

BUG MAN

Mindy Friddle

Winston had been sleeping in his cousin Harley's basement for ten days, pretending to study for the pest control exam. Harley needed help at We Wack'em. Winston needed a job and a place to stay—until his wife took him back, anyway.

Winston tried to be grateful about the arrangement. Most of the time, he managed to hide his growing panic. Tiffany had made it clear she wouldn't talk to him until he earned a steady paycheck. But his dizzy spells were getting worse. Like all the time.

"Pull over!" Winston yelled. If he hurred on his We Wack'em uniform, he'd have to wear it all day.

"Again?" Harley stubbed out his cigarette on the dashboard. The van lurched and slowed. Winston hung his head out of the van's window. His long, fine hair blew around. Gravel pinged. The van stopped.

"Jesus, what are you a dog?" Harley said. "Keep your tongue in."

"My throat's burning," Winston gasped. His heart was a snare drum. "Feels like I'm...dying."

"It's nothing." Harley shook out another cigarette. "Pesticides. Used to make me sick, too. You get used to them."

Winston hoped it *was* the pesticides. But these god-awful spells had started before he worked at We Wack'em, before he'd up and quit his job selling refrigerators, before Tiffany had stopped speaking to him.

"It was that class you took that brung all this trouble on us," Tiffany told him. "And that man put some crazy notions in your head—to just up and quit a good job and take off like that!"

Winston had taken off for the wilderness to figure out how to fight off the mire of day-to-day living before it sucked you down its black gullet. A week later, he'd come down from the mountains half-starved, penniless, chigger-bitten and fevered, with an ER bill he'd have to pay off in installments.

He'd come back to no job, no house, no wife.

Tiffany was right.

It was that class that ruined him. That book.

And that man named Thoreau started up Winston's spells.

Worse than the pesticides.

"You ready?" Harley asked. It wasn't a question.

Winston wanted to run across the highway and head for the pasture. Just take off. Leave his uniform wadded up in the crotch of a tree. Linger in the woods like a shade—no appointments, no schedule. His heart broke with the longing. But he'd already tried that.

"I'll be all right if I just set here a few minutes."

"No time. We got a schedule."

If you were on time for every single appointment for a month straight, corporate threw in a bonus.

Winston swallowed and looked down at his naked left hand. He'd pawned his wedding band the day before.

"Pest control is a man's game, son," Harley said. "So grow some."



Winston was still trying to figure out how to be tender-hearted and still be a bug man. But you just couldn't.

"Mrs. Gordon, here?" Harley whispered to Winston as they rang the doorbell. "SOL. It's time her quarterly treatment got upgraded to deluxe. Watch and learn."

Mrs. Gordan was another Sweet Old Lady, the third SOL that day. answered the door in a housecoat, cradling a snarling chihuahua no r than a squirrel. "Taco's highstrung, bless his heart." Mrs. Gordan led to her kitchen. "I got ants. Those itty bitty ones, going every which way. Can you boys do something about that?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Harley said. "We sure can."

Harley raised his nose, sniffing. He pushed aside the ceramic strawberry canisters. He crushed a small ant by the sink, licked his smudged finger, rolled his eyes as if he were judging a chili cook-off.

"Argentine." Harley sucked his teeth. "Yep. *Definitely* Argentine."

"Is that...bad?" Mrs. Gordon asked. She glanced at Winston, who stood silent, not even nodding. Customers pitied him, assuming he was a deaf mute or worse.

"Hoo boy. This is bad. Yes, ma'am," Harley said. "These ones are your scouters for the killer ants that come up through Mexico." Harley was laying it on thick. End-of-the-month quotas. "There's this new breed of killer fire ants now. Flesh eating. I heard of a woman down in Sumter. They ate her up like acid. Nothing left when they found her. Not even her cat."

"Oh, my word." Mrs. Gordon clutched Taco.

"Then you got your new species of termites. With snouts," Harley said.

"Snouts?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harley said. "And great big old wings. They can go through floorboards and drywall like *this*." Harley snapped his finger.

"You need to upgrade to the deluxe plan," Harley said.

