Arriving home from work, Jeffery mechanically placed the car keys on the edge of the mother-of-pearl counter top, set his lunch box by the sink, marked a day off the covered bridges of America calendar, put a record on the phonograph, and walked to the bathroom. The routine was always the same, the same row of oily orange bottles sleeping behind the bathroom mirror. There was always the short stare in the mirror before counting out the various colorful little buttons in his palm. He sucked down his pills and a few handfuls of water, tucked the bottles back behind the mirror, and wet his face.
Privately, Jeffery was rather disorderly, but this week, Mother and Father were on holiday out of town and Jeffery therefore enthroned himself in the living room: master of the domain. As Jeffery continued down the hall from the bathroom, he walked past a messy house sprinkled with magazines, a half eaten sandwiches, a few crystal ashtrays from Niagara falls, and a smattering of records in and out of their sleeves lying languidly all over like a bunch of passed out party goers.

Jeffery was expected to stay in the house while they were gone as was dictated in the lengthy letter his mother left taped securely to the refrigerator door. He could have his friend Walter over if he was so inclined, but it was Walter and only Walter. His parents had even given Walter a key to the house. The parents trusted Walter because he had gone to church with Jeffery's family for years, gone to scout camp with Jeffery, and was an upstanding young man attending college upstate. Jeffery never went to college, nor did he really like Walter or any of the family friends he had always been surrounded by the entirety of his twenty-four years. He had not made many friends when he was in school because he missed much of it and grew up through stints of home schooling. Most of the time, he resented them even. Jeffery preferred his friends that he had made at work. They liked to drink, tell jokes, and talk about engines and panties.

At work, Jeffery swept shop, kept the stock room full, and often ran errands. His father's company acquired the shop a decade ago and Jeffery had worked there since he was eighteen. Once he had almost been invited outside with Max and his buddies for lunch, and was sometimes invited to smoke on break with them. Mostly he just listened to them banter about baseball or women, laughed with them, and occasionally commented. They were chewing tobacco type men, and grew up in the rough parts of town. Jeffery had told Max that he dropped out of college to play Baseball in Ohio, but got injured on the team and had to return home to get a job—a complete lie, but nonetheless, he had gained entry into their circle by virtue of their curiosity. Outside of work, however, Jeffery never spoke of Max, and never saw him. Whether his parents were home or not, it didn't matter. Jeffery's friends could never come over and see how he actually lived with his parents, lived with his routine. They could never know that the car he drove to work wasn't his. He could never let them know that he lived off of Westgate Street and not in an apartment with his "brother" James on Ninth and Michigan. So Jeffery had nobody over, as was routine.

The Buddy Holly record had expired and Jeffery leaned forward to mash his cigarette into the ashtray and lit a new one. He walked back down the hall to the bathroom and began expressionlessly trimming his fingernails with the cigarette pointing out of his tightly formed lips. Having scanned his fresh fingertips with his thumbs, Jeffery looked vacantly into the mirror. He then wrestled himself out of his shirt revealing pale, freckled white skin stretched across his chest and continued to watch himself finish the cigarette. After dropping the butt into the toilet.
and flushing it, the staring continued. Jeffery flexed his arms and chest, prodding his meager arms with his index finger. Then suddenly Jeffery began making strange expressions into the mirror, trying on various faces of jubilance, comedy, gruff confidence, madness, and charm.

Ruffling his hair and posing, Jeffery began with, “I’d like to thank all of my fans in New York City for coming out tonight and supporting the band.”

“Oh yeah? Well this time’s different Blackey, because I got the map and the only other man who knows where the gold is DEAD!” He even laughed to himself between costume changes, and again whole-heartedly after the dress up had stopped and he leaned against the counter top with his elbows locked.

As Jeffery put his shirt back on, he decided he would walk out down town. He grabbed his coat, scarf, his smokes, and all the money from the envelope put atop the fridge that Jeffery’s parents left for him. Jeffery walked around the sidewalks for a while, past shops, matinees, and lounges. Suddenly, his aimlessness and boredom led him to walk into the Tootsie lounge, drawn by the wails of a trumpet. As he hung his coat up, he froze for a second panning across the crowd.

“Move it or lose it junior,” a man uttered, slightly pushing Jeffery out of the way by the arm.

Jeffery continued to search the room wide eyed. He concluded that he would follow the other young men and do as they did. Jeffery walked behind two brawny college-aged boys and sat down at the bar. His shoulders touched his ears as he hunched over on his stool, still panning across the surroundings. The music was lively, and perhaps the only coherent sound in the bar. Jeffery sat and listened.

