wide-eyes, closed mouth, opened eyes: life can be so challenging.

Head shake, head shake, wide eyes: Life is just too damn short.

Wide eyes, open mouth: Your news is certainly unexpected.

I felt the lowered head, lowered eyes was a tempered effect and really was what the situation called for, but to lay it on just a touch more, I gave a slow back and forth head shake (one-two, one-two), with eyes still lowered and mouth pressed firm; expressing resolve to soldier on in the face of hardship. I was especially proud of the mouth pressed firm as it captures sadness and frustration as well as resiliency.

I snuck a peek at Claire in the mirror and thought I could spy a few tear streaks on her face. I wasn't certain, but she certainly looked to be in the moment as well. It was time to ask her to choose sides. I let out a sigh and looked at her in the mirror.

"I need to ask for your advice on how to best deal with the situation." Good start. I placed her in a position of authority and power. "What would you do if you were in my

position? I've given my life to the show (Head down. Eyes closed. Mouth open). I've given everything (Head shake. Eyes open. Mouth pressed firm). And Jack comes in here and tells me that he wants to just take it away." Conversations and personal relationships are like fishing. Sometimes you need to let the line out to pull the catch in. I needed to add a touch of sympathy with a dash of humility and honesty to win over Claire's empathy. I looked at Claire directly in the mirror. I stared at her in the mirror and looked directly at her eyes. She moved closer and stood right over my right shoulder.

"I know I'm not a perfect man. I could be a better husband. I'm short tempered sometimes and certainly intense in the work place, but that's just because I demand so much out of myself. If I haven't said it enough or demonstrated it enough, I'm sorry, but I truly appreciate everything you've done for me and the show. And quite frankly, I need your advice now. I need your support and expertise now. I need you now."

Head down. Mouth closed. Eyes open. Exhale.

I looked back up at Claire in the mirror again. I reeled her in. She took another step towards me. Her expression – mouth and eyes opened – denoted wonder and sympathy. I reminded myself to get her flowers. She stood so close to my right shoulder I could feel her breath on my neck. Take that, Jack. Line in the sand time, are you ready?

"You fucking asshole."

Oh, shit.

"You degenerate, perverted, old man. You slept with that girl?"

Claire, don't do this to me. Don't do this to me, Claire. You were supposed to be my first Lieutenant. You were supposed to be my confidant, my consigliere as we marched off and tried to do this thing.

“What are you talking about? What just happened here?” Feeble effort, Matthew. Pull yourself together.

“I heard the conversation. Jack said you slept with a contestant.”

“Former contestant.”

“What difference does that make?”

“Claire, you’re talking about the integrity of the show here. I can’t give the impression of impropriety or bias. The student contestants, their parents, schools, and the community at large need to be assured, feel assured, that the game is fair. It’s crucial to the show. I’d think you know that.”

“Don’t obfuscate the situation.”

I wondered if Claire and Jack talked to each other before coming in to my dressing room. I bet they did. I bet this was some sort of setup.

“What are you aiming at here?” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Your incredulity seems forced. Did you and Jack speak? Did you and Jack talk before coming in here to talk with me? What’s he promised you?”

“You think we need to talk about me? We’re talking about you and the girl. I went to bat for you. One year ago I walked into Jack’s office and said there’s no chance, no way, no how Matthew’s sleeping with a contestant.”

“Former contestant.”

“A young girl.”

“A young woman.”

“A high school student.”

“She’s eighteen.”

“That’s what you’re going to say to me, she’s eighteen? You know you’re in a position of authority. These kids coming on the show, and God’s honest truth I don’t have the foggiest idea why, look up to you. They see you as some person of influence in their life, a controller of their destiny.”

I liked that, *controller of destinies*. That would make a great slogan to have printed on coffee mugs and t-shirts. Forget *Make the Smart Choice*. *Controller of Destinies* was much more grandiose. I wanted to ask Claire if she really thought that but I could tell now probably wasn’t the time.

“Well, Claire, I’m kind of disappointed in your response. You’ve been my go to. You’re my go to. You’re my favorite producer on this show. You’re who I trust.”

I didn’t know how to finish. I wished everybody would just shut up. Claire, Jack, my ex-wife’s attorney who is still gouging me for money at every turn. I made a few dollars and all of a sudden become an evil villain. I made a few dollars and so what? People make a lot more than I do, and people make a lot less. I seemed to make an amount that pissed everyone off. I don’t want to cry and sound ungrateful. If there is a God, he’s been good to me here, but it makes one’s eyes ache to tie up or unravel, depending on what you want to do with them, all the loose ends of fate and destiny. I’ve become much more of a here and now person. Maybe we all live in a fog. No, that’s not right. Maybe we all want to live in a fog where visibility is only about five feet. There is a great need to project forward and understand what’s going to happen next, but the secret is it’s the same for all of us. Death is the backstop to life.

“Claire, you know that we’re all going to die?”

“Don’t give me that post mid-life crisis crap. There’s a question on the table.”

“I’m not trying to change the subject, I just want to know. I’m just trying to understand what people think about and you’re the only sample I have at the moment.”

Maybe I should work as a life coach or for one of those companies that represent lottery winners. There’s a group who needs to fully understand where we’re going to end up.

The faint electric buzz of the intercom clicked on in preparation of an upcoming announcement. The nodes and currents seemed to buzz in excitement of being used, fulfilling circuitry. If all you ever had was a hammer. A voice came over the loudspeaker and announced fifteen minutes till curtain.

“Fifteen minutes to curtain.”

“I’m sorry, but we’re going to have to put this conversation on hold,” I said.

“Shove it.”

“Professionalism, Claire.”

“I quit. This is my last show.”

“I think that makes two of us.”

It sank in a little deeper that this might be one of my last shows or the teetering over point to some finale. Precipice. There’s an exhilarating moment when you’re a child and you’re on a seesaw at school during recess. I used to ride the seesaw with a girl named Suzy in grade school. We were both small and would push off on the ground to add a bit more force. My favorite point was when you were in mid flight and the saw or see was just beyond equal, a moment of freefall and weightlessness that could be experienced on both the upstroke and down so that you didn’t know or could be fooled into feeling like you were both coming and going. This didn’t feel like that.

“What am I going to do?” I said.

“You want my opinion? Try to become the person privately you pretend to be publicly. Maybe find the girl and apologize.”

I wish I had a comeback that would cut down her response.

“We’re all going to die, Claire. For now, know that you don’t need to quit. They’re forcing me out.” This gave Claire pause or at least took her off the one track she was on.

“What are you going to do?”

And therein lies the question.

Question: Who were the two former hosts of *In It to Win It*?

Question: What was I going to do?

“Ten minutes to show time,” the intercom said.

Claire took my silence as a response and left. I sat there. I continued sitting there. I’m not sure we said goodbye. I don’t think we did. I remembered the first show I did. There was no dressing room at that point. We didn’t even think the show was going to make. Niles was a disaster and they asked me to come in and provide some quiet dignity during the show’s quick fade out.

The sun is almost fully over the horizon. It’s a new garden community that was built within the last ten years. Last farm in the city limits. The landscape is flat and the trees are low to the ground and probably won’t grow much taller before I’m dead. One day they will finally grow above the rooftops and stretch their limbs to form a canopy that transforms the look and feel of the place. I don’t know what kind of trees they are. Okay, I do know that there are a few evergreens strategically placed within the layout of each home. The most common placement of the small evergreens – they’re really not much taller than the height of a normal sized man, if that – is at the end of the driveway, opposite the mailbox. The base of the tree is surrounded by a

circular placement of woodchips. The other popular location for the evergreens is at one of the corners of the front of the house. I think about the architect in charge of landscape design who was tasked with constructing the overall layout of the landscaping within the estate, sitting at a table with a miniature of the estate as he tries to figure out the exact placement of the evergreens. In front of him, he has a bushel of mock trees and spends a week dispensing them throughout the miniature: tree, tree, tree, no tree, tree, tree, no tree, no tree, tree. *Or, he thinks, should it be tree, tree, no tree, tree, no tree?* He needs a second opinion and calls over his coworker to explain his conundrum.

I feel my ass again and think I have to pee. I am interested in these dual sensations and the timing of their reoccurrence. My feet are cold, but more importantly my legs are cramped from sitting in the same crouched position on the floor for a while. I think to move. I stretch my legs from their curled position underneath me to in front of me. My feet look swollen, which raises my concern about blood clots and whether I should add this to the list of illnesses I worry about. I want to be proactive in dealing with health issues so I do a few calisthenics from my sitting position and try to touch my toes. I can't, but I'm close. If I wiggle my big toe a little and flick the middle finger of my right hand, I'm close, very close. Not so close as to touch, or be in danger of touching, but close enough to provide the sensation of touching. I do three bends. That is enough for now.

There are other trees in the development, but I don't know their names. There's one in particular I like that reminds me of the perfect tree. If I think back to what I thought a tree was when I was younger, the image of the perfect tree comes to mind, the tree image that kids start off with: a green lollipop with a brown stick stuck into a hilltop. This is the tree the landscape architect thought of when he added more variety. This pleased him immensely. His joy was in

moving beyond placing the garden variety shrubbery to providing an artistic rendering of the first tree, the perfect tree, the first perfect tree in all of its lollipop tree flawedness, within the sparse landscape of a planned community. When I came to look at the model home for the development there was a small band of protestors outside the main gate holding posters and chanting something. It was raining that day so my windows were closed and I couldn't quite make out the chants as I pulled up. A few of them stood in a smaller group smoking cigarettes in cupped hands and flicked their cigarettes down when they saw me. It was cold. They looked cold.

The posters were soaked through and illegible. I got the message, but the message paled in comparison to the brightly lit, well manicured, newly constructed model homes with 4 beds, 3.5 baths, a family room, 3 car garage and an optional greenhouse-type room that could be added on. Each home was to be built on 1.5 acres and come with its own in-ground swimming pool (optional). There were three designs to choose from. As an added incentive for buying, I was told I'd be cut a good deal if I agreed to act as a spokesperson for the development. I decided to get in early on the project.

I think I am one of the lucky ones as I have two lollipop trees in the backyard. One is located beyond the pool in the center of the yard near the fence line, and the other is located to the right side 2/3rds of the way toward the back fence and ten feet to the left of the side fence: no tree, tree, tree. I'm thankful for the tree, tree. Driving around the development, I've seen some homes that actually have no tree, no tree, no tree. Granted, my back yard only has two of the possible three trees, but it could have been no tree, no tree, tree; or no tree, tree, no tree; or tree, no tree, no tree. Also, I prefer no tree, tree, tree to tree, no tree, tree as ending tree, tree allows me to view both trees at the same time from the bathroom whereas if it was tree, no tree, tree, I

would have to crane my neck to view the first tree and would lose sight of the second tree altogether. It is true that if it went tree, tree, no tree both trees would have been visible, but from the bathroom, which is located in the left corner if someone is facing the back of the house and the back right corner if someone is facing the front of the house, I would have had to crane my neck to the left in order to have both trees visible from my vantage point and this is far less desirable a viewing position than my current position of chin tilted on my forearm resting on the bathroom windowsill. Some houses were even luckier and had their lot filled with tree, tree, tree, but this is not the norm. More aptly put it is the abnorm. If someone were to drive by with a tree strapped to the roof of the car and ask me if I would like it, I would most certainly say sure, but this hasn't happened yet. I suspect tree, tree, tree back yards are anomalies created by the landscape architect having a budgetary surplus that needed to be spent or that when he was finished placing the lollipop trees in the pattern he wanted, while he was sitting in his circular, backless, swivel chair staring down on the table with the miniature of the development atop it, he forgot about three or four model trees that he had in his lap. Instead of sweeping these extra parts under either the proverbial or literal rug – i.e. throwing them out or allowing his young daughter to play with them in her Barbie Home play set – he randomly scattered them throughout the miniature. Or maybe he held back on three or four trees, went to lunch with his coworkers and conversed with them about the project or daily political happenings while the whole time relishing the idea of returning to the model after lunch and placing the final three or four trees that he fingered in the pocket of his wool blazer, careful not to get grease on them, in places that weren't part of the overall pattern he had used to position the rest of the trees. The added trees were cracker box prizes if cracker box prizes weren't evenly distributed. In this small act, the

landscape architect felt God-like. Now, this isn't the God we think of when we hear the word God, but for the landscape architect it was enough.

