

Fiction II

Spring 2014
Final Portfolio

Joe Bruner

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Section I

“Where the Heart Is” Original Submission

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 1
Joe Bruner

The morning we left New York was warm and beautiful, just like the day dad died. The sunlight filtered through the overcast sky, the golden rays glinting in the dew drops that clung to the grass. Silence nestled comfortably into the neighborhood with its velvety coat.

I made my way to our koi pond, carefully treading on the centers of our stepping stones. Sitting down on my usual stone seat, I started dropping lettuce bits into the pond. The water's surface was calm, until the koi surfaced and began to eat the shreds of lettuce.

"Well boys, this is it." I said. "I guess this is goodbye." I sighed and looked up across the yard. The faint sunlight felt warm and pleasant on my face. "I'm really gonna miss you guys," I said, dropping a few more lettuce bits. I watched them eat the leaves, their mouths endlessly puffing open and closed. "Mom says we're going to move into this cottage right on the ocean shore that her parents owned. Apparently she would visit over summer holiday and go skinny dipping with her friends."

Glub, glub, glub.

I dropped a few more shreds of lettuce. "I know what you must be thinking. You didn't need to know that about mom."

The fish just continued to stare unblinking at me, while they ate the lettuce.

"I met the people who are going to move here. They seem like a nice couple, and apparently they love koi, so you'll be taken care of. Don't worry. And who knows, maybe I'll drop by and say hi sometime." I brushed the last of the lettuce into the pond. Once they had gobbled up all of it, the koi sank back to the bottom.

The sun had crept higher in the sky, and now I could feel it on the back of my neck.

“...he’s not in the house, so he must be out here.” I heard my mom’s voice on the back patio. “Chase!”

“Yeah?” I called. I stood up and looked behind me. As soon as I did, I wish I hadn’t. Sarah was back. No doubt here to apologize for Evan again.

“Sarah’s here. She wanted to see you before we left.”

I sighed.

“When you’re done talking, it’s time to go. The moving truck is all packed.”

I nodded, and then turned back towards Sarah. “7 am. It’s a bit early for you, isn’t it?” I crossed my arms and stared at her. She had her brown hair up in a ponytail, which with her sharp chin and ears, made her look rather elfish this morning.

“Chase, please,” she said, not quite meeting my gaze. “I’m not Evan.”

I looked down and unfolded my arms. My hands found my pockets instead. “Sorry. I know.”

She looked at me finally. “You’re really going, aren’t you? This is really it. Good bye.”

I sighed and looked across the yard again. “It’s not really good bye. I mean, there’s still Facebook. Skype. Cell phones.”

She smiled, but looked like she was about to cry. “I know.”

I opened my arms and gave her a hug. I could feel her shaking in my arms. “Besides Evan, you’re my oldest friend,” I said. “We won’t just stop talking.”

We just stood there in silence for a few minutes. I felt the sun intensify on the back of my neck, watched water drip from the rain spout. Birds were chirping from the trees, though I couldn’t figure out where they were.

Sarah wiped her eyes finally.

“Look,” I said, “I’ll call you when we get there. I’ll tell you what our new cottage is like. I’ll talk to you however long you like.”

“Deal,” she said. “And Chase...” I looked up at her again, though unwillingly. “About Evan...”

“Enough,” I cut her off. “If he wants to apologize, he should have come here himself. I’ve told you that all this week.”

We just stared at each other. After a second of silence, she said, “I was going to say, he loves you. I don’t know what it is he said, but the way he’s been living these past couple weeks, he’s going through hell.”

I was outraged. “He’s going through hell? HE’S going through hell? What does he think I’m going through then? First my father dies. Then he breaks up with me. And to top it all off, I’m moving for good.”

“If you would just tell me what he said –”

“No.”

Sarah just opened her mouth, and closed it without saying anything.

“Chase!” It was my mom again. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yeah, one sec,” I called back. I turned to Sarah. “Look, you don’t want to know what he said. It doesn’t matter. I know all that I need to.” I started walking over to the car. As I reached for the passenger door, Sarah grabbed my arm.

“Chase...” her tone was gentle.

I closed my eyes and turned around.

“I know you’re angry at Evan. But you don’t have to block me out too. Let me help. Just tell me what he said.”

I felt water rising in my eyes. I stared at her for a long second. "I can't. I just can't. It hurts too much. You don't want to know. He needs a friend, and I can't be it. He needs you." I gave her one last hug, and whispered, "Good bye." Then I climbed in the car. A minute later we were driving down the street. I looked back until I could no longer see Sarah or my old house, wondering if I had made the right choice. I just kept thinking that she didn't need to know he told me I was selfish, that I was the reason my father died.

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 2
Joe Bruner

I had my seat reclined, and was staring out the window, at the country-side rushing by. We had been driving for about 5 hours by this time, and just pulled out from lunch. I watched the big ugly office buildings and hotels cramming around the highway entrances recede into the distance, to be replaced by long stretches of grass fields.

