Several months ago, a ghost started following me around. I was returning home late one evening. I worked in a kitchen at a barbeque restaurant, and I often didn’t get out of there until one or two in the morning. That particular night was dark and damp, the black roads glistening like obsidian glass where the sparse streetlights cast their dim yellow glow. I didn’t sleep much, perhaps because of my unnatural waking hours, or perhaps due to my unnatural stress, which I always prided myself on being quite adept at managing. Maybe it was clinical.

I rounded a sharp corner in my neighborhood, entering into a circular patch of hazy light. Near the globe of the streetlamp, I noticed specks of moisture, seeming to be suspended in time, just hovering, unmoving. I looked back to the road and saw a figure in the distance, shrouded in darkness. I thought it was just a shadow, or maybe a young tree at the edge of someone’s yard. When I neared the shadow, I realized it was a person, a man. He started walking into the street. I pulled the steering wheel to avoid hitting him, but the man quickened his pace, almost like he was trying to get hit. My breath caught in my throat. I missed the man and made the left turn onto my street. My house was the second on the left. I pulled into the driveway, my tires sloshing through the standing water at the end of the driveway. I let out my breath, just realizing I had

Tony Ferrese – Honorable mention

Cruel Prison

_Echo (alas) that doth my sorrow rue,
Returns thereto a hollow sound of plaint._
_Thus I alone, where all my freedom grew,_
_In prison pine with bondage and restraint;_
_And with remembrance of the greater grief_
_To banish the less, I find my chief relief._

_Howard Henry, earl of Surrey – “So Cruel Prison…”_
been holding it, and, breathing heavily, looked out my window in the direction where the man had been. For a moment, I didn’t see the man; I began to think he was never there. I need to get some sleep. Then I saw him. He seemed to be facing me. He stood there, in the street, for a moment, and then he started running toward me.

I grabbed my keys, got out of the car in a hurry, and ran through the yard, soaking my shoes in puddles hidden in the overgrown grass. I forgot to leave the porch light on, so it took a couple tries to get the key in the knob, but I managed to get in and slam the door behind me—all without looking back at the man. I stood in the living room, back against the front door, for a moment. I went over to the window next to the door, pulled the curtain back, slightly enough to, hopefully, be undetectable from the outside. The man was standing on my front porch, looking at the door, no worry, no sadness, no frustration, no anger, no emotion at all on his face. He had a strange hue, like his whole body was made up of a very thin white curtain. I knew then that he was a ghost.

He was wearing old-looking clothes, the color undiscernible, and there were pins affixed to his shirt. He also had thick-soled boots on. I decided I would open the door; somewhere inside, I thought he wouldn’t actually be standing there, but he was.

“What do you want?” I said, through the cracked doorway, trying but failing to sound forceful.

“This land’s in bad decline,” he said, his voice like a movie trailer voiceover if the volume was turned way down.

There were a few seconds of silence, him seeming to be waiting for my next move, me waiting to wake up. My phone buzzed in my pocket. It made me flinch, but it brought my mind out of retreat. I caught a sudden whiff of barbeque sauce, hickory, and onion. I need to stop
wiping my hands on my shorts. Or start wearing an apron. The man was still standing there staring at me, his face unchanged.

“Okay,” I said, “but why are you on my porch?”

“It’s that damn Hitler,” he said.

“Oooh,” I said, nodding, as if I knew what the hell he was talking about. So, he’s nuts. At least he doesn’t seem like one of those dangerous, scary ghosts. “Okay, well,” I said, “I gotta go now. You have a good night.”

He still didn’t move. We looked at each other for second or two, before I slowly closed the door. Well, that was odd. I stood staring into space for a bit, wondering what just happened, until I started for my bedroom, my feet squishing in soggy shoes. After removing my wet shoes and socks, I sat down on the end of my bed, and my phone buzzed again. I took it out and saw I had two messages from Katie, my girlfriend of six months.

“I need to talk to you…” the first message read. “I think we need some time apart,” read the second.

