

Free Time

by Jesse Jarnow

The desk calendar was brilliant, unused. The problems with it didn't begin until March. Bingham had inherited it from a neighbor who'd moved out just before the holidays and left behind a box of books he didn't feel like lugging down the condo stairs and to Colorado. Mostly, they were about physics and the paranormal. Bingham planned to put the others in a milk crate and get whatever he could in store credit at the used book shop, but what would they want from a six-year old desk calendar, no matter its abstractly beautiful illustrations, its gently textured binding, its practically handcrafted pages that smelled vaguely of beach?

Bingham left the calendar on the kitchen island as the holidays progressed through a series of parties and innuendoes. Occasionally, before pouring his cereal, he picked it up and held it, careful not to get any of the powdered sugar on its pages. Once, it only barely eluded a spray of tamarind pulp as he tried the tart fruit in his juicer. His sky blue Flexflar jogging suit, a gift from his fitness-included uncle Mark in Tampa, was not as lucky. Despite its shiny surface, or perhaps because of it, the fruit-meat bonded with the Flexflar. Bingham tried to remove it with hot water, but the Flexflar didn't respond well to that, either, and it created a lump in the surface. From then on, when he ran, Bingham could feel a slight abnormality in his left thigh, a disruption in the field of the pants' ultra-modern aerodynamics. At least, Bingham thought he noticed it.

He resolved that the desk calendar should not suffer in the same way. Bingham knew he could simply move it to another spot in the house, but that was no good, either. He felt protectiveness towards the book, and wondered if he might be able to use it. After all, the year was young. On some calendars, he reasoned, the day of the week wasn't displayed so prominently. Maybe he wouldn't get confused.

Upon having this thought, he paused the TiVo and stepped into the kitchen nook to look closely at the gleaming, empty date pages for the first time. As it turned out, not only were the days of the week large, they were absolutely perfect, exactly big enough to be seen from a glance, appreciated in the arc of a Monday-Friday workweek. Written in a friendly font, Bingham even thought he detected a gradation between the colors, a subtle difference between the intense navy blue of Monday and the more effervescent Pepsi blue of Friday.

Well, Bingham thought, a broken clock is right twice a day, before remembering he wasn't dealing with a clock at all. At the very least, he knew, even an off-calendar would be right once every few years, so this one would eventually be useful, despite the date on the cover. He could calculate its date of usefulness. It was currently Saturday the 12th. He flipped the book open, thumbed past a variety of the elegant supplementary features the publishers thought to include--charts on how to fold paper and tie knots, seasonal star maps, and several pages of abstract art--and arrived at January. Sure enough, there it was: Saturday the 12th. Bingham could use it after all. He felt a monumental lifting. He left the calendar on the table overnight, satisfied he'd found its purpose.

The next morning, Bingham skipped his run, and sat in the kitchen in his silk boxers. He carefully drank a glass of starfruit juice, his hand lazing for a moment in a puddle of light landing on the table-island in the middle of the kitchen's vast and practically self-polishing hardwood floor. When he finished, he put the glass in the sink, wiped the counter with a four-ply towel, and placed the calendar-book in front of him.

The house was quiet. Bingham sometimes wondered if he had too much room there, by himself, but he wanted Bethy and Ray-Ray to be able to come visit. Maybe even, someday, their kids. He would

never get sick of the view from the living room, he thought, of the small westward-looking parcel of lush wilderness formed by the comb-like layout of the housing development. From above, where the roads spiraled into form, the green would surely just be a tiny patch, no more than 30 feet deep, but it encompassed the entirety of Bingham's view. To his eyes, it could have extended on infinitely, like a diorama in a natural history museum implying untold spaces behind it.

Bingham used a blue pen to fill in the birthdays: Ray-Ray (April 27th) and Bethy (August 12th), of course, and Uncle Mark (July 19th), too. He copied other birthdays out of the previous year's calendar--Steve-O (February 2nd), Sunny (March 1st), Clara (December 9th)--and several others he knew that he would never call. He entered his other appointments: the alternate Wednesday meetings with Dr. Gowanlee at the office in the mini-mall (1/16, 1/30, 2/13), an oil change (1/19), dates to redirect settlement checks to the Prentice School (1/20, 1/30).

