“The Fort”

The screaming started right after the silent dinner. Jerry’s father, Harold, had come home, dropped his briefcase at the door without a word, and gone straight to the dining room table, where he sat, staring at the empty place mat in front of him, his jaw muscles flexing, his sinewy neck taut, and his face blotched with color. Jerry’s mother, Maggie, put full plates at each of the three settings and slipped into her chair, refusing to look across the table at her seething husband. Jerry’s gaze alternated between his parents as though he were watching a tennis match, waiting for one of them to say something, anything. He was disappointed, but not surprised, when neither did. Silverware scraped against china as they mechanically chewed and swallowed their food, more biological necessity that had to be endured than family time to be enjoyed. When Maggie finished her meal, she took her plate to the kitchen and did not return. Jerry pictured an oversized thermometer on his father’s forehead, the red line of mercury pushing higher as he forced forkfuls of food with increasing vigor into his mouth, chewing like an African predator on the savannah. Finally Harold could endure it no longer. He pushed his plate away from him, leapt up, and stormed into the kitchen. Jerry still had some mashed potatoes and a few bites of pot roast to finish, so he sat and ate alone as his parents shouted at each other. He tried to block out the noise.

As the pitch of the argument increased, as expletives exploded like depth charges and the sobbing began, Jerry left his unfinished meal and retreated to his room. He had done this before, lately with greater frequency. He had a routine. He pulled the Batman sheet off his bed, anchored one corner on the top of his desk with a model brass cannon his father had bought him when they visited Gettysburg on a family vacation and the other corner with a geode, with glistening white

and purple crystals in the interior of a gray, stony crust, a memento of another trip to a cave close to where they lived. He pulled the sheet so it stretched away from the desk and draped the other side across the top of a straight back, cane bottom chair. The rest of the sheet would sag down on each side, creating a canopy for his fortress. He would then select an armful of books from his shelves, grab a pillow from his bed, a flashlight from his nightstand, and retreat beneath the desk. Once he was comfortably seated, the light clicked on, the first book opened on his lap, he was safe. He didn't hear the plate shatter. He didn't hear her crying, or when she slammed the door to her pottery studio. He didn't hear his father stomp down the hall, punch the wall, and throw open the door to his office. He didn't hear any of that — the dog barking in the neighbor's yard, the phone ringing, the siren of the fire truck racing to an emergency.

He was already in another world. Tonight, as his parents' marriage unraveled further, he was the captain of a pirate ship, tossing and pitching in the roil of the high seas. He licked the salty ocean spray on his lips, blinking in the sun as he shouted orders to his crew. They had been disabled by a fusillade of Royal Navy cannon fire, their foremast shattered, their rigging shot through with holes. They could not escape, but they would not be captured and subjected to brutal British law without a fight.

"We are being boarded, maties!" he yelled above the surge of the waves and the roar of artillery blasts. "Fight like savages, but die, if you must, like men!"

The grappling hooks were cast over the gunwales and the two vessels were pulled to each other. Men swung over on ropes. They came with pistols, fierce knives, and cordage hatchets, screaming battle cries. Jerry drew his sword, with gold hilt and blade engraved in Latin with a prayer for victory, the booty of some wealthy victim of his piracy. It flashed in the sun for a dramatic moment before it descended into the melee of flesh and weapons and blood, washed in

brine on the rolling deck. Jerry hacked and parried, thrust and shouted, fending off everyone with a uniform, coming to the aid of everyone else.

He had been in battle before, as a knight on crusade to liberate Jerusalem from the infidels, as an infantryman who scrambled from landing craft to Omaha beach before he was machine gunned by the Germans, as a hoplite warrior in ancient Greece fighting Persians. He had fought through the centuries for reasons noble and those less so. But his favorite battles were on the sea. He loved the romance of the swashbuckling adventures he had on both sides of the law. He was Blackbeard, and he was Admiral Nelson. On other days he was a private investigator, a safari leader, a king over distant realms. Sometimes he was a brain surgeon and other times a rodeo champion. He traveled across deserts on camels and explored forgotten civilizations. In none of these worlds were there ugly words, accusations, or strained marriages, just quests for gold, voyages, and thrilling escapades. In these places he was an emperor, a ninja, an astronaut, not a frightened child under his desk.

After he fought off the best of the British Navy and sailed into the sunset to pillage and pirate another day, he closed his book. The house was still. He poked his head out from under the sheet and inched from his hiding place. The grandfather clock down the hall tocked, reminding him it was late. He did not search for his parents. He just dutifully brushed his teeth, slid beneath his thick comforter, and turned off the T. Rex lamp beside his bed.