And who could blame him really.

“Good evening folks and welcome to another exciting edition of *In It to Win It*, the scholastic competition that pits the best and the brightest students and schools from across the region against one another. I'm your host, Matthew Mathers. Tonight's competition promises to be a good one as the reigning champs from Glenville Academy look to continue their winning ways against the Panthers of Central High. As always, each team has four members, one of whom will be selected team captain. Let's go ahead and meet the contestants. First, the reigning champs from Glenville...”

I am Matthew Mathers. How can it be that I am Matthew Mathers? I know this must be true. I think it is true. I am confident that if I conferred with others about its trueness I would find support for this belief. I am Matthew. I am Mathers.

The contestants for both teams were unimportant, all but one: Dick, Jane, Suzy, Jack, Jill, Gerry, Tom and *Matthew*.

The night has gone out of focus, but I'm sure the other students had names and that I would have introduced myself to them and them to the audience.

*From Glenville tonight we have Dick, Jane, Suzy and Gerry. Welcome back. Your team is on a four game winning streak. One more victory tonight places you in the champions' tournament at the end of the year. Good luck.*

*Standing in the way this evening is the team from Central. Represented here tonight...*

Here tonight.

Here TOnight.

HERE tonight.

I think, or used to think, have thought that I must have conjured him with some stress on the syllables. There must have been a combination I stumbled into. But I didn't know this at first. At first it was just a joke, a humorous moment shared by everyone backstage prior to the show.

“Enunciate your response. Be clear and proud. You're representing your communities, your schools, your families tonight.”

I didn't notice him at first. Something familiar in his movements – maybe. A lip curl or a stance that rang familiar where he stood with his weight placed on his right foot, hip out. He didn't say anything. Was there a smell? Did I even look at him or he at me?

“I'm Matthew Mathers.” I said.

I don't shake hands. I think the remove keeps the evening on a more professional keel. But I'll have the teams shake hands before the competition. Fairness, class, professionalism. We need to instill such understandings in today's youths, and I took the time to do my part.

The contestants from Glenville introduced themselves – Dick, Jane, Suzy and Jerry – with the swagger of being past winners. *Jack, Jill, Tom and Matthew* said the other team with a smile. The whole team smiled.

“I'm Matthew Mathers,” the last team member introduced himself, game show voice and all.

“We have our own Matthew Mathers,” said one of the Panthers.

“Maybe one day he'll be a host, a sort of Matthew Mathers in his own right. Do you have an interest in broadcast journalism or communication?” I said, thinking it was all some sort of joke.

A lot of the contestants stand in awe when they meet me backstage. There are a few, both boys and girls, who go silent or giggle. Some, usually the male contestants, will imitate my voice and introduction. All in good fun.

“No, no. My name is Matthew Mathers. I’m Matthew Mathers, too.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” his teammates chimed in.

I made the requisite jokes about parentage, lineage, nepotism and favoritism to both teams. What would have happened if I reached out and touched this young Mathers then? He stood only a few feet away. I could have easily grabbed his shoulders and shook the truth out of him then and there. Though he was nothing more than a boy with the same name as me.

I’m Matthew Mathers. I’m Matthew Mathers. I’m...

I’m getting ahead of myself. I’m ahead of myself. He was just a kid with my name. There are plenty of other people in the world with my name. I get letters from them. If the letter is from a man, it is usually accompanied with a picture of him – this Matthew Mathers – dressed up as me. That is, as a game show host. The picture is of the man wearing a gray suit and toupee or wig and holding a microphone in hand as if he is about to ask a question. Sometimes he’ll have his family dress up as contestants, coats and ties, and will act as if they’re real eager to answer the question the host is about to ask. Sometimes the picture comes with a caption below:

Question: Who’s your #1 fan?

Other times, the letter writers will inform me that said photo, the photo included with the letter, will also be used as a holiday greeting card this season as they know their family will get such a hoot out of seeing them dressed up as *the* Matthew Mathers. In life, the letter writing Matthew is a plumber, accountant, lawyer or some such other professional. Sometimes the letter writing

Matthews don't have a family readily available to dress up in contestant garb so they get their pets to do so. Cats, dogs, gerbils, parakeets, parrots, I've seen all kinds of animals dressed up as contestants.

If I had to guess, I've received letters and photos from 20-30 real Matthew Mathers over the years. Are they proud or annoyed that their identity has been usurped? Do they bring this larger identity to different sections of their lives? Do they use the name for discounts or preferential treatment when they take their wives or girlfriends out to dinner? *I'd like to make a reservation for next Friday...Nothing Available?...No, no, I understand. If something does open up, my name is Matthew Mathers...Yes, the one and only...Oh, you do? That's perfect.* I'm assuming one or two of them have used this tactic as I've used it myself on numerous occasions. The name has weight. Matthew Mathers is a public figure, and why shouldn't they ride the coattails of their own name? We're all looking for a leg up. I often wonder too when they're home alone with their wives and the name Matthew Mathers rings out, if the wife is actually thinking of me. Maybe these Matthews even role play using their own names as the donned identity. I've slept with a number of women who wanted me to keep up the act and were actually disappointed, if I let down the mask of my public persona and game show voice. I'm the real victim here stuck with the singular identity, a public figure and known commodity. These women want Matthew Mathers. They want *the* Matthew Mathers, not me. So I have sympathy for these other Matthews whose wives ask them to role play as Matthew Mathers the game show host. I have sympathy for their suspicions, much like my own when I run into women who want the game show host me and not the real me, that when they are done role playing and their wives call out Matthew in the night, they are still crying out for the game show host Matthew, not them. How would these Matthews ever know? How could they ever be sure?

I suppose my sympathies are strengthened by my own distrust of twins. How can two people share a physical form and be considered to be different? This fear resonates from my larger fear regarding human interaction. How can two people who have different forms and interiors – different identities – ever truly understand one another? I'm not sure if all of these thoughts predate my final show or were caused by my experience then, but it is something I think about now. Now. Now.

*Oh, Matthew!*

How can I know and what difference does it make if the me now is different than the me before? If there is a difference how can that difference be measured and interpreted? I met the younger Mathers backstage during what turned out to be my last show and I missed the significance of the moment. That's where the see saws.

The team from Central walked to the side of the stage where they were to stand and wait to be called out. I kept the team from Greenville for a moment to reassure them about the basic honesty and integrity of the show. That I was only kidding. While taking the time to alleviate their concerns, I wondered, for a moment or two, about the younger Matthew. I wondered if he walked like me. I looked up to see if I could watch him walk away, but he was around the corner to the other side of the stage.

I wished the returning champs good luck and reminded them that the audience tonight was rooting for them to continue their successes.

I think the lighting must have had something to do with it. Moving from the dimly lit backstage to the brightly lit front causes an imbalance. There's a moment when a person walks from behind the back curtain when he is equally positioned in both halves, the borderland of front and back, light and dark, public and private. It's the moment where anticipation and

experience connect. This must have been a crucial moment though I can't decide if he or I is the independent variable that changed. Did the younger Matthew walk through this point and morph into me or I into him or were we always what we were, just waiting to be discovered? The lights above the set radiated heat. The heat seems important too. Now that I think about it. I'm merely looking at the moment to help me understand, looking within the moment to find the cause: walking through the curtain from the backstage and onto the set seemed like it could be something. The moment when the lights are felt on the skin, on a cellular level so that one's whole being is aware that this space is different and thus the individual is different too. But Matthew was no different after walking onto the stage than before. No different. No different.

Before a show, typically I sit in my green room and place a wax paper dickey around my neck in order to protect my shirt and tie from the powdered makeup I apply to my face. If I didn't know better, I might suspect that it was the makeup that caused the transformation. If I had not met him backstage I would suspect it was the makeup. But I had seen him. Maybe I just missed it. The hair. The smile. The teeth. Height and weight for his age. Eye color. What color were they? I just missed it. But how could that be possible? I was in the dressing room talking with Jack or Jack was talking with me. Then there was Claire and her abandonment. I finished getting ready for the show. I then walked back stage and introduced myself to the two teams. I stood on my mark and waited for my cue to make my entrance. Green room, backstage, teams, Claire, Jack, Lou, Reid, making my entrance. The lighting was different. Maybe I needed the true light to see for certain. It was dark back stage, the lights were dimmed for filming. The air somehow seems thicker back there, too.

Maybe my eyes are no good. I add the eyes to my growing list of physical issues I need to pay attention to: eyes, sphincter, prostate. The list is growing, which is not good. The list is

not good. There was nothing else. I stood on my mark in the space between the two stages and waited for my cue during the announcer's introduction. I have this thing where I half jog on stage. It's a way for me to raise the energy levels in the room. It's my thing. It's my personal trademark. I use this move when entering the stage for the show or when I'm giving any kind of formal presentation or speaking engagement. If there is a podium and a stage, I make my signature entrance.

During my last show I walked out on stage using my trademark entrance and thanked the audience for coming, thanked the teams, thanked the schools. It was all routine. There were Teleprompters and most of the time I don't even pay attention until we get to the actual competition.

"Tonight we have the returning champs from Glenville Academy who look to continue their winning ways against the Panthers of Central High."

I don't even think.

Introduce contestants.

"First from Glenville we have..."

Introduce the team captain and the three other members.

"Tonight they'll face off against," and I think here's where it happened. I went through the routine for the first three competitors, not a whole lot to it: Jack, Jill and Tom.

"Tonight we have a special treat for the audience. The fourth member from the Central team tonight is Matthew Mathers. Matthew enjoys hiking, soccer, basketball, and hopes to attend State in the fall. It's not every night you have one Matthew Mathers as a host and one Matthew Mathers as a contestant. Tell us Matthew, what do you hope to study in the fall?"

"I'm Matthew Mathers."

The little shit mimicked me again.

“I’m Matthew Mathers.” I said in response. “You’re Matthew Mathers, too.”

“I’m Matthew Mathers.” His teammates chuckled again. It felt good knowing that there were ways for their laughter to cost them in later rounds. I knew subtle ways to affect the game once we get to the lightening round. I could assert a little control.

“Well, Matthew, good luck tonight to you and all your teammates. And good luck to both teams as we compete to see whose team will be victorious in tonight’s edition of *In It to Win It*.”

I looked at Matthew and Matthew looked back at me. The lights from above shone down on him and I felt a trickle of sweat dribble down the back of my neck. It’s an old game show host adage to keep your hands steady and in front of you so I fought the urge to swipe at the back of my neck. It took willpower to be in a situation and know that you could not move and yet have the feeling of sweat drip down your neck, below the collar of your shirt and down your spine. I followed the progression of the bead as we opened up with the first round of questions for the night. I tried to remember what the questions were. History, math, political science, did we start with geography or another topic?