He could drop-off the latter on the way to the mini-mall. The rest of the dates were blank, vast unsettled tracts of white. In Bingham's mind, the lines of the calendar subdivided them like an ever-expanding network of roads. These were manageable parcels, Bingham thought, and he saw networks of fiber-optic cables curling through the blank heartland, tentacles looking to connect and make meaningful other nodes of experience. Soon, it was time to go to work. Bingham thought for a minute if he should fill in "work" everyday, but knew quickly that was redundant. It was an assumption of the geography, like bedrock or plumbing. The book stayed behind on the table when he left.

He backed the Lexus out of the driveway and through the development. Rounding a curve, he briefly caught sight of a small prism in the arc of a sprinkler. His house was in the southwestern most quadrant of the development, furthest from the highway.

Bingham had picked this intentionally. He wanted his new surroundings to emphasize a lack of hurry. It had only taken him a week for the route from his house to the access road to become nothing more than a muscular tic in his wrists as he maneuvered the car through the curves, as if the vehicle were stable and the ground pulled from behind him on a conveyor belt, the houses on either side of him sliding past.

Bingham only occasionally fretted about his lack of interest in working at the printer supply company. He didn't really need to work, but he enjoyed the routine of it. He was good at the job, besides: a slightly simpler version of the catalogue editing he'd performed since high school for his father, and later for luggage manufacturers and a shoe distributor. Like the Flaming Oak development where he lived, the third-floor warehouse office was a similar attempt to subdivide a functionally infinite space. Moving through it required no expenditure of energy, and his colleagues slid by, his mouth moving muscularly, repeating jokes from Letterman or (with Jerald, the intern with the Grateful Dead sticker on his car) Jon Stewart. Then, with a filled coffee mug, he was in his cubicle, which-minus bathroom breaks--he didn't leave until close. The days of January and February stretched on like this, as white as ever, with no help from the desk calendar and Bingham more or less forgot about it.

In his house full of gifts, Bingham watched the season. There'd been no snow in December. There were one or two dustings in January, but when a front arrived during the last week of February, Bingham felt that the change was upon him. The morning after the dreadful Leap Year party at the office, Bingham stepped into the living room with a distant hangover that hovered like the omnipresent jungle sound effects at the Cocoa Bean Rainforest Grill. The window to the wilderness in his living room was whited out, and Bingham felt himself in the world of the calendar, of pure possibility.

Despite the mild hangover, Bingham carried some of the boxes he'd received from his family into the living room. They'd been arriving continuously since he did, unlimited by formally marked holidays, as if they were things he'd had left behind by mistake. Some, he'd taken to (the Flexflar suit, the juicer), more he'd put in the spare room he'd designated for Ray-Ray. Assembled on the living room floor to the north of the kitchen island, in the maw of the whited-out window, he looked at them massed before him, like some kind of inanimate army.

There were over 30 objects in front of him including an unassembled Stretchumatic exercise apparatus (from Uncle Mark), an internet-enabled digital safe (Aunt Maria), a case of Focolate organic chocolate syrup with a proprietary blend of aphrodisiac-like herbs from Colorado (also Aunt Maria, with a Valentine's Day card), a laptop micro-station (he couldn't remember where that came from), and--finally--the box of used books he'd inherited with the desk calendar.

Bingham left aisles between the objects, and he marched slowly through them, weighing out the possibilities of lives that included all of them. How would the Stretchumatic fill up the whiteness? What past could he discover through the digital picture converter? The change was inherent in one of the objects, Bingham thought. The right one would offer... what? He felt himself brought to the edge of a precipice, as if he'd finally found the far end of the woods outside the window. In the same way he tried not to think of the infinity of death, Bingham tried hard not to think of his free time as the absence of Ray-Ray and Bethy, though he occasionally couldn't help it.

On those occasions, Bingham tried to remember the songs his mother sang him and sang them among the empty house. They were lullabies like any other he'd thought when he was a child, no reason to suspect any of his classmates from hearing anything else from

their own mothers at bedtime. Without much other music in his house growing up (his father preferred iron silence), it was some years before Bingham encountered any of the songs again. One, which he found out was called "Lonesome Town," he heard at a bar in college. It was a syrupy pop number from the '50s, though--like the others--contained the basic seed of country & western. Despite the discovery, Bingham never acquired recordings of any of them, preferring his memory's mutations. It was "Lonesome Town" that Bingham sang as it snowed, and he eventually picked the digital picture converter.