My reverie was broken by the crinkling of a Doritos bag as my mom ate the last chip. I sat up blinking and shaking my eyes, rubbing them.

“Have a good nap?”

“I wasn’t asleep.”

“Sure looked like it.”

I smiled, and brought my seat up again. “I was just thinking.”

“What about?” She glanced at me.

I sighed, and looked out the window again.

“It’s not healthy.”

“What?”

“Thinking about him that much. You and Evan both said what you did. Brooding this much about it isn’t going to change anything.”

I didn’t say anything.

My mom put her hand on my left thigh and rubbed it. “It’ll be ok.”

“I...I...” I wasn’t sure what I was going to say, so I just fell silent again and stared straight ahead out the windshield.

“You what?”

We glanced at each other.

“I don’t know. No clue what I was even going to say. I guess... I dunno. I keep reliving that afternoon. I just keep thinking there must have been something I could have done, something I should have seen coming.”

“There’s nothing you could have done. He clearly had something cooking for a while, and that was the day it all just broke out.”

“Thanks mom...” I said. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

She smiled. “Well, maybe not right now. But it’s not your fault. And the sooner you believe that the better.”

“Sure,” I muttered, looking out my window again.

She sighed. “Look, I think this move will do you some good. It’ll be good for you to get out of that place. It’ll be good for both of us.”

I watched a telephone pole zoom past the window. A couple of birds, crows maybe, were perched on the top. We had just pulled out of the latest suburban sprawl, and were now riding through farmland and forests again. “So... what is there to do up in Lemoine, Maine. It’s got, what, like 20 people?”

Mom smiled. “There’s a bit more than that. It has a little under a thousand in population. It’s a small coast town. There’ll be plenty to do there. I bet you could do ok selling your photography.”

I rolled my eyes. “I need some high quality stuff if I’m going to do that.”

“You’ve got your camera, what more do you need?”

“Printer... ink... paper... and good stuff at that. Need I continue?”

My mom laughed. “Well, give it a chance. You’ll find the people up there are really quite nice and very approachable. It’s one of those places where everyone knows each other, and most of all, it’s incredibly beautiful. You never know what might happen if you just give it a chance.”

“And what about our house?”

“What about it?”

“Where is it? Who are our neighbors?”

She smiled and glanced at me. “We’re right on the coast. We’ll be waking up to an ocean view every morning.”

“No effing way,” I said, unable to contain my smile.

“Yes effing way,” she said back, also smiling. “It’s really more of a cottage, or a cabin. It has two floors, two bedrooms and two bathrooms. A mini-dining room/kitchen combo and a living room. Apparently it’s also got a small study on the first floor and a den on the second floor. I think you’ll really enjoy it. And as for our neighbors, I have no idea who they are. I haven’t been in touch with them, so we’re going to find out together.”

I nodded.

“Bathroom break?”

I glanced at my watch. I had slept for the last 30 minutes. “I could stretch my legs.”

Mom turned on the turn signal and a moment later, we were entering the rest area. We got out and looked around. The sky was overcast now and a cool gust rustled the trees. The greenness was even more pronounced now, if that was possible.

“So what do you think of Maine?” she asked me.

“Oh, is this it?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She said, nodding. “We crossed the state line a couple minutes ago.”

“...It’s nice.” I made my way up the windy path to the visitor center. The sloping lawn was dotted with trees, and a row of thin-leaved shrubs bordered the doors. I passed the stands of colorful motel coupons and adventure advertisements in the vestibule between doors.

The lighting in the building was dim, and the benches were pocked with scratches and dents. I rushed to the restroom to do my business.

When I came out, my mom was in the lobby holding a bag of sour patch kids. “A last treat before we make it,” she said smiling.

“You’re the best,” I told her, taking it. “Thanks mom.”

We walked back to the car in silence, my mom taking deep breaths, and I plopping sour patch kids in my mouth, three at a time.

“How much longer?” I asked, finally.

“Not much,” she sighed, as we climbed in the car. “I’d say probably no more than an hour or so.”

I groaned.

“But then we’ll be there.”

We sat in silence, admiring the countryside as it passed us by. I saw enormous manors, with sprawling pastures dotted with enormous deciduous trees, oaks or maybe maples, I couldn’t tell from the car. Occasionally I would see cattle, or maybe a horse and its calf, but mostly it was just green fields, and forests of flowers.

I must have drifted off to sleep again, for what seemed like moments later, my mom was shaking me saying, “We’re here.” She smiled when I finally looked up, and then unbuckled to get out.

I brushed the sour patch bag off to the side, opened the door, and nearly collapsed on my first step, my legs were so heavily asleep. I let out an obnoxious yawn, stretched my arms and legs as far as they would go, and took in the sight.

We were parked on a single-lane cobble stone drive way, in front of perhaps the most picturesque cabin I think I had ever seen. It was a two story cabin, made of genuine wood – none of that fake wannabe stuff – with two windows peering over us from the second floor. The whole cabin was on top of a hill, and walking around to the back, I could see the ocean just a couple hundred feet below, at the bottom of a steep slope.