"Deluxe plan?"

"Covers all of them, everything you've got," Harley said.

"Where do I sign?" Mrs. Gordon took out a pen.

"A smart choice, Mrs. Gordon."

◆

Tiffany dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. If taking her whole lunch hour to see a lawyer and sign all that paperwork wasn't bad enough, now her car was acting up. She nearly lost power at the red light and barely made it back to the Lorrick Manufacturing parking lot. She'd have to go in there to her desk and everyone would see her crying her eyes out, a bigger wreck than her car.

She had a good mind to call up Winston and cuss him out. Hadn't she warned him last summer about the old clunker? What kind of man didn't know how to fix a car for his wife? What kind of man took off to the mountain for an "experiment" so he could figure out how they could "really live?"

She would have made him drop out of that class he "accidentally" signed up for in a skinny minute, only he didn't tell her about it until it was too late for a refund. She had come across his tuition bill—balance paid in full—from the community college in the mail. Not one refrigeration class. No wiring or electricity. Just American Literature. And using their tax refund money to pay for it! He hadn't even acted surprised when she hollered at him. He'd looked relieved. He plunked down at the kitchen table—no dishes, no supper; she was that mad—and talked about desperate men having quiet lives, or something like that. Literature? It was the craziest thing. What was he thinking of?

"It's what he's thinking with," Tiffany's hairdresser, Carlie, told her. "And the sooner you admit it, hon, the better."

But Winston swore he wasn't fooling around on her, that he loved her, and said that's why he had to—Lord, she'd remember those words for the rest of her days—*know his own bone*. "See, you got to do what you love. Know your own bone. Gnaw at it and bury it and dig it up." He said that thing like it was holy, like something from Proverbs, but it was from that class. Tiffany had gone on the computer at work and found out that *Walden* was about a pilgrim who lived a long time ago on a pond in New England, a deadbeat who was sent to jail for not paying taxes.

Gnawing at bones is definitely a sexual reference, Carlie told her.

When Tiffany thought Winston was still up there alone on the mountain braving the elements and thinking about who knows what, she found out he was secretly staying with his cousin Harley Spenser. Harley! That disgusting toad who spent Fridays at Tips n' Tails stuffing Washingtons and Lincolns down the cleavages and cracks of every pole dancer he could get his pink pudgy hands on.

Well, her lawyer said they'd serve papers on him soon, and he'd know a thing or two all right. And then there would be a hearing, the lawyer said, and they'd be done with it.

Done with it.

A marriage, a husband, Winston—gone...just like that? *Done with it?* And she'd be alone. Sleeping single in a double bed. She'd have to get *out there*. Get gussied up just to go to the store. Bikini waxing even in the winter. On the market again at twenty-eight! She'd have to work forever as a temp at Lorrick Manufacturing. It made her tired just thinking about it.



"Three SOL deluxes by noon. Damn, I'm good. You hungry?"

"Not hardly," Winston said.

Harley turned on the radio, a sign he was growing weary of Winston's ailments. They pulled into the Big Clock, the only place in town that still had curb service.

"You scared those poor old ladies to death talking about migrating termites with snouts and wings."

"Wasn't that something?" Harley said.

"Why don't you save the Armageddon plan for the country club folks?"

"Armageddon? Damn, that's good, Winston. The Armageddon Spider. Yes. I might use that, Winston."

Winston sighed.

"Look, you want to get paid? You want Tiffany back?" Harley said.

"I used to get sick headaches after spraying, but nowadays I don't even notice. You can get used to anything."

Winston was scared he *would* get used to being a bug man.

"Gonna hit the can," Harley said. He always disappeared into the bathroom after lunch. "Hey, walk some, get some air, is my advice. We got a flea bombing in half an hour."

Harley lumbered across the parking lot, the newspaper sports section tucked discreetly under his arm, as if it were possible to do anything discreetly in a scarlet We Wack'em jumpsuit. The uniforms—stiff and garish and cheap—were designed to catch more eyes than bugs. Worse, with a wash or two, the jumpsuits faded to the saffron shade of prison overalls. It was only a matter of time before he and Harley were going to be mistaken for robbers as they emerged from some lady's crawl space, and since it was easier to get a gun than a drink in this town, the confusion might prove deadly.