Several days later, he went to the mall for his pre-work appointment that Dr. Gowanlee had rescheduled due to a Las Vegas junket provided by the health care company for whom he worked. The secretary was surprised to see him.

"Mr. Laurence," she smiled politely, "our scheduling system doesn't have you listed for today," she told him. She pecked at the keyboard without looking away from Bingham, only glancing down after she hit 'enter.' "Yes," she said. "We have you for tomorrow. This time tomorrow, yes."

Bingham nodded, though he was sure he'd written it down properly. "Tomorrow, yes," he repeated. As he turned to go, he nearly bumped into an attractive blonde woman who was entering the office's welcoming area with a toddler in overalls walking unsteadily at her side. She smiled at Bingham as he passed her.

"I like your hat," she said of Bingham's fedora, which he'd inherited from his father. "Very cub reporter." She moved past Bingham to the secretary's desk. Putting the hat on that morning was a whim, and he was glad she noticed, he thought, as he wended across the vast parking lot. As he drove to the office, he realized that her compliment was exactly the opposite of why Bingham wore the hat to begin with, which was to feel like an adult. It was the hat he'd

worn, even, the day that he and Linda went visiting for the house, in the development near Decatur.

"Oh, Bling," she'd sighed when they saw the second floor, calling him by the name that would cripple him repeatedly, daily, after Linda's death, when the word entered television's daily vocabulary. For her, it'd been a fusion of "Bingham" and "Linda," a phrase of contentment. "I love it," she said. "Loveitloveitloveitloveit." Bingham wondered for a second about whether or not she would have loved any of the identical units just as much, but she put her arm around his waist, he instantly saw what she meant, their shared possessions filling the rooms in flickering high-speed auto-animation, in a way relative the specific view from those specific windows. All that information in one hug, transferred osmosis-like through her fleshly tentacle.

To Bingham, that was the feeling of bling, right there, and every time he heard the word, it was like Linda's invisible tentacled body was being tortured somewhere, twisted and water-boarded by some horrible organization producers weren't allowed to report within the limits of cable news, as if they were trying to get her to say it, their private word. Every time he heard it, it was one more knot. He'd worn the hat to look at houses, to think that he was like his late father, responsible in every way, understanding the ins and outs of the real estate market, of interest rates and hedge funds and sub-prime mortgages and the IRS, leaving Bingham and his siblings with enough money to never have to work again.

But the woman at Dr. Gowanlee's office had reset its meaning, at least temporarily: he was a cub reporter. Bingham was okay with that. If he was a cub reporter, it meant he wasn't Bingham. All day at work, he thought about the type of decisions a cub reporter might make: he would probably be more excited about the Laserbond Tri-Toner than Bingham was, maybe unable to suppress the excitement into anything less than three giant exclamation marks at the end of

the product name. As a result, the day went slower, Bingham had to think about what he was doing, but he was more than okay with that. He even found himself trying out a new posture, physically leaning into his work as an excited cubbie might. By mid-afternoon, he could feel the hints of an oncoming charley horse in his leg. He got up to take a stroll around the perimeter of the office.

Jerald the intern was standing in the northwest corner of office, a little-used corner of file cabinets. "Bingham, hi," he said.

"Hello, Jerald."

"What'cha doing over here?"

"Pardon?"

Jerald laughed. "I hang out over here a lot. It's dark. I like it. Just never seen you in this part of the office." Bingham noticed that it was, in fact, darker, one florescent nearly blocked by a teetering tower of probably-empty cardboard boxes, the other dimmed slightly from the other 144 in the office, like a disconcertingly discolored eye. After a moment, though, Bingham found it pleasing.

"Just going for a walk, I guess," Bingham said.

"Good," Jerald said menacingly and moving towards Bingham, "'cause I don't want'cha fuckin' with mah territory, otherwise Imma fuckin' kick your nutsack in, bitchslut, y'understand?"

Bingham did not.

Jerald smiled. "Just kidding, dude."

Bingham went back to his desk.

The next day, Bingham went back to Dr. Gowanlee's for his now re-scheduled appointment. He half-hoped that he'd run into the woman again, but that was silly: she'd had her appointment the day before. Except for the secretary, though, Dr. Gowanlee was the only person Bingham spoke with. The roadways peeled back and Bingham floated through the mall, past the cool air of the fountain-amplified atrium, around the perimeter of the food court's Congress of Nations, up a silent escalator, and into the glorious sunlight filtered through the arched windows above the third floor northwest corridor that spilled over the sleek benches as if they were church pews. People moved around him expectantly, and Bingham moved among them. And with Dr. Gowanlee, as usual, Bingham did not feel as if he was speaking, only offering responses to the state-appointed doctor's proddings, except once, when Bingham misheard him.