A hand grabbed the back of his arm suddenly.

“Hey, is your name Albert Schneider?” asked a striking young blonde girl.

“Uh, what?”

“Are you Albert, Albert Schneider?”

“Uh, no sorry my name is—” he paused to think, “my name is Greg, Gregory Lofton.”

“Oh well I didn’t mean to stir you Gregory, really I didn’t. I’m sorry.” Her eyes began searching the floor with disappointment while she collected her coat from the adjacent stool. Jeffery noticed her remarkable beauty, all that short bouncy blonde hair, her hips and her ass wrapped tightly in her skirt, and her gentle, almost motherly looking hands. He had never seen a girl like her in his life. Mostly Jeffery never saw girls, at least not his age, and girls never saw him. In twenty-four years, Jeffery had never had a woman. Almost, but not quite.

“But I know Albert,” he blurted out.

“Really, how do you know him?”
Noticing an Ithaca College pin on her coat, he remarked, “I was in a class with him once. Writing, we were in writing together a while ago. How do you know Albert?”

“Oh well I don’t directly, he’s a friend of a friend I guess. Boy am I sorry, my name is Mary, Mary Appleton, my pleasure to meet you Gregory Lofton.”

The two shook hands. Her skin was as supple as a peeled orange.

“Likewise, the pleasure is mine. Well, Albert said that he wasn’t feeling well and wouldn’t be going out tonight.”

Jeffery felt incredible having first convinced Mary that he went to college with this Albert character because he was mad with desire for Mary. “Would you like a cigarette?”

“Surely, thank you. Say, you wouldn’t want to be a friend and get me and my friend a drink would you?”

“Nope, I wouldn’t want to be a friend.”

“Hey now!” She chirped as she slugg’d him childish in the arm.

Jeffery called the bartender over with a confidence learned in a thousand television westerns.

“Waiter, three drinks please.”

The bartender stared tiredly back at him.

“Whaddya want chief?”

Jeffery looked at Mary helplessly disarmed.

She leaned in and said, “Three Tom Collins please.”

“Well Mary, what are you doing in town? Actually, can I take your jacket for you?” Jeffery asked.

Jeffery didn’t wait. As soon as his palms rested upon the epaulettes of her wool jacket, his fingertips slightly curling into the flesh of her shoulders just above her clavicles, Mary piped up.

“No, thank you, I can get it.”

Jeffery’s hands remained motionless as Mary slid out from underneath them and removed her jacket. Mary shot a brief smirk back at Jeffery for the gesture.

“Well you see, I’m in town because my older sister just had her first baby girl. That makes me an aunt now,” she remarked with jubilation.

“Then back to classes I bet. You look like the studious type and I couldn’t help but notice the school pin on your pea coat.”

“Oh yes, back on the day after tomorrow. My sister is the only one that lives here with her husband; I’m staying with my friend though.”

“What part of town does your friend live in? Around these parts?”


“She lives near Sutton street above this wonderful little bookstore, but what's it to you? You're out of town tonight as well.”

Jeffery tried to remind himself to make eye contact, but Mary's eyes seemed cautious and skittish. Then she flashed a quick awkward smile. A slender glass hovered across the bar and Jeffery slid a stack of bills at the bartender.

“Hey chief, you owe me another two.”

“Oh right! My apologies.”

“You don't go out much do you Gregory? I can tell.”

Jeffery again tried to dress his face in a practiced seriousness, the seriousness he used when he would lie to his parents.

“Well you see, I'm from Houghton and there aren't any places like this one there, so I just am not used to a place like this you see. But I go out, on occasion. Actually, most of my time is eaten up. You see, I've been drafting a novel about naval warfare in the North Sea. It's very time consuming, but I absolutely enjoy it. But I try to make it out once in a while still.”

“Right, I bet you do,” she deflected. “Well when I see my sister, I like to come here for the music.”

“Music, really? I absolutely love music. Do you like Miles Davis much?”

“Oh, I absolutely love Miles Davis!”

“I do too, he sure is something,” he said beginning a nervous nasally laugh.

Jeffery realized he had not so much as even touched his unfamiliar drink. He winced briefly as he composed himself and turned back towards Mary who was watching the bass player. For a few seconds, Jeffery examined Mary. Her hair fell gently to her shoulders and her gray knit sweater clung to her exquisite breasts. He could almost make out the color of her bra through the stretched, tightly knit wool. Jeffery had never kissed a girl, but if he did, he would kiss Mary’s neck, and then make his way down her chest, just like on the movies. He felt blood moving in his legs as he stared at Mary’s finger rubbing side to side across her bottom lip reapplying some balm, her mouth slightly open in the shape of an oval. She turned towards Jeffery and extinguished her cigarette. Her blue eyes narrowed inquisitively and her head tilted towards her right shoulder. Mary’s free hand tugged gently on the hem of her sweater.

