



Civil**W**ar**L**and
in bad decline
stories & a novella

G e o r g e S a u n d e r s

CIVILWARLAND

IN BAD DECLINE

Stories and a Novella



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Introduction

By Joshua Ferris

George Saunders doesn't need an introduction. He's not a dead guy whose work was ar remains difficult to read. He's not toiling away in obscurity or translated from th Chamicuro. He's the future of American short fiction and has been for about fifteen years. H publishes in *The New Yorker* like Cheever and Updike used to publish in *The New Yorker*. H has won a MacArthur grant and a Guggenheim fellowship, four National Magazine Award and even something called the World Fantasy Award. I bet Cheever and Updike never wo the World Fantasy Award. The man himself has appeared on *The Colbert Report* and the *L Show with David Letterman*. He's practically a celebrity, and you don't find many of those the literary world these days.

Nevertheless, on May 24, 2012, at 3:07 P.M., I received an email from an editor at Rando House that read, in part, "We're publishing an ebook of *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline* November (it exists only in paperback now)... [and] I wanted to ask if you would consid writing a short intro to it." I happened to be online when the email came in, and witho giving too much consideration to what I might say, or to the compositional challeng inherent even in a short introduction, I replied seven minutes later, at 3:14 P.M. unequivocally: "Done. Give me the due date. Totally psyched."

And I was totally psyched, continue to be totally psyched, even as now, sitting down t write, I realize that Saunders needs no introduction, and yet I'm responsible for writing a introduction. Whatever I do or do not say about him will be secondary and beside the poin especially confined as it must be to one modest introduction and to only one of Saunders collections, *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, his first, published in 1996 and never out of prin still as fresh now as then, still as wholly original and startling and unsettling as it was the when I was working as a clerk in a bookstore, broke, miserable, and desperate, and picked up and couldn't put it down again. And I sort of knew this when the Random House ema came in, at 3:07 P.M., with me online and capable of responding at 3:09 or even 3:08, or eve in the same minute as the email was sent. In the back of my mind, I knew that Saunde needed no introduction and that the collection, seven pieces in all—six stories and on novella—also needed no introduction, no clarification or commentary, because it remains a perfectly capable of conveying everything that's necessary in and of itself. I knew in the bac of my mind that enthusiasm is never sufficient reason to agree to write anything—that th greater my enthusiasm, in fact, the more vital it is for me to demur, because all that needs be said has already been said by the work about which I feel enthusiastic. The work that sti the greatest passion is also the work that creates around it the greatest silence, the stronge imperative to stand back and admire and let others admire, without interfering. I knew th an introduction would not allow me to adequately flesh out the many thoughts I've had abou Saunders and his work since I read him as a clerk in a bookstore. It might not even allow m to flesh out what is, in this one collection, both immediately winning—the humor, the hea—and what remains more obscure and subterranean, like the layers of irony he uses in th title story alone, one centered around a history-themed theme park where one "good" wa (the Civil War) is ultimately destroyed by one of our "bad" wars (Vietnam).

But at the same time I was debating the difficulties, I also thought that it would be easy to talk about how the premise of any one of Saunders's stories looks and feels a lot like one of Edgar Allen Poe's, as it's almost always a highly imagined premise, a premise limitless in its outrageous gothic possibilities, and yet somehow Saunders tethers the premise and makes it something deeply affecting in a way that Poe never did, in a way more easily achieved with straightforward realism, as Melville did in "Bartleby, the Scrivener"—in other words, I position Saunders as the natural heir to both Poe and Melville. And because he uses the American vernacular with more ingenuity than anyone else—because he's also like Whitman who wrote, "I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard, / Nature without check with original energy"—because his stories speak with Whitman's original unchecked energy, I thought, in the seven minutes it took me to respond to Random House's email debating whether or not I had anything to say about George Saunders that might go beyond hagiography, I could talk about how Saunders, in moral interrogation and clarity of voice, is as close to the nineteenth century as he is to the twenty-first, which is a little surprising when you read him, because he's so absolutely contemporary. He is an entirely autonomous product of his own devising, aided by this new era in our berserk republic. At the same time I thought, I could rectify the all-too-common mistake critics make when talking about Saunders, which is to call him a satirist in the early style of Mark Twain: while Saunders does satirize, or, in other words, render the real absurd, he also carefully and lovingly and artfully renders the absurd real, which is a much harder trick to pull off and, once done, moves the so-called satirist out of the pigeonhole and into the open air of the first-rate artist. But I also thought that all that sounded academic, and that Random House probably wasn't really interested in what some guy had to say about George Saunders's nineteenth-century roots and his divergences therein—and that I wasn't really interested in talking about all that, because it wasn't what made talking about George Saunders such an imperative. As I debated whether or not I could say anything about George Saunders, I thought that ultimately what I could do if it came time to write and I found myself really stymied, was just do what's kind of expected in introductions, which is to talk about what makes the book great and why I love it. Just talk about why you love it, I thought as I debated, despite knowing that talking about something I love is a recipe for disaster, as well as knowing that I would of course say yes to Random House. It took me seven minutes to respond to an email I could have answered in thirty seconds, or even ten seconds, after receiving it, knowing that I would seize an opportunity to talk about George Saunders—seven minutes because I knew how hard it would be to talk about him.

