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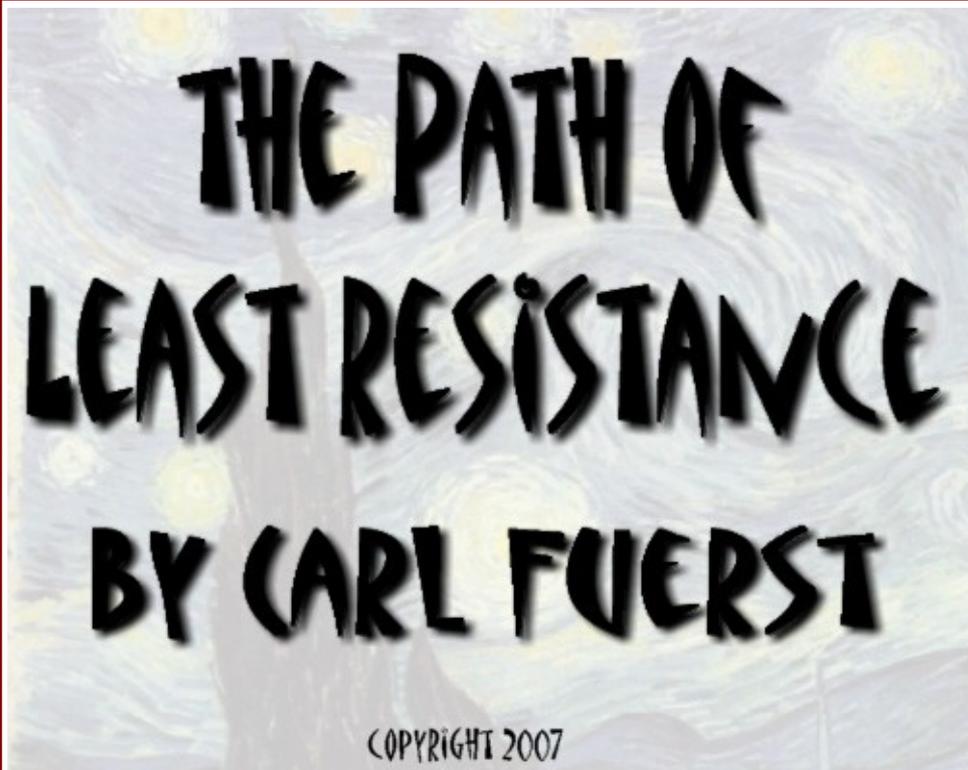
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I stared at the crab rangoons while I waited for Ray, who was my last friend, and who was late.

The restaurant was downstairs from my apartment, and I liked it. They had dragons carved into the tables, the music was exotic, and the waitress was my neighbor, and though she talked to me like a stranger, she always gave me a discount on the bill.

But Ray kept being late, and my neighbor kept coming back to my table and saying do-you-want-another, and I had so many others that by the time Ray showed up I forgot that he was coming at all.

He was wearing a T-shirt that said Eat Me.

I said, "I'm supposed to eat you, or eat the shirt?"

He ignored me. Then he yelled for a basket of rolls.

"They don't give rolls here," I said.

"Oatmeal's better than no meal," he said. "I guess."

Our food came and we ate it. Half way through he was still complaining. "Seriously," said Ray, "instead of giving us the real shit, they change it to be like our shit. So how could they make it? It isn't their shit." He slapped his noodles with the back of his fork. A splash of oyster sauce speckled one side of his glass. "The portions are too small, too."

I was listening and nodding and trying to bend a spoon with my mind.

"What's worse?" he asked. "Bad food or bad pussy?"

"Don't know."

"They're both really goddamn bad," he said. He said it loud, too. He wanted our waitress, my neighbor, to hear.

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He'd changed his look since I'd seen him last. He'd buzzed his hair. He'd bleached it. He'd grown a goatee and bleached that, too.

"You look cool." I meant it. "Turning a leaf?"

He sneered, and his braces looked full of pain. "No new leaf."

I asked him if he'd made any plans.

"Worry about yourself," Ray said. "Seriously. What's your goddamn plans?"

Then he left for the bathroom, and instead of describing my decision to spit in his water, I'll tell you how Ray got fired. One night, after work, he'd convinced some guys to drink with him in the parking lot of the plant. Half way through a bottle of corn whiskey, he pulled a rifle from the back seat of his car.

