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In strewn banners that lay like streamers from a longago parade the sun's fading seraphim rays gleamed onto the hood of the old Ford and ribboned the steel with the meek orange of a June tomato straining at the vine. From the back seat, door open, her nimble fingers moved along the guitar like a weaver's on a loom. Stitching a song. The cloth she made was a cry of aching American chords, dreamlike warbles built to travel miles of lonesome road. They faded into the twilight, and Silas leaned back on the asphalt, as if to watch them drift into the Arkansas mist.

Away from them, across the field of low-cut durum wheat, they saw Evangeline's frame, outlined pale in shadow against the highway sky, as it trembled.

That's the way it is with a song, isn't it? she said. The way it quivers in your heart. Quivers like the wing of a little bird.

In a story too. He spoke it softly in a voice that let her hear how close they were. That's the way it is with a story. Turns your heart into a bird.

—from *The Tornado Ashes Club*, by Pete Tarshaw (me)

You have to understand how bad things were for me back then.

I'd leave my radio alarm set to full volume at the far end of the AM dial, so every morning at seven-thirty I'd wake up to static mixed with a rabid minister screeching in Haitian Creole, because for sheer bracing power that sound cannot be bested. When the alarm went off I'd have no choice but to eject myself from my bed, panting, infuriated, flailing everywhere. I'd have to pee really bad.

There'd be either one or two beer bottles filled with urine next to my bed. I used to drink five or six beers before going to sleep, but I'm much too lazy to get up in the night to go to the bathroom. My roommate Hobart, who was a med student, only once brought up the public health implications of this arrangement. My feeling was, if he wanted to do something about it, terrific.

Sometimes I'd wake up wearing my jeans. I wore jeans daily because jeans can double as a napkin, and sometimes I fell asleep without bothering to take them off. So, often when I woke up I'd be covered in a film of sick feverish sweat. This was a blessing in a way, because it forced me to take a daily shower, which otherwise I might've done without.

Walking into the kitchen, I'd shove my hand into a crumpled bag of kettle-cooked sour cream and chives potato chips. Two

fistfuls made breakfast. This seemed only a few steps removed from a healthy plate of hash browns like a farmer eats. Next I'd open a 20 oz. Mountain Dew. Coffee-making is a process for which I'd had no patience ever since one time when we ran out of filters and I thought I could use an old shirt. You can't use an old shirt. Bad results for floor, coffee, shirt, and the jeans I was wearing at the time.

This was a good system anyway because it involved no dishes. In the novel *Cockroaches Convene*, there's that great scene where Proudfoot puts his dirty dishes in the back of a pickup truck and drives through a car wash. Sometimes I wished I had a pickup truck so I could do that.

The Mountain Dew acquired an extra kick because I'd multitask by drinking it in the shower. Traces of soap and Herbal Essences would get into the bottle. This is called "bonus spice."

After dressing I'd get in my Camry, with which I had an abusive and codependent relationship. I'd pull out of the driveway, bashing up the fender a little on the wooden beams that held up the garage. It deserved that. But the car knew I really loved it.

In the car I'd listen to Donnie Vebber. He's this borderline fascist talk radio host who advocates, among other things, rounding up illegal immigrants and then deporting them to Iran and we'll see how the Islamopigs like it when they're selling their burritos and pushing their twelve kids in shopping carts around the streets of Tehran. Another plan of his is a nuclear first strike against China. I don't agree with this, I should point out. I listened to Donnie Vebber in the hopes that he'd rouse some scintilla of emotion or outrage in me. But I numbed to it fast. Then and now I thought about politics

with the indifference a grizzled city coroner has toward the body of a murdered prostitute.

I'd drive south out of Boston down I-93, past those oil tanks by the harbor, until I got to the place where all the clams and mussels were dying of unknown bacterial wasting disease. The tidal marshes gave off a car-permeating stink. Then I'd follow Old Town Road past St. Agnes High, where I'd wait in front of the rectory and watch the half-Asian girl with the monstrous rack and her friend Sad-Eyes as they pulled cigarettes out of improbable folds in their uniforms. They'd smoke and I'd switch the radio to classic rock, except in November through January when the classic rock station turned to all-Christmas songs.