I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. I knew it was coming. For almost six months, Katie and I saw each other every day, talked all the time, spent about every night together- in more ways than one- but for the last few days, we only texted. She said she was busy, that she needed to be home with her mom. Her father went through drinking benders, during which he could become abusive. She told me she was the only one he would listen to, the only one who could subdue his rage. I took her at her word. I texted her back. “What’s wrong? Did something happen? I’m just trying to understand,” I responded. Immediately, the little responding dots started doing their little wave, and shortly, her response popped up: “Let’s talk tomorrow, okay?” I plugged my phone in, set in on my nightstand, turned on the small lamp, and I fell onto my bed,
hoping sleep would eventually take me over, holding its grip despite the turbulence of the night, the heightened senses from that strange encounter, the adrenaline (from the encounter and from work), and the impending turmoil I felt so sure to come regarding Katie.

After a restless night, soothed by narrow windows of sleep, I awoke to find the ghost sitting on the end of my bed. Oddly, I wasn’t startled. He sat with his back to me, and when I started stirring, he simply glanced over his shoulder at me, quickly turning his head back forward. I grabbed my phone, just to reread the text exchange from the night before, just to make sure I didn’t read anything wrong, to make sure it actually happened. “I think we need some time apart?” I said aloud.

The ghost man, half-turned his head in my direction and said, “It’s that damn Hitler,” straightening his head forward just after the words filled the space between us.

“What are you doing here?” I said, rubbing the crust from the corner of my eyes. “And why? Why are you here?”

“The name’s George,” he said, without turning his head this time. He stood up and turned to face me. “Captain George Humphrey the third, US army,” he said, with a slight nod, “and thanks for askin’.” Then, he turned away and walked through the closed door, exiting my room. Weird. I realized I only had a couple hours before I had to be at work (my shift started at two), so I thought I should start getting ready (I was always at least half an hour early, the idea being that I could smoke some cigarettes, maybe make myself some food, get a head start on figuring out what the day would look like, business/prep-wise, but, usually, I just ended up jumping on the line and helping, usually forgetting to clock-in).

While showering—the warm water washing away not only the grease and grime from the restaurant but the fog in my mind, the coddling cloud of steam clearing my sinuses, refreshing
my senses—I was thinking, obsessively, about what the conversation with Katie would be like. I didn’t know what was going on with her, where her head was at; I only knew that I didn’t want to let her go. I wondered what magic words I could say to her to not only make her feel better, whatever was troubling her, but also keep us together. A knock at the bathroom door jerked me from my thoughts.

“Joe,” my roommate called out. “Joe, can you hear me?”

“Yeah, man,” I said, “what’s up?”

“You almost done?” he asked. “I’m about to head out. I’m gonna try to play a quick nine before my shift at six.”

“Okay,” I said, trying to keep the shampoo out of my eyes. “Where are you going? Are you going by yourself?”

“No,” he said, “Brian’s coming with me. He said he would meet me at the golf course after he picks up some balls. We’re going to Legend Oaks.”

Brian was the Kitchen Manager before I got promoted. He left for another job at a chain restaurant that he said paid more money. Before he left for good, Brian told me if I ever wanted to leave, just give him a call, and he would have a spot for me at his new job. I hadn’t spoken to him since he left, but I guessed he would make space for me if I ever did decide to quit. It was always good to have a backup plan.

“Okay, cool,” I said. I missed playing golf with my roommate; Robbie wasn’t very good, but he was good company. I didn’t have as much free time as I used to, having been promoted to Kitchen Manager a little while back. Robbie and I worked together for a couple years before we found this little house to rent. We talked a lot after work, often standing in the parking lot, carrying on a conversation that we thought would be a short, passing thing, until an hour or more
passed. Then we started hanging out together at each other’s apartments, talking, playing chess, drinking, smoking. He was a good roommate. We hadn’t hung out together for a while, girlfriends and all, and we hadn’t played golf together for months.