“How would you like to dance with me Mary?” Jeffery spit out.

Mary’s eyes remained narrow as a grin grew across her face in light of Jeffery’s juvenile advance.

“If you attend Houghton, how would you know Albert? He goes to school in Ithaca upstate, with me.”
Jeffery began to slowly petrify, starting in his toes and working its way up, staring at her hand on her stomach, entertaining fantasies of wild sexual abandon and also of jumping off a building or in front of a train.

“Well you see, I used to attend Ithaca, but I left after a few semesters. I hated the place really; it was creatively stifling for my writing. So I decided to go to Houghton and Albert and I met while I was still at Ithaca, in writing class. But now I am at Houghton and I’m doing much better. I like it there now. I still see Albert once in a while if our track teams are competing against each other.”

Mary took one last drink from her glass and Jeffery watched those fresh lips bond with the rim of the glass and time slowed as they peeled away. Mary motioned across the room and began to wiggle into her coat.

“Right, well Gregory, it was nice meeting you but I’m on my way now.”

As Mary stood waiting, her body leaned away from Jeffery in the shape of an ‘S’ towards the door. Dammit! Jeffery thought. At this point he would settle just to grope her as he brushed past her, but he couldn’t move.

“Wait, you never answered my question,” he said.

“What question?”

“You know, if you were intending to dance with me?”

Mary chuckled, “Riiight.”

Jeffery watched her leave on her friend’s arm, laughing theatrically. He watched her hips rise and fall with each step away from him. For a while he just sat and let the bass ripple in his body while the trumpet burrowed into his heart in minor key. He began to think about Max and his friends at work. As far as they would know, Mary danced with him, he felt her up on the porch of her apartment, and he would be seeing her in 16 days. As far as his parents knew, he was safely stowed away in his room listening to Gospel Greats. He began to snicker to himself, feeling partly mad as he hung his head. He traced swirls into the sweat on his glass with his thumb.

“Gregory Lofton,” he muttered to himself, “Jesus fucking Christ. I spent a small fortune on those stupid drinks. That’s gotta be worth something? That’s gotta be worth at least a quick feel up?” As Jeffery mumbled, his eyes remained fixed on the center of the swirl on his glass.

Jeffery returned home, scuffing his feet, and went straight to the bathroom as he always would before bed. He saw himself deflate in the mirror. A stare down began. There would be no orange plastic bottles tonight before bed, no palms of quaint little buttons. No, sorry Mom. Tonight the truce was called off.

Jeffery lit a cigarette and put on an old Miles Davis record he enjoyed. His thoughts moved
to Mary and the bar. He walked into his parents’ bedroom. Drawers flung open manically and Jeffery rummaged through clothes and through jewelry until the dresser lay open like an opera singer’s mouth. Jeffery paused, ashing his cigarette in the middle of the room and thinking. He went into his father’s closet and dug into a stack of old shoeboxes. He paused to look over a few pictures of his young parents and himself and a family photo album containing his entire social life. Box after box, Jeffery’s hand slid into a black cardboard box on the top shelf of the closet. He reached blindly inside, furrowing around until his hand grazed something cool and metallic. His hand produced the loaded seven round magazine. He lit a half-smoked cigarette he found in the ashtray on the dresser and took a long drag staring at his discovery. Jeffery knew his father kept a handgun. His father kept one ever since the war, and on occasion, as a child, he would go searching for it. It would be moved and there would be no mention of it ever.

“Where is my old friend hid now?” he asked himself aloud, his arms stretched out like wings.

As Jeffery got older, it became harder to keep hiding the gun and even more difficult for his father to not talk about having to move it again over cereal in the morning. Jeffery thought hard. His father was a very orderly man—a man who took his family’s safety very seriously. Jeffery sat down on the side of the bed trying again to unravel his father’s riddle. Then, instinctively, he reached between the mattresses of the bed. There his hand grazed the handle of his old friend, the 1911.