Beware of uniforms. The vague sense of a line floated up to Winston, and he reached behind him and dug through the clutter in the back of the van—take-out bags, beer koozies, We Wack'em brochures—until he found his notebook. He flipped through the pages, and there it was, that line: *Beware of all enterprises that require a new set of clothes*—Walden, page 62. Winston rubbed his chest.



Tiffany had three minutes to get inside and back to her desk. She squinted into the car mirror as she reapplied mascara. Then she noticed the baby seat in the next car and she lost it again. Why had she listened to Winston when he told her they should wait to have kids until the time was right? Well, the time never had been right, and now she was going to end up without a husband or a kid. Every baby shower hurt like hell.

A sudden knock on the passenger car window startled her, and she lunged for her purse and fumbled for her pepper spray keychain. But it was just Charlie Fletcher standing there in his security guard uniform. He leaned down, his face softening when he saw her swollen eyes.

"I seen you hobbling down the road," he said after she rolled down the window. "Pop the hood. I'll take a look."

Charlie's round, shiny eyes and long front teeth gave him a nervous.

**The mass
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Damn.

**That had some
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rabbity look, but he was a gentleman, all right. As he fiddled around under the hood, she wondered if she could stand to kiss him. It sort of made her sick. She couldn't stand the thought of kissing her bald red-faced lawyer or the pimply-faced bagger at Publix, or Mr. Ray, the vice president of Lorrick Manufacturing, either. She'd probably forgotten how to kiss. You never had to worry about kissing when you were married.

"I tell you what," Charlie said. "Why don't you drive my Firebird home and I'll drop your car by when I get it running."

"Oh, that is so sweet. But I...I couldn't put you out like that."

"No trouble. I got my pick-up at the house. I don't mind driving it this week."



Harley's wife was on the warpath. "What did you do with it? Huh?" Winston could hear her carrying on up there in the kitchen. "We got bills to pay, in case you forgot."

Winston and Tiffany never fussed like that.

There was the sound of splintering china and heavy footsteps.

Winston and Tiffany never threw coffee mugs at each other, either.

So why was Winston sleeping in Harley's basement? Why was he spending his black lonely nights here—his ass itching from Harley's scratchy tweed sofa—studying pictures of larva until he dreamed about squirming grubs?

If he went back home too soon, if he still didn't have a clue how he could do what he loved—whatever *that* was— he'd be back at Ed's Appliances in no time learning to fix refrigerators, and having kids with Tiffany, trudging ahead like a blinkered plough horse.

"Dammit, Belinda," Harley yelled. "You're going to wake the kids."

Winston saw now how easy it was to end up with a stunted life, gray and chewed up as old gum. You had a house payment, an overdue light bill, a rent-to-own sofa, a gas-guzzling clunker, a big screen TV, and then you had to spend your days doing things you hated just to keep the things you no longer like. They didn't call it trappings for nothing. Ted, the teacher, had said that.

"Wake 'em up, then. I don't care. They need to see their daddy is a no count lazy ass bum."

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. The teacher had written that in big letters across the board the first night. *Ted*. He insisted they call him by his first name. Ted was thin as kindling, a middle-aged guy with bad posture. A beady-eyed sad sack. But those words jumped out, burned Winston like sparks. Ted's *quiet lives of desperation* talk gobbled up Winston's attention so much, he didn't bother to stand up and make his excuses about how he was in the wrong class, and how, as he later discovered, a computer screw-up had plunked him down in room H306 Humanities instead of room S306 Skills and Trades.

He left the classroom that first night feeling as if he could live a different life. The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. Damn. That had some sharp teeth.

"All right, all right! I'm going," Harley yelled.

"Hell, yes, you are!" Belinda said. The door opened, and Winston sat up with a start. Harley descended the basement staircase at breakneck speed. He was in boxers—bare-chested, big-bellied—a cartoon hippo.