“Also,” he said, “I just wanted to remind you… the internet bill is due this Friday. The water bill is due next week.”

“I know,” I said. “I just got my check yesterday. I’ll try to deposit it before work today, so I should be able to give you the money in a day or two. Thanks for heads up.” Despite my promotion to kitchen manager, I still lived paycheck to paycheck. I was used to it, but it still proved problematic whenever bills came due on certain days between paychecks.

“No, problem,” he said. “See you at six.”

Robbie was gone when I got out of the shower, but George was back. The ghost was sitting at our tiny, wooden dining table set off to the side of the kitchen. In the sunlight pouring through the kitchen window, George looked almost transparent, almost glowing; he looked like he was the one with steam radiating from his body.

“Hey, George,” I said.

“Joe,” he said, lifting his right hand from the table, pretending (I guess) he was raising a mug or something to his mouth, “It’s Joe, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Hey, Joe,” he said, and he pointed to my laptop sitting across the table. “What’s that?”

“That’s my computer,” I said. I walked over to the table, sat down, and opened my laptop. “Check it out.”

George got up, walked over, and watched over my shoulder. As soon as the screen powered on, George gasped.
“A lot has changed in the world, George,” I said. I started clicking around, trying to think of the most important functions to succinctly display the range of computer capabilities for George. I opened the internet, but George didn’t seem to grasp what it meant, granted it was just an empty Google search screen. I opened a spreadsheet, sent to me by Robbie, showing our due dates and amounts. Finally, I opened my email. “See,” I said, “It’s kinda hard to explain. Computers do so much. They’re pretty much a requirement in life these days.”

“Are you,” he said, “some kind of spy?”

“Of course not,” I said. “Do I look like a spy?”

“Well, no,” he said. “But I don’t like the look of this machine.” He stood up very straight, began rubbing his forehead with his right palm. “Be careful there, Joe,” he said. “This could be a propaganda machine. That damn Hitler. He’ll try anything, anything, I tell ya. He’s always trying to get into the minds of the masses.” He leaned over to get eye-level with me. “That’s how it all started you know? Eventually, he brainwashed enough people so he could do whatever he wanted. Then it was too late…” He turned toward the window, slowly shook his head, and put his hands behind his back, gripping one wrist. “We should’ve seen it coming,” he said. “Once it grew so big, the good people left in Germany couldn’t stop it. That’s why we had to go in there…” He sounded pained by the memories.

“George,” I said, “you know the war’s over, right?”

“Sure, kid,” he said. “Whatever you say.”

“I’m serious,” I said. “I can show you.” I began the process of proving my point with hard evidence, by way of Google, but as soon as I started typing, George interrupted.

“And…” he said, retaking his place over my shoulder, “how am I supposed to believe anything that comes out of that damn Hitler machine?”
“Okay, George,” I said, “but, I’m telling you, the war’s over. Hitler’s dead.”

“Pfff,” he exhaled, looking incredulous, and backed away from me, as though I was stricken with the Spanish flu. “No way, kiddo,” he said, “but he will be. Once I figure out how to get at him. Everyone should be trying. Everyone should be paying attention.”

I closed my computer and got up from the table. “I need to get ready for work, now,” I said. “You just,” I paused, not knowing what else to say. “You just keep doing whatever it is that you do.”

George sat back down at the table and pretended drink from his invisible mug. I left him sitting there and finished getting ready to leave.

Sometimes, most often, really, I hated my job, but there were a couple things I liked about it. I liked that I was really good at it. I liked the feeling after the dinner rush, after digging us out of the weeds. I hated the low hours after that high spent exhaustively cleaning and tearing everything down. I was also the last person to leave, being that I had to check everything, release everyone else, put everything away, mark inventory, write notes for the incoming opener, and other stuff like that. Basically, every day I decided I would quit my job, but by the end of the day, I went from I hate this, I’m out to this isn’t so bad, it’s kind of fun sometimes. Rinse and repeat, day in day out. It was a little more tolerable after getting together with Katie.