The next morning his mother roused him early. Wiping the sleep from his eyes, he grabbed a book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, from his desk and stumbled down to the breakfast table. His father was already there, reading the financial pages, scraping butter and jam on hard toast.

One bite and he shouted, “Damn, Maggie. Don’t you even know how to make toast? It’s real easy, you know. Just take a piece of bread,” dangling the toast between two fingers, talking as a parent to a slow child, “then you put it in the toaster, like this,” moving it down, “then you push the lever…”

“Bastard,” she whispered.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. Just eat your breakfast.”

Jerry was floating down the Mighty Mississippi with Jim, the muddy water buoying his log raft as he poled his way down the river, far away from Pap and the slave shackles.

“Purty nice day, ain’t it, Jim?” Jerry as Huck asked his imaginary partner. “Beats getting sivilized, don’t it?” He closed his eyes and felt the warmth on his cheeks. He swayed with the current, imagining what it would be like to be free in Indian Territory.

“Huck?” Jim said, stretched out on the raft, his knees bent and his hands behind his head, basking in the sun. “Jerry?” a strange word on his lips.

“Jerry? Do you hear me?” his father shouted, shaking him from his nineteenth-century reverie. He blinked into awareness, lowered his book and stared at his father.

“Do you have any idea what I have been saying to you?”

Jerry slowly shook his head.

“Give me that,” his father said, grabbing the book from him, flipping it over to see the cover. “You and your silly stories. It’s probably your mother’s influence,” his gaze cutting over to Maggie. “Never too young to read the stock quotes, if you have to read anything. That’s all I’m saying.” He pitched the book in the garbage bin near the table. “We’d all be happy if you read less and contributed more to this family,” he said, his eyes never leaving the newspaper.

Jerry blinked back tears. And something began to rise in his chest. It was emotion, but it was more than emotion; it was resolve. In books he found beauty, goodness, mystery, exploits, and universes of possibility. In this house he only knew heartache and fights about bills, the same people, the same furniture, and the same arguments. He chose books over that. Just ink, paper, and words, but how magnificent they were! They built a place where he wanted to live. *Just time-wasting fantasies*, his father would say. But how could the world of smog and misunderstanding be any more real than the places and experiences conjured in his imagination? Did they not both exist, one made of thought and the other of mass and volume? And were the planets and kingdoms in his mind not more enjoyable, more perfect, preferable to what he endured when he was not reading? They were, so he decided his life would be lived in books.

With this resolution, he drew further and further into these little portals of escape. His parents were too consumed with their own problems to give much thought to how their son spent his time. An involved parent would have encouraged him to spend a few hours outside, playing sports, breathing fresh air. He should have been encouraged to make friends, join clubs, go on hikes. Instead, he was left alone. When his mother was able to look beyond her own concerns to see him, she was pleased he was reading. He could have been vandalizing, smoking, and fighting; she knew reading was a healthy alternative. At least he wouldn't be the cretin her husband was. His father, on the other hand, did not give him even this little thought. His mind was on his sales figures, his board meetings, his golf outings, and his crumbling marriage. The result was a young man who lived almost entirely in the fabulously opulent landscape of his mind.

The summer after Jerry graduated from high school, two months before he was to begin university, his parents divorced.

"It's not you, Jerry. We both still love you very much," she would try to explain. "It's just that sometimes moms and dads learn that they can be happiest and love you best when they live in different places. Nothing can change our commitment to you."

He appreciated what she was trying to do — assure him of her love even as she was leaving a desperate and miserable situation — but he had witnessed the way they expressed their supposed affection for each other over the past several years and found it difficult to believe her.

His first Christmas home from college was split between them, his mother in their house and his father, with a young new girlfriend, in his apartment on the other side of town. His mother hid her melancholy under a thin façade of holiday cheer. She seemed genuinely happy to see him, to somehow restore a measure of normalcy to her life. While his parents were together, she was distracted by the conflict. With Harold elsewhere, she could focus on Jerry and their relationship. She made plans for them to go to a museum together, to go out for coffee and chat. But he could not see her as anyone other than a pastiche of fictional mothers, good and bad, that he was intimately more familiar with. She was distant and indulgent, repentant, artistic and hurt, and Jerry could point to dozens of books in which the mother characters acted the same way. That part of his heart that connected him to his parents had turned to concrete during the terror of their incessant fighting, and he couldn't see either of them any longer as actual flesh-and-blood people. They were literary types.