"Ouch. Shit." Harley hit his head on the naked light bulb dangling from the low ceiling. The door slammed. Harley's sheepish gaze followed the sound of Belinda's fading footsteps crossing overhead.

"Porn again?" Winston asked.

"Nah. Casino dot com." Harley grinned. "Poker in the front, liquor in the back."

Winston hid his notebook under the We Wack'em study manual. Harley padded over to the ancient television. He glanced at Winston, who had moved to a sagging lawn chair beside the couch, trying to appear interested in a diagram of emerging termite larva.

"Jesus, Winston. How long you got to study on that? What are you, a retard?"

"I'm stuck on this part about the lifecycle. I don't really get it."

"Get it? There's nothing to get. Like it says: Egg hatches, larva eats, insect lays eggs then dies. Repeat."

"Yeah, I know. I just wonder...why. Like, what's the purpose?"

"Purpose? Ain't no purpose! They're *bugs*, you idiot. They eat, fuck, and die."

"Like us."

"Yeah, Einstein. Like us."

Harley collapsed on the sofa. A cloud of dust rose around him in the bruised light of the television. He put his bare feet on the old army trunk, aimed the remote, channel surfed.

"Reception is shit down here."

"Can I ask you something?" Winston said. "Do you love pest control?" "Look at that would you?" Harley said, ignoring him. A green blob hovered ominously over the weatherman's map. "Heavy thunderstorm warnings."

"Do you love being a bug man?" Winston asked, louder.

"I heard you the first time."

"I was just wondering if—"

"Love? *Nobody* loves pest control. Nobody loves working. It's Adam's curse. God a-mighty, Winston."

He flipped through the manual on his lap. *Insects that pupate in a cocoon must escape from it.*

"I was wondering if I could borrow the van tomorrow."

"For what?"

"I'm going to go talk to Tiffany."

All this pondering and pining away in Harley's unfinished basement made Winston miss Tiffany something awful. He'd have a paycheck tomorrow. Least there was that. If he could just talk to her.

"You know Tiffany's over at Lorrick now."

"What?"

"She's temping over there, Belinda says."

"But she's a cashier over at Wilson's."

"Naw. She's a temp in the office at Lorrick."

Harley turned the television off, yawned, and scratched his balls. "Guess I'll be sleeping down here with you."

Winston stood and gathered his backpack. "I don't mind sleeping in the van."

Harley stretched across the sofa, farted, and closed his eyes.
"Sut yourself."



"Try not to breathe this in," Harley told Winston the next morning. "Gives you limp dick."

Winston stepped away as Harley poured a sinister green liquid into a jug. "How do you know?"

"Believe me," Harley said. "I know."

Winston backed away. "Count me out, then."

"What you worried about? You ain't using yours anyway."

Harley was up to something.

He was souping up a new formula for bug bombs. They'd already gone to the Army Navy store to buy two old gas masks. Leaky, worthless gas masks, more for effect than effectiveness. Another one of Harley's schemes. To look like bad asses. Which pretty much explained his popping by the Firecracker Pit to load up on cherry bombs and sparklers. All because Sweet Creek Apartment's annual contract for pest treatment was up for renewal and the new management was balking about re-upping.

"Yes sir," Harley said, squinting at the Sweet Creek entrance. Sweet Creek is gonna sign with We Wackens all right. That's for damn sure."

Winston's eyes burned. He was groggy from a sleepless night at the inn. "I don't know about this."

"How many times I got to tell you, Winston? We're conspiring with the damn man. Remember, Sam? We got to stand out. Everyone can tell who's winning. Fire bombs and cherry bombs, that's genius."

He handed Winston a gas mask. "Here."

"That ain't going to do a thing for a lot of good and you know it."

Harley ignored him.

"The ain't got up a sweet deal like this one," Harley said. "Before we start on the negotiations, we're going to walk in the park. Just to show we mean business and show the man. That's where the little bug gets its start. Follow me."



But the pool was dry, closed for maintenance, the patio chairs stacked. Harley stood by the diving board, smoking and sulking, surveying the empty concrete. After giving him a few minutes to cool down, Winston asked, "What now?"