And then Matthew moved. I saw him move his right hand and scratch at his lower back. The kids are naturally twitchy, as if they are uncomfortable not only with the lights and the stage and the studio audience and the pressures of competing against their peers, but also with their own greasy, hormonally charged skin. They swat and twitch as if it were black fly season, and then as if they notice their own movements, stop and stare at me with all the intensity they can muster to show the world how committed and focused they are. Matthew slouched and appeared to show limited interest in the surroundings. He slouched and scratched his back in a way that

made me intensely jealous. To be in a situation and realize that one thing stands in the way of fully realizing your own completion, your own contentment, causes the moment to seem endless. It is not the bead of sweat and the itching or need to scratch. It was that Matthew was on stage with me. It is his slouch and his freedom to move while I stood straight and held my arms stiff on the podium. This was my podium and my stage and if I was to remain stiff and straight and focused on the game and was not allowed to scratch at an itch, an itch caused by a bead of sweat trickling down my spine, then why should he be allowed to twitch and slouch and scratch at his greasy skin. His hair hung low across his forehead like an advertisement for youth and virility. (His hair advertised the fact that he doesn't bleed when he shits or drip pee while sitting in the dark, with the cold linoleum floor pressing against his feet. His urine flows freely and powerfully) His hair was long and unkempt and he scratched his back, and again, he scratched it again.

"I'm Matthew Mathers." I said into the microphone as one of the students from Glenville was in the middle of giving a wrong, wrong, answer to a question.

"I'm sorry, that's incorrect."

I saw Claire standing between the teleprompter and camera, giving me a quizzical look. I ever so slightly squinted to let her know it was just a brief slip up. I focused back on the contestants as I asked the next question and when I saw Matthew ever so slightly squint and look at Claire as well. Claire shook her head from side to side and I looked at Claire and squinted a little more ever-so-slightly and tried to get her attention, but Matthew did the same and then scratched his back lower this time, just above the belt where the bead of sweat had reached on my own back and dissipated against the pressed fabric into what seemed to be a thousand little

rivulets of sweat that all itched, and Matthew squirmed and scratched and squinted more profoundly at Claire and I tried to get her attention in order for her to do something.

“We’re going to take a quick commercial break with the underdogs from Central in the lead by 25 points. The second round coming up when we return.”

I waited for the camera light to turn colors so I knew we were off the air. Claire stepped out of the shadows and announced that we were taking five minutes. *Take five*. I shuffled a few note cards on my podium and pretended to be engrossed with a few notations and then scratched my back with my left hand. I started down near my belt and worked my way backwards up the line of moisture that had been absorbed by my cotton undershirt. I switched hands and got the area between my shoulder blades.

“You feeling alright?”

Claire stood in front of me.

“Yes. Why?”

“You seem a little preoccupied up there, Jack. I know we got into it earlier, but you’ve got to focus on the show right now.”

“Did you just call me Jack?”

“Yeah, Jack as in Bub or Pal. Hey, Jack. How ya doing? I’m talking about the show, Matthew. We’re in the middle of the show. I know there’s a lot going on right now, but as you say we need to be professional about this sort of thing. Why don’t we get together tonight or tomorrow and have a couple of drinks and we can talk.”

Normally, I never turned down an offer for drinks. Especially in this instance where Claire is waving the white flag, not necessarily out of surrender, but certainly in attempt to engage in meaningful dialogue. *A line in the sand*. And I wanted to focus on Claire, but I caught

sight of the younger Matthew standing behind his team's podium. Usually during TV timeouts, the teams will group up and confer with each other about how they're doing. This is the time when Claire talks down any contestants who have frozen under the lights. There are times when a contestant will just freeze on the air. The lights play a big part of it, but it's really caused by a trifecta of the lights, camera, and studio audience. For most of these kids this was their first time in front of so many people. It's just too much. You can tell who these kids are as soon as I introduced them. Instead of smiling back or nodding or gesturing in some fashion, they just stared back at me or looked at me then at the camera. The first commercial break came at the nine minute mark. It took about a minute for my opening spiel and to explain the rules, and then we got into the action. This left the stricken contestant eight minutes to stand and stare at me or the camera or the audience or whatever object she's chosen to focus on for the time. Once or twice, we've had to stop filming in order to retrieve a contestant who fled the stage. A few other times, we've stopped in order to console contestants who started sobbing uncontrollably. It's difficult to describe the scene. To watch someone lose control of herself in front of their friends and family. You can look into the eyes of these contestants and see the pleading.

Do something.

Stop this.

(I can't stop this.)

Why won't you do something?

Stop.

Stop now.

Stop.

From me to the camera to the audience. Maybe this is what the show was really about, not measuring the amount of knowledge an individual or team possesses, but the point at which an individual will reach her limit for being able to handle such a situation. Between practice time and studying and parental expectations and lights and microphones and everyone at their school wishing them good luck and having to deal with the inner truth of not wanting to be on the team in the first place, *I don't want to do this*, to the lights and me and the audience and their friends who expect them to do well and maybe that's the most important part of what they're responding to. Anybody can stand in front of a group. We slap a little powder on their faces and ask them to perform. Can you dance? Sing? Hit, throw, catch this ball? That's great, now do it in front of a bunch of people you care about. But this isn't a sport and these aren't athletes. The ones who break down are statues: fear in repose. In the beginning, you can see the ones who are breaking down try to pull it together in order to stave off the first wave of panic.

*Just pull it together* – It, me, you, I.

The show runs on a time delay, we film at five and air at seven thirty. When I first took over we used to run the show live. Any and all foul-ups would make it on. Every contestant breakdown would air as well. Now, we run the tape delay in order to address such mishaps. A contestant who will respond negatively to the environment will do so during the first segment of the show. If this happens now, we simply restart the show from the beginning and ask the team to use an alternate. If there's no alternate around or the alternate also freezes on the air, then we'll run the show with only three members for that team. Over my tenure there have been three incidences of passing out, two of urinary discharge, and a handful of vomitors. As the Production Manager, Claire dealt with such mishaps. I never had the patience. *Get on with it* is what I usually thought. If you didn't want to be here, then don't be here.

“Matthew, do you hear me?”

I wasn't listening. I watched the younger Matthew. He hadn't lost it, but he wasn't engaging with his teammates either. The group from Glenville huddled together and recounting their performance thus far in the competition. Three of the members from Central were doing this as well, but Matthew was not a part of the huddle. He stood on his mark staring at me.

“What's this kid's deal?”

“What?”

“The Matthew from Central? The contestant on the end. What's his deal, why isn't he huddling with his teammates?”

Claire looked over her shoulder.

“Him? Why are you even dealing with him right now? Matthew, did you hear me about getting it together?”

“But he's just standing there. He's not talking with his teammates. He's standing there staring at me. I want him to stop.”

“He's just standing there and we're standing over here.”

“I want him to stop.”

“Is this an issue? Do you need me to talk to him?”

I looked down at Claire. Did I need her to talk to him?

“And is there something wrong with your back? You've been scratching the whole time we've been talking.”

I had. I had been scratching my lower back, between and just below my shoulder blades. When I started, I never thought scratching could feel so good, but I scratched for so long it no

longer felt good. I frowned at Claire and frowned at myself for scratching. *Stop it.* I looked at the young Matthew.

“There’s something about him I don’t like.”

How could I tell her that this eighteen year old had gotten to me? Why did he get to me?

“Stop scratching. You’re driving me nuts.” Claire said to me.

“What?”

“With the scratching.”

“I’ll be back in a minute. I’m just going to run to my dressing room for a minute.”

“Be quick.”

As I walked away from the podium I heard Claire in her microphone say that we’d be another five. *Make it ten.* I walked off stage left, feigned like I was going to my dressing room, but walked around to the far back of the stage where there was a break in the curtain. I pulled back on one edge to get a better view of Matthew Mathers from Central High. From my vantage point, I had a clear view of his profile from just over his back right shoulder from about twenty feet away. He wore the classic young man’s formal-casual attire of a blue blazer, chinos and oxford shoes. He stood leaning forward with most of his weight on the podium. His teammates took seats chairs provided for them during longer breaks. His white collared shirt stuck out from the top of his blazer. The neck was two sizes too big: it looked like he was wearing a button-down shirt that his father had given him. Matthew scratched at his neck line and moved the collar of his shirt to reveal a large mole on the right side of his neck. The mole was brown with a few prominent black hairs sticking out. I loosened my tie and undid the top button of my shirt to get at my own neck. I fingered a scar on my right side, the lasting remnant of a mole I had removed when I started on the air as a TV journalist. The mole was gone, but I felt the soft ridge

where the skin had been pulled taut and sewn shut. The younger Matthew felt the hairs between his fingers. I remembered fingering those hairs too when I was nervous. It was a habit my mother tried to break me of all throughout my younger years. She thought it even worse than sucking my thumb as the movement did a lot to draw attention to the mole. I remember when I first had to wear collared shirts how I would ask for them a size or two large so the cotton wouldn't rub up against the raised mole. I fingered my neck as Matthew fingered his. I wanted to reach out and feel the thickness of the hairs between my fingers again. I rubbed my own fingers together and felt the ghost hairs of my mole roll between them. I suddenly had the intense desire to slap his hand away from his neck. He was filming in front of a live studio audience, and was obscenely drawing attention to himself by fiddling with his neck.

“Stop fiddling with it.” I whispered softly.

*Stop fiddling with it.* I remember these words leaping from my mother's lips as her hand shot out and slapped mine away. *You're not going to make it go away by playing with it. The only thing you're doing is drawing attention to yourself.* I took one of the razors my father kept in the medicine cabinet and tried to saw it off. Marissa Davies caught sight of it while we were necking in the back of the school auditorium. Up until that point things had been going well for me, but when she moved from my lips to my neck she pulled back quickly and said she had to run as she was late for class. After returning home that afternoon, I studied the mole in the mirror, trying to determine if it was something that would drive Marissa away. I hadn't thought of it much before then, but if it were something she would think about then it would have to be something I would think about and I didn't want to think about it. I opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out a single razor. I placed the sharp end against the place where my pink flesh met the raised skin. The blade nestled into the groove and I started to slide the blade back and forth.

I wanted to cut the whole thing off. If I could just get the edge raised a little, I thought I could peel it off like a piece of masking tape. All I did though was cause the mark to bleed and scab over. It wasn't until I became a TV personality that I did something about having it removed. It was a blemish that stood out on TV. After the stitches healed, I caught my fingers searching out for the raised flesh. I missed the comfort of knowing that it was there and that I could pick at it.

Caught in the moment, it took me a minute to realize Matthew had turned around and was staring directly at me while I rubbed my scar and he the mole on his neck. I hadn't pulled the curtain back far and I was sure from his vantage point that it seemed as if the air current from the cooling vents had caught hold of the curtain and blown it back ever so slightly, but it was disarming to have him stare directly at me and I pulled back instantly. *Claire's right*, I thought. *Pull it together*. I buttoned the top button of my shirt and tightened my tie. The idea of there being a mole on his neck was a rational one, but only if it remained his mole. Maybe it wasn't even a mole. *It was it was it was*. A page walked by and I saluted the young woman.

"Are you alright, Mr. Mathers?"

"Fit as a fiddle."

"They're calling for you on the set. Claire asked me to come find you."

"I'll be right out."

The young woman walked away but not before giving me the once over, so I gave her the once over back and made a mental note to have her fired before I left the show. This all must be somehow related. I was a rational man living in the real world, but maybe the day had been too much for me. Jack wanted to replace me. Bring in someone younger to revitalize the show so I imagined seeing a younger version of myself. It was a cheap manifestation of my own

insecurities doubled by the odd coincidence of having a contestant who shared my name. You can't be crazy if you realize you're being crazy.

I walked quickly back to the dressing room to make sure my tie was on straight and examine myself in the mirror. I never allowed drinking during the show, but I took a little sip to calm my nerves. Seeing my face older and made up was a comfort.

“I'm Matthew Mathers.”