On Tuesdays the girls had chapel or something so I'd just go straight to work.

The Alexander Hamilton Building had little in common with its namesake, unless he was a brick man who squatted next to a bog. Hamilton was at one end of Founders Office Park, where in buildings named after Washington and Jefferson people managed mail-order sporting goods businesses, investigated insurance fraud, planned trips to Maui and so forth.

In the lobby of the Hamilton Building there was a koi pond. I loved the koi pond. I was jealous of those fish. Fat, lumpy, blissful. Their time was theirs, to do as they wished: open and close their mouths, float, suck the algae off rocks. Perhaps I would have used my freedom differently. But the koi were living much the way I wished to.

Exiting the elevator on the third floor, I would pass Lisa at her desk. She was a mountainous black woman who served as receptionist for a team of small-claims lawyers. At first I thought she was a cheery, lovely presence. On account of my

undernourished physique, she frequently offered to take me home and “put some meat on those bones.” This seemed cute and charming, and I’d grin and say “any time!”

But then she started adding that when she got me home she was also going to give me a bath. “I’ll scrub you good. Scrub that dirt out of your hair.” There were more and more details about the bath each time—which parts of me she was going to wash, and how, and with what kind of soap. I took to scurrying past while pretending to read the newspaper.

Thinking back on it now, this is about the only affectionate human contact I had around this time, and I guess I really appreciated it. On this particular day, Lisa was on the phone, but she stared at me and made a vigorous scrubbing motion. I hurried along, eyes on the rug.

This was a Friday. It wasn’t going to be too bad. I was carrying Hobart’s copy of last Sunday’s *New York Times*, and there’d be ample time for going on the Internet, looking at pictures of pandas, YouTubes of Danish girls singing karaoke, cats on record players, kids in Indiana launching themselves from homemade catapults. (Remember, this was a few years ago—the Internet was much less sophisticated.)

My only assignment was Mr. Hoshi Tanaka. I had to write him a business school essay.

The company I worked for was called EssayAides. On its sleek brochures, EssayAides stated their goal of “connecting minds and expanding educational opportunities around the globe. Our 200+ associates, trained at the finest American colleges and universities, provide the highest level of admissions consulting.”

What that meant “on the ground,” as Jon Sturges was fond of saying, was that a wealthy kid would send us some gibberish words. We’d turn those into a polished application essay for college or grad school.

This raises ethical issues, if you care to bother yourself with them. I’d worked at the company for three years. It’s not my fault the world is a nexus of corrupt arrangements through which the privileged channel power and resources in complex, self-serving loops. I needed to pay for Mountain Dew.

Many of the clients were rich American kids. They’d be applying to Middlebury or Pomona or wherever, and they’d send you something about how *Anchorman* or the golf team had changed their lives. I’d polish it up, change Will Ferrell to Toni Morrison, and golf to learning woodworking from a Darfur refugee.

I didn’t *not* feel bad about this. But I took pride in my work. Sometimes we’d get some work from a current college student. I got one unspeakably dumb sophomore at Trinity an A– in “Post-Modern Novel” with a series of essays of which he should be quite proud, if he ever reads them.

Soon Jon Sturges, the entrepreneur behind all this, knew I had a gift. He promoted me to Senior Associate. Here I learned that the real money was coming in from Asia, where aspiring applicants would pay more and never raise the tiresome questions about “accuracy.” I wrote the toughest essays myself and farmed out the rest of the work to part-timers among the starving and overeducated.

EssayAides had only one other full-time employee. As I sat down at my computer, she stood in my doorway.

“Hey.”

Alice couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds. Her voice should have sounded squeaky like a cartoon mouse. Instead it was disturbingly deep. She stood there for a really long time.

“What're you doing?”