"Winston?" A voice rang out behind them. They both turned to watch a young woman approach. Pony-tailed, pasty and thin, more Harley's kind of girl.

"Are you Winston Court?"

"Yeah. That's me." Her hair was blue-black, out of a bottle. Her eyebrow was pierced. A Goth girl.

"I got a good memory for cute faces," she said. "Did you take an American Literature class with Ted?"

He nodded, his face reddening.

Harley patted down his pockets, looking for another cigarette. Winston hoped he wasn't staring a hole through the poor girl.

"Anyway..." She handed Winston an envelope. "Here."

"Thanks," he said, puzzled.

"I feel awful about this," she said. "They pay me fifty bucks for each one. It's just...I need the money."

Winston tore into the envelope. "I don't...what is this?" He shielded his eyes from the sunlight, the mica twinkling across the asphalt. The girl had broken into a run across the parking lot. Harley read over Winston's shoulder.

"You been served. Damn, son. That's cold. Not even a phone call to tell you, neither."

"Served?"

"Divorce papers."



"You sure were sweet to organize a get-together for me like this," Tiffany told Georgette, not for the first time. Probably the third. It was hard to remember after all the Sunset Slings. Georgette had insisted on giving Tiffany a ride so she could celebrate all she wanted. The other Lorricks employees who'd

toasted Tiffany had left. That they'd even dropped by the Shrimp Shack for Happy Hour to celebrate Tiffany's promotion was a shock until she figured out Georgette, as office manager, had tapped into the employee recreation fund to cover a few pitchers of beer and a basket of hushpuppies.

"I never even meant to work outside the home. And here I am an assistant inventory clerk. I just hope I don't let ya'll down when the rush season comes," Tiffany said. "I still got a lot to learn."



That afternoon at work Tiffany's lawyer had phoned to say they'd served papers on Winston, and told her to call the law if he showed up, because mad husbands were dangerous, he didn't care how inept they were. Soon after, Winston barged in at Lorricks, but he didn't get past the front desk. From the second story office window, Tiffany had watched Charlie Fletcher, relishing the rare opportunity to fulfill his security guard role, escort Winston from the building. Winston had come back later claiming he was there for pest control, but that hadn't fooled Charlie Fletcher, even though the We Wack'em van was idling across the parking lot.

All day, Tiffany's feelings about her imminent divorce came and went like the tides. Now, thanks to the Sunset Slings, she just wanted get the damn thing over with. Relief. That was new.

Georgette looked over at the bartender. "She'll take another."

"Oh, no, Georgette." Tiffany giggled. "I really shouldn't."

Winston's scarlet coveralls had been too short. Even from her office window two stories up, Tiffany could see his bare ankles, white and sad, above his sneakers. She knew he'd come there with some excuse about how it was all a big misunderstanding, him running off into the woods, and how he had himself a new job as a bug man.

"I got to make my own way now. Since I'm single again." Tiffany swallowed. Her eyes stung. "Oh, Lord, here comes the waterworks. I guess I better head home. We got work tomorrow."

"We're not going anywhere." Georgette pointed to the television monitor. "Flash flood warnings. We'll wait it out."

Tiffany stood hugging herself. She
was silent and that hurt the worst.
Winston wished she would holler at
him. He would have given anything
to have her light in to him good, the
way Belinda hollered at Harvey.

That settled it. Georgette was good about making decisions. She practically ran the Lorrick office. She supervised the receptionist, the secretaries, and just about everyone, except Mr. Ray, of course. It was no coincidence, Tiffany knew, that she'd been hired on from the temp pool the same week she went to see a divorce lawyer. Georgette had seen to that. Georgette liked her, she could tell. Maybe because Tiffany was friendly to Georgette even though the other girls at the office weren't. They said ugly things about Georgette because she was a real career girl from out of town, from some place in Indiana or Illinois or Idaho—one of those "I" states.

Georgette wasn't married, which explained why she was the only one who could stay out late at a bar on a Tuesday night and not have to go home and fix supper for a husband or tuck a kid into bed.