I repeated my name like a mantra. I looked good. I looked normal. I leaned in close to inspect the tie and saw a dark hair protruding out the top of my collar. I pulled back on the stiff cotton and saw the distinctive dark hairs leading to the raised brown skin of the mole I had had removed. I loosened my tie to get a better look. I felt the mole with my fingertips. I pinched it. I pick up a pen from the table and poked it with the end. I felt around the raised edge and mapped out the shape of the skin. I pressed harder with the cap and flicked at the edges, pressing into the rut and flipping upwards at the end. I must have pressed too hard as a droplet of blood formed in the crevice underneath the edge of the skin that I peeled back. I wanted to look underneath the mole, tear it from the skin and see the vessels and sinewy flesh dangle from the bottom like roots from a fallen tree.

“Matthew Mathers to the set.” I heard the intercom crackle before the voice came on.

“Mathers, what are you doing?” I asked myself in the mirror. I pulled back from the mirror and took stock of the situation. Blood trickled from my neck where I had dug into my skin. The mole was still there. The hairs were still there.

“Mr. Mathers.”

I turned to see the page again.

“Tell Claire I’ll be right there. I heard you before and I heard the intercom. Anything you need to say?”

“I think you have a spot of blood on your neck.”

I watched her scurry out. I took a napkin and pressed it against the cut to stop the bleeding. I then turned the napkin around and spat on the edge to try and clean myself up a bit. I found a couple of Band Aids in a drawer and applied the smallest, making sure it wasn’t visible under my shirt collar. I checked my tie, jacket, collar – *I’m Matthew Mathers* – and walked back to the set.

I walked with my head down through the back curtain, felt the lights hit me, and took my spot on the podium.

“Sorry folks, a bit of a wardrobe malfunction.”

Claire walked up to me.

“You don’t even need to ask. Let’s just get this finished.” I spoke quietly, yet sternly. I needed to take control of the stage again. This was my home.

Claire gestured for quiet and cued the cameras to roll.

“Welcome back to this exciting contest. I’m your host Matthew Mathers and with us tonight are teams from Glenville Academy and Central High.” Before walking out onto the set, I made a promise with myself to not look at Matthew. I needed to give it a moment. It was important to make eye contact though with the contestants and I made my way from left to right through both teams, ending with my eyes on him. He was fingering the hairs on his neck, staring right back at me. I stopped myself from lifting my own hand to my neck.

“Let’s get started with the action for round two.”

Taking a closer look, he looked like a younger me. There are things you should accept and things you can deny about life all based on the experience of the event. I experienced this event. I looked at a young me playing with his neck. My mole had returned. I was actually glad to have cut myself as the blood was a demonstration of the real.

My hands were resting on the windowsill. I have old hands now. I reached for the mole which is again gone. Gone are the long hairs. Gone is the raised brown skin. I feel the spot on my neck and imagine what the edge, the place where skin met skin, used to feel like. When I was a younger man, I had young hands. Again, that's not very deep. It's funny what we remember. I try to recall simple things that I have done ten or a hundred times, but only remember the thing being done as a collective and not the actual doing. I've gone to the store. When specifically? I don't remember. I've lived many Sunday nights and have watched TV and been with my son when he was younger. I remember some things about being younger. I remember a time, when I was younger, when a blanket of snow covered everything outside my house. I was staring out the bathroom window then, in the house we lived in then and the snow covered everything and looked welcoming. It was late and my parents were in the living room or the bedroom, awake somewhere and I didn't want to see them so I snuck downstairs to the mud room. I sat on the floor, partly in a puddle of melted snow from earlier so half my pajamas were wet and stuck to my skin. While sitting on the floor I put on my big, dark, rubbery boots that had giant eyeholes, and laces that came untied easily. I stood up, unlocked the door and walked into the front yard. I felt the cold and wet against my sockless feet. Beneath my feet, the snow made a faint crunching sound. Looking back at the tracks, I thought if I were hunting myself I would have no problem following these markings for miles. The multi-colored lights from my neighbors' homes colored the snow. The homes around me radiated heat and light and offered the weight of

the lives of the people inside. My hands and skin were young; the only difference between me and the landscape was shadings of whiteness. Urged to move, I pulled down the waistband of my navy blue cotton pajama bottoms to my knees and danced back and forth across the lawn. The ground around me was no longer pristine. The breath came out of my mouth in white puffs. In the front yard of the neighbor's house across the street stood another boy with his pants down, dancing. I moved forward and the boy moved backwards. I shouted across to him, but my voice carried no farther than the edge of my yard. I strained to get a closer look at the person and thought it didn't look like either of the Johnson boys who lived there. The person pulled up his pants up and waved to me as he ran off behind the home. I, too, pulled my pants up and went back inside. Now, I can't say if the person truly existed or not, but for a moment we shared each other's nudity in the quiet night of a snow-covered street. My old hands are pockmarked and scared. My veins protrude more and the wrinkles have deepened to the point where it looks like I was born with too much skin. Matthew's hands caught my attention that night. The smooth whiteness of the skin shone in the light of the studio.

I don't remember the questions any more. I've asked thousands of questions and all I can remember is the asking and the answering.

Question.

Correct.

Question.

I'm sorry that's incorrect.

Question.

I'm sorry, we were looking for...

Question.

Correct.

Question.

Question.

Not the questions, but the color of the prompter, the light blue letters on dark blue background stood out to me. I used all of my energy to stay focused on the colored lettering as it passed by on the screen. Question. Answer. Correct. Oh, so close. There were stock responses to incorrect answers and correct answers alike. My body moved behind the podium as if it were tethered to a pole attached at the base to circular disk that twisted me back and forth. I was an automaton. Years of practice had led me to this moment of pure mindlessness. Maybe I had reached nirvana through the absence of body and mind and only blue rising upward, scrolling across the screen. Such comfort in knowing new blue-colored shapes would always come for the bottom of the screen for my mouth to give form. My mouth formed the necessary syllables and sounds. My lips wrapped themselves into the necessary shape, and I pushed breath up my trachea through the correct shape, round peg round hole, square peg square hole, and felt the breath and the moment between forms. I inhabited the stage like any other essential object. Or maybe I was the microphone and sound and light and heat all at once. I knew when a contestant would answer incorrectly before breath was pushed through an individual's trachea. I could tell instantly by the shape formed on his lips, the same way lovers meet in the dark and know each other.

I'm sorry that's incorrect.

Question.

Correct.

Question.

Answer. Answer. Answer. Blue. Breath. Shape. I gave shape to the space and was alive in a way that I gave shape to myself by being less than alive. If Matthew answered a question, I was unaware. I was unaware of the contestants. There were no contestants. There were no cameras, no set, no guests, no parents, no Claire. Only light and heat and breath. It had to end, but at the moment I was unaware of time the way I was when I was a child, playing in the snow in the front yard. Eventually, the whiteness of Matthew's hand caught my attention. I had reached perfection only to be pulled back to an earthly existence by a prankster playing a younger me. Who reminded me and only me of a younger me.

“Question: what is the...the...the...”

And I was aware of myself again as much as I was aware of Matthew who had lowered his hand back down to the team podium in front of him. Aware of Claire and her headset and the static and sound that constantly comes through the wiring to her ears. Jack and his two henchmen standing behind her. Aware of my body filling out the gray pinstripe suit and the dried sweat on my back and a hole in my sock and the exact height of the podium as I placed my hands on either side to rest a bit of my weight.

“...the...the...the...”

But the blue shapes no longer scrolled past. The cushion or comfort in knowing the words would continue to appear was gone. I looked below and above the prompter. My eyes scaled from bottom to top in the hopes of finding the blue shapes still rolling upward. And when that didn't work, I looked to left and right and my eyes darted from prompter, to contestant, to my hands on the podium now holding more and more of my weight, to Claire, who looked again concerned, and Jack and the studio audience and finally a few blue colored shapes did appear outside of the confines of the prompter and I thought if I could only find more then things would

be okay and I took great joy in finding more and more blue markings scattered throughout the sound stage and my lips took pleasure in trying to give form to the shapes but the lettering darted here and there, or if it did hold still more letters appeared and piled upon themselves so nothing was entirely clear. Finally, the lettering was gone and my eyes fell to Matthew.

“Do you have something to say?” I said.

Nobody answered.

“Mr. Mathers, did you want to say something?”

The young man looked to his teammates who looked back to him. Eyes narrowed, mouths opened.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t say anything. You were in the middle of a question.”

“I know where I was, but it seemed perfectly clear to me that you needed my attention and the attention of the audience. What did you want to say? Say it now, so we can move on.”

“I don’t want to say anything.”

He moved his hands upward, palms up, like he was carrying an invisible box, and I did the same. Eyes open, mouth open. I opened my eyes wide and my mouth wide.

“We can sit here like this all night.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“I think you do and I think it’s about time for you to cut the shit.”

Jack leaned in to Claire and said something to her, but she was already making a move in my direction.

“I don’t think it’s necessary, Claire.” I held up my hand to her and Matthew held up his.

“See that’s what I’m talking about, Matthew. Do you see, Claire? Do you see, Jack?”

Jack moved towards the audience, talking with one or two of the guests while Reid and Lou fanned out as well.

Claire walked out onto the stage and clicked on her headset to connect to the intercom.

*Let’s take another quick five.*

“Claire, I don’t think it’s necessary to take five, but if you want to, that’s fine. I was just trying to ask Matthew what he wanted. From my vantage point he seemed like he was trying to ask me a question.”

Claire stood in front of me and gave me a look – opened eyes, wide eyes, huge eyes, closed mouth.

“What the hell is up with you?”

“Nothing, I’m fine. I’m fine and nothing’s up with me. This kid is dicking around with everyone’s time though. Maybe you can’t see it from where you’re sitting, but from the podium it’s pretty clear.”

The parents of the Glenville team made their way on to the set. One of the fathers, heavysset, verging on fat, tugged on Claire’s sleeve.

“We just want to know if this contest is going to wrap up now or if there will be a makeup game. I’ve spoken with the other parents and we think we should be awarded the win. I mean, we’re winning now, we made a remarkable comeback in the second round and have a lot of momentum going into the final lightning round. We just want to be fair to the kids, our kids. If we were to press pause now, it would give an unfair advantage to the team currently losing.”

“Sir, we’ll figure this out. Just hold on a minute and we’ll be able to wrap things up tonight so there will be no disagreement or discrepancy about fairness.”

“With him? Are you sure he’s going to be able to honestly officiate this contest? Are you, sir? Will you be able to officiate this contest?”

“I’m Matthew Mathers.” I added.

“Matthew.” Claire said.

“I know that, what I’m asking is…”

“*I’m* Matthew Mathers.” I said and interrupted the man.

I lost interest in the parent and tried to look over to the other team from Central. Their parents had gathered around, and a couple of them were listening in on the conversation. I wasn’t interested in what Claire and this man were talking about. I looked for Matthew and Matthew’s parents. My parents have been deceased for a number of years so it would be nice to see them again. They would still be in good health at this point, at the age of the young Matthew.

“Matthew,” said Claire.

“That’s neither here nor there with what we’re talking about. Can you effectively finish the show?” said the heavysset father.

“Matthew,” said Claire.

“Yes, of course.” I said.

“Matthew, I don’t think it’s such a good idea. Maybe we should stop for the night?” Claire said.

“Waitaminute. He just said he could go on and now you’re saying that he can’t go on. Either we continue tonight, soon, or I think the game has to be called in our favor,” the heavysset father added.

A mother from Central had come closer to the action and seemed to want to weigh in on the decision. I was still standing behind the podium, which gave me an air of authority. I wanted to tell the gentleman to back off.

“Sir,” Claire said to the gentleman, “we’ll have this straightened out in no time. Mr. Mathers has just been under the weather the last few days and needs a minute away from these lights.”

“Is that true?” the man asked.

“Is what true?” I said.