“A Japanese guy applying to Wharton. You?”

“Just going over some things I farmed out. A lot of my team's been making them too smart. I had an essay for Colorado College that I sent to one of those Palo Alto guys, and he put in two quotes from Walter Benjamin.”

“Yikes. Gotta cut that out.” Jon was always warning us not to make the essays too smart or colleges would catch on.

Alice unfolded her arms and held out a hardcover book. On the cover was a pen-and-ink drawing of a flock of birds in flight. *Kindness to Birds* by Preston Brooks.

“I've been reading this.”

“Oh. How is it?”

“*Breathtaking.*”

I knew this Preston Brooks. He was sort of the Mannheim Steamroller or the Velveeta cheese of novelists. But I just nodded, because I liked Alice. There was a lot weird about her. Her grandmother had died two years ago and left Alice all her clothes, mothbally '70s sweaters with big poofy necks. That was all Alice wore, as some kind of tribute. But back then I wore napkin pants and ratty running sneakers and my hair had mysterious crusts, so as far as that goes Alice was friggin' Donna Karan. Alice graduated from some woman's college in Nova Scotia or something, and how Jon Sturges found her I don't know.

That the two of us came into the office at all was, macro-economically, pointless, because no one called or came in. Jon Sturges just liked having some humans in an office so his company felt like a legitimate enterprise. He paid us more to sit there for an approximation of regular business hours.

My office was barren except for a framed poster of a Roman aqueduct. Jon Sturges based his business philosophy on this book called *Caesar, CEO: Business Secrets of the Ancient Romans*. He constantly made analogies to ancient Rome, in the flawed belief that knowing about one smart-guy thing made him not an idiot. He referred to our rival company, Academic Edge, as “Carthage.” They did seem to threaten our empire; we’d been getting fewer and fewer Hoshi Tanakas this season. The application-essay “consulting” business was getting more and more competitive. But Jon Sturges had other businesses in similar moral gray areas. He couldn’t really focus on one thing for more than like an hour at a time. “An empire has to expand,” he said. He said lots of inappropriately grand things.

On my computer I opened up Hoshi Tanaka’s essay. The topic was “How do you expect an MBA from Wharton to help you achieve your career goals, and why now?”

Hoshi had replied:

Wharton School of Business is held in the first category. At this time in my career, it is passing to the next step to attend business school for study. As to what I can provide, experience.

Warren Buffet has this word: “partnership.” This is realistic. The many cases of blemishing companies were cases when this did not partnership. For one year

I have worked at sales managing. Here, I dampened with the Japanese method of business: loyalty, namely self-sacrifice, namely adherence to the group, namely entrusted effort. This maintains the strong corporation, the flood of all sections is very skillful. Yet also I learned “partnership.” This is seen in the part of a car. They experience partnership or the car failures.

But “globalization” means changings in turbulence. The company and the leader where the entire market is part of success always maintain the necessity of adjust to the environment. As for the business school, “actual state,” and the serious problems which face the entrepreneur are engaged in the setting of science.

This is as in a car’s machinery. A new leader is prepared. This is my sincere hope.

Now began the part of the day where I would stare out the window and think about how I got here.

It began with my mom: she was vicious about limits on the TV. This was back when moms could still pull that off. There probably would’ve been nothing she could do if I was born ten years later. But we didn’t even have cable.

Books, on the other hand, were allowed. Books are not as good as TV, but they were the best I could do, so I read a lot. By the time I was twelve I’d read the entire Nick Boyle oeuvre, from *Talon of the Warshrike* to *Fateful Lightning Loosed*. I’d go to the library and pick up any book that had a sword, a gun, or a powerboat on the cover. This led to an interesting informal education, like the time I read *The Centurion’s Concubine*. I

knew what a centurion was, and I assumed a concubine was a type of sword.

With no TV to fill it, my spongy brain absorbed everything. Once Mom took a bite of pecan pie and said it was really good. So I asked her if it made “her tiny muscle of passion quiver with inflamed anticipation.” This was a line from *The Centurion’s Concubine* that didn’t apply.