Three men came in and sat at one of the bar tables. In suits. A good sign. That meant they had jobs. Tiffany squinted in the dimness, trying to see if they wore wedding rings. She could hear a chorus in her head: You got to *get out there*, meet some fellows. *Get out there* like it's the wilderness. But she didn't want to *get out there*.

The bartender set down a fresh Sunset Sling. Tiffany nibbled the cherries off the plastic sword. She'd never had more than one Sunset Sling at the Shrimp Basket because Winston couldn't afford to pay for Surf 'n Turf and drinks, too.

"What are you mooning about now?" Georgette said.

"Oh, nothing. Just—the Shrimp Shack was special for me and Winston."

Tiffany looked up from her drink and met her own woozy eyes in the mirror above the rows of bottles. "He popped the question here. Got on his knees."

"Perfect," Georgette said without hesitation. "You can pick up your life right here where you left it."

"Oh. I never thought of it like that." Georgette had what Tiffany's daddy used to call *plain good sense*, a quality Winston sorely lacked. "I was a nineteen-year-old bride when I married Winston. Dumb as a rock."

"Winston. What kind of name is that?"

"Like the cigarette. His mama said she had to give up her *Winstons*

when she found out she was going to have him. The filterless ones, anyway.”

A peal of thunder shook the windows of the bar. The overhead lights flickered. They turned to watch the rain splattering the windows.



The hydrangea wept from the rain. Winston could make out the dripping blue blossom heads in the headlights. He'd bought that shrub for Tiffany back when they'd first moved in, and she'd planted it in the front yard with a rusty nail so it would bloom purple.

He drove past, killed the lights and parked out of sight. Now he just had to keep himself awake. In a few hours, Harley would notice the We Wack'em van was gone, and Tiffany might call the law if she saw Winston out here before he could talk to her. Winston yawned. It was almost five in the morning. He took some comfort knowing Tiffany was nearby, sound asleep in their bedroom. He was more than a little drowsy himself.

That's when he saw the strange car, parked in the side yard, right where Tiffany's car should be.

That woke him up.



Tiffany stepped out of one high heel, lost her balance and laughed. “Oops.” Georgette caught her. “Hold on.”

Tiffany held onto Georgette's shoulder and kicked off her other heel. It soared, hit the ceiling, clattered onto the kitchen linoleum, and gave Tiffany the giggles.

“Where do you keep your aspirin?”

“You sick?”

“It's for you, silly goose.”

“The bathroom cabinet,” Tiffany said.

Tiffany made her way to the bedroom where the ceiling spun like that ride at the state fair, the Bucket, where the floor dropped and you got mashed against the walls.

"Aw, honey, here," Georgette said. "Aspirin and water. Sit up, okay?"

Georgette helped her off the floor and into bed. Kissed her on the forehead and on the cheek and on the lips and on her neck, nibbles that tickled. Georgette had hard lips and a velvety mouth and soon there was a whimpery sigh, naughty and long, and Tiffany realized it was coming from her, she was the one who was moaning.

"Here, honey, arms up. Let's get you out of this dress."

"Yes," Tiffany said. "Yes yes yes."



The We Wack'em van held all manner of poisons, but it was Harley's special concoction Winston wanted. *Gives you limp dick*. Winston unscrewed the nozzle with the skull and crossbones and added a little more juice.

He got out of the van, his heart knocking in his chest. The strange car was a Firebird with orange flames painted on the sides. A man's car.

He crept around to the backyard and popped the lock on the flimsy screen door. He uncorked a bug bomb, tossed it into the kitchen. The fetid cloud swelled. He threw in a cherry bomb that rolled lazily in front of the refrigerator.

Then he hid behind the old white oak tree in the front yard just as Tiffany burst out of the door, coughing. He stepped out of the shadows.

"Winston? Oh, my God, Winston, the house is on fire." She fell into a coughing fit.

"No, it's not."

Tiffany was barefooted, wearing a wrinkled t-shirt. Her mascara-smudged face was stamped with sleep lines.

"There's smoke," she said. "It...*stinks*."

"Hell, yes."