“What are you discussing here? If you’re discussing tonight’s show, I don’t think its fair for the three of you to make unilateral decisions on behalf of this contest.” The mother from Central wore a blouse and slacks and had a large brooch pinned to her chest. The brooch was a blue and gold flower and glinted in the stage lights. The brooch seemed to dance to the woman’s speech.

“How does your brooch work?” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“Ma’am, I can assure you this gentleman...”

“Mr. Warren.”

“...Mr. Warren is just, like yourself, expressing his concern for his child and the completion of the game. I’ll tell you, like I was just telling him, that Mr. Mathers is fine. He has nothing but highest regard for the fairness of the competition. He’s a professional. He’s been battling a major flu for the past couple of days and this has taken a toll on his body. His physical health is what needs to be addressed now so let’s everybody step back for a minute and give the man a little space.”

I looked fondly at Claire. The flu business was a nice touch and would put the parents at ease for a minute.

“I’m Matthew Mathers.” I said.

I looked for Matthew in the fray of students and parents. I wanted to see his parents. I wanted to see my parents. The woman’s brooch still danced in the light and shone directly in my eyes. Dark figures danced just out of sight and the reflection from her brooch reflected beams of light that broke up the shadows.

The first time I saw a crystal hanging in a window, I was about eight and my parents and I were at my uncle’s house. We were sitting in his kitchen around his wooden table. As a child, I thought his kitchen was so different from our own. He was older. Old. Maybe only a few years older than I am now, but I was a child then and he lived by himself and his kitchen smelled of unfamiliar foods mixed with his old-man-ness. He had a few days worth of stubble on his face, and I attributed the smell to this growth for some reason. His stove was a black gas behemoth and had an exhaust pipe that fit into the wall about midway up to the ceiling. His refrigerator was a single block of ivory with a metal handle that you pulled on to open. My uncle left the room through one of two swinging doors, always to return with something new in his hands: cups for tea, an old framed picture of his deceased sister, a book he wanted to recommend to my father. I tried to peek through the crack on his way in or out to see what was on the other side, but the doors never stayed open long enough. This sliver of insight only increased my desire to know for certain what was on the other side. Sometimes he would leave through one door and return through the other and I thought there must be more than one of him on the other side. I wanted to catch him in the act and tried a number of times to sneak away from the table to follow him through the door or walk through the opposite one to meet him or a gaggle of him

on the other side. Each time, I was rebuffed by my mother, told to sit down and drink my milk, but the milk was too thick and the cookies he gave me were unlike the cookies we had at home and didn't seem to have any sugar in them. I believed that to old people salty and sweet tastes were intense sensations at a fraction of the levels of my own or any child's intake levels. That they had used up all their ability to ingest either taste so that when they did have something to eat, the scales were set so low any amount of sugar became a mound. To my uncle, the cookies, with their fraction of sweetness, were sweet cookies, but to me the cookies were just brown. They were brown, crumbly cookies.

We sat in his kitchen for so long I started to think he didn't have any other rooms in his house and the two doors led to the outside. I watched the walls and the shadows from the clouds move across. The table was pushed up against the side of the room with three windows. The windows were the only source of light for the room. He didn't think to turn the lights on. I started to ask my mother why he didn't have any lights on, but she stopped me and said not to interrupt the conversation the grown-ups were having with such questions.

“Drink your milk.” My father.

“Would you like some more cookies?” My uncle.

“Don't go to any trouble. He'll just spoil his appetite.” My mother.

I went back to watching the wall and the brown wall paper patterned with thin, dark red lines. The vertical lines ran parallel to each other in clusters of three with about five inches of space between each cluster. Each line was broken up by red diamonds about four inches tall, were separated vertically by the same amount of space the lined clusters were separated horizontally. Where a new segment of wallpaper met an old, the diamonds didn't always match up. Some were sliced in half and the second half was farther down the line.

I'm not sure how long we sat in the kitchen, but the clouds finally moved past and the sun shone through the three windows. When this happened the wall paper took on more of a dark tan color and the red lines became more maroon. As I watched the color of the wallpaper change, I looked around the room to see what other effects the light might have. As my eyes moved to the ivory block of a fridge, a small band of a rainbow played across the front. I tried to hold onto the colors and make sense of them, but they darted from the fridge across the room to the far wall and back again. At times the bands included all the colors of a rainbow and made a perfect triangular shape. At others, they seemed to be a fragment of the whole. Green and blue were the most prominent within the bands, but this changed depending on where in the room the color fell.

After watching the light for a while, I walked up to the fridge and placed the back of my hand against the outside. I wanted to feel the color on my hand to see if it had any weight or heat to it.

“Matthew.” My mother again. “What are you doing?”

I didn't know how to say I wanted to catch the color. I wasn't even sure if they could see it.

“It's okay. He's just interested in the hanging crystal.” As my uncle said this, he gestured upwards and pointed at a diamond shaped crystal hanging from the ceiling. The crystal was only about three inches tall and spun back and forth on a long piece of string. “This room gets the most light in the afternoon.”

The crystal spun slowly on its axis. When the crystal stopped in its rotation, the sun refracted through and provided the most fully defined diamond-like shape. This was when the bands of color were their thickest. My favorite discovery, though, was when the crystal was in

the middle of its spin, when it rotated at the greatest speed, it fractured the light into a number of fragments of color. At the most I counted six different places on the wall where bands of color could be seen so what I had initially thought was a single fragment moving across the room were actually multiple fragments projected from the crystal and these instances of color all seemed to dance on their own accord. The crystal spun on the string and the light played in the crystal, showing color on the wall, and I wondered why everybody didn't have one of these in their kitchen. *They must be expensive.* I followed the crystal up the string to the ceiling. The string was a very simple brown thread and I thought that if I had such a fine thing as a crystal that made color dance on the wall, I would certainly hang it from something that bestowed more grace or beauty onto the deserving crystal than brown string. I walked back to the fridge again and placed my hand against the door. After a few spins, the light finally played against my palm. I tried to grab it, but it danced away. The colors didn't feel like anything. I didn't know what to expect, but wanted the color to feel sweet. I stood there the rest of the time my parents talked with my uncle trying to catch light as it played through the crystal.

Claire seemed to have everything in control, but I wasn't sure anymore. The woman's brooch seemed angrier now as she spoke more forcefully. The light reflected from the brooch captured her mood as it played in my vision. Did everyone feel the light or was she directing it solely at me? It kept me from following the conversation, but what was worse, it kept me from seeing Matthew and his parents. I reached out for the brooch, wanting to shield it from my eyes. I didn't mean to grab the woman, but she seemed to take my gesture as an act of hostility.

“What are you doing?”

“Matthew.” Claire said.

“The light.” I said.

“I think the game should be called.” The father said.

“Sir, did you just grab me?”

I looked to Claire to try and explain about the light reflecting off the brooch and the way it was getting in my eyes, but she had her mouth in her headset. The man grabbed my chest and pushed his hand against me, an unnecessary movement as the podium kept the woman naturally out of reach. I saw Matthew through the cluster of people, which seemed to have grown since the last time I looked up. Color started to return to the dark figures, and the suits and dress attire of both students and parents became more distinguishable. Through all of this, I saw Matthew looking at me. We made eye contact. He winked.

“I’m Matthew Matthers.” I said as I tried to move away from the father now holding on to my sleeve. I moved to the other side of the podium, but the mother thought I was advancing towards her and she yelped, turning people’s focus on her.

“I’m not interested in you, you old cow. Let go of my sleeve.” I pushed on the man, but felt someone on my other arm. This time the grip was more forceful and I was tugged toward this new player.

“Get it together.” Jack in my ear. Claire on the walkie-talkie.

“What?”

“You heard me. Pull it together.”

Jack turned to the two parents.

“Hi folks, I’m Jack Granger, Executive Producer for this show. I think I’m going to take Matthew back to his dressing room and call in his personal physician. You can see from the sweat on his forehead and the color in his cheeks he’s not feeling well. We need to get him some

care immediately and then we'll figure out how to proceed with the show. Claire, would you take the two teams back to the conference room and order the good folks some food."

Both parents cried outrage. Jack pulled on my arm and dragged me through the curtain towards my dressing room. We stopped just on the other side and I could still see the action on the stage through a slit in the curtain.

"Are you out of your mind? Did you just try and grab that woman?"

"What? Jack, are you joking? Her brooch was reflecting light in my eyes and I was merely trying to remove the problem so I could better see the contestants and get the show going again." From where we stood, I saw Matthew clearly. He was with two people I had never seen before. We didn't make eye contact, but I'm sure he saw me, too. The stage ballooned with confusion as friends and school administrators joined the contestants and their parents. With their friends with them, the kids now felt it was time to express their emotional frustration over the situation. The tears seemed a little forced but it didn't stop them from gathering together around one another to console. Claire was still with the two parents who were hyper animated in expressing their opinions on the best way to proceed.

"Matthew, are you hearing what I'm saying?"

"Jack, of course. I'm as concerned as you are about the show. Integrity. Ratings. Everything is tied together."

I assumed the two people Matthew stood with were his parents. They both had looks of worry, bemusement or confusion, I couldn't really tell from my vantage. What's clear was that they were not my parents, which was disappointing. It would have been nice to see them again. Matthew's parents were a bit younger than mine were when I was the same age as Matthew. I

took a quick survey of all the parents and found them all of the same formless shapes. The common thread seemed to be that the time and energy went into the children.

I often wondered if my own son watched my show. He was young when his mother took him and left. Early on, I saw him most weekends and watched him grow, but I never felt especially vested in the relationship and eventually there was just a space. The parents I met through the show were wholly committed to their kids. I used to watch them when they wished their kids good luck, often wondering what they were thinking about. Some parents, in the classical style, were clear with their thoughts. But their role seemed too clichéd to be real. The soft hand on the elbow to steer their children in the right direction. The younger siblings who were brought along because they were part of the family unit, but also used as a reminder to the contestant that there were others in line to take the place of favorite if they screwed up. Of course, they were not the only kind of parents. The contestants on the show were highly functioning young adults. These were the successful parents or at least the parents who swam in the best intellectual gene pool. Good for them.

I wondered if Matthew was brought to me as some last ditch effort by the cosmos to provide me a relationship with my son. For some reason, he wasn't available so they thought the next best thing would be to provide a carbon copy. To what end? To what end? What vision do children give parents of themselves that they don't get from all of their other interactions? Also, I had a child. I had that. I saw myself through his eyes and my wife's and noted our existence as a family unit. Mine, ours should be thought of as a cautionary tale or at least as one of balance for those looking to get into the business of making kids. It's difficult to sort out now when exactly things went awry. But that's not true either. That's the response I have provided women over the years who wanted to get close to me. *I thought you had a family, they'd start.*

*What happened? Or, Where's your wife? Kid? What happened? What happened? What happened?* How to explain nothing happened. I had a wife. We had relations as husbands and wives do. Our actions bore us a son. He was the fruit of our concupiscence. He was a sweet, fragile thing that needed to be protected. I taught him how to oil his baseball glove. I taught him cheating was wrong. We went on family outings and took pictures of those outings and placed them into slide shows to watch with our friends and family. My parents were around for some of this, but then got sick and I moved both into a local nursing home. Her family was in the area and we would bring our slide show there too. "This is the Grand Canyon." "This is Niagara Falls." "These are the Smokey Mountains." And then you could just insert any combination of my wife or me or my son in front of those places. "This is my wife and me in front of Niagara Falls." "This is my son wearing a rain slicker on the boat tour of Niagara Falls." Next. Click. Next. Click.