The rifle turned out to be a BB gun, but the cops had to force him off a chain-link fence. He spent a day and a night bleeding in the clink and when he got home he discovered that he'd been fired. Management had been looking for a reason to fire Ray ever since the rumor started that he'd taken a piss in the break room sink.

He came back from the bathroom with dripping hands. He stuck his nose into his palms and took a deep drag, relishing the smell of the perfume in the soap. "I got a cousin who works for a dealership in Orland Park," he said. "I might do that. I can do sales."

"Orland Park is far."

"I said I got a cousin there. You think I might know where it is?"

When the check came, Ray snatched it up and tossed it onto my plate. "Got fired," he said. "Remember?"

He finished his water. I grinned.

My first night at the plant, management assigned me to a scrape-and-grinding bastard of a machine, and that's where I met Ray. Sitting on his tool box, using a screwdriver to gouge clumps of mud from the bottoms of his shoes.

He tapped his ID badge. It said "Radical Ray." He thought that badge was pretty cool, I could tell, so I looked at it blank, like it was in Chinese, or like I couldn't tell what he was trying to get me to see.

That whole night, Ray and I stacked boxes of hand wheels onto pallets. The kind of work that's fine, so long as you let your bones take over where your mind leaves off. You just rock back and forth. Eventually, you start to feel like the sea.

But it was clear that Radical Ray did not feel like the sea. He swung his face like an old-man's fist, and he wrapped his arms around boxes and let them fall where I'd strain to push them into place. It was slow work, and the shift-boss kept making us rebuild our crooked pallets. It was Ray's fault, but I didn't say anything about it.

After we punched out, Ray asked me to go to a farm pond and get drunk. So I shrugged and looked at my watch and said sure.

We hadn't yet spoken much. It was too loud at the plant, and during the drive I was too shy to talk. Then we parked on the side of the road and I struggled to keep up as Ray led me through a cornfield to the pond, which was less a pond than a hole in the mud left behind by a spike in one of God's golf shoes. Nervous waves of foamy water stabbing at a cold shore of crumbling dirt. But Ray had a cooler full of ice and beer (that I carried from his truck), and we made ourselves

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warm with Wild Turkey and a fire of dried-up corn stalks, and nobody could see us from the road.

“Radical,” I said. “Nickname? Or something you made up?”

“Bigger than a nickname,” he said, and tapped his chest again, though he left his badge at work. “It’s because I’m a radical, in the term’s purest sense. I’m a man of big ideas. Like Martin Luther King. Like Scarface. Only I’m more real.”

“I thought it meant ‘radical’ like ‘tubular.’ Surfer talk.”

“Seriously. Do I look like a goddamn surfer?”

No, he did not. And he did not look like a man of big ideas, either. But I didn’t say anything because it would’ve been too weird, and because, five beers later, we were best friends.

“Hey dude,” he said, and it was hard to tell if he was talking to me or to the moon. “How many chicks have you banged?”

The wind picked up, smoking our fire and bothering the surface of the pond. The water heaved like it was trying to throw its weight onto land and drag itself away. I caught myself feeling sorry for the pale-eyed fish that had to live in such a cold and forgot-about place.

“One,” I answered, surprising myself with my honesty. I bent a bottle cap between my forefinger and thumb and pushed it into the mud.

“Christ.”

“You bet,” I said.

“That’s not many. Just one.”

“Yeah. It was the best time of my life.”

“What. Like you were banging away at some chick and you had the time of your life? Or all the times with one chick put together?”

“Don’t know.” I was embarrassed talking about it. I prayed for a big bass to jump so we could talk about that instead of this.

“I’ve only banged six. Or five. Don’t feel too bad about one.”

“I don’t.”

“Best time of your life?”

“Yup.”

A minute went by. Maybe it was half the morning. God knows.

“I don’t remember a best time,” said Ray.

“That’s too bad.”

“Except once I was in Florida, on vacation with my folks. A little kid. And this one night I snuck down to the beach with one of my dad’s smokes.”

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"This is a story?" I asked.

"Goddamn right it's a story. I'm telling you about the best time of my life."

"All right."

"I never seen the ocean before, except when I was with my parents and had to crank my headphones because I was a fucking punk, right? But with this smoke in my mouth I felt like my own man. Like I could finally enjoy the water. I rolled up my jeans and walked in up to my knees. I stood there trying to light that smoke and a wave taller than God came out of everywhere and took me the fuck down. I've been punched ten-thousand times over the course of my life and I tell you now that nothing has ever hit me as hard as that wave.

"Next thing, I was in the water, with water in every direction, except I didn't know what any of the directions were. I could've been two inches, I could've been a mile down."