"Did you try to stop the spying?" Gowanlee asked him.

"I never spied," Bingham said, proud that he could offer the Doctor, in his glittering office, with an authoritative answer.

"No, Bingham, *buying*. When did the buying of the house start to become repellant? To you?" And then Bingham tuned out again, back into the muted, looped strip he pulled his answers from.

"No," he heard himself saying, "I just let us stay there, all of us, even though I knew we shouldn't have." Occasionally, when Bingham listened to himself, he sounded like a homeowner being interviewed on the local news, maybe picked up for syndication if he didn't suspect that what had happened to him and his family in the Sunnyvale development had already happened in a dozen, maybe several dozen, developments around the country, had already happened a dozen times over and he'd never read about it, missed the paper that day -- just part of the organic process of developments, like the universal behavior of beehives. Necessary. And then he would slip right back into the loop, the Doctor part of a

different system entirely.

Even his more recent actions, Bingham thought, came from the hive. He was merely acting as his forerunners at the company might act at the Christmas party, as his eventual replacements might act. As if to confirm this, nobody at the office had suggested to him that anything remotely abnormal or untoward had occurred in the conference room, there, with Marlene, the acquisitions manager. Jerald had given him a ribbing, literally, but that was the only post-Christmas acknowledgment.

"Yes," Bingham had told Dr. Gowanlee, "I've been sexually active," thinking of Marlene's dress thrown over the back of the Duotech office chair and entangled in the intricate system of levers that made the Duotech one of the most nuanced and adjustable chairs on the market, thinking of her eyes closed practically to slits, and what he assumed was a smile on her mouth. But even that, too, had become part of the microfilm, something that could pass him by in an instant if he wasn't careful.

The next appointment that Bingham bungled came over the weekend. He'd finally called a used bookstore--*the* used bookstore--about the books he'd inherited from the neighbor. "Sure," the man said. "Come on by. I'm here all day on Saturdays."

"How about Saturday the 9th?"

"Sure, the 9th. It's a Saturday, ain't it?"

"Okay," Bingham repeated. "Saturday the 9th." Except, as Bingham found, the bookstore was closed. He pressed his face up against the smudged glass and peered down the aisles. He squinted into the darkness and the light provided by a dim exit sign in the back and tried to make out anybody moving inside. He couldn't. Bingham felt an anger stirring. He'd left his cell phone at home. He only had it in

case of emergencies, but what trouble could possibly befall him en route to a used bookstore? He wanted to call the owner and unload, to tell him that he was a very busy man and that the owner shouldn't make appointments he didn't intend to keep. After all, it was two in the goddamn afternoon, and Bingham knew the used book business wasn't booming, what with the internet and all, and what respect should Bingham have for a man who clearly didn't respect his own business.

At first, Bingham tried to find a payphone, to call the man. He stalked down the block, stewing over what he might say. Passing the open door of a florist, he caught whiff of the flowers' syrup, pushed out to the street on a column of hothouse air. In the cold March, the smell enveloped him for a second, and he imagined a heat map showing him in the middle of a jetstream of color and warmth as it made its way out the florist's door, up into the sky, like a rainbow reversed. The buoyancy of this image stayed with him for the rest of the day. He found himself smelling his environments, mapping localized odor maps in his head, like systems of prevailing winds.

At home, carrying the first load of books back up the stairs--an enclosed tunnel of dense must--he figured out where he must be going wrong: the desk calendar. It was off by one day after all, beginning March 1st. He had forgotten to calculate for the Leap Year. He put the box down on the kitchen island, and checked the calendar, which had taken over a position at its center, replacing a perpetually empty fruit bowl that Bingham now converted for popcorn usage. Indeed, he'd followed the gradated days-of-the-week, falling prey to the color-coded listings.

Bingham went back downstairs for the second box of books, half-inhaling the stairway's must. For a half-second, Bingham thought of the mold and froze. The funny thing about the mold--if anything funny could be said of the situation--is that the mold didn't smell like anything at all, which is partially why Bingham didn't think of it

again until it was too late. The other reason is that Bingham was a sucker. He'd taken it for something else entirely.