My mom came up behind me and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “What do you think of it?”

I glanced at her. Her grin stretched from ear to ear. “This is fucking amazing. Are we seriously living here?”

“Uh-huh. And do you see down there, if you look past our drive way, up on that adjacent hill is another cabin?”

“Yupp.”

“Those are our neighbors. Hopefully we’ll meet them later tonight or tomorrow.”

“It looks like someone’s coming out right now,” I said squinting at the door.

My mom spun around and glanced. We watched the woman figure walk out, and make its way towards us. Suddenly my mom gasped. “Is that... no, it can’t be.”

“What?”

“Rachel?” She called out, as the woman approached.

“Debbie?” The disbelief in both their voices was evident. They both squealed and hugged each other. It was the first time I ever saw my mom behave like a high school girl greeting a friend, and I hoped that it would also be the last time.

My mom's friend certainly was very pretty. She was wearing a summer-yellow dress going down to her knees, and her face was surrounded by very curly, somewhat bushy red hair. Her gentle brown eyes and a few freckles on her face, gave her the appearance of a traditional 1950s country girl. She looked to be about the same age as mom, maybe in her mid-thirties.

"Rachel, I want you to meet my 17 year old son, Chase." My mom said, bringing us face to face. We shook hands, her tight grip catching me off guard.

"Hi Chase, it's so great to meet you," she said, pulling her hair back behind her ear. Seeing her smile, it was difficult not to smile back.

"Chase, this is Rachel, a childhood friend of mine. We would always romp around here together, whenever my parents brought us up. Rachel, I had no idea that you were still in the area. I would have called you if I had known."

"Actually I haven't been until recently. When I met David, we moved down to Florida, and I tried to sell this house, but never got any bids. I came back here a couple years ago when David and I decided to divorce. But you're probably not interested in hearing about all that. Come, I have cookies from the bakery and lemonade waiting for someone to eat them at my house. I figured you must be the new neighbors when I saw your car pull up, and wanted to introduce myself and invite you over."

My mom glanced at me. "You want to come Chase?"

I hesitated.

"Come on Chase, you'll probably get to meet Nathan, though he's still working at the bakery right now. He's your age, about to turn 18 in a month or so."

I perked up at the thought of having a friend who was my age up here, and so followed my mom and her friend, who were busily buzzing away, and wondering about this Nathan, imagining what he must be like.

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 3
Joe Bruner

It was dark outside, only the sound of the waves crashing on the shore floated through my window. I had my floor lamp set up next to my door, which was the only source of light for the time being. The room was small, and felt fairly cramped with all the moving boxes inside.

The moving truck had arrived a couple hours later, and I had left Rachel's house to help bring everything in. Nathan hadn't shown up, which I guess wasn't too surprising. Rachel said he's been working later into the evening recently.

I stared up at the ceiling. Now that I didn't have anything to do, my mind started wandering back to Evan. I wonder what he was doing. Possibly getting ready for bed. Probably not. Maybe thinking about me. Maybe wishing the past could be undone, as badly as I wanted it to. I rolled on my side and let a tear escape. God, it still hurt so much to think about him. So I sat up and went to my now routine escape. Facebook. Sitting on my bed, I opened my messenger bag, and pulled my laptop out. Sure enough, Sarah was still on "web" with a bright green dot next to her name.

Sarah: Hey! Are you there yet?

Me: Yeah, we got here this afternoon, and met our neighbor who happens to be my mom's old childhood friend.

Sarah: No way! That's so cool. So what's the cottage like?

Me: It's really amazing. I've got this tiny little room with my own bathroom, with the den right next door. That's where we've put our sofas and TV. Mom wants to make it a really cool media room.

Sarah: That's awesome. I miss you already. :(

Me: Me too. I should go, I think I hear my mom coming. I'll call you tomorrow.

Sarah: Promise?

Me: Pinky promise.

I shut my laptop and looked up right as my mom entered.

“Hey hon, you getting settled in nicely?” She looked around at all the boxes.

“Well, I haven’t really started unpacking, but I think I will soon. I was just talking to Sarah over Facebook.”

“Oh? How’s she doing?”

“Ok, I think. She was excited to hear about the new house.”

“She’s always been such a dear. Tell her hi for me, when you talk again.”

I nodded, wondering what she would think of being called a ‘dear’. “Did you come up here for a reason mom?”

“Oh, yeah,” my mom said, shaking her head. “I want you to come outside and look at something. I promise it’s worth it to get up.”

I groaned and sat up. I slipped into my bright green crocs, and followed her downstairs. On the way out, she turned off the porch light.

“Wait for your eyes to adjust, and when they have, look up.” She led me to the edge of the hill overlooking the ocean.

I could barely make out the white foam of the waves, as they curled right before they crashed on the shore, but once I could see it more clearly, I looked up at the sky. It literally took my breath away.

I had no idea that so many stars actually existed that we could see from Earth. There were what looked to be massive *clouds* of stars. There were reds and blues; it was as if an artist had gone ballistic with dripping paint all over a black canvas. “It’s... unbelievable.”