"What'd you do?"

"I remember thinking, 'Ray, it doesn't matter."

He smiled and I looked at my shoes.

"Once I made that decision, I could see the blackness of the water spreading forever in every direction, and I know a kid isn't supposed to be smart but right then I goddamn knew that it was always supposed to be exactly like that."

I waited for the punch line.

"That's it. That's the best thing. I don't know. Beer me."

So I gave him a beer, and we drank into the morning, and then he drove me back to the plant and dropped me off at my car.

That was the only time we went to that pond. Everybody at work hated Ray, and I was forced, you understand, to choose between him and everybody else. So I did what a normal person would do, and we didn't hang out again until, about a week after he'd been fired, he called and suggested that we go out for dinner. I accepted, because, like I said before, I was down to my last friend. Who was Ray.

We stood outside the restaurant and stared at the neon in the bar across the street. I lit a cigarette and offered one to Ray. I was lonely as hell and wanted to invite him upstairs. "Got anything going?" I asked.

He spat at the curb, but the wind carried it back towards our shoes. "You?"

"Not really."

"You live around here."

"Right up those stairs."

"Want to go up?"

"If you want," I said. "I don't care."

I'd already been to the liquor store to buy expensive beer for the occasion. Usually I don't like fancy stuff, but I'd tried this brand in Yellowstone, and just seeing the label gave me that

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vacation feel.

Ray inspected my fridge while I looked for my cat.

"I'm not sure what's in the fridge," I said.

"All you got is this fancy shit. Is that all you got?"

I couldn't find the cat. Ray took a deep swig off one of my vacation beers. "Tastes like they stirred it with a stick of incense. Tastes like shit."

I got a bottle for myself. The glass was slimey under the label from sitting in the store's cooler for so long, and the beer didn't taste anything like it did at Yellowstone. It tasted even better.

"Yeah," I said. "This shit was a gift."

"Well," Ray sighed. "I guess oatmeal's better than no meal."

He turned on the TV, and we sat on my couch, watching a show and working our way through those beers. My cat stopped hiding and rubbed against Ray's leg. We watched and watched, and I tried to limit myself to one beer and one cigarette per show, but I lost track, and then I was almost out of smokes and almost out of beer. We watched the late night talk shows, and then we watched the reruns, and then the infomercials came on. I started bumming smokes off Ray. We watched an advertisement about a food dehydrator. We watched the national anthem. The test patterns came on. We must've watched for fifteen minutes more before I stumbled over to the tube and turned it off, and then it was so dark in my apartment, with only the light from the hallway spilling under my front door.

"Listen," Ray said, his head hanging like a bowling ball attached to the top of a cactus by a spring. We were both drunk, and we hadn't talked in hours. "I got a proposition, and if you're not interested, you can fuck off."

"Maybe we should save this conversation for later."

"I got a business opportunity, and I'm going to tell you about it, and if you're interested, you can fuck off."

"I don't know what you want me to do."

"What I want you to do is shut the fuck up so I can talk about this goddamn business opportunity, because I can take one other person into it, who might be you."

He went on to describe an invitation he'd received to a free business lunch. He mentioned how important it was that he act now. He went into stuttering detail about the high quality paper upon which the invitation had been printed and the mysterious free gift to which it had alluded.

I said that it sounded like a scam to me.

"I got unlimited earning potential," he said. "They liked my 'qualifications.'"

I kept saying that it sounded like a scam to me, and a few minutes later, as Ray left, he tripped and fell in front of my neighbor's door. I almost laughed, but when I saw the look on his face I thought better.

I watched him stumble down the stairs and out into the street.

My neighbor opened her door, investigating the noise. She was wearing her work shirt and a pair of basketball shorts. She had a toothbrush in her mouth. I shrugged at her and she

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shrugged back and then she closed her door and I closed mine.

Later that same night, I woke up with a leftover piece of panic lodged in my chest. I sat up and tried to remember the nightmare that put it there, and just when I thought I could reach into that empty air and pull on the string of images that formed that dream, an uneven scrap of black detached itself from the rest of the black in the room and fluttered through my peripheral sight. I realized the problem. It was a bat.

I scooped up the cat and she scratched me, so I wasn't gentle when I tossed her into the bathroom and shut her in. Then I felt bad for being rough, so I slipped a treat under the door.