Katie was the shift manager, the ‘floor manager’, for the front of the house, the wait staff. When I started working at the restaurant, Katie was engaged. I got the sense she was sort of pursuing me after a while. She would make comments, sexual innuendos and the like, and I would respond reminding her that she was engaged. One night, after lots of drinking, we were playing pool at a bar. She turned up the charm, and I was weak. I couldn’t resist anymore. We
ended up sleeping together in her car—her mother’s car, actually. That night she called me and told me that she wanted to be with me.

“You’re engaged,” I said.

“I know,” she said, her sweet diminutive voice piercing my resolve. “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“Listen,” I said, “I don’t want to break up anyone’s relationship. I don’t want to be the guy who brings chaos and confusion. I’m about happy and fun. You need to figure out what you want to do. Honestly, if I thought your relationship was gonna work, I might have been better at avoiding you.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, and I could hear her grin through the phone, “sure you would’ve.”

“Whatever,” I said, trying to conceal my own grin. “I think you should tell your fiancé, or at least break off the engagement.”

“I don’t know what to do,” she said. “He’s gonna be so upset.”

“But it needs to be done,” I said. “If we just, you know, hooked up, there must be a reason. You must know that you weren’t ready to be with that guy. Or that he wasn’t the right guy. You just need to follow your heart.” The lingering silence after I finished speaking was palpable. I could almost feel it in my mouth.

“What if my heart tells me to follow you?” she said.

I wasn’t expecting that one; it caught me off guard, but I’ll never forget what I said next. “There is a difference between your heart and your head,” I said. “You need to think hard about which one you’re hearing. I am just your out. Your heart told you that you needed out of that relationship, your head takes control to keep your heart safe. Anyone would look good right now, anyone that would help your mind find a reason to abandon your engagement. I think you should
get out of that relationship. Take some time for yourself. Clear the confusion between your heart and your head. I don’t think you should jump straight into seeing someone new.”

“I think you’re wrong,” she said. “I want you. I’ve known it for a while.”

“I think you want the idea of me,” I said. “What’s gonna happen in a couple months when you realize that you don’t really like me after all, that I was just a way out?”

“I don’t think that’s gonna happen.”

The problem for me was, though I tried my damnedest to protect myself, I let myself fall for her too much during our six-months together.

As I was getting in my car to head to work that day, Robbie texted me. He said he was waiting for Brian to show up at the golf course, and also, “by the way”, he wanted to remind me to deposit my check, again telling me that I can do it from my phone. I still didn’t trust making phone deposits. I told him I was headed to the ATM right now, though I had actually forgotten. Finally, he wrote, “OK cool. Hey, did you hear about what happened in Virginia yesterday? It’s all over the news at the clubhouse. Somebody got run over by a car. It was some kind of protest, I think.” I responded that I didn’t hear about it, but that I had enough to worry about in my own life.

I had to get out of my car at the ATM; I never pull close enough to reach. After depositing my check, I got back in the car and saw George in my rearview mirror. He was looking at the ATM. He glanced at the mirror, making eye contact with me, then slowly shook his head. Neither of us said anything on the way to work. Probably, we both had a lot on our minds.

I was at work for about an hour before Katie started her shift. She had a new employee waiting for Katie to arrive, walk her around, introduce her to everyone, give her the rundown of
the restaurant procedures, and so on. I hadn’t talked to Katie yet. We barely even made eye contact. I had just finished making an order (I was still by myself on the line for another hour, besides the prep guy in the back), when Katie and the new girl appeared on the other side of the line. Katie introduced her as Tara. Tara was really pretty. She was short, with short, shiny dark-brown hair that looked like it could have been featured in a commercial for hair products, and she had a cute smile that stopped just beyond one crooked canine tooth, somehow adding to the cuteness.

“Welcome to Heavenly Pork, Tara,” I said, with a little bow.

“Hey,” she said, and immediately looked down, toward the plates sitting under the heat lamp.