“It’s unearthly, isn’t it?”

I looked down again and saw her grin. “What is this place?”

“Home. This is where I always felt the most at home.”

The next morning, I woke up, the sunlight streaming directly into my eyes. I glanced at my alarm clock. 8:00 A.M. Groaning, I sat up, and slipped into my crocs. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I took a shower, enjoying the fact that I had it all to myself. It only took a couple minutes to wash and rinse myself off.

Looking in the mirror, I studied myself as I combed my hair. I had blue eyes, which had received more compliments than I could count, and jet-black hair that was usually somewhat messy, though not as bad as Harry Potter supposedly had it. I sighed as I put the comb down on the sink countertop.

I had always looked very mousy, too much so for my liking, which was due to my being relatively short, at 5’6”. I also had a mole next to my nose on the right side. I used to hate it, and had looked at what options there were for removal, but now I kinda liked it. I felt like it added character.

After putting on my typical flannel button down, I head downstairs and found my mom sitting at the dining room table with a cup of tea and the newspaper.

“We get a newspaper here?”

“It’s yesterday’s. I needed something to entertain me while you were snoring away upstairs.”

“Huh.”

“What say you? Want to head into town, maybe go by the bakery where Rachel’s son works? See if we can meet him?”

“Sure.” It’s not like I had anything better to do. I led the way out, and walked over to the edge, looking out across the ocean.

“It’s marvelous, isn’t it?” My mom asked, coming up next to me.

“Yeah... but I miss my koi fish.”

“I know,” my mom said, putting a hand on my shoulder.

I reluctantly turned away from the ocean view, and we walked back down the hill to our car.

“I figure we’ll probably walk usually, it’s only about a mile until we hit the main road which goes through most of town, but perhaps not this morning.”

“Appreciated,” I said, and we got in.

It almost seemed a pity to drive though. Not even five minutes later we were at the bakery. The parking lot was one of those adorable lots, that has like three spots in front of the store itself and that’s it.

We walked in, and the door jingled to let them know we were in.

“Welcome to Tom’s Bakery, how are you folks today?” A teen, probably around my age, stood behind the counter, which was off to the right. I figured this must be Nathan, though he looked nothing like his mother. He was slightly taller than me, though probably not quite six feet, was fit but by no means muscular and had light brown hair.

“We’re good, thank you,” my mom said. She glanced at him, and then up at the menu.

“You folks aren’t from around here are you,” he asked, with a slight smile.

“No, we’re not. We just moved here yesterday from New York, though I used to spend my summers up here as a kid.”

“You’re our new neighbors, aren’t you?” He asked, his tone suddenly becoming much brighter. “My mom said I just missed you last night.”

“Yeah, we’re right up on that hill along Ocean View Drive, right next to you,” my mom said.

“Sweet! I’m Nathan,” he said, holding out his hand. We both shook it. “And you must be Chase,” he said.

I didn’t want to make eye contact, but something about his eyes kept me locked in. “That’s me.”

“So what can I get you folks today?”

“I think I’ll settle for a blueberry scone and an orange juice,” my mom said.

“I’ll second that,” I said, raising my half-curved right hand.

“Awesome! That’ll be \$11.63.”

Once paid, we sat down across from the serving counter, next to the window. I could see a section of the town. It was just a bunch of little stores, with cute little parking lots, one after the other. I couldn’t help but think that Evan would have loved to come up here. This was just his kind of place.

But then our orders came up, and I diverted my attention to my orange juice. We ate in silence, and I could feel Nathan’s gaze watching us the whole time, though he didn’t say anything.

I looked around the café. It had a very nice appeal to it, with colorful, abstract paintings on the wall with red-shaded lamps hanging down from the ceiling over every table. There was soothing piano music playing in the background, creating a comforting silence between us.

It only took a few minutes for us to eat our food.

“Ready to go?” My mom asked, glancing at my empty plate littered with crumbs.

“Ready.” I mostly just wanted to get out of Nathan’s stare.

“You folks leaving already?” he asked.

“Yeah, we’ve got a fair amount of unpacking to do,” my mom said.

“Of course. Well, I’m sure I’ll see you around,” he said smiling. “Take care.”

I left the shop feeling somewhat confused. It’s not that he creeped me out, but it had been unsettling. He was cute, no doubt about that, but surely he was no Evan. I shoved the possibility from my mind as I climbed back into the car.

Section II

“Where the Heart Is” Revised Submission

Revision Note

For the revision, I decided not to include chapter one because I didn't really focus on revising that. Most of the feedback I received regarded the second two chapters.

The first thing I changed about the car ride was addressing the father's death, and how that has mostly been an unspoken issue between the two of them. I wanted to take the opportunity to reveal a little better that they usually get along pretty well, and to give the reader some of the emotional struggles of the two characters.

The second thing I added, which was a major change in scene was the stopping at the diner. My goal with adding this was to show the reader Debbie's familiarity with the area they are approaching, and to give Chase and his mom an opportunity to talk about why they're moving up to Maine, and show the reader that she wasn't going to willingly talk about her history with Debbie.