When he met his father before he returned to campus, Harold's perky girlfriend giggled to fill the silence, kept popping up to refill drink glasses and spoon out additional portions. The conversation was limited to pleasantries and questions about school, the sort of meaningless chatter more appropriate between strangers than a father and his son.

"So how's the football team at State?" his father inevitably asked.

"Fine, I guess," was Jerry's answer. "I don't really go to football games."

"No? Why not? I know you weren't much of an athlete, but you should at least go to the games. Get out of the library, eat a hotdog, cheer the home team. You know, the old college Rah, Rah!"

Jerry shrugged, pushed food around his plate. The girlfriend giggled.

"So what are you going to major in?" his father asked, trying to change topics and find something that would provoke interest in discussion.

"Literature," Jerry said. There was a glint of fire in his eyes, but he did not launch into further explanation or justification.

"Literature?" his father said, concerned. "What are you going to do with that? Be an English teacher? It's hard to support a family on that salary. You really ought to go with something like business or engineering, something stable, something that will keep a roof over your head."

Jerry saw the templates of characters from Dickens and Balzac laid over his father's words. As he spoke, Jerry didn't hear his actual, flawed father give a word of advice, intending to help, based on the accidents of his experiences; instead, he heard passages from novels and short stories echoed, of avarice, selfishness, and condescension. He heard familiar tropes, of self-absorbed salesmen who ran off with younger women, of failed husbands who desperately tried to hold onto their role as father, who tried to atone for past sins, even as they committed others. He had met this man before between the covers of books.

Jerry was relieved when the New Year arrived and he was able to return to campus. He was definitely classified as an intellectual among the many student categories that existed. Matriculation required that you fit into one group or another. You were a jock, a member of an

ethnic group, a hippie, a Greek, or a brain. He was in the latter class. He largely kept to himself, though, content with his books. His nickname was Don, as in Quixote, the "gently mad" reader of romance novels who struck out on the Spanish plain with his infinitely patient and accommodating sidekick, Sancho Panza, in search of the adventure he knew from his books. He had no squire — an only child of divorced parents was used to being alone — and no skinny nag, no lance and no pot for his head. But he was still a modern Quixote, idealistic, his mind formed completely by ideas, not experience.

On the verge of graduation, he had given no thought to life in the world beyond the college gates. His father had pressured him to apply to business or law school. He had the grades, but not the desire. He had no interest in moving in with either of his parents, even if they had offered. He ended up in a low rent apartment with dingy walls and rampant cockroaches, but plenty of room for his books. He waited tables and delivered pizzas to keep the lights on, and he read. When he was not working or reading, he would wander the aisles of the local used bookstore, flipping through unfamiliar volumes, picking out books he would buy for a few dollars and keep rather than check out from the library. The musty smell of browning pages and the dust mites that clung to heaps of bound paper, the scent of a thousand ancient libraries preserved by the neighborhood peddler of cheap paperbacks, was a sensual connection to all that he held sacred. It was the incense for his Eucharist, the perfume of his estate garden. He would have been content with this arrangement for the rest of his life, his books not complementing a full life, but entirely constituting it, the reason for his work, the explanation for his existence.

"Jerry," the voice of his mother rasped when he answered his phone one afternoon. She had been crying. "Jerry, I have something to tell you. Are you sitting down?"

Jerry sat. "Yes."

"Your father is gone," she whispered.

"What do you mean, 'gone'?"

"He passed away, son. He was jogging, they said." Pause, a sniffle. "He had his problems. And Lord knows we had our differences. But he had some good in him. I loved him deep down. I know you did, too."

Jerry didn't hear another word she said. When she stopped talking, he mumbled something and hung up. He was numb. He thought of death in literature, of how sons mourned their fathers, of mythologies of the afterlife. If he had been left with his thoughts, he would have probably only found himself further isolated in his mind. But his mother had arranged a funeral, not because her husband had been particularly faithful, either to the Almighty or to her, but because it was what one did, like getting married in a church, or celebrating Easter, regardless of the state of one's soul. And it was at this program that something happened to change him.