I pushed the plates farther in their direction. “These are going to table twenty-four,” I said, and when Tara reached for the plates, I grabbed her arm just above the wrist. “Just a word of caution,” I said, and I leaned as far into the window as possible without burning my face on the red tube of heat hovering just over the shelf. “Do not eat the pork,” I said, staring dead into Tara’s eyes, at least until she looked away. I let her arm go and nodded sincerely.

She lowered her brow and almost frowned. “Is something wrong with it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but, sometimes, I get very tired after eating only a few ounces of it. Just be careful, is all I’m saying.”

“Duly noted,” Tara said, a nervous smile sneaking across her face.

“Oh, Shut up, Joe,” Katie said, grabbing the last plate from the window. “You’ll get used to him. He’s funny, once you realize he doesn’t mean most of what he says.” She narrowed her eyes in my direction, which I took for playful. “Come, on,” she said to Tara, “let’s go drop these off, and I’ll get you set up in the computer.”
“Wait,” I called out, too loudly, “one more thing. If anyone offers you a taco, don’t eat it.” We had a tradition of making tacos out of the printer paper, fried in egg wash and seasoned batter, stuffed with pulled pork and tangy barbecue sauce, topped with lettuce, cheddar, and diced tomatoes. They looked really good. They tasted pretty good, too. A couple of the guys that worked on the line would be upset to know that I just ruined that prank for them.

There were no orders, so, after taking a quick lap around the restaurant to see if there were new tables, I decided to take a smoke break. On the way out, I yelled to the prep guy to come get me if he heard a ticket coming in; the printer was super loud, like a dial-up internet connection or an old fax machine. I went out behind the restaurant and into the dumpster area, which was surrounded by a fence and butted up against the back wall of the building. I had a ladder set up against the wall, so I could climb up onto the roof. The roof of the building was flat, covered in some sort of white plastic-like material, with big metal boxes sitting in random spots, some were air conditioning units, some for ventilation. The front of the building had a wall that rose to my chest, which hid the equipment on the roof. That wall was why I always went on the roof. The building sat just off a busy, four-lane road next to a large intersection with traffic lights. I often stood there, overlooking the street, not really watching but looking at the traffic. That day, I thought about Katie. I didn’t feel bad about it yet. It just seemed like she needed some time to think, but I didn’t feel like I did anything wrong. She didn’t seem upset, or anything. Maybe she was confused, or maybe there was something going on at home. I would eventually ask her all these questions, but not that day. That day, we barely spoke, but when we did it was light and pleasant, although a little awkward.

When I turned around to head back inside, I saw George sitting on one of the A/C units. He was pretending to smoke a cigarette.
“Hey, George,” I said.

“Joe.”

“What are you doing here, George?” I asked.

“What’s it look like?” he said, never turning in my direction. “I’m smoking. I miss smoking, Joe.” He took a long drag from an invisible cigarette and exhaled a little too dramatically. He looked over at me and said, “I miss coffee even more,” and then he stared into the distance almost wistfully, slightly shaking his head.

“I have to go back inside now,” I said, starting for the ladder.

“See you later,” he said. “I’ll just stay out here a while, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Okay,” I said, “see ya.” I didn’t see George for more than a week after that.

That week was tough. I was at work most of my life. I was able to give Robbie my portion of the bills, although it was a little late due to my forgetfulness. The only other person at the restaurant that worked as much as me was Katie. Our relationship, or lack thereof, was becoming all-consuming for me. People started noticing. One of the waiters told me Katie was seeing someone else, a roommate of one of the bartenders. I didn’t really believe him. For one, Katie said it wasn’t true. But I also kind of did believe him.

I talked to Robbie a lot about Katie. Actually, our conversations had become mostly centered on Katie, things I said, things she said, what I would say next. Robbie mostly listened, sometimes offering to talk to her, sometimes helping me work out what I was thinking and doing. Usually, though, he just aligned himself with however I was feeling that day. If I seemed like I was ready to move on, tired of being confused, Robbie would jump on board, offering ideas for how I should move on. If I seemed like I thought I was on the verge of a breakthrough
with Katie, Robbie would agree that he could see those signals, too. This went on for two months.