A little thing I added was Chase's observation about speeding past the telephone poles, because a lot of feedback I got regarded wanting more of Chase's thoughts, and I felt like it was the kind of thing he would notice. Given more time to go back and revise further, I'd put in more moments like this.

Major comments I got regarded the random chance that their neighbors just happened to be old childhood friends, and so I changed it to the fact that they already knew, moving up to that area, that Debbie lived there with Nathan. It also allowed for the conversations to happen in the diner, as previously mentioned.

The last thing in Chapter 2 that I changed was the encounter with Nathan. I wanted to seriously tone down any foreshadowing that Nathan and Chase might end up together, and that they think they might end up together, and so I made it a much briefer, distant encounter, and I also had a seeming girlfriend walk in the room to, to help keep the reader from thinking the story might take that direction.

For chapter three, I completely threw out the old chapter three, which was the scene in the bakery between Chase and Debbie and Nathan. Again, I wanted to remove any foreshadowing, and so I changed the scene to take place at home, on the beach, and just have Chase start getting to know Nathan and Debbie a little bit.

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 2
Joe Bruner

I had my seat reclined, and was staring out the window, at the countryside rushing by. We had been driving for about five hours by this time, and just pulled out from lunch. The big ugly office buildings and hotels crammed around the highway entrances receded into the distance. Soon I was staring at idyllic green fields rolling by, one after the next, underneath a effervescent blue sky, filled with thick, full clouds – thicker than sheep wool.

My reverie was broken by the crinkling of a Doritos bag as my mom ate the last chip. I sat up blinking and shaking my eyes, rubbing them.

“Have a good nap?”

“I wasn’t asleep.”

“Sure looked like it.”

I smiled, and brought my seat up again. “I was just thinking.”

“What about?” She glanced at me.

I sighed, and looked out the window again.

“It’s not healthy.”

“What?”

“Thinking about him that much. You and Evan both said what you did. Brooding this much about it isn’t going to change anything.”

I didn’t say anything. For some reason, the comment really irked me.

My mom put her hand on my left thigh and rubbed it. “It’ll be ok.”

“Like Dad? Will THAT be ok?”

My mom didn’t say anything.

“This whole fucking semester hasn’t been ok. Ever since Dad died in January, you’ve been pretending everything is all right. I’ve been struggling to put two and two together in my calculus class, and Evan hasn’t given a crap about anything. The only one here who’s been doing anything about this is Sarah, and she’s trying to get me and Evan back together.”

“Chase, please.” My mom sounded like she was about to start crying. She was gripping the steering wheel so tightly, her knuckles were completely white. “This whole semester I’ve been trying to keep it together for your sake.”

I fell silent and stared straight ahead out the windshield. Now I felt like crap. I wasn’t sure what to say.

The sun was much higher in the sky now. According to the car clock it was quarter past noon.

“Do you want to stop for lunch?” she asked her voice back to its usual cheerful tone.

“Yeah.”

“I know a great little diner in the next town coming up here. We used to stop there whenever we’d go up to Maine. Back then it was owned by Anthony, and now it’s owned by his daughter Amy.”

A few minutes later we were pulling off the highway, and driving into the tiny parking lot of the diner. Stiffly climbing out of the car, I stood up and stretched. I felt like I should be trying to touch the sky as I stretched. Even then it probably wouldn’t feel like enough.

The inside of the diner was cozy. Instantly I felt like I was walking into a time bubble, trapped in the 1970s. The floor was checkered black and white, and there were turquoise padded, silver chrome stools lined along the bar. In the back, a row of booths padded with the same turquoise leather were up against the windows.

“Welcome to Amy’s Diner,” a short, cheery woman said. She was very bright red, from her short hair to her lipstick to her shoes.

“Hello Amy,” my mom said perking up.

“Why hello dear!” She sounded like they were long lost friends. “It’s been a while now, hasn’t it?”

“A couple years since I’ve last been here,” my mom said.

“Good gracious. That long? Well, come on in. Take a seat wherever you’d like. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

We made our way to the back to pick a private booth, though no one else was in the diner so it didn’t really make a difference.

“What can I get you dears to drink,” she asked, placing a menu in front of each of us.

“I’ll start with an iced tea,” my mom said.

“I’ll just have a root beer,” I said, folding my arms and leaning on the table.

“Coming right up,” she said.

I glanced around the diner again. The place was spotless. The chrome stools glinted in the sunlight streaming through the windows.

Amy returned with our drinks, and took our orders. As she walked away with the menus, I turned back to my mom.

I tapped my fingers on the glass, and took a sip from the straw. The awkward silence lay thick between my mom and I. We exchanged glances a few times, but every time I opened my mouth, the words got stuck.

“You seem like you want to ask me something,” she said finally.

I took another sip from my root beer. “Why Maine?” I waited briefly, “I mean, you’ve told me about this cottage and all, but why are you going back?”