He was on the second pew of the chapel, next to his mother. His skin crawled under the wool suit he had bought for the occasion. He listened to the homily, the clergyman reading scripture from a heavy Bible and talking about resurrection and everlasting glory. He looked around the room to choke down the nausea prompted by the sweet, polleny smell of the ashen white flowers around the casket, by the creeping heat of the stale sanctuary, by the maudlin organ music. And he saw people. There were other, actual human beings there to pay their respects to his father. They were business associates and family members, friends and others of unknown connection. They had taken time off from work. They had paid babysitters to watch their children. They had stepped aside from the responsibilities of their lives for a couple of hours to change into black clothes, drive across town, and sit through a long service. They had done something for his father, if only for the afternoon. They were involved in a living

community, connected by this man in complicated ways. These were not imagined characters, but people in the world, independent, imperfect, unpredictable, unable to be entirely explained by books kind of people. And this reality came as something of an epiphany to Jerry. That there was a messy world outside of his books was something he had known for years, but seeing the minister read from a book on an occasion like this, speaking written words to this collection of humans to make sense of life and death, illuminating the world, affecting it, was something new. A seismic shift occurred in his mind. What had been absorbed, unacknowledged, through his reading, how books had shaped his thinking, now became explicit. Books could not only provide a retreat from life, not only provide an explanation for life, but could also change life.

As he looked from face to face, from the robed cleric to the pale organist, from pulpit to stained glass, he saw the world in microcosm. And he was sitting right in the middle of this world. For years he had sought an escape, a utopia found only in books. But he realized there was no real escape. And for once he didn't want an exit. He wanted immersion. Although not particularly devout, this place prompted him to see himself in religious terms. He had heard the call years ago under his bed sheet fort. Today he responded to his calling. Instead of a hermit, on top of a pole in the desert or tucked away in some cell, alone with his God, he decided he would become a missionary of sorts. A missionary with the only zeal he knew, for the only divinity he recognized: the truth found in books.

He thought of options. He could no longer just read for his own sake. He had to share his paradise with the world. He could earn a Ph.D., but he didn't want to be cloistered and swallowed by a university, possibly spit out as an itinerant adjunct. He considered other possibilities. His inheritance from his father would buy him some freedom and time for planning.

As he formed his master plan, he went where missionaries usually went. He went to prisons, taught literacy classes, formed reading groups. He visited homeless shelters, sharing books that people donated, giving talks about great works of literature. He was allowed to teach classes at community clubhouses, at senior centers. He was young, had a strong education, was enthusiastic, required no payment, and was welcomed among those desperate for good stories. While he first sought deliverance from pain by retreating inside himself, he learned to turn his eyes outward. Although still seeing through the lens of literature, he saw not dragons in windmills or princesses in harlots, as the man of La Mancha had, but hopefulness in desperate situations and the possibility of nobility, majesty, and limitless potential. He realized reading was no mere diversion, no simple entertainment, but the marrow of life, a distillation of the best of the human spirit. And as he read, shared, and encouraged from the encyclopedic wealth of the reading packed in his memory, his life purpose became clear.

He started The Fort exactly two years to the day after his father's funeral. He rented a storefront in a strip mall on the edge of town, pooling his remaining inheritance and donations he collected. The motto of the venture was "Healing Through Literature." It would be a sanctuary for the broken. He started by focusing on children of divorce. There were storytellers who came to present tales to enthralled audiences. There were actors who volunteered to come and act out classic stories, classes in story writing and art sessions for telling stories in different media. And of course there was an extensive library for kids who just wanted to read, made up of the personal library that Jerry had accumulated and found solace in during the years of his difficulties. In addition to the creative experts, he also recruited counselors, trying to expand the ways he could heal the deepest hurts. He had suffered and found hope in books. He was no expert in psychology or social services, but he wanted to help others who were as vulnerable and

damaged as he had been. He knew the power of books in his own life and was convinced they could change others as well. From there he reached out to divorced adults, and to those who struggled, doubted, and hurt, who were members of the fraternity of pain, and he masterfully applied the balm of reading, a biblio-remedy for all the wounded he encountered.

His world grew, his influence spread, and hearts were mended by the magic of good books. And he planned to start other Forts in other places. He was busy and happy, persuaded that his love of books was intersecting a great need to good effect. This was his contribution, his engine to change his little corner of society, a settled bachelor with the world as his family.

But as he should have known, life is not as neat or as structured as the stories in books, and one day a single mother brought her son to an event at The Fort. She had blond tresses like Cinderella and a smile like Snow White. Something stirred in him; every princess of every fairy tale, every heroine of every story he had ever read rushed to the front of his mind, each one a portrait from his memory that jostled and quivered and merged into her particular, magnificent form. All this mental activity was occurring as she stood in front of him.