But all this reading taught me how to churn out sentences. Before long, Mom was paying me to write thank-you notes for her, a dollar a pop. And they were good, too—“I was touched to my very core with gratitude,” etc.

Thusly I cruised through high school.

In senior year, an English teacher who was called Weird Beard recommended his alma mater, Granby College, “sort of a small college Ivy.” The brochure he gave me showed a flax-haired woman in a skirt, half sitting and half lying next to a field hockey stick while listening to a guy with glasses reading from a book. The moral was clear: guys with glasses who read books could do well here. So that’s where I ended up.

Suddenly I found myself transported to a secular paradise. A lush green valley where no one expected anything of anyone. I could do whatever I wanted, which it turned out was not very much plus drinking. I played Flipcup and Beirut and Knock ’em Toads. Off trays I ate cheese fries and ageless pizza in the Commons while girls scurried through in their last night’s clothes and fliers demanded I free Tibet and take guitar lessons. I slept on futons and went for pancakes and pounded the Plexiglas at hockey games and parsed *The Simpsons* and lost bets and threw Frisbees. I went to seafood dinners with people’s uncomfortable dads.

The stoner who couldn't shut up about Radiohead, the guy who tried to pull off smoking a corncob pipe and loaned me his dog-eared copy of *Atlas Shrugged*, the premed who would fall asleep with a highlighter in his mouth, the dude already with a huge gut who quoted *Rudy* and ordered wings—I loved them all. I knew the taste of Busch Light as the sun came up after a drive to the beach.

But best of all was my girlfriend. The fetching Polly Pawson first slept with me because it was easier than walking back to her room. We'd have low-energy make out sessions that devolved into naps. She wore faded sweatshirts and track pants over her dainty figure, and her flops of hair smelled like raspberry shampoo.

The actual classes of course were pointless. I signed on as an English major, but the professors were dreary pale gnomes who intoned about “text and countertext” and “fiction as the continuance of a shared illusion.” Instead of loving perfectly good books like *Moby-Dick*, where a fucking *whale* eats everybody, these fuckers insisted on pretending to like excruciating books like *Boring Middlemarch* and *Jack-Off Ulysses*. They were a bloodless and humorless race who spent their hours rooting around in eighteenth-century sonnets and old *New Yorker* stories looking for coded gay sex. But I got their lingo down. I could rattle off papers on “*Moby-Dick*: A Vivisection of Capitalism” or whatever in a couple hours and get an A–.

Polly had her own ingenious strategy to get herself out of papers.

THE PAWSON METHOD. Rub bits of crushed-up flowers or peppers under your eyes. Your eyes will get red and

puffed-up. Go to your professor at his office hours. He'll (or she'll, but Polly was especially good on males) be stunned to see you because nobody ever goes to office hours. He'll be so excited he'll start prattling about the Northern European Renaissance or whatnot. Look distracted. Stare out the window, look around the office, pick up a book or something. Then sob—once, not loud. Hold your face in your hands until he stops talking. He'll ask you what's wrong. Say "I . . . I need to go home for a while." GIVE NO DETAILS. The professor, remember, is just an awkward grad student, grown up. If he had people skills he'd be doing something cooler than lecturing hung-over twenty-year-olds about the Northern European Renaissance. He'll be ashamed that he prattled on. Say, "I don't think I can take the exam right now." Remember that these academics are trained to be on the lookout for depression, schizophrenia, etc. He'll envision nightmare scenarios where you kill yourself and after an investigation and a lawsuit he doesn't get tenure. He'll agree to anything. Stand up and give him a hug. Hug him for a few seconds too long, to reinforce the awkwardness.

Polly was brilliant.