The real estate agent had sold them on the progressive scientific virtues of the house, the Azek trimboards on the back deck that would never need maintenance, the wired-in wireless network, the Lego-like bricking on the roof so one could install Christmas lights without fear of falling. For all of these features, Bingham had studied the mold in the crawl space under the strong beam of his new flashlight and decided it was some kind of futuristic marbling process, perhaps related to the house's insulation. Bingham had never told Dr. Gowanlee about the mold. As much as he missed Ray-Ray and Bethy and Linda and their life together, he missed the house, too, and all of its features. Sometimes, he even missed the mold, which was just as much a part of life in the house as they were.

From then on, he decided to continue using the desk calendar. He would write the dates down correctly. An appointment on April 23rd (a quarterly visit to check for any residual mold damage in his own lungs) would be written down as April 23rd, but observed first on the Tuesday the calendar said it was, as opposed to the Wednesday it actually was. If the doctor's office could reschedule him within the next 24 hours, Bingham would return at the correct time. If it were 48 hours or more later, they would suffer the whim of the book. In this way, he would always be true to himself.

Remembering the flowers and his day of the cubbie, Bingham knew that if he didn't keep the off-dated appointments, he would spend those days imagining what coincidences might have been. Bingham could not abide by this double life, of living in the shadow of spontaneity. Besides, it would give him something to do. Perhaps he could even untangle the coincidences like the time in college he tried to chart his dreams on pieces of paper attached with Scotch tape. (Now that there were workflow programs, he realized he could

make such a chart on his laptop, possibly even a Powerpoint presentation.) Bingham would have to be on the look out for such convergences.

After the malarkey at the bookstore, Bingham settled in with the Sunday newspaper. Even with every world event being piped in moment by moment (a suicide-bombing in Beirut, the President's heated remarks in a SkyMiles Captain's club lounge at a Milwaukee airport terminal) and endless color stories pumped through to meet the massive expanse of bandwidth (orphan boys' baseball squads in the Dominican Republic, a new New Wave cinema out of the Crimean tundra), Bingham was happy to know that everything could still be condensed to a pile of headlines that would read like any newspaper since Victorian times, filled with violent tribal disputes, worried people in the money markets, and popular heroes. He also liked the comics, and woke up with them on his chest just after midnight. He made a turkey sandwich with olive oil and a little bit of Parmesan and ate it. When he was done, he took off his pants and fell into bed.

As Bingham was in the throes of his book, spring erupted. Just as he'd planned, whenever he followed the miswritten dates, life emerged around him. It was as if the book had finally unlocked it. For the first time since he'd moved, he felt that he wasn't merely leaning on an older version of his life, that he was actually creating something anew. At the post office, a day late in mailing the allowance money for Ray-Ray and Bethy's special school, he met a woman named Joanne, herself single after a terrible accident. Joanne was spritely and blonde.

"Every Sunday, I play Magick," she told Bingham as they waited for the clerk. "I go so I can mack on the kid who works at the comics shop." She giggled. "No, I don't," she said. "I just go because it's, you know, fun to do that. Play cards." Still, Bingham felt a tinge of jealousy and asked her out for a drink. Though he questioned his

motivations, it felt entirely wholesome. Perhaps he would even tell Dr. Gowanlee about her.

At the office, Bingham felt refreshed. Even as he navigated the endless automated phone systems in some of the distributor's offices in other states, he felt a sense of purpose. He imagined them as hallways through which he was passing, pressing '4' to go down one fork, '3' to go down another, the walls decorated with tapestries and portraiture of the company's founders as if they were medieval barons. He didn't feel more or less productive. He briefly contemplated using the datebook to manage his work-related appointments, but decided against it. This book was for him, not them. Nonetheless, he found himself more alive during business hours. It was not that he enjoyed his job more, but became more conscious of himself as blood flowing through the company's veins, moving through various arteries and organs. He loved the springtime. Bingham felt he was everywhere at once.