He wrapped his hand around the familiar chequered grip, and a sweaty vapor formed in the crevices of his palm. The metal sent a cool vibration into his hand as he held it tighter. His index finger reached out to gently touch the trigger, the way he would have reached out to touch Mary’s breast while laying her down on the bed in his mind. The gun and Jeffery’s hand began to melt together into a solid mass of bones, skin, sweat, wood, and steel. Jeffery began to lift the gun up and down admiring its incredible heft, its titan density and spiritual presence, as he always did. His free hand began to caress the slide, his eyes pooling into the precise engravings. “Serious injury or death...caliber .45 automatic...” Those words were like the carving of God himself, in steel. His fingers began to run over those prophecies, those engraved commandments, channeling them like a blind man. He imagined Mary’s body would feel something similar to the soft powdered steel of the gun as his hands traced up and down her naval.

His hand swallowed the handle and the abrasive chequered grip licked his palms like a cat. He hunched over the gun, inhaling the aromas of oil and the acrid factory smell. His other hand wrapped around the handle and he slowly bent his elbows upward, bringing the gun up to his face, his forearms against his chest, closing his eyes. He breathed in. The chemical compounds
and particles whirled into his nose bonding with his cells; the spirit of death was again swimming in his lungs and a russet taste stuck onto the back of his tongue. He kissed the gun, just under the front sight, letting it rest on his lips.

The gun was always speaking to him, through the silent walls at night, whispering to him from under his parents’ bedroom door while he tried to sleep. The gun knew all of Jeffery’s secret thoughts. He wondered sometimes if the gun was inescapable. There certainly was no going back to life without the gun. Sometimes he wondered if he had the manliness and constitution to speak back to the gun, to command it. Men have always killed, but Jeffery had never killed anyone before and wondered if somehow he had lost touch with that dark primordial pool of male sex and violence buried deeply in the ancestral mind of men. Part of the seduction of the gun was the arousing re-connection with that noir essence.

Jeffery entertained fantasies with the gun. A few years earlier, without his father knowing, he kept the gun with him for three full days in the bag he took to work. He frequently had dreams of robbing banks, shoot outs with police, or even being in Vietnam. Even Jeffery knew he wasn’t a killer, but he pondered the profound possibility. Turning his head, he caught the image of himself across the room in his mother’s full-length mirror. He paused to look at himself, posing, and dress rehearsing a suicide with his mouth open wide and his eyes looking up back into his head. Then he decided that tonight he would take his baby out. He slid the gun down his skin into his waist and headed for the car.

The radio played loudly, while Jeffery drove easily thirty miles over the speed limit in some stretches of the emptying road, left elbow cocked coolly out the window the entire way. Eventually he reached the end of town and drove into the woods. There he left the car running to throw the headlights onto the distance and leave the radio playing in the background. He marched deeper into the woods. Jeffery then reached into the waistband of his trousers, producing the pistol. The magazine slammed into the bottom of the grip. He flipped the safety off with his thumb and pulled the slide back chambering the bullet; this was all familiar. However, for as much practice as he had in chambering the weapon, racking the slide, loading and unloading it, Jeffery had never actually shot the gun before. He raised the gun slowly upward in his hands and aimed it. His finger dove into the trigger and then darted off. Nothing. Jeffery did not expect the trigger to be so stiff, not with all the accidents he heard about. It took quite a bit of commitment to pull the trigger. At this point, he also decided that he would shoot with both eyes open, so as to not miss anything. Re-aiming the weapon at a tree stump, again he tried the trigger, pulling it achingly inward, deathward. Finally a shot rang out.
His ears rang and he staggered back swearing to himself. Jeffery’s heart started beating again like a drum on a Greek warship. The smoke from the gun crawled intimately over him, kissing his balmy skin. Getting over the initial startle, he wiped the sweat and hair from his eyes. Again he raised the gun in his quaking right hand this time and fired again, then again, and again, and again and.... The slide hung open like a runner’s mouth, exhausted. He walked over the hot brass pearls by his feet, pushing a few of them into the soil with his toe, panting. Back to the humming of the car, the warm skin of the gun made his stomach sweat in his trousers. The lonely radio continued, “...over one thousand uses around the house from cleaning to disinfecting!”

Jeffery smoked the whole drive home, elbow sticking out of the window, coolly sucking down at least four, maybe five, smokes. The moon was flashing in the foggy sky like a dime in a fountain. The radio had been turned off, and Jeffery fixed his eyes down the road unbroken and silent.

Jeffery returned home as he always did. The door was locked behind him as he entered the still warmly lit living room of orange, wood panels, and taupe. His feet scurried past record sleeves, records, and magazines through to the shadows towards his room. The door quickly shut. He kept the gun against his naked stomach, and crawled into bed. He reached down into the waistband of his underwear and peeled the gun that was bonded to his sweaty body upwards. His hand ran up and down the frame slowly. There he slept with a gun under his temple, in his right hand, beneath his pillow.