The truth is there is no truth. I have a house now. It's a big house. I am the former game show host of the most successful scholastic competition of its time, *In It to Win It*. I stay most days in my home and watch for signs of my body's deterioration. I should collect the fluids that leak from me and use them to measure the passage of time. I could prove an inverse relationship between urine and blood. I could also measure time by the new pains that come to me daily. What I would tell those women now are sad stories about the fragility of love. What I wish I could tell them is that Niagara Falls brought me little joy. What's more in a couple of hundred years Niagara Falls will be no more than a gentle stream. I could, but I wanted them to want me so I needed to meet them on their terms. Some needed to think they were healing me. Some needed to think they were conquering me, protecting me, stealing me. Next. Click. Next.

Click. Life is a game. Courting women is a game. Having a wife and raising a family is a game. I wasn't interested in winning and learned that I found no joy in playing.

I wake in the middle of the night and drip out my offerings in the dark while I feel the cold tiles beneath my feet. I am Matthew Mathers. I use this time to think about the young Matthew. I use this time to think about the young me. I measure my time by those thoughts. In the end, maybe it was all a cosmic gift. Who am I to deny this?

“What the hell happened out there, Matthew?”

What the hell happened out there? That was the question. That's a good question. Were there any other questions?

“The only way this could have been worse would be if you had hit a kid.”

“Ha, ha. Good one, Jack. There's the integrity of the show to consider. I'd never...”

“Are you even here right now?”

“I'm with you, Jack.”

“Christ. Are you bleeding? We weren't going to take the show from you right away, but there's no way to defend this. We'll have to bring in Lance now. Do you hear me, Matthew, we'll have to bring him in *now*. ”

I rubbed my neck and looked at Matthew and his parents. I motioned for Jack to come closer.

“Jack, I'm going to lay it out there for you. Do you see the contestant, Matthew Mathers?”

“Leave it alone.”

“Come here and look. We'll look together. You tell me what you see and I'll tell you what I see and if we both see the same thing, I'll be satisfied.”

I grabbed Jack's arm and pulled him closer to me. I looked at him and him at me and I see him trying to form a measured response. This was a new situation for him.

"It's okay. This is a new situation for both of us, but I need you to come here for a minute. I'm not asking you to do anything else but stand here and look."

"We've got to manage the situation. You've put the show at risk."

"Look. Just look."

We both stood in the shadows of the opening and I ask him to tell me what he sees.

"I don't know what answer you're looking for."

"I'm not looking for an answer. There's no correct answer. Just tell me what you see."

"I see a fucking mess."

"What else?"

"There's nothing else. A lawsuit, maybe. That's it."

I decided to be patient with Jack. I needed him to tell me what he sees so I'd be able to understand how to respond. One needs to ascertain the specifics of a situation in order to understand how to respond.

"Describe the stage. What's there?"

"The stage is the stage. You have the podium and lights and microphones and sound equipment and all the normal things that have been there for years."

"The people. Look at the people."

"They're pissed."

"What do they look like?"

"They look like they're pissed."

"Physically."

“Jesus. You’re not right, are you?”

“What do I have to say for you to answer the question? Pretend you’re trying to amuse an old man. What do they look like?”

“There are parents and contestants. They look like all the other parents and contestants who have been on this show.”

“Jack, you have the imagination of a gnat. I’ll be more specific to help you out.”

“You’re grabbing my arm.”

I was, not hard, but I was. I wanted Jack to see. If he saw and disagreed then things could move on. I have my mole, but things can be explained away. On an experiential level, I needed Jack’s and my perception to have a one-to-one relationship.

“Look at the contestants. Is there anything different or familiar about them?”

“They’re kids. They look like teenage kids with bad skin and floppy hair. I don’t know what you’re looking for. Why don’t you just...”

“I don’t want to corrupt your view. I just want you to look at the contestants. Nothing seems familiar to you about any of them? Look.”

“Let go of my arm.”

Yes. Let go. Let go of his arm. That was not the point. We were two grown men hiding in the shadows to avoid some kids.

“Who does Matthew look like to you?”

“You look like you’re bleeding.”

“Not me, the contestant Matthew. He’s standing with his parents over there. Who does he look like?”

“He looks like the other contestants.”

“What else?”

“His blazer’s too big for him.”

“What about his looks. His looks. What does he look like? Who? Who?”

“First, let go of me.”

I was grabbing his arm again. I hadn’t realized it, but I just was trying to steer his vision in the right direction. I wasn’t grabbing him hard.

“Okay, fine. See, no hands. Look, no hands. Just tell me what you think of Matthew. That’s it. That’s all I want.”

“What do I think of him? I don’t think anything of him, Matthew. I think of the show and what your actions will do to it.”

Yes. Yes. Yes. All of this was known.

“Jack, focus. Just look at the kid. Who does he look like?”

Jack finally focused on Matthew. I watched his eyes to make sure he was really looking. Jack moved his lips up and down like he was silently reading Matthew’s appearance. *Look at his hair. His nose. Eyes. Don’t pay attention to his age. Age is insignificant. Look at his stance. The fundamentals of his skeletal shape and the contours of his body. Hair recedes. The ears and nose keep growing. We all get a little pockmarked with age.* Jack’s eyes scanned Matthew up and down. The lights of the stage reflected in them. I understood then how Jack could win over a room. His eyes were a blessing. He’s a man who could get everything he asked for out of life if he could ask for those things while standing only a foot away. I saw his lips move.

“Look, Jack. Doesn’t he seem familiar? The eyes? The ears? Look at his hands and the way he’s standing.”

“His parents...”

“Don’t worry about them.”

“I’m sorry, Matthew. I don’t know what you want me to see.”

“Look at me. Now look at him.”

Jack studied me and then looked at Matthew.

“Isn’t there a familiarity?”

“Maybe. Sure. A little. Is this really what this has been about? Are you scared of one of the contestants?”

“I’m not scared of him. Look. Look at my neck.”

I lowered the collar of my shirt and showed him the mole with the long hairs. Jack looked at my neck and then back up at me. See. See.

“Your neck’s still bleeding. Why don’t we head back to your dressing room and we’ll have someone take a look at it.”

He saw my neck, but I don’t know why he couldn’t see the truth about Matthew. I was alarmed when I looked to Matthew and saw him staring over his mother’s shoulder looking at me. The loudspeaker hissed on, and an announcement was made about the postponement of tonight’s competition. Matthew raised his forefinger to his lips as his father grabbed his shoulder to lead him off the stage. Matthew looked over his shoulder and jammed his hand into his pocket. I saw him grab for something. He pulled his hand out, and had something hidden within his fist. Just as he and his parents were about to move out of eye sight, Matthew looked over his shoulder and drop a folded slip of paper on to the ground.

I moved to walk back out there and grab the slip of paper Matthew dropped for me, but I felt Jack’s hand on my shoulder.

“That’s what we’ll do. We’ll head back to the dressing room and have your neck looked at. The cut looks like it could be infected.”

I didn’t respond to Jack, but applied a little more force to moving forward. He tightened his hold and I pondered how best to extricate myself. I’ve got twenty to twenty-five years on him, but I still had a move or two. All I needed to do was hit him once.

For the most part, the audience cleared out and just the parents and contestants remained, milling about, slowly making their exits. The woman with the brooch and the father from Glenville had a couple of last words with Claire. Claire looked tired. She looked like she wanted everyone to just go home. The paper sat precariously on the edge of the stage, just before the step down. No one saw it, and its size kept its existence hidden. The cleaning crew won’t come in for a bit so once everyone leaves, I’ll have no problem coming back and just picking it up.

“Alright, Jack. Let’s just go back to the dressing room. We’ll go back to the dressing room and talk about whatever it is you’d like to talk about.”

I found myself once again sitting in my dressing room chair staring into the large vanity mirror. The name certainly fits as the lights bordering the mirror picked up on every crease in the face. Crows-feet. Sullen eyes. My hair had less pouf than usual and my suit seemed decompressed. The makeup on my face was caked and small flecks of it had started to chip away to reveal the lighter toned skin beneath. After depositing me in the chair, Jack receded back into the hallway. He fluttered past occasionally followed by Lou or Reid. They moved so quickly that their shapes look like dark apparitions swirling around. Speed seemed to be important. At one point Claire breezed in, looked at my neck, grimaced, placed a new, larger

Band Aid on the cut and walked out. As she applied the adhesive, she looked at me in the mirror and shook her head. *What'd you do?*

I liked the vanity mirror. I felt comforted being back in my dressing room in front of it. I liked the way people spoke to me through the mirror. I could sit back and watch it as if I were watching TV. After Claire left I poured myself a drink, which seemed like the thing to do. *I'm Matthew Mathers. When I get done with a show I like to kick back with a tall glass of Porter's. Porter's, it's the smart choice.* I'm not sure I could use the line, but it worked. I made a mental note to contact my agent and have him float my name to the national distributors. Jeff's a good guy but a bit unimaginative when it came to thinking about how to push the Mathers product. I knew the campaign would probably have to start regionally first, but from there we could see what happened. For now, I felt I needed to hold on to something to balance out the scene. The man in the mirror needed a drink. *After a hard day's work I'm a man who likes to kick back and have a drink.*

From the lights in the room, the liquor seemed alive in the short glass. I like the idea that there's a mystique to sitting and having a drink. Loosen the tie. Stretch out the arm holding the glass. Slouch slightly at the shoulders. Drinking became both a thing to be and a thing to do so that one is being and doing and doesn't need to worry about anything else. Usually. Usually that is. A few dark shapes fluttered by the door and moved on. Usually I come back to my dressing room and have a drink after meeting with the two teams and talking with parents and a select few audience members. I'll sign a few autographs after the show. Only after, never before. I'll talk with the parents after the show. Mothers and fathers who want to know what I think of their little Billy or Suzie. Even if I think the kids are *real winners*, I'll talk them up. What do I lose by a little glad handing? It's a win-win. I inevitably have to turn down a few requests for

recommendations or references. I mean, I don't actually know these kids so what would I have to say? Besides, each of them will put the show on the resume or college application. I'll also meet principals or other various community leaders after the show. I mingle and am my charming self, the charming Matthew Mathers. Most will walk away thinking how charming I am or nice or considerate even though I don't have the time, but I made the time and this demonstrates my down-to-Eartheness. Down-to-Eartheness is something we monitor here. I need to appear knowledgeable, fair, honest, and approachable. The mothers need to want to sit down and have coffee with me and their husbands a glass of beer. Need to want. I don't think they actually want, but needing to want is what the end game is. It's strange to think about what's important for these parents and how the notion of connection is universally measurable. That is, even though these are parents of high academic achievers, they, the parents, can still be thought of as people who have wants and needs just like all the slob parents out there. "Have a cup of coffee" is just a euphemism for "Date my daughter." And beer is beer. Beer is always beer. It's what men do with other men and what they do when they need to communicate. Beer, like liquor, is a thing you are and a thing you do. It's the not-so-secret handshake for knowing who's normal and who's some feather weight. Its euphemistic portent is that non-beer guys are sensitive. It's a euphemism for the man in the mirror.

I've brought a few parents back to the dressing room. Nothing much has happened here, but it's the start of where things have happened. For some reason the dressing room, a windowless, ten by ten closet essentially, signifies the import of who I am and what I do. It is the epicenter of Matthew Mathers, game show host. It is the perceived inner sanctum of my existence. Behind the green curtain. I've often been tempted by the thought of hanging a green curtain in the doorway for emphasis. But the truth is that those parents I bring back here, mostly

women, learn nothing more about who I am. There's no reveal; the room is simply an extension of the public persona, a reinforcer for who I am and what I do.