“Pardon me, is there a fee for him to participate this afternoon?” she asked. “Excuse me?”

She had no idea that she was being compared to characters in hundreds of stories. He just stood there, a goofy grin plastered on his face, flipping madly through the mental filing cabinet of his reading.

“Um, yes,” he said, shaking himself into awareness.

“Yes, we have to pay?” she tried to clarify.

“No, no,” he stuttered. “You don’t have to pay. It’s free. Supported by donors.”

"Great. Thanks," she said, with a smile and an uncertainty about his sanity. She turned to lead her son to the reading group on the other side of the room.

"I, uh," he stumbled. She turned. "I wonder if you would like to, well, get a bite sometime."

She blushed. Her eyes turned to her shoes and she swiped a blond lock of hair behind her ear.

"Sure. I guess. That would be fine."

And with this he took a huge leap into the wider world of the human community. They exchanged cell numbers and agreed to meet for coffee the next week.

She was reading a book in one of the overstuffed chairs at the coffee shop when he arrived. An enchanting little crease between her eyebrows as she concentrated on the novel was the only thing that marred her seraphic countenance. But to him it was no flaw; it was a mark of perfection.

"Anything good?" he asked. She was so engrossed in the story she had not heard him walk up.

"Austen," she said, turning the book to look at the cover. "I know it's a little cliché these days, but I just adore the Victorians. Every year I reread all of them, Austen, the Bronte sisters, even some men," she said with a grin. "I love the classics."

He was ready to propose, but instead ordered a cup of Chai tea for himself, a café latte for her. They talked about the British nineteenth-century novelists, of course, and he expressed his fondness for their Russian contemporaries, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gogol. They talked about other favorites, about what books she loved when she was a little girl, what books she prized in college, which ones saw her through her divorce and her mother's terminal illness. It was a

mutual lovefest for literature. When she mentioned Derrida, he choked on his Chai, waving off her concern as he regained his composure. Whether it was because she knew the name or he loathed the man's critical theory was a mystery he never clarified. Either way, he was impressed.

Over the coming weeks, they continued to meet for coffee and conversation. He learned she hated techno thrillers, that the taste of saltwater taffy reminded her of family trips to Hilton Head, that she was afraid of dying in a library fire. He shared his hidden love of detective stories and his public regard for contemporary literary fiction, his guilt over his parents divorce, his ambition to one day write a novel that expressed his heart and soul. As they spent more time together, the thread of books was woven through their conversation and bound them closer together. He gathered ideas for winning her affection from countless fictional scenarios and at the appropriate time he dazzled her with centuries of the best love poetry: Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Browning. Books, as with everything else in his life, were his guides in building their relationship.

There were dinners and movies, picnics in the park and street festivals. They told secrets, confessed weaknesses, and shared fears, usually in the form of stories. As the days passed, they shared their histories, thinking of the past as backstory, and then they began to imagine how their lives would unfold, how their dreams would materialize, and tentatively, excitedly, how their individual plots might merge into one story of a life together, a tale of "we" and not just two "I"s. It was not merely that she was well read, although that certainly commended her; he admired the way books had seeped into her soul, how they had shaped her perspective, had encouraged the seeds of compassion, empathy, and humanity to flourish. But it was more than just her passion for great literature that he loved; he loved all of her, the best and the worst, the disarray and the brilliance, the doubt and the magnificence. And that realization shook him. He

had never loved another in quite the same way who had not been captured on a page. And it was his love for her, as surprising and bewildering as she was, that finally changed him on a fundamental level, the way he thought about himself and his world. His favorite stories had bright, joyous endings, and his life itself was unfolding as his perfect story, not penned by others, but composed entirely by him, not enacted in his mind, but experienced in a shared reality.

He declared his love and proposed. They had a fairytale wedding — he found someone to donate a white carriage with a matching horse to take them away — and, in the best tradition of storytelling, they lived happily ever after. They found a little house to live in and, not surprisingly, lined the rooms with bookshelves, filling them with books of history, biography, and literature, stories of animals and pyramids, of aliens and sunken treasure, folktales, love stories, and mysteries. And when their son read those books, as he often did, it was not under his desk in fear, but in the garden or in his favorite chair in the den, not an escape but an enrichment, much to his parents' delight. When his sister came along, he read them to her, too. She giggled and marveled as she was initiated into the glorious world of stories. There were obstacles and plot twists they couldn't have imagined, but they kept living and reading, loving their books and each other and never fearing The End.