She sat back, her face taking a thoughtful pose. “Well, my childhood friend Rachel still lives up there. She’s moved in next to our cottage, or as close as next door can be in that town. She has a son, Nathan, who’s about your age. The cottage has been left in a mess, and with everything we’re bringing up, it’s not going to get any better. I was hoping they might help us clear out all that junk that my parents left.”

“Why haven’t I ever met them?”

My mom’s face fell. “We fell out of touch for a while, until dad passed away.” She didn’t say any more, and I didn’t ask.

Amy came back with our food, and that was the last of our conversation.

When we walked out of the diner, the sun was significantly lower in the sky, indicating it was well into the afternoon. I sighed, I just wanted to be there already.

“We’ve only got a couple hours left,” my mom said, though I could tell she was starting to feel the exhaustion as well.

Most of the drive back was silent. I entertained myself with timing how long it took us to go from one telephone pole to the next. We usually hit about 6 seconds. When I got bored of that, I started trying to watch out for stars. The sky was starting to lose light, and we pulled off towards a rest stop exit.

“Sorry,” my mom said, “I have got to stop for the restroom. We’ve still got about 45 minutes left or so.”

I groaned, but got out of the car when she parked. My mom raced to the restroom, but I slowly strolled up the windy path to the visitor center.

There was a gentle warm breeze you could see in the lawn that looked like it hadn’t been mown for a couple weeks. The sky was now dark blue, though not quite black. Stars were popping out. The gently sloping lawn was dotted with trees, and a row of thin-leaved shrubs

bordered the doors. I passed the stands of colorful motel coupons and adventure advertisements in the vestibule between doors.

The lighting in the building was dim, and the benches were pocked with scratches and dents. I decided to also use the restroom.

When I came out, my mom was in the lobby holding a bag of sour patch kids. “A last treat before we make it,” she said smiling.

“You’re the best,” I told her, taking it. “Thanks mom.”

We walked back to the car in silence, my mom taking deep breaths, and I plopping sour patch kids in my mouth, three at a time.

We sat in silence, admiring the countryside as it passed us by. I saw enormous manors, with sprawling pastures dotted with enormous deciduous trees, oaks or maybe maples, I couldn’t tell from the car. Occasionally I would see cattle, or maybe a horse and its calf, but mostly it was just green fields, and forests of flowers.

I must have drifted off to sleep again, for what seemed like moments later, my mom was shaking me saying, “We’re here.” She smiled when I finally looked up, and then unbuckled to get out.

I brushed the sour patch bag off to the side, opened the door, and nearly collapsed on my first step, my legs were so heavily asleep. I let out an obnoxious yawn, stretched my arms and legs as far as they would go, and took in the sight.

We were parked on a single-lane cobble stone drive way, in front of perhaps the most picturesque cabin I think I had ever seen. It was a two story cabin, made of genuine wood – none of that fake wannabe stuff – with two windows peering over us from the second floor. The whole cabin was on top of a hill, and walking around to the back, I could see the ocean just a couple hundred feet below, at the bottom of a steep slope.

My mom came up behind me and wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “What do you think of it?”

I glanced at her. Her grin stretched from ear to ear. “This is fucking amazing. Are we seriously living here?”

“Yessiree! But before we go in there, and see how bad the damage is, let’s walk down to that cabin over there, across this valley to that other hill. That’s where Rachel lives with Nathan.”

We didn’t even have to knock. Rachel through open the door, and I was immediately struck at how similar she looked to my mom. They could have been twins, even in their mid-thirties.

“Debbie?” The excitement in her voice was evident. They both squealed and hugged each other. It was the first time I ever saw my mom behave like a high school girl greeting a friend, and I hoped that it would also be the last time.

My mom’s friend certainly was very pretty. She was wearing a summer-yellow dress going down to her knees, and her face was surrounded by very curly, somewhat bushy red hair. Her gentle brown eyes and a few freckles on her face, gave her the appearance of a traditional 1950s country girl. She looked to be about the same age as mom, maybe in her mid-thirties.

“Rachel, I want you to meet my 17 year old son, Chase.” My mom said, bringing us face to face. We shook hands, her tight grip catching me off guard.

“Hi Chase, it’s so great to meet you,” she said, pulling her hair back behind her ear. Seeing her smile, it was difficult not to smile back. “Come in, come in, both of you. Make yourselves at home.”

We stepped into the house, and it looked homely. Framed photos of Rachel, and who I presumed to be Nathan hung on the wall near the door. Some of the photos included another girl,

probably about Nathan's age, and she had long hair reaching down below her shoulders, and it was filled with bright blue highlights.

Rachel came out from the kitchen with three mugs of tea. She saw me looking at the photos as she handed me a cup. "That's my son Nathan, and his childhood friend Stella. They've been friends since they were born. Basically."

I took a sip, scalding my tongue.

As we all sat down, I heard the back door open.

Rachel leaned forward. "Nathan? Is that you? Come into the living room will you? Our neighbors, the Silvermans arrived."