Some days Katie was playful and flirty. Some days I was those things, too. Other days she was really distant, and I was a mix of frustration and sadness, or both, often racking my brain to find the right combination of words or actions to either win her back or figure out whether it was actually over. It was like a period of purgatory, in which I didn’t know whether I would come out up or down, single or in a relationship. Sometimes I would pretend I didn’t care, figuring I should just be the old jokey, fun, free-spirited self that drew her to me in the first place, whether that meant ignoring her or not, which sometimes attracted Katie and sometimes seemed to attract Tara.

Occasionally, some combination of my words or actions seemed to work, which I interpreted based on the infrequent days that she would come home with me for a sleepover. Those hook-ups made everything more confusing. They never changed anything. I would think, “Okay, things are looking up,” but then she wouldn’t talk to me for a day or two. Or, she would act like it didn’t mean anything, despite her looking down into my eyes as she straddled me, saying that she loved me between lusty breaths.

On the days I decided I was done playing whatever game Katie and I were playing, I started to grow more and more attracted to Tara, who seemed eager to talk to me, having quickly gotten over her initial shyness, often inviting me to hang out with her at a bar, a house party, wherever her and one of her friends from the restaurant were going. Usually, I felt bad right away, though, still feeling like it wasn’t over with Katie, even during the days-long stretches when Katie seemed happy, laughing and flirting with other guys at work, never even talking to me.
On a particularly infuriating day, Katie only spoke to me in short, almost mean sarcastic comments. At the end of the shift, I met her in the office in the back of the restaurant.

“What’s going on with you?” I said.

“What’s going on with you?” she replied, focusing on the money she was counting.

“Nothing’s going on with me,” I said. “You’re the one who seems to have an issue. Are you mad at me or something?”

“No,” she said, as if she had no idea what I was talking about; it occurred to me in that moment that maybe she didn’t.

I brought up a few of the comments I took offence to, and she said, “I was being facetious.” I told her I needed to do something really quick, that I would be back in a bit, and she said that was good because we really should talk. I actually left the room to look up the word ‘facetious’, just to make sure I had all the facts before I kept talking. When I went back to the office, she told me it would have to wait. I finished cleaning the kitchen with Robbie, and then I went out to the roof to smoke. Afterwards, I checked back in with Katie.

“What’s up?” she said.

“You said we should talk,” I said.

“You seem to want to talk,” she said, “so talk.”

So, I did. In that tiny office covered in stacks of papers, her sitting in the one chair at a desk attached to a wall, me standing just inside the door, the only open space available, I told her all about how I felt. I told her I was so confused, that I thought we were good, that we had something special, which she said so herself all the time, and I told her my perspective on things, that one day we were blissfully together and the next we were hopelessly distanced.
“How am I supposed to feel when you tell me you love me,” I said, “you know, looking right into my eyes?”

“I meant it,” she said.

“Well, then,” I said, “what are we doing?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“You don’t know?” I asked. “Well, what do you know?” I figured it was her turn to lead in this little dance.

“I know I care about you,” she said, “and that I value our friendship.”

“Are you scared?” I asked. “I know it might be scary, especially considering your family, but when you find something good, someone good, you need to fight for it.” I paused, and she continued to stare into my eyes with an unreadable expression. “If you find someone who might be the one for you,” I said, “it would be a shame to let it slip away because you are afraid of your feelings.”

After a brief pause, me thinking I was nailing this conversation, her looking at me with soft eyes that could mean longing or pity, she said, “What if you’re not?”

“What if you’re not ‘the one’,” she said, softly, finally breaking eye contact.

That took me by surprise. The only thing I could come up with quickly enough was: “What are you saying?”

“Remember when we first started dating,” she said, “and you told me I might just be confused? I needed to listen to my heart instead of my head?”

“I remember,” I said.
“And you said I was just trying to get out of that relationship, and I should take some time to figure out what I really want? Well, that’s what I’m doing now.”