The bat was clinging to where the wall and ceiling met, still as a dusty doorknob. I went to the living room to think about what to do, but all my attempts to invent a solution morphed into dull imaginations of failure. And all I could think about was how there was a bat in my house, and how I couldn't get it out. I was tired and still drunk and I'd never gotten a bat out of a house before. I didn't think I could.

I wanted to go to sleep and wake up and have the bat be gone, which is exactly what I would have tried, if it wasn't for my cat, who was pawing at the door and moaning a pathetic and complicated cry that would not let me ignore that, sooner or later, that bat and I would be forced to measure the consequence of each other's existence.

So I got a bucket and a piece of cardboard and a hammer, and I climbed the dresser in the corner where the bat was perched.

Slow and careful as hell, I put the bucket over the bat. I slipped the cardboard between the bucket and the wall, and when the bat fell into the bucket, it might as well have been a rolled up sock.

"Is it asleep?" I thought. "Is it dead?"

Then came the fight.

The bat thrashed and I pushed the bucket, desperately trying to maintain a seal between it and the wall. A clawy hand punched through an imperceptible gap, followed by a prying wing, followed by a hog-nosed, spiky toothed head, snapping wildly against the bucket's plastic rim, desperate to sink a bite into something that mattered more than itself.

The bat's neck worked its way beneath the bucket's rim. I closed my eyes and pushed to break its neck, and I didn't open my eyes until I heard the satisfying crack, and when I did I saw half a half-broke body and two wings.

I took a swing with the hammer, but fear weakened my commitment, and I missed the head and hit a wing. Cardboard, bucket, and bat fell to the ground. I watched the bat scramble across the cardboard with a wing that looked like a broken umbrella.

It looked me and screamed.

The cry of that bat joined the moaning of my cat in a chorus so disgusting and human that I could not have it. I pounced on the bat and swung against its head and wings until the hammer was the only thing that moved and the only sound was the muddy thud of metal against meat.

I scooped up the stuff and tossed it out the window, and then I cleaned the carpet, and then I let the cat out of the bathroom, and she darted to where I'd killed the bat and rolled in the carpet, scratching and licking the stain.

Seconds later I knelt by my bathtub, using the hottest water my pipes could imagine to rinse the blood and skin off the hammer's head. I picked up the bucket and plucked a tuft of fur from handle. I balled it in my palm. It was warm and soft as hell. That's when I knew that I'd call Ray

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and take him up on his lunch. I knew that, sooner or later, it was going to be me and Ray.

When I picked him up, he was wearing the "Eat Me" T-shirt again. He slid into the passenger seat, and my car suddenly smelled like a sink-full of dirty dishes. Ray, I realized, hadn't changed his clothes since I'd seen him last. He hadn't shaved, either, and his bleach-white bristles jutted from a patchy field of brown and red. He had a set of directions to the banquet hall. They'd been done up on the internet, so I asked him if he'd bought a computer. He told me no; he told me that he'd had the bank print the directions out for him.

"Listen," he said. "I'm hung over. I'm sleeping while we drive, if it's all right with you."

He grabbed my sunglasses from the cup holder and stuck them on his face, slammed his seat back, crossed his arms over his chest, and, as far as I could tell, he instantly fell asleep.

I hadn't had a reason to use the highway in a long time, and it felt good to get out of town, even if it was only for one part of a single day. I tuned the radio to a "We Play Everything" station, and, in the hour it took to get to the suburbs, they played the same song three times.

I slowed to a stop in a long line of cars, all of us waiting for a light to turn green.

"Wake up," I said. "We're in the 'burbs."

Ray sat up. He pointed at a house-sized cloud of construction dust as it rolled between the Hummers parked in a dealership's lot. He barely cranked his window up in time, giddy as dust sprinkled the roof and hood.

The banquet hall looked like a Wal-Mart. As soon as I found a parking spot, Ray shot towards the front doors, and I felt like an idiot jogging after him. When I caught up, he was looking at a player piano in the lobby. It was surrounded by an uneven oval of velvet museum rope. "This is what they do in the movies," he said. "This is the real deal, dude." But it was not a player piano in the term's purest sense, since the music came from a CD player whose chord ran from inside the piano to the wall. And, though I'm no Mozart, I'm pretty sure that the instrument on the recording wasn't even a piano.

A hostess said Gentlemen-can-I-help-you.

Ray took the invitation from his jeans. "We're here for a business opportunity," he said, slow and big as hell. She told us where to go, which was to a set of doors with a sign that said "Welcome Entrepreneurs," and a much larger sign beneath it that read, "Lunch will be served after the presentation."