It was the aphrodisiac-laced chocolates that finally tripped him up, in mid-May. He'd eaten one of the Caramel Ice-Swirl Pheromone Enhancers, savoring the ribbon of minty white chocolate, before a date with Joanne. Throughout their dinner at the Italian restaurant, Bingham could feel something, as if his pores were opening up over localized parts of his body -- first, under his left thigh, later on the small of neck. The evening was not unpleasant. When Bingham dropped her off, she kissed him hard, pushing him up against his car. Bingham felt his stomach rumble, though it normalized quickly. His arm went around her back. She pressed into him and he could feel her breasts press against his chest, as we went erect against her thigh. She bit his lip as she pulled away. "Thank you for a lovely ev-uh-ning, Mr. Bingham-sir," she said in a mock Southern accent, kissed him on the cheek, and went inside.

As Bingham was getting ready for bed, his digestive system imploded, and he spent a hallucinatory night between the bathroom,

where he read the same Far Side caption over and over, and his bed, where he lay in a sweaty non-sleep. As he did, he felt the pores opening and closing again, as if they were tiny mouths gasping for air and being drowned in his salty perspiration. The next day, he received the second letter from Felicity Harrison, the Prentice School's Facilitator for Residential Services.

Like the first, it was curt but respectful. It informed him that it was deemed best for Bethy and Ray-Ray to spend the summer remaining on in the school's adorable cottages modeled on a German village, nestled on their emerald campus, though Bingham was welcome (and encouraged!) to visit for Ray-Ray's birthday in June. He had visited them the previous year under the same circumstances and he recalled the trip like a silent movie, the children playing on the campus's expanse of empty lawn.

When Bingham came to, it was with a jerk. He was slumped on the kitchen-island, the letter in his hand. He couldn't tell if he'd passed out suddenly and the shock of his head on the hardwood had woken him, or if he'd simply put his head down and fallen asleep out of sheer exhaustion. He wrapped himself in a bedsheet and climbed onto the couch. He was clammy and cold. His stomach was totally devoid of food, and he knew he needed some sugar, but he lay on the couch and thought of Ray-Ray and Bethy some more.

He'd never been a bad father, he didn't think. The longest he'd ever been away were for a series of quarterly one-week seminars in Kissimmee, Florida, where he stayed in a pink stucco hotel and ate fresh oranges. During those weeks, Linda would take the kids into her workroom and teach them to quilt. Upon his return, Bingham would inevitably be met with a new quilt, which would stay on the couch for a few days before being hung by Linda and the girls, with some ceremony, in the girls' playspace, which was actually a walk-in closet in the rear of Linda's quilting room--entered through the back of another closet, a fact which the girls' loved because it felt like a

secret door--and the point in the house closest to the mold.

The room was one of the house's selling points, Bingham and Linda assuming correctly that the girls would love it. It became their private club, Linda allowed in only occasionally (usually to hang quilts), and Bingham never. He intended to fix the room up, rig up a real light socket, or maybe even put some Christmas lights on a dimmer, but the girls seemed to like it as it was, with floor lamp in the corner and the walls covered with thickets of glow-in-the-dark stars, like deep space clusters in galaxies that burned with white intensity.

"It's so beautiful, Bling," Linda told him after one of his trips, when Ray-Ray and Bethy had permitted her to join them for a sleepover. "It's like being on another planet. You can almost see by the starlight. It's all green and wonderful." She ran her hand up to his shoulder and positioned her head in the crook of her neck and fell asleep. Bingham lay like that pleasantly for 15 minutes, watching the backlit virtual tick of the bedside alarm clock, before gently sliding his shoulder out so Linda's head landed on the pillow, and he could sleep, too.

When Bingham recovered his strength from the food poisoning, he went for a run. It was one of the first real days of spring. Bingham upended the usual loop of the housing development, exited out, and followed the road to the lake. He wasn't sure if it was manmade or not, sketched in the architects' renderings in glassy blue, or if it had slowly emerged there through a million-year deposit of water from the ever-eroding earth. The Flexflar suit responded well to the warm weather, its material yielding to the passing air like lace curtains.

If the lake was designed by human hand, it was a good one, the shoreline knotted with deep, unpredictable bends. Several times, the lakeshore wasn't amendable to a trail, so the path jutted into the woods. Another nice touch, Bingham thought, leaning into a faster

pace when the water wasn't in sight. Each time he came back into view of the lake, Bingham breathed deeply. In, out, in out, in out, in out. He thought about each sequence of inhalations and exhalations as a recitation. He smelled the spring air. He was on his knees somewhere, in a great cathedral. In out, in out. With a massive dome, like the Parthenon, big enough to accommodate the illusion of sky.