I don’t remember what I said next, only that the conversation went a few minutes longer. I just remember that I felt both the world collapsing on my shoulders as well as some twisted relief. I went outside to smoke again and found Robbie sitting by the back door. We went up to the roof, and I told him all about the conversation. For the first time in several years, I was on the verge of tears. My voice started trembling as I got to the part about her valuing my friendship, and even more when I got to the part about me not being the one, her tossing my own words back at me, like a grenade. Robbie got up from the A/C unit we were sitting on and hugged me. It was the first time he ever hugged me, and I felt awkward and pathetic. I looked up from Robbie’s shoulder and saw George standing a few feet away from us. Robbie let me go and took a step back.

“Stay out here as long as you need, man,” he said. “I’ll finish putting stuff away for you.”

I just nodded and let him leave. Once Robbie was down the ladder, George approached, stopped about a foot in front of me and leaned over a little.

“How old are you, Joe?” he said.

“Twenty-five,” I said, refusing to look up at him, even though he was only mere inches from my face.

“Pfff,” he exhaled, the noise startling me into eye contact with him, “You know what I was doing at twenty-five?”

I looked at him for a few seconds, waiting for him to continue, thinking it a rhetorical question.

“Well, do ya?” he asked.
“No,” I said, and he stopped leaning forward, looking large and looming standing in front of me, the moonlight seeming to brighten his glowing aura on that cloudless night.

“Neither do I,” he said, confidently and with pride, as if he just blew my mind, and then he walked away and climbed down the ladder; I got his point, and it almost seemed like he was trying to help, though it didn’t seem very helpful.

I was left alone, with the stillness of the night sky, the bright stars and shining moon, with the sound of cars, their tires rapidly rolling along the road.

The next couple months were full of ups and downs. I was still back and forth about whether to let go of Katie, whether I wanted her, loved her, or hated her, or whether she needed me to be there for her. Mostly, though, we didn’t talk much, aside from cordial work-related stuff, friendly banter, or the occasional jokes, every so often reminiscent of good times between us. As we became more distant, and she seemed to be clearly getting on with her life, I started to like Tara more and more. Eventually, she convinced me to go to a house party thrown by one of the waiters. That night Tara and I kissed. It was late, or very early, depending on how you look at it. For the first time in a while, I felt good, even feeling some butterflies. Word spread quickly through the restaurant rumor mill, and a few days later, Katie texted me, telling me she wanted to meet me at a bar before work.

At the bar, she had ordered my beer of choice before I arrived. I wasn’t in the habit of drinking before work, but what the hell. She sat there looking grave, and the small talk ceased rather abruptly. She seemed angry, bitter. She told me she heard about me and Tara.

“That’s messed up,” she said.

“What’s messed up about it?” I said, and I took a long swig of my beer. “I thought we were done.”
“You know what I mean,” she said.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” I said. “You seem to be doing okay. I heard you’ve been out having a good time.”

“Not at work,” she said. “I wouldn’t do that to you. I don’t want to see that. It’s messed up.”

“Look,” I said, “I don’t know what you want from me. I don’t do anything besides work. Where else am I supposed to meet someone? Tara is cool.”

“Do you like her?” she said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Sure. I like her. We only just started hanging out.”

“Okay, well,” she said, “please don’t date anyone at work. I wouldn’t put you through that, and I hope you won’t put me through it either.”

Then she got up and left, her drink untouched and mine half gone.

The conversation made me feel horrible. I fought against the feeling that maybe she was coming back around, that maybe seeing me with someone else got her attention, though that wasn’t my intention. For a few days, I started distancing myself from Tara, she started being blunt and almost rude to Tara, and nothing got better between Katie and me. I started feeling trapped, like there was nothing I could do but work. I felt alone, sad, and, too often, angry. As the days passed, I started opening back up to Tara; I couldn’t avoid her, plus I really did start to like her a lot. One day, Tara and I were flirting, and Katie became visibly frustrated, more with each passing hour of the day. Finally, she yelled at me for something. Some inaccurate order or something. I broke and yelled back at her, telling her to leave me alone. She told me she could get me fired, and I screamed at her not to fuck with my job; I said it was one thing to tear my
heart but another to take away my livelihood. After the blowout, I went out behind the restaurant to cool off. I paced around for a bit, until Tara came outside.