Part of the reason it's so hard to talk about him is the shared acknowledgment among writers that Saunders is somehow a little more than just a writer. Of course he's only a writer, only predominately a short-story writer, and even though he established a new template for the short story in *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, a template as influential as Raymond Carver's was to his generation, and even Hemingway's to his, hopelessly parodied by younger writers but belonging to Saunders alone—even though all this is big new stuff, Saunders is still just putting one sentence in front of the other in the service of the humble short story. Sometimes those sentences revel in the purely comedic, as does this passage from the collection's sixth story, "Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror":

A young girl gets extremely worked up on the honeymoon and the next thing she knows her new husband is scampering into the kitchen for a zucchini squash. Even through my crying he insisted, saying it would bring us closer together. Imagine the humiliation of being just eighteen and having to go to your family doctor with an infection difficult to explain. Finally he found it in a plant book.

And sometimes Saunders's sentences create a new world and toss you right into it. That when they crackle with a dizzying inaugural energy. Here's a classic example from "The 40 Pound CEO":

At noon another load of raccoons comes in and Claude takes them out back of the office and executes them with a tire iron. Then he checks for vitals, wearing protective gloves. Then he drags the cage across 209 and initiates burial by dumping the raccoons into the pit that's our little corporate secret. After burial comes prayer, a personal touch that never fails to irritate Tim, our ruthless CEO. Before founding Humane Raccoon Alternatives, Tim purposely backed his car over a frat boy and got ten-to-twelve for manslaughter.

And sometimes the sentences, while funny, are tinged with a melancholy in a fashion that has come to be a trademark of Saunders, who has a genius for wringing laughter from the tragic. In "The Wavemaker Falters," the unnamed narrator has accidentally killed a "sweet kid" named Clyde, who now haunts him at night:

Even though he's dead, he's still basically a kid. When he tries to be scary he gets it all wrong. He can't moan for beans. He's scariest when he does real kid things, like picking his nose and wiping it on the side of his sneaker.

He tries to be polite but he's pretty mad about the future I denied him. Tonight's subject is what the Mexico City trip with the perky red-haired tramp would have been like.

And sometimes, when Saunders is really on fire, he imagines the afterlife. Take the collection's title story, his first unequivocally great story. The unnamed narrator, complicit in killing a kid and burying his hand to cover up the crime, is being stabbed to death by the vigilante he's hired to keep CivilWarLand safe from roving gangs:

Possessing perfect knowledge I hover above him as he hacks me to bits. I see his rough childhood. I see his mother doing something horrid

to him with a broomstick. I see the hate in his heart and the people he has yet to kill before pneumonia gets him at eighty-three. I see the dead kid's mom unable to sleep, pounding her fists against her face in grief at the moment I was burying her son's hand. I see the pain I've caused. I see the man I could have been, and the man I was, and then everything is bright and new and keen with love and I sweep through Sam's body, trying to change him, trying so hard, and feeling only hate and hate, solid as stone.

Here Saunders imagines for us what it's like to die: "Possessing perfect knowledge. [E]verything is bright and new and keen with love ..." But the narrator doesn't focus solely on his own death and all his terrible regrets. With an unusually expansive heart, with a uniquely inspired imagination, Saunders allows his narrator to inhabit the mind of his own assailant. Even as he's being killed, Saunders endows him with an almost irrational empathy, and this empathy is the source of all humanity.

I find it hard to talk about George Saunders and yet at the same time must talk about him because of this expansiveness, this feeling that he is inspired. It is hard to articulate what it means to be inspired, and yet it won't do to shy away from it. It means, of course, that he has redefined the short story. Realism, if it is to reflect current reality, must include fantasy, computer simulation, rampant consumerism and corporate malfeasance, and futurism as a permanent state of mind, as well as all the old stuff: character, consequence, the thoughts and predicaments of regular people, the unmitigated exploitation of the weak by the powerful, the eternal possibility of the individual's redemption. Come to think of it, it's not just the short story Saunders redefines by bringing all of these