A moment later Nathan and Stella came in. Nathan had much shorter, cropped hair, and had clearly been working out since the photos had been taken. Stella's hair shimmered with a quality that clearly had not been caught on camera.

Nathan stepped forward and held out his hand. "Hey there Chase. I'm Nathan. And this is my friend Stella." We shook hands.

Stella turned towards him and whispered something.

"We're going to be upstairs if you need us mom," Nathan said.

Once they were upstairs, I settled back comfortably in my seat and held the hot cup of tea to warm my hands.

About an hour later my mom stood up and put her empty tea mug on the lamp table. "Well, Rachel, it's been good catching up. And we'll talk a lot, but it's time Chase and I got home so we can get to bed. It's been a long day for us."

Rachel stood up as well and gave her a hug.

“Good night Debbie!” She said as we walked out. “And it was nice to meet you Chase!” she said, smiling.

My mom sighed contentedly as we walked back. “Well that was wonderful. I’m sorry if you were bored out of your mind. Maybe next time Nathan will stay around.”

I shrugged, and then jumped as my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a call. I scrambled to take it out, but then froze when I saw the name. Evan Morrow.

My mom glanced over. “You need to take that call?”

“No,” I said, hitting the power button to send it to voice mail. “It’s not important.”

Where the Heart Is
Chapter 3
Joe Bruner

My face felt warm, almost hot, and when I opened my eyes, sunlight was shining directly through the windows. Damn windows, I would have get out the curtains at some point, and before too long.

I stood up, and walked into my new personal bathroom. The view of the ocean from my shower was unbelievable. Opening the window, I listened to the constant wave crashes as I soaped up. The sun glinted off the curl of the waves, striking an odd contrast of white and blue in the water. As I dried myself off, my body dropped what felt like ten degrees when the wind breezed through the open window. I neatly draped my towel on the metal wrack on the sliding shower door, and walked over to the mirror. My comb lay on the counter, and as I flattened my hair, I noticed my eyes were a striking blue today. Sometimes they change from vivid blue to a dull bluish-grey. I wished they would just pick a color and stay that way, but Evan would always tell me they were so beautiful the way they are. A lump formed in my throat as I put the comb down and went back into my room to get dressed.

After getting as far as putting my pants on, I sighed, and sat down on my bed. The sight of my room depressed me. Boxes upon boxes were stacked against the walls. It would take me weeks, if not months to get through all of them. Some had been opened, books and newspaper and packing paper and wads of used tape all littered the floor. The walls were barren, an ugly off-white that showed off its cracks.

Finally I stood up and put my shirt on. I walked down stairs to the dining room. My mom was at the table with a plate of toast and cup of tea.

“Did you sleep well,” she asked, when I stumbled in.

“Yeah,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “The sun woke me up though. Where are the curtains?”

“Down here. I guess we didn’t think to put them up last night. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it later today. Do you want breakfast?”

I stared at the toast. “No, I’ll get food later when I’m hungry. I think I’m going to head out and walk around a bit.”

My mom seemed surprised, but she didn’t say anything.

I grabbed my sunglasses off the table and walked out. The fresh sea air was almost instantly rejuvenating. The sky was totally clear, and the hill our cottage was perched on a vibrant green. Standing at the top, I felt the freedom of the ocean in front of me, the sky above me, and the wind and waves calling out to me. I took a deep breath of the warm, salty air.

Taking my phone out of my pocket, I turned it on, and the first thing I saw was that Evan had apparently texted me after trying to call. *We need to talk...soon*. I grimaced and ignored it. I flipped through my contacts until I found Sarah Coyle. I hit the call button.

It rang twice before she picked up. “Chase! I’ve been waiting for you to call. How are you? What’s it like out there?”

I smiled at the sound of her voice. “It’s nice to hear you too,” I said. “This place is sweet, I’m not going to lie. Our cottage is quite literally on the shore.”

“That’s awesome. So you can, like, hear the ocean waves all night long and everything?”

“If I keep my windows open.” I could almost feel her excitement over the phone.

“That’s so cool. Look, I don’t know if you’ve heard from Evan at all—”

“He texted me last night.”

Silence. I sighed and waited. Slowly, I made my way to the beach, and trudged, one step at a time, through the sand.

“He did? ... What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

She sighed. “Are you going to say anything? Or are you going to continue this insistence that you don’t want to talk to him?”

The bitterness in her tone caught me off guard. I said nothing. I sat down on the sand and stared across the ocean, watching the waves crash in front of me, one after the other, never ending. I tried to swallow several times, before I succeeded.

“Hello? Chase? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I finally managed to whisper. “And for the record, I do.”

“You what?”

“I do want to talk to him. I want more than anything in the world to just sit and laugh and talk with him again.”

“You still love him.” She said it as a statement, not a question.

“I hate him. I hate him so much,” I whispered, a tear escaping me.

“But you also love him.”

I said nothing.

“Then what’s the fucking problem? He even texted you! He couldn’t have made it easier for you.”

“Easy? I am 600 miles away. I am not coming back. There is nothing easy about it. He had his chance. He missed it. It’s that simple.”