Ray looked at that second sign, and then he looked at me, and I could see the hesitation bubble in the blood in his cheeks.

I already had my hand on the handle of the door.

"Wait," he said. "Hold up. You're right."

"What."

"This is a scam."

"Actually..."

"You know what we could do? We could check this town out. Check out some stores. Hit a bar."

"Maybe. Scam? What. Because we have to wait for food?" I cracked the door in a way that was ever so slight. "Doesn't seem like a scam to me. It makes sense. How could people listen to a

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goddamn business opportunity if they're eating free food? Seriously."

"You're right," said Ray, only I could tell that he knew that I wasn't, and that he only wanted me to be. He slapped my hand away from the handle and sprung through both doors, and I realized that it was all one big scam stacked up against Ray, and that I was as big a part of it as anything else.

But I didn't want to go home. I'd driven all that way, and I was looking forward to lunch. I figured that, for once in my life, I'd do something for my own goddamn self.

So I followed him in, and the room was more crowded than I expected, and the crowd was predictably geriatric. Ray chose the least populated table, and we sat down next to each other, separated by a couple of chairs on each side from an elderly woman in a purple blouse and guy with a head like the hump on the back of a bull.

The woman pulled her purse close and said, "Have you eaten here before?"

"Nope."

"The rolls are excellent. That's what this place is famous for. Their rolls."

We started doing what everyone else in the room was doing: staring at the front of the room with a half-bored sense of anticipation and discomfort.

Music piped through speakers somewhere in the walls or ceiling, so quiet that it felt like it was coming from inside my head. I identified the source as the same "We Play Everything" station that we'd listened to during the drive, and just when I was going to nudge Ray and tell him, a guy came in with a crate of shrink-wrapped binders and started passing them out.

This got everyone excited, and we twisted around in our chairs in order to give him a better look. He was stopping by each person, handing them a binder and saying things like: "Compliments of the seminar."

And, if someone asked, he'd say: "This is a business organizer valued at over \$40.00. A complimentary gift for you."

"No thanks," I said.

He put his hand on my shoulder, and I was surprised by how much I liked it there. "Complimentary," he said. He leaned close. Breath like a bug bomb.

"I don't have a use for it," I said. "But thanks."

"He wants one," sighed Ray. "Give it." And after the guy left our table Ray rolled his eyes as he grabbed my binder and stacked it on top of his. He put them both on his lap. "You drive me nuts," he said.

"I didn't think you'd want two," I said.

"This is a real fucking business lunch, man. Show some goddamn respect." He hugged the binders to his body and turned towards the stage.

Eventually the guy made his way to the front of the room, where he set up a laptop and clipped an unnecessary microphone to his collar. He gave one of his shoes a kick and then he said:

"Good afternoon!"

We clapped.

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He explained that he wanted to help us discover an unbelievable opportunity.

Ray barked "Opportunity!" in a voice that was serious and loud and that sounded drunk. He was leaning so far forward that his chin almost touched his knees, his skin pulled over his face like saran wrap stretched over the lid of a too-large bowl. He was using the tips of his fingers to push the ends of his moustache into his mouth.

"That's right," the presenter said. "Opportunity."

Cellophane crinkled as someone unwrapped their binder.

"The opportunity I have for you is simple, clear, and absolutely real."

Ray squeaked and punched himself in the knee. Hard. Nobody looked.

"I have a simple way to take what money you already have, or even no money at all, and use it to multiply your yearly income by thousands. And, if you follow the steps I'm here to share with you, it will be the easiest thing you've ever done in your life."

Ray whispered loud. "See. See?"

The presenter showed us slides of dragon-shaped candles. Cheesy black-light posters. Poorly painted 6-inch Santa Claus figurines.

"I stock these windsocks for five dollars each. Do they sell for ten dollars? More. Twelve? That'd be an amazing profit, but still no. \$29.95! That's a profit of more than 200 percent, and they sell faster than I can have them shipped."

Ray was balling the tablecloth in his fist. "You should fucking thank me for this. You owe me."

The presenter nodded in silent agreement with Ray.

"Pick up the Wall Street Journal, and all you see is 'experts' talking about the 'online' economy. But what happened to Mom and Pop? Well, let me tell you, Mom and Pop have relocated to cyberspace." He projected an image of two luxury cars parked on tree-lined driveway, and one license plate said "Mom" and the other said "Pop," and he lowered his voice to a whisper and said, "let me tell you... Mom and Pop aren't doing so bad for themselves, either."

We clapped like crazy.