I watched the mirror closely for changes in the scene. I needed to sense whether the atmosphere was truly different. Tonight's show was different. I needed to know if I was different. No. I wanted to need to know. I felt the same. I was the same. But the world was wrong. I had a cut on my neck where I tried to pry off a mole I had removed years ago. I was reintroduced to the younger me. *I was introduced to the younger me.* The two of us exist. But none of it made sense as I am *the* me and he must be some other me. His parents were not my parents. I still wished they had been my parents so they could have seen what I became and who I was. I would have asked them back to my dressing room after the show and given them a guided tour of the place. I don't think they would have liked to hear that my ex-wife and I had divorced and that I am not in contact with my son. They were thrilled when my son was born. They were thrilled to be grandparents in a way that was different from how they felt being parents. Or, it fulfilled their sense of being parents as it fully underscored the continuation of the family lineage and their role in the cyclical nature of life.

A stagehand walked by and peeked into the room. I was sure Jack or Claire sent him in to check on me. I hoped it was Claire because she would have sent him out of some sense of concern; I know she still thinks fondly of me deep down. Jack, on the other hand, would only send someone out of concern for the studio's property or that I wasn't in here with my pants down around my ankles throwing my own feces. I called for the hand, who wasn't much older than the contestants on the show.

"Charlie, come here for a second. Come in. Come in."

The young man inched his way in and slouched behind me. I examined him in the mirror. He wore jeans and an army green t-shirt. He had a light-gray dust smeared on his shoulder and upper chest. Why did the technical support team look like they just crawled through clay or broken their way out of a room made of drywall? His hair flopped over his eyes and he had to toss his head to the side to be able to see. Just out of curiosity I gave his neck a once over. The neck of his shirt was stretched wide, revealing his greasy skin and farmer's tan. I wondered if the boy doubled as a day-laborer or farmer. I wondered if there were still farmers in the area. The paranoia was silly of course; the stagehand was three inches shorter than me and had sandy-brown hair, a color I've never had. He looked nothing like me.

The boy stood there waiting, breathing through his mouth to mark the time.

"I need you to do something for me."

I saw the hesitation and concern in his eyes or maybe I was just reading into the situation and he actually thought about nothing or something else or being somewhere else. Maybe he was only half here, thinking about the farm and how much rain has fallen this month and where the table is. I couldn't ever be a farmer.

"I dropped a piece of paper on the stage and I need you to run and fetch it for me. Do you think you could do that? Could you do that for me?"

"Sir, my name's not Charlie."

"Did I call you Charlie?"

"Yes, sir. When I first walked in you said, 'Charlie, could you come in here for a minute.'"

"Did it bother you that I called you Charlie?"

He thought for a minute, again counting time by breathing through his mouth.

“No. Not really, but my name isn’t Charlie and I wanted to introduce myself. I’m Kyle.”

“Well Kyle, it’s good to meet you. So, do you think you could do me this favor and run out to the stage and look for the piece of paper that I dropped?”

“How big is it?”

“It’s just a folded up piece of paper.” I gesture in the mirror. It’s a fucking piece of paper, just go get it.

“Where on the stage?”

“I think I dropped it just on the edge, before the step down. It might have gotten kicked around a bit, but it should be just around there. If it got knocked down, it should be resting up against the elevated stage.”

Apparently that was all Kyle needed as he slumped his way out of the room and down the hall.

*I am a man drinking and waiting. I am waiting man. I am drinking man.*

I slouched lower into my green leather, high-back chair. The leather stitching was diamond patterned on the back and came together at brass buttons. The chair was cocoon-like. I waited and the Matthew in the mirror waited and we both noticed the dark flashes that passed the open door to the hallway but did not come in.

How was it possible that two of me exist or that I exist twice? Maybe the younger Matthew was a direct copy. Some genetic mashing where the combination of two different sets of parents happened to form a shape similar to my own. Nature happens all of its own accord: a two-headed snake, a six-legged calf, a three-eyed fish. These things happen in nature all the time. Why can’t it just be a two-bodied Matthew Mathers? The name was insignificant of course, or should be understood to be less significant than the body. The eyes, hair, nose, ears

and general shape are the same. Same. Same. I needed to get a closer look. Yes, there's the mole, but what else. The scrotum? Hammer toe? What if something was different? The skin can be different. He could have cuts or bruises or marks that I might not have. He lived with a different sun. If he was like Kyle and worked the farm, this could have any number of effects on his skin. The name has happened already. The name was less significant. I met other Matthew Mathers. I knew they existed. But this. But this.

"But this..."

*Is something different?*

"Yes. Obviously."

*Okay. What is it?*

"Don't know. I thought he was my son for an instant, the first time I really looked at him. When I first looked at him I thought he was my son."

*Our son.*

"Sorry. *Our* son."

*You thought that?*

"Just for a brief moment. A millisecond. A glimmer of a passing thought."

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. *Sitting man. Drinking man. Talking man.*

"Of course, I've thought about it before."

*I know.*

"He's about the right age, our son. I thought he might try and make an appearance on the show."

*I know.*

“Or find me somehow. Bump into me at a speaking engagement. Wait for me in the back parking lot.”

*To exact revenge?*

“No. Yes. *No*. Of course not. Out of curiosity. A sense of wonderment and need. The need to want to know who I am.”

*Maybe that’s just a projection.*

“Could be.”

*He hates you.*

“Certainly a possibility.”

*More than a possibility, a probability.*

“Clever word-play. I’m convinced.”

*Why would he want to know the man who abandoned his family?*

“She left me.”

*She was forced to leave.*

“Okay, I’m convinced.”

*Thank you.*

The Matthew in the mirror took a sip from the glass as a sign of victory.

“I’ve tried to contact him before though. It’s not like I’ve been completely out of touch. I give money, too. Don’t forget that.”

*Guilt money.*

“Money nonetheless.”

*Maybe he’ll use it to buy the weapon he’ll use to do you harm for abandoning him.*

*There would be some significance to that. Portent. Irony, I think.*

“That’s true. I’ve thought of that.”

*Of course you have. It keeps you up at night.*

“My body keeps me up at night.”

*You’re old.*

“Yes.”

*Breaking down.*

“Yes.”

*Over the hill.*

“Not quite.”

*Forget it; the world has passed you by.*

“Maybe it will soon, but not yet.”

*That’s why you’ve invented this younger Matthew. He’s a construct you’ve invented out of some inner need to matter, to feel, to experience. You need to face the facts of the situation. You’ve been headed down this path for a while.*

“Not true. Matthew exists. My mole exists. The three black hairs exist. You saw him, too: backstage before the show and then on stage with the team from Central.”

*Maybe he’s a psychological manifestation of your son. You haven’t seen him in a while and the only image you have of him is of when he was a child and even that is slipping away so you fall back on the closest representation you have, which is of you around the same age. It’s sad really.*

“Matthew exists.”

*Maybe.*

“Matthew’s real.”

*Maybe not.*

“He’s a physical being. He’s also trying to get in touch with me.”

*We’ll see. What if there’s no paper. What if Kyle can’t find the paper?*

“It could have gotten swept up. I can look in the trash.”

*What if you don’t find it?*

“I’ll have Claire track down the information – names, addresses and telephone numbers – for all the contestants tonight. I’ll tell her a story about how I want to get in touch with them and their families to apologize for the show tonight. Jack’ll want me to make amends anyway.”

*The blowhard.*

“Exactly. There’s always a way.”

*Why would Claire stay loyal to you though?*

“She will.”

*And Jack? He’ll want more than an apology.*

“These things happen. He’ll tell a story about exhaustion and how I needed to check into the hospital for a couple of days. We’ll invite the two schools back and make amends.”

*You think he’ll let us remain host after this?*

“Sure. And if not, maybe it’s a sign to move on. I’ll let him bring Lance in and I’ll move to the booth, and a more ceremonial position.”

*Just like that.*

“I’ll adapt. It’ll be a change, but I’ll have a nice swan song before graciously handing over the reins.”

*That’s fear talking.*

“Whatever.”

*After tonight, Jack won't let you host one more show, let alone be connected to Lance in any fashion if the possibly exists that you might tarnish his name"*

"I have a good name. I'm Matthew Mathers."

*Drinking man. Sitting man. Talking man.* I sat and mulled over my next move.

*Thinking man.* A rap on the door pulled me out.

"Sir?"

"Kyle. Good man. Did you find the slip of paper?"

"Yes."

"Good man. Good, good man. Let me see it."

Kyle handed me the paper. The paper was blue-lined, torn from a notebook and had been folded over a couple of times. The creases were deep. It must have been in Matthew's pocket for a couple of days. I wondered then how long he had it. How long did he know that he was going to give it to me?

"Did you read the note?"

"No."

"Is there something else?"

"I wanted to talk to you about the possibility of a job?"

"What kind of job?"

"If you needed anything in your house. I'm a general handy man." Kyle reached into his pocket and pulled out a card from the back pocket of his jeans. The card was creased in the corners and was smudged with finger marks. He tried to hand me the card and I had to shuffle Matthew's folded piece of paper from right hand to my left and the drink I was holding from my left hand to the table in order to receive it. I looked down at the card and back at Kyle.

“I’m sorry about the condition. I had it in my pocket the last few days. The front has my address and contact information.”

*Kyle Dumbrowski. General Contractor.* So it is. Young Kyle was an entrepreneur. Kyle the stagehand had a side job as a general handyman and had a card. I couldn’t care less about who he was or what he did. I couldn’t care less about his request. I had a nice house that didn’t need repairs. The card would go in the nearest trash bin, but *if it makes you happy, Kyle, sure, give me a card.*

“Well, probably nothing now. In the future, maybe.” I said and held up his card and as a toast.

“Just keep me in mind for the future then. Or, if you happen to know anyone who might need some kind of work done then if you could pass my name...”

“Or the card.”

“Yeah, or the card. That would be fine too. I’ve placed a couple up in the mess and on the front bulletin board. But, you know, if you need or know someone who needs anything, just pass my name along.”

I stared at Kyle, and he stared back at me so the room was full of quiet. *Waiting men. Quiet men.* I don’t know why I felt this way, but I was done with Kyle and wasn’t going to say anything more. There was something perverse about the young man and his need for closure to the conversation. I sat in my chair and he stood in front of me. I sat and he stood and we were both quiet. Though I don’t know how we got there, we suddenly found ourselves in a standoff, and I had the immediate and intense urge to win: to not talk anymore. I looked at the card and then back at him and slid the card into my right front breast pocket where I usually kept a tissue,

but which had nothing in it at the moment. For dramatic effect, I patted the outside of my blazer to let him know it was secure and gave general contractor Kyle a half smile.

“Well,” he said, “if you ever find yourself in need, like I said, just let me know. Also, I wrote in a secondary number on the back of the card if there’s ever some kind of emergency.”

*I’m not going to say anything. Run along.*

I shifted back in my chair so most of shoulder and part of my back faced him. I looked down at the folded piece of paper nestled in the cup of my hands.

Kyle got the picture and left. As he was walking out the room I asked him to close the door on his way out.

“Mr. Mathers. I’m sorry, I did read the note. Who’s Elizabeth?”

“Just a friend,” I said.

With that, he closed the door.

I tore into the paper and unfolded it across the dressing room table. The folded segments turned the paper into a 3D object constructed of perfectly shaped rectangles. Across the paper was written a name and an address.

*Mike’s - Friday @ 8pm. See you then, Elizabeth.*

Below that was an address for a town some miles away. I didn’t know the place well, enough to get there and ask for directions from a gas station later.

I assumed Mike’s referred to someone’s house and Friday, tonight, was the day they were to meet and that Elizabeth was some girl Matthew knew. The existence of the note meant that I wouldn’t have to get Claire to track down his information after all. Matthew wanted me to meet him at Mike’s at 8 o’clock tonight. Why didn’t he just hand me the piece of paper earlier? Why go through the trouble of dropping it on the floor?

*What if the paper isn't meant for you?* said the Matthew in the mirror.

“Who could it have been for if not for me?”

*You don't believe in happenstance?*

“What?”