“Look, he finally made the move. Now the ball is in your court. You better make it before it’s too late.”

I shivered. Then I shook my head. “I’m done talking about this. I’ll talk when I’m ready. I’m not right now. That’s just the way it’s going to be. I need to go.”

“Alright then, good bye. I want to hear from you again soon.”

I simply hung up without saying anything. I chucked my iPhone into the sand and wrapped my arms around my bent legs.

“Things not going so great back at home?”

Nathan’s voice startled me a little, but I didn’t turn around. A moment later, he and Stella both sat down next to me.

“Moving is hard on everyone,” I said.

“I wish I could say I know,” Stella said.

I looked over at her. The blue highlights in her hair were quite vivid in the sunlight, and the way her hair spread over her shoulder was quite beautiful.

“No you don’t,” I said smiling. “I appreciate it though. The two of you have lived up here your whole lives?”

They both nodded.

“Born and raised here,” Nathan said matter-of-factly.

“Is it a good place to live?”

Nathan and Stella glanced at each other. “I say yes,” Nathan said. “It’s quiet, you get to know everyone – who is very friendly by the way – and you’ve pretty much got everything you could possibly want.”

“But don’t you get bored, without a big city nearby that you can just go to?” The thought of not having New York just minutes away still scared me.

“Psh, we’ve got the stars and the ocean,” was Nathan’s response.

I laughed.

“Who were you talking to on the phone?” Stella asked me.

I looked down at my hands clasped around my knees. “Just my old neighborhood friend, Sarah.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

I stood up, and brushed the sand off my shorts. “Not really. You know, I think I’ll go and get some breakfast. Have you two eaten yet?”

Section III

Semester Cultural Events

Visiting Writers Series ~ David Treuer

I particularly enjoyed this writer's event (both of them that we attended), in comparison to other VWS events that I have been to. In the Fiction Workshop II private Q&A session, it was interesting to learn about his take on his own writing, how he came to be a writer, and his transition on his writing. For example, it was interesting to learn that at the time he published his first novel, he thought it was an awesome thing that was some of the best writing he had ever done, and now, years later, he laughs at that notion, saying his writing has dramatically improved.

I loved hearing his stories about his time in school, and the rivalries he had with schoolmates/fellow writers. I thought it was interesting that he wasn't accepted to his writing program the first time he applied, but rather the second. So many times I've heard about writers getting publishing rejection letters, but I rarely hear about their educational experiences, which is what I'm presently going through. Of course, once he was accepted into the program he studied with Toni Morrison as his adviser, which is impressive, to say the least.

Finally, I enjoyed his thoughts on his transition from fiction to non-fiction writing. Having read a little bit of both in our class, I found it interesting I much preferred his non-fiction to his fiction (which perhaps makes sense, because the fiction was his first novel, which he didn't like very much now either).

Briefly about the presentation that night, I enjoyed it because it was so different than other readings that writers have given here. He didn't strictly stay with just reading from his memoir, but he would actively make comments, and share the stories that inspired related descriptions or moments in the novel, and he took it down a much more stream of consciousness route, which seemed to give it a more purposeful reason for going and listening to an author, rather than simply listening to something I could just read instead.

Night out at the Opera ~ Billy Budd

This is definitely one of the most impressive professional performances I have ever been to, if not the most impressive. From a writer's point of view, perhaps the most important thing from this night, was the reminder of what is possible from language even when it is not in the standard novel or memoir. Music is as much a language as words are, and the effect can be powerful when the two are used together. As I have told countless people, my favorite moment in the entire Opera was towards the very end, when Captain Vere (who is haunted by the memory of having to hang Billy Budd) comes out as an old man like he does at the beginning, and he just stands there at the front of the stage, standing at attention, while the hanging happens behind him, and music is sweeping and dramatic, speaking for the action and his own thoughts as well. The other striking moment for me in the Opera was the series of 34 chords, which is the conversation between Captain Vere and Billy Budd that the captain is telling Billy the verdict that he will be hung. In this adaption of the opera, you can see the two figures moving around on stage in very dim lights, and the music *is* the conversation between the two, with moods and reactions changing within the very music. It's incredibly powerful to see it live, more than anything else.

Visiting Writers Series ~ Senior Portfolios

Like last year, this event was amazing. The senior portfolios/capstones just blew me away, and I find it hard to believe that someday (soon) it might be me up there reading something of that caliber (hopefully!). Some of the seniors read professionally, and I was totally caught up in their stories. I particularly enjoyed the first senior, though technically it was also the last Redlands Review piece, about the Jewish family. The other senior I particularly enjoyed was the last senior; his performance of his piece was riveting. Having gone to this event twice now, the thing that I perhaps most strongly take away from it is the reminder that these students are people who tirelessly commit themselves to the craft, especially those who shined are students who put a tremendous amount of effort into the workshops, and they pushed, and continue to push themselves in the hopes of becoming better writers. It's inspiring, and is certainly something I would hope to get out of an event like this.