Sticking to his guns, Bingham decided to make the drive to the Prentice School a day early, in accordance with his calendar's recording of Ray-Ray's birthday as occurring on a Thursday. He made the hour-and-a-half drive with a smile, a box of books for Ray-Ray--some requested by her, more picked by Bingham--jostled in the back. It wasn't Bethy's birthday, but Bingham got her a case of nice watercolors. He listened to the radio on the way, a sports call-in show deriding the state of the local ballteam, just to have some voices in the car with him.

The secretary was surprised to see Bingham. "We don't have many visitors over the summer, Mr. Laurence," she told him, a tone of voice implying slow, long days. "It tends to allow our patients time with their loved ones, alone, without a reminder of the life of the rest of the campus. Please understand that," she said.

"I'm sorry," Bingham said. "It's my fault. I'll come back tomorrow."

"You have come all this way. It might be a bit before I can find them," she added. She looked around somewhat nervously. "It might be a little bit, maybe 20 minutes. Next to the parking lot, there is a small ante-garden, with a bench. If you'd like to wait there, I can bring the girls there when I find them."

"Sure," Bingham said.

He found the bench without a problem and sat for a minute. The

garden that extended out into the campus was lovely, a futuristic statement of tubular hedges and integrated fountainworks that looked lifted from a mall in Dubai. The plant-life, Bingham knew, was specially designed and bred to produce oxygen at an accelerated rate. It was the product of some benefactor far greater than himself, and one of the Prentice School's greatest attractions, its pure air counteracting the toxins that drifted across the landscape of the earth.

He wasn't a benefactor at all. He was here on the state's dime. Or, more technically, the dime of the BIPPP Corporation of Greenwalls, Tennessee, manufacturers of Warm-U-Rite dry wall, the killer of his wife and the destroyer of his children. He wished he had a newspaper. Presently, Bingham heard voices coming towards him. He looked past a row of shrubs, which executed a deft turn like a pulse on a sine wave, and saw two people coming out one of the paths that spread deeper onto campus. They were adults. Even before Bingham could make out any more detail, he could tell that one, dressed in white, was a nurse and one, dressed in an earthier brown, was a patient. The patient was walking very slowly. As he got closer, Bingham realized that the man did not have a face. There was no double-take needed.

Bingham sat with his back against the hard bench back, right leg crossed over left, and had nowhere to go. Where the man's face should have been was pure burn. There was something resembling a mouth, and eyes, but that was all. There was nothing at like cartilage -- no nose, nor ears. Bingham was amazed how much detail he could make out with the man still some 20 feet down the path. Though he was stooped, Bingham could tell that the patient--in brown denim and a blue collared shirt--was tall, and generally good shape. He wondered how recently the man had befallen his fate, which had landed him without a face, and in the technologically rarified air of the campus of the Prentice School for Malignant Respiratory Ailments. Even the man's sneakers were nice, Bingham

saw, desperately looking for something to look at while the man walked by slowly. The man's arms were normal, untouched. Gradually, he passed, and Bingham looked deeply into the near distance, away from the man, as if he were watching for something specific, and had been before the man and his brown-haired, frumpish nurse came into his sight.

Presently, the girls arrived. Both wore flowered sundresses, their hair--blonde, like Linda's--pulled into ponytails. Obviously sisters. They were smiling, as they always were when he saw them, but Bingham felt himself rooted to the bench, as unable to speak to the girls as they were to him, their throats sealed in paralysis. Bethy sat down on the bench next to him and wrapped her arms around him. Ray-Ray stood, waiting her turn. Bingham looked meekly up at the secretary, half-expecting--as always--that she would hand him a receipt and make him sign for them. He'd had to sign for Linda, to identify the body, when the morgue was done with her. He'd been enraged. Who else would it be? She'd been at the hospital already for six weeks, her asthma-damaged lungs unable to take the insult of the mold Bingham noticed but never acknowledged. It was the last time he saw her. She wasn't smiling. But she wasn't not-smiling either.

Finally, Bingham stood. He took the girls' hands--Bethy on his left and Ray-Ray on his right--and walked into the oxygen-abetted garden. He would give them their books later. He loved the garden, loved it for what it did to his still-healthy body. There, his bloodstream enriched, he felt something inside him move to the side, like a drain being temporarily opened. "Hey ladies!" he said, and felt life turn cheerfully through his arms as he squeezed their palms. "What's going on?"