Tiffany looked behind her at the gaping front door. The smoke had thinned to an acrid stench. He watched her take in the We Wack-'em van in the driveway.

"Winston, what did you do?"

"I decided to smoke out some vermin. Where is he?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You sure didn't wait long, did you?"

The hurt on her face was like a gift.

"Where is he, huh? That *Charles Fletcher*." He spat the words, and tilted his head, indicating the Firebird. He'd gone through the glove compartment, found the registration.

"There's no man," she said quietly.

Even in the dimness he could see her blush.

"It's a loaner. Our clunker died on me, on account of you never fixed it."

"You mean..." he said, trailing off. His mouth was dry as sand.

Tiffany stood hugging herself. She was silent and that hurt the worst. Winston wished she would holler at him. He would have given anything to have her light into him good, the way Belinda hollered at Harley.

The neighbor's porch light flicked on. "Ya'll all right?" croaked a voice.

"We sure are, Mr. Jenkins," Tiffany called. "I'm sorry about this. You can go back inside."

"Need us to call the sheriff?"

"No, sir. Everything is just fine," she said. "Winston is just being Winston."

Mr. Jenkins grunted and shuffled back into his house.

"I reckon I lost it when I got the papers about you wanting a divorce and all," Winston told her. "That came out of nowhere."

"Nowhere?" She laughed in a new way. "Winston, *you* left me."

"I didn't leave you, Tiff. I left *for* you. So I could figure out how we could have a good life and I could take care of—"

"That don't make a lick of sense and you know it." Tiffany ran a hand through her hair. "How am I going to get back in the house with that bug bomb everywhere? How am I going to get dressed for work, I'd like to know?"

"You don't need to go to work," he said. "We could live on a boat. I could work on a shrimper, and you could sell jewelry on the beach."

"You have really lost it now."

Winston watched the hard line of her mouth softening. He couldn't let himself see the pity there.

“Remember the week at Myrtle Beach?” he asked. “You loved it there.”
“I didn’t mean living there, Winston. That was our honeymoon.”

“You said selling souvenirs on the beach was about the best job you ever seen.”

“What are we going to eat, Winston? Where we going to sleep? You want us to be bums?”

“We’ll live at the ocean.”

“A beach bum is still a bum.”

“We’ll work it out. I got the picture in my head, see, Tiff, and once you got the picture, you follow it.” *One advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with success.* Winston hadn’t even grasped the meaning until last night, or rather, the meaning seemed to grasp *him*, by the collar, and give him a good shake.

They had to leave this place.

“We could go this morning,” he said. “We could move to the beach. How does that sound?”

“Like a song on the radio. A pretty love song on Lite Rock.”

“This town’s got nothing for us.” It was right there in front of him all the time, how going to the place they loved would set them free.

“I got me a real job now, Winston. I got benefits. Dental, too. I get vacation days.”

“Tiff, I mean it. I’m serious about this thing.” He reached into his back pocket. He unfolded a paper and held it out.

“What is that?” She eyed the sheet, but didn’t take it.

“Greyhound schedule. I was going to buy our tickets today and surprise you, but the bus station window don’t open for a few more hours.” He would cash his first-and-last pest control paycheck. Just enough for two tickets.

“Tickets?”

“Tickets to Myrtle Beach. We’ll be there by dinner. Then we’ll figure it all out, but, see, we got to take that first step—”

A siren wailed and Tiffany groaned. “Oh Lord. I bet that’s the law. There’s liable to be a scene. They might put it on the news.”

A chorus of dog howls rose as the sirens grew closer.

"You coming with me?" he asked.

She began to run toward the house.

"Tiff?" he called. "Tiffany?"

"Don't follow me!"

"You getting your things?"

"What things?" She turned around on the porch and stared at him in the darkness. "You ruined all my things. You ruined it all." She slammed the front door.

He stood under the white oak. The fire truck barreled up the street and drowned out the friendly trilling of crickets. A squad car squealed to a stop. Winston looked behind him. The darkness had begun to purple. A crack of morning sun glowed on the horizon. The ocean beckoned to him now. He could feel it looking right back at him, like a beautiful green eye.