If I could've stayed in college forever, everything would've been fine. Sometimes, on dull afternoons, I'd duck down to the Talbot Reading Room, a wood-paneled chamber in the library, full of voluptuous leather chairs. I'd take out *Stackpool of Granby College*, a nineteenth-century boy's book set at my very institution. It tells the story of Stackpool, who after a few missteps wins the big game for the Granby eleven in between innocent

hijinks and courting visits to the daughter of a local farmer. Here's Stackpool's assessment of College Days:

Bless the blissful idyll! Bless the companionable pipe, and the low arm-chair, by now well-broken for comfort. Bless evenings among that hearty fellowship, reading the old volumes and filling the head with wonders. Bless days free to wander in the scholar's revelry, before the cares and labors of the world press down upon the brow. Bless those days before the summons of manhood must be answered, and one may linger for a fading hour as a carefree youth.

Exactly. I'd fall asleep and dream of Polly.

Stackpool ended his college career carried off the field in triumph. I was not so lucky.

I should have known. The signs were everywhere. I even saw a test prep book in her room once. She claimed it was her roommate's. And I guess I just wanted to believe her.

Polly Pawson was cheating on me. With the LSAT. The whole time she was secretly working on her law school applications. Those times when she told me she was taking a second nap—a second nap! Think of how I loved her!—she was working.

She hid her law school acceptances from me until graduation day. And then she broke up with me. I pleaded. I told her about my plans for us (conning a wealthy dowager) and she retorted that they weren't "realistic." It was awful. There were hysterics and there would've been worse hysterics if I hadn't been so hung over. I swore at her before vomiting on the granite steps of Prendil Hall.

So I was shoved, bloodied, into adulthood.

My friend Lucy told me to get a job like hers. She became an assistant at Ortolan Press in Manhattan. But I knew they'd find some twisted assignment like making me edit textbooks. The last thing I needed was for the universe to impose a *Twilight Zone* ironic twist.

Anyway, that summer I decided to stop reading, because of the worst book I ever read.

The Worst Book I Ever Read

During the Dark Period, right after graduation, I loafed around the Granby campus, sleeping on a friend's futon, working at a sandwich place called Stackers. If you ate at Stackers that summer you should know that I rarely washed my hands.

Worried about my condition, my mom paid me a visit. She gave me a copy of *The Chronicles of Esteban*, which her lesbian sister had told her was inspiring. It said "a touching, uplifting narrative of love, pain and healing" right on the cover. Sounded like just what I needed.

Wrong. Here's the plot of *The Chronicles of Esteban*. As his ten-year-old daughter lies in a hospital bed, dying of leukemia, Douglas entertains her by telling a story of his own invention. It's about a shipwrecked sailor from the Spanish Armada, Esteban, who's stranded in Ireland.

The daughter gets sicker and sicker. Meanwhile Douglas continues the story, in which Esteban gets sick. Esteban is helped along by kindly spirits and fishermen full of folk sayings. He searches Ireland for a mystical spring that's been blessed by either Saint Patrick or some leprechauns, depending on who he asks. All of Douglas's characters talk in a ludicrous brogue,

but they all agree that there's a spring somewhere with healing powers.

Here's the last paragraph of *The Chronicles of Esteban*. Douglas is talking to his daughter:

“There, beside the cool and clear and dark, the placid waters, Esteban raised his hand. Trembling. He grasped at the thin mist as though he might capture it in his palm like a butterfly.” Douglas paused. And he knew, in the silence, that the strained, timid breathing that had been to him like a second heartbeat, that faint and fickle dream of love and life, was gone. The moonlight illuminated the unforgiving steel of the respirator and cast its pale light across the bed. But Douglas wouldn't look, knew he couldn't look, not until he finished his tale. And so he continued, summoning everything within him. Memories and hands and remembered laughter he called upon now, to keep his voice steady. So he could finish his story, into the still air. “Esteban bowed before the waters, the sacred waters he had seen in visions. The waters that promised to heal. To restore. To give. He dipped his face, closing his eyes as his lips touched. And he drank.”

I read that last section while I was adding bacon to a Stackers Meat Combo. In furious disbelief, I almost dropped the book into the vat of spicy southwest sauce.