He'd show us how to make as much money as we cared to make, and even more. "It's the easiest thing you'll ever do in your life," he'd say. As he heaved words from those leathery lungs and pushed them into place, I felt my mind pressed gently forward by the current of his voice.

Every time I looked at Ray, the wider his grin, the more pinched his face, the smaller, the more like a boulder worn into sand by waves.

The presenter paused and looked at his computer. "Wait. There it is. Yup. It look's like a customer has shopped my virtual shelves and found something they want to buy."

He put his hands on his hips and gave the crowd a sweeping glance. "I just had an idea. Who here wants to see for themselves how easy it is to start making real money? Who wants to make a sale?"

Ray leapt onto the stage, flushed and heaving and I could hear his breath rattle in his chest.

"All right, buster. Just follow these 'complicated' directions and we'll have this done. See that box on the screen that says 'Complete Sale'?"

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Ray pointed.

"Click it."

Ray clicked. An invoice appeared on the screen.

"It's that easy," he said. "It's. That. Easy."

We applauded again. Ray jumped up and down and stuck out his tongue.

"With the click of one button, sir, you've just made me \$750. When was the last time you made almost one thousand dollars in a fraction of a second, and by, literally, lifting a single finger?"

Ray licked his lips and nodded.

"Do you think you can do this on your own?"

Ray nodded again.

"Do you think that you could turn your personal computer into a one-unit warehouse, shipping-center and mega-shopping-site?"

Ray nodded and slapped his belly with both hands. "Fuck right I do," he said.

And then Radical Ray popped like a dropped light bulb. He'd realized it. Ray didn't own a computer. He couldn't afford one. It'd be a long, long time before he could.

"Did you think that by this time tomorrow, you could..."

"Wait," Ray said. "Yeah. Tomorrow? What the fuck? Yeah."

The presenter, sensing a shift in mood, put a comforting hand on Ray's shoulder. Ray nervously batted it away. "Wait, dude. I gotta take a shit. Seriously." He hopped off the stage, scooped up his binders, and shot straight to the door. I didn't follow. I still wanted my lunch.

In a display of remarkable control, the presenter continued without so much as a stutter, and after a few more tries to get us to buy his "system," the waitresses came and asked us what we wanted to drink with lunch. I said Coke.

Somebody said: "I went to Jamaica, all they had to drink was Coke and Red Stripe Beer."

"Really?" said someone else.

"I hate Coke. So I had a good time. A darn good time!"

Then my Chicken Kiev came, and it was dried out and on a bed of tasteless rice, and the portions were way too small. After I cleaned my plate I figured that I could take a piss and then track down Ray.

But when I walked into the bathroom, there was Ray, leaning against the wall between the hand dryer and the garbage can, holding his binders close to his chest, eyes half open, head back, back straight. Just gone. Both faucets were running. Neither of us said a word.

So I took a piss and when I was washing my hands I watched him in the mirror the whole time. I ran my hands under the water for a long time. I don't know, though. Ray was staring right at me in that mirror. I didn't say anything. It would've been so weird.

I went out to the lobby. I looked at that player-piano, and, strangely, I realized the beauty that

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Ray had sensed in it when we first walked in. I appreciated it not as a piano, but as a piano emptied out: an object free of purpose and meaning. And as my eyes glided along its surfaces and curves, I recognized its heavy breast, its weight pushed down on its two front legs, like two massive arms that ended in hard-knuckled fists, its tapered rear lifted by short and thin back legs, and it was like an abstract statue of the original man, so polished that the reflection of the room was more real the room itself, and the blackness of that meaningless thing spread forever in every direction, exactly the way it was always supposed to be.

I looked up and I saw Ray, standing by the doors with a pack of cigarettes in his hand. He seemed recovered, or at least partially so. Enough for me, at least.

"Let's go," he said. "Let's blow out."

"Sure thing," I said. "Best idea all day."

I wonder if I had a spring in my step as I followed him out the door and towards the car: It wonder if it was obvious that I was having the best time of my goddamn life.

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**Carl Fuerst's** fiction has appeared in *Farmhouse* magazine, and he has forthcoming work in *Our Stories*. He is the author the novel *Killswitch*, and readings of some of his stories can be heard at his blog, *Break Room Stories* ([www.breakroomstories.blogspot.com](http://www.breakroomstories.blogspot.com)). He received a B.A. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, an M.A. in Literature from Northern Illinois University, and is working towards a PhD in Literature from the same institution. He is currently a technical writer for a software company in Madison, Wisconsin.