“Was that because of me?” she asked. “I know you and Katie used to date.”

“No,” I lied, “Katie’s just crazy.”

“Yeah,” she said, looking down at her hands, her right fingers coyly gripping her left, one after the other. “If you need anything, let me know, okay?” She turned and went back inside without waiting for a response.

I went up to the roof, hoping the cool air, the steady hum of traffic, would calm me down. I got to the wall overlooking the street, and I heard someone clearing their throat behind me. It was George.

“Hey, Joe,” he said, and I simply nodded. “You all right?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I just feel stuck. I feel trapped. I don’t know what I’m gonna do. I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

George looked at me, crossed his arms, then uncrossed them. He swayed a bit, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Finally, he spoke.

“You know how you keep asking me why I’m here?” he said, and this time he didn’t wait for my response. He shook his head back and forth. “I don’t know what I’m doing either, kiddo. It’s that damn Hitler. That’s all I know.”

“George,” I said, suddenly feeling bad for him, the poor guy, being some lost soul tormented by the haunted past. “I told you, Hitler’s dead. I promise it’s true.”

He took a deep breath and turned to look out over the street. “That may be so,” he said, “but it’s not just about the man. The past carries on within us, something we’re supposed to learn from. You. Me. Everyone.” He waved his arms, like performing a breaststroke, over the wall as
he said everyone. “Don’t think of your life now with regrets. Just remember there’s really no such thing as mistakes. Not really. They’re just things we’ve done, decisions we’ve made, things for us to learn from.” He put his elbows up on the wall, and we stood there in silence for a few minutes.

As I watched the cars rolling through the intersection, I suddenly noticed them, the freedom I once associated with driving, the world whizzing by as I went wherever I wanted. George seemed to be watching them, too. I began to feel a sort of connection with George, like we were somehow going through something together. George started speaking again, as if he never stopped.

“I thought I needed to kill Hitler,” he said. “I thought I would be free if only I could get at that damn Hitler.”

“Maybe it’s something else,” I said, “something you just haven’t found yet.”

“No,” he said, backing away from the wall and turning toward me, “it’s Hitler, all right. It makes no difference that he’s dead, Joe. Nobody truly matters. It’s ideas that matter, ideas that live on. Something has to be done about it.” He put his hands behind his back, clasping one wrist with one hand and started rocking from the ball of his foot to the heel.

“I don’t think I can help you, George,” I said, “if that’s what you’re getting at. I can’t even figure out my own life.”

He stopped rocking and stood looking at me for a moment. Then, he turned back to the street. We stood there for a good five minutes, soaking in the soothing silence, the consistent white noise of the cars gliding along the asphalt. Then, George stepped back from the wall, and I turned to face him.

“Well, anyway,” he said, “you need to do something about it.”
“Yeah,” I said, as he was walking away. He was almost to the other end of the roof, where the ladder was propped against the wall, when the thought occurred to me.

“Wait,” I said, “you mean my thing or your thing?”

George never turned back. He said, “I’ll be seeing ya, Joe,” and kept walking. He walked past the roof, continuing into the air, as if the roof were still underfoot. He kept walking, hovering over the parking lot, until he gradually disappeared. I never saw George again, but as I stood there, more confused than ever, some clarity began to emerge. That night I decided I would quit my job. I would call Brian in the morning to see if he still wanted me to come work with him. Plus, maybe it would be easier to see what unfolded with Tara with some distance from that job. Maybe it would be a mistake. Maybe I wasn’t ready to let go of Katie. Maybe I would hate working at the chain restaurant. Either way, perhaps George was right. I had to do something.