“Oh, for fuck's sake!” I shouted, alarming several customers.

It wasn't that big of a deal at the time. I stopped reading. Whatever. The tide had already been turning me toward TV for a while.

* * *

At the end of the summer I found the EssayAides job on Monster.com. Jon Sturges was impressed by my Granby degree and my shallow but convincing erudition. In a practice test, I turned a Korean high schooler's dense babble into a tidy five paragraphs about how her pet snail taught her to love biology.

Now here was Hoshi Tanaka. A core of earnestness runs through all four paragraphs of Tanaka's work. You can tell he means what he says, whatever that may be.

Hoshi did manage to get across that he worked in the auto industry and this had taught him something or another. So I made up a story where Hoshi learned about how important cars were from an aging mechanic. The mechanic took him into the shop and showed him how all the pieces had to fit together just so. It was a nice moment, ending with a grease-stained handshake. This, I'd have Hoshi conclude, was a good metaphor for running a company.

This had all the elements of a tight business school essay. There was a vague metaphor, a sense of respect, a mentor figure, evidence that the applicant didn't think it was all about money, and creative thinking (but not too creative). It sounded plausibly Japanese. Pleased with myself, I decided to knock off for lunch.

For lunch I favored Sree's USA Nepal Food Fun, located in a strip mall across a four-lane highway from the Hamilton. Trying to cross without being killed was the most invigorating part of my day. This was in January, too, so there was the obstacle of melting snowpiles to add to the challenge. The thrill made Sree's feel extra-relaxing, like sitting on the beach of a remote island surrounded by sharks.

Sree's was decorated with Nepalese posters for the movie *Ghostbusters*. Sree loved *Ghostbusters*, and he liked me. So, solid guy.

"Hello! Pete."

"Hi, Sree."

"Did you see Conan O'Brien show last night?"

"No."

Sree heaved with silent laughs. "Oh! He had a comedy who talked about women's thighs. Oh!"

This may not have been the conversation we had that day, but it's the kind of conversation we had. Actually, I think that day he was in the back, setting traps for an animal of some kind, so I ordered from his wife who was shaped like a squash. I got the Nepalese Fish Fry, which was fish sticks with some sort of pineapple sauce smeared on top, \$3.99.

The only other regular was there. He was a lopsided old man with chapped lips who always wore a New England Patriots parka, ate a Curry Hamburger, and drank a Bud Light. When he finished his food, he would saunter over to me. He would tell me about his daughter, who lived in Arizona, and how when she was a little girl she could sing like Judy Garland. Then he would start alluding to terrible things he'd done as a Marine in Korea.

Hearing him out was the closest thing I did to charity, but today I didn't want to deal. So to keep him away, I'd brought Hobart's Sunday *New York Times* along with me. I ate hunched over the magazine. I stared at the ads for houses in the back, sprawling Gothic castles in places called Bass Harbor and Elm Neck, and wondered how I would get the requisite 3.5 million dollars. I flipped through an article about the next generation of kitchen designers.

Turning the page, I saw a full-page photograph that captivated me.

It was black-and-white, and this is what it showed: in front of the shattered window of a discount electronics store, the mystery novelist Pamela McLaughlin was squatting, clutching a notebook. She was leaning over the chalk outline of a body. Her tube top was pulled tight over her fulsome cleavage by the weight of a pistol in her shoulder holster, and she stared grimly at the camera. Next to the chalk outline lay a book. Unclear what book, but you don't have to be the steel-willed and firm-bodied, half-Vietnamese, half-Cuban crime reporter/freelance investigator Trang Martinez to realize that's an important clue.

It was part of one of those photo essays they have sometimes. This one was called Best Sellers, and it was all portraits of writers who were currently on the best-seller list.