*Luck or accident – that the world is filled with actions that have no real relation to each other, that there are causes and effects, but no master pattern. Why do you think Matthew had this in his pocket and wanted to hand it to you tonight? Why isn't it just a random piece of paper?*

“Because it just isn't.

I looked at the piece of paper again. The signature was soft and loopy and the E of Elizabeth was bubble-like. There were no hugs and kisses or any other affirmation of desire. The note was a simple invitation.

*Well, even if the note happens to be for you, what do you think the young Matthew will want to get out of meeting? Money? The answer to some secret?*

I don't have any secrets for him. I was not going to give him money. I hadn't thought of what *he* might want though.

It's dark again, just before sunrise and that doesn't seem right. It was just fully morning. The sun has yet to rise over neighboring houses and provide me with a view of the development. The smell of *Meadow Dew* is still prevalent in the bathroom. I don't think it is wise for someone my age to be sitting on the bathroom floor for as long as I have. To hell with it. I grab the bathmat from where it hangs on the edge of the tub and lie on top of it to create a layer of insulation. I roll onto my side and feel a slender protuberance in the right front pocket of my pajama bottoms. I wear pajamas. I believe I have a wad of tissue in my pocket. I roll on to my

left side in order to gain access to the pocket and reach inside. My fingertips hit the object and a peculiar sensation comes over me. I know what the object is but think that it cannot be what it feels like. I pull out a folded piece of paper. It is early morning and still mostly dark so it is difficult to see the blue lines, but I'm sure they're there. I sit up and rest my head on the open window. The outline of my two trees are visible to the coming dawn, and there is just enough light to make out the lettering on the note.

*Mike's - Friday @ 8pm. See you then, Elizabeth.*

I must have had it in my pocket this whole time in the bathroom. I squint to look closer and hold it to what little light there is, angle it as best I can to try and catch the dim light of the time just before morning. The bubble E is the strongest of the letters. It is saturated with the scent of *Meadow Dew* or my nostrils are filled with the chemical smell and any object I smell now will now be possessed by the scent. What good would smelling the note do me anyway? The note looks much older than I remember. The corners have browned and the creases are dark ruts. There is a coffee cup stain now, too. The paper must be held like a fragile document and I'm mad at myself for so carelessly leaving it in my pajama pocket.

I am back in my chair in my dressing room. Or, I'm still in my bathroom looking at the note, but I can feel the armrest of the chair beneath my hand. I pluck at the brass button at the end of the armrest and finger the worn out place where the leather is rough and thin. The repetition of sitting down or standing up, flopping and plopping into one's seat, has given the chair character. I don't like sitting in public seats when I fly. You can see the brown thin spots where others have sat and the places where strangers' thighs have darkened and worn thin the synthetic fiber. I try to sit in those seats, but all I can think about is the number of people that have come before me. The number who have shifted their weight and felt the thin cushion give

way like a brief sigh. Weight serves no purpose. If they were hikers in the woods, their treads would provide safe passage to some end destination. In public seating, it is just a sign of gravity and the space between being places: where one was and where one wants to be.

Back in my dressing room on the night of the show, I remembered feeling the worn places on the chair and the way my body created natural grooves to fit into. They were Matthew grooves. A person needed only to sit, experience the act of sitting, to understand. Any person who wanted to sit in this chair would have to deal with the shape I've worn into it: a Matthew space to be filled by Matthew. I smiled to think of Lance trying to sit in this chair. I smiled to think of him sitting and having his makeup applied, smiling to himself about his chance to take over the show, but something just not feeling right. He'd slide and shift his weight to get comfortable, but the chair would be a reminder that he was truly in someone else's space. A Matthew space that his Lance shape just couldn't fill. Most likely then, he'd talk to Jack about having the chair removed. *I need a new chair*, he'd say. *In fact, can we do a whole redesign?* No matter what he does, there will be reminders for him and everyone else. They'll have to go down to the base of the room, to the dry wall and floor boards, and tear out each and replace it with something new in order to completely change the space. I thought of the younger Matthew and wondered if he was a replacement for me; new floorboard to replace the old one with so many soft spots. Was that it? Were we a team? Were we enemies? Certainly, he had nothing to fear from me. I glanced at the mirror and saw Jack and Claire walk in. Reid and Lou stood in the doorway before Jack gave them a nod for space.

I wanted to tell him about Matthew and the note. I tried to talk to Jack earlier, but he wouldn't listen. To be fair, we were in the middle of the show and he seemed preoccupied. The

contestants and their parents must have left the conference room, or maybe they want me to go in and say something.

“Do you want me to go in and say something?”

Claire looked to Jack, but he just kept his eyes level on me.

“Matthew, do you understand what happened tonight?” He asked me.

“To tell you the truth, I’m really not sure. I’m struggling with this. I should go in though and say goodnight and offer apologies and, I don’t know, sign autographs or something to make up for the evening.”

They both looked tired.

“The mother from Central wants to sue. The father wanted explanations and certainties about his son and the competition. You grabbed a parent tonight and have been muttering about the kid with your name and you think signing a few headshots will do what exactly?”

“Jack, you tell me then. You tell me what should be done.”

“Have you lost your mind? And I ask that in all seriousness, or did you have too much to drink tonight?”

The all but empty glass sat on the table. *Drinking man. Talking man.*

“This was after the show.”

“Claire?” Jack said.

“You had one before, at least. I saw you when I came in.”

She looked down after saying this, closed mouth, lowered eyes, and I was glad to see she had a small reserve of shame left. I pick up the glass and raise it in the air. *Toasting man.*

“This? This is after the show. Sure, I’ll have a small sip before the show, but that’s just ritual, ceremony.”

“Jesus, Matthew.” *Jesus, Jack.* “We’ve gone through this before: detox, a couple of weeks away, then the weekends after that.”

“It’s not the booze.”

“It’s what then, the kid?”

“He is Matthew Mathers.”

“It’s a name.”

“He is me. Why don’t you see that? Claire? Come on. Tell me you didn’t see that. Tell me you didn’t see the way he looked. And look at my neck, for god’s sake. Just take a look.” Putting down the glass, I loosened my tie, pulled down my collar and took the Band Aid off. I proffered my neck to the mirror so they could get a better look. The mole was starting to scab over, but it was still visible. “Explain this. Explain this. This is physical. You can’t explain this away.”

“Explain what? It’s a cut that’s bleeding. It’s disgusting to look at, that’s for sure, but it’s just a fucking cut.”

“Claire, tell him. Tell him you haven’t seen this before.”

Again, she looked to Jack before speaking.

“Don’t look to him. He doesn’t know. You know. Speak up. Enunciate. Tell him you haven’t seen this before. I had it removed years ago, before you even started working here. There should be a scar where they stitched the skin back together after removing the blasted thing. Tell him. Go on, tell him. Don’t look at him. Tell him.” The physical needed to be accounted for. If they could see that, then maybe there’s a chance of them being able to see Matthew.

“I don’t know, Matthew. I don’t know whether you’ve had that or not or had it removed or not.” She looked to Jack again.

“Stop looking at him.”

“Don’t shout. There’s no reason to shout,” Jack says.

“I’m not shouting. I’m not shouting.”

I wasn’t shouting. I didn’t feel like I was shouting. I couldn’t understand why Claire refused to tell Jack that she hadn’t seen the mole before. I mean, it was my goddamn mole and I should know whether I had it removed. It was years ago. I scheduled the appointment. It was back before, when I still did those sorts of things, before I had the studio secretary do those sorts of things for me.

“I scheduled the appointment. I went to the doctor’s office. The doctor, the doctor will have a record of the surgery to have it removed. All we have to do is call him, the doctor, to confirm it. He’ll confirm it.”

“It’s after six.” Claire said.

“So what? So what if it’s after six.”

“I just meant that the doctor’s office is probably closed for the night and we’ll have to wait till morning, maybe even Monday morning.”

“Wait till morning, wait till morning then. You’ll see. You’ll see that this thing shouldn’t be here on my neck.” Jack looked skeptical. In the mirror, Jack looked skeptical: lips pursed, eyes narrowed.

“There’s no reason to look skeptical.” I said.

“I’m not going to do this. Claire, we talked about this outside.”

*A line in the sand.*

“Outside, huh? You talked outside and had a game plan ready for when you came in. A united front for how to deal with the situation. Look at my neck.” I looked at my neck. I stretched my neck out further to give them a better view of the mole. The tension caused the soft scab to open and more blood to flow.

“Claire, give him a napkin or something to wipe up with. Jesus, Matthew.” *Jesus, Jack.* “And you wanted to walk into the room, and say what exactly? Did you want the contestants and their parents to look at your neck, too? Were you going to march in there and pull down the collar of your shirt and start yelling at them to look at your neck? What would be next? Strip down, expose yourself? That’s what we’re thinking here. That’s our concern.”

I hadn’t thought about how far I would go. If this were to be something significant I would have to get Matthew to understand. I think he knows now, but if he doesn’t I’d have to show him. I think he’d understand with the neck. And if not that then maybe I’d have to do something else, but not with the body. I’d recognize his body, but why would he recognize mine? He has the skin and bones and body of youth. What do I have? What do I have that he’d understand? I’d have to talk and tell him stories about what it’s like. They’d be stories about the feel of oiling up a glove or kissing a girl or doing more with a girl for the first time in the front seat of a car. I’d have to set the story in the back seat as bench seating has gone the way of the Dodo. I’d have to set the story in the back seat, but talk about the way the fingers fumble with the bra, or how getting hard happens quickly, or how once inside for the first time there’s a moment of disbelief and surrealism where the thing that is happening is happening to someone else. How her lying underneath you in the backseat of the car was happening to the two people inside the car and you were standing outside, just watching. The window was rolled down so everything smelled and felt close up, but he and I were watching from the outside, this thing that

was happening. Or maybe how if it was close up, if he was in the moment, how the pain is his back and hip from bending at the angle he was bending in order to make the thing work, how the pain was something that he focused on as much as the in and out and being there and having a soft woman underneath him. How the pain was there, but I didn't want to stop to adjust my position out of fear that if I had she would say we should stop period. So you deal with the pain. If not the pain then the surprise of it all. The utter surprise of this girl being here with me, you, I at this moment. As if you thought she was giving a gift without knowing what was being given. The way he, you, I smiled at this thought and Darcy opened her eyes at this exact moment and saw me smile and thought I was smiling at her so she smiled too in a way I thought was pure happiness. How the pain in the back and hips receded and the only word worth recording was friction. Of course her name won't be Darcy. His moment won't include a girl name Darcy, but if I were to use the words friction, surprise and pain then he will know exactly what I am talking about. He will know these words and fully understand this moment. He will say, *I know*. He will say, *I understand*. He will ask me about when it was all over if the feeling of surprise returned and if I wondered, too, whether Darcy could somehow take the moment back. And of course his Elizabeth is my Darcy, but it is all the same because I will know exactly what he means. If he hasn't done it yet, I'll tell him a story about whatever he wants to hear or has experienced and I'll tell him what's it like and how I experienced it and he'll understand the words I use even if I am able to only use just one word for which he responds, *Yes*.

A dampness has settled under my armpits and groin. I am damp and cold. My face is plaster. I scratch at my cheek bone and one of loose flakes of skin. I finger it. Poke it. Play with it as if it were a loose tooth. The flake comes off and I roll it between my fingers and think of placing the flake under my pillow later. For the fairy. If there is a tooth fairy there must be

some kind of fairy for this. The Flake of Skin Fairy. Just tell me how much I have to collect and what what's my reward. I'll trade you. I'll make an Even Steven trade for this flake and each flake I collect for new pieces. Think fresh. Think a baby's skin. How's that sound as a deal? I'll collect them in a neat little pile and place them under my pillow and you'll come and give me new skin and a new start. Good? Good. I'll even ask nicely. *Please.*