The Pamela McLaughlin photo suggested an editorial message, like "readers are America's real victims." You might agree, if you read Pamela McLaughlin's latest, *Fashion Victims*, wherein Trang penetrates the lingerie industry in a desperate ploy to stop a serial killer who targets makers of bridal wear. For one regrettable chapter, Trang poses as a pre-op transvestite to lure a depraved leather magnate into an unwitting confession. The tagline on the paperback was *Blood is the new pink*.

I took a bite of fish, and with a mouthful of saccharine sauce turned my attention to the opposite page: the sunglassed eyes of Nick Boyle, my beloved author of action thrillers, gleamed against the light. Nick Boyle was wearing a windbreaker, and a baseball hat that said "USS Hornet—CV-12." Framed against the sky, ocean spraying behind him, he was at the helm of a hulking World War II amphibious landing craft.

True Nick Boyle fans wouldn't call it a landing craft, of course. They'd identify it as an LCT Mk-5 or whatever, because you'll find his books baffling if you can't keep track of different pieces of military hardware.

Nick Boyle has the smushed-up face of a bullfrog. His cheek-skin could be stretched into a full yard of normal face. I counted twenty-six folds of faceflesh, and eight isolated bulges. But he was grimacing with vindictive American anger. And he pulled it off. He looked ready to start setting wrong things right with the business end of a 20mm machine gun.

The eyes of Nick Boyle, who'd given me so much weapons-related entertainment, accused me of civilian weakness. He looked at me with revulsion, knowing I was unworthy to stand beside him in the crush of battle. He looked at me as though the best thing I could do was get the hell out of his way, so he could launch armor-piercing shells and win freedom for pantywaists who didn't know what to do with it. Later, at some salty bar where war banners hung, he and his comrades would mutter grimly over bourbon and nod at each other's bloodstained shirts.

I took a sip of Nepalese nut soda and turned the page.

Next was Josh Holt Cready. He was done up like a Civil War tintype. Clever enough, although it looked like those old-timey photos lame families get at amusement parks. Josh Holt Cready was the precocious author of *Manassas*, a novel about a precocious author named Josh Holt Cready who retraces the steps of his ancestor who fought for the Union and died at Cold Harbor. Writing a novel about the Civil War is lazy. Brother against brother, battles in peach orchards and wheat fields, all those Biblical names, the poignant geography, Abe Lincoln

and slavery hanging over everything. There's so much built-in pathos, it writes itself.

But being lazy myself, I couldn't fault Josh Holt Cready for cheating. So I didn't hate him. Not even when his book first hit the best-seller list. Or when awestruck profiles of the fresh-out-of-Yale prodigy started cropping up everywhere. I certainly didn't hate him when *Entertainment Weekly* ran a three-page feature and talked about him as though you were some kind of crazed nihilist if you failed to be floored by his brilliance. I didn't hate him when his smarmy wide eyes stared out at Ann Curry on the *Today* show while I tried to get through a bowl of Froot Loops. And I didn't hate him when he was briefly linked to Scarlett Johansson. Or when Sean Penn signed on to play Grant in the *Manassas* movie, to be directed by Tim Robbins.

In a burst of not-hatred I turned the page so fast I gave myself a paper cut.

There was Tim Drew, he of *The Darwin Enigma*, posed with his arms folded, in a natural history museum, in front of a Victorian phrenology model.

Turning the page again, I was confronted by a man of about sixty. In contrast to Nick Boyle, the skin on this face was stretched tight around the skull like a drumhead. Two thin lines of beard converged on his chin into a vulpine point. He was sitting on a park bench, shot in dreary overcast gray. Along his arms and legs, birds were perched. Different kinds and sizes of birds. One nestled in the lap of his corduroy pants.

The picture, like all those in the Best Sellers series, was identified only by the author's name and his current best-selling book: "Preston Brooks, *Kindness to Birds*." This was just too much, the old bastard sitting there with birds on his arms. I

smushed some fish rind on his face, threw him in the garbage, and said good-bye to Sree.

It's likely I never would've thought about Preston Brooks again if it wasn't for an e-mail that I read when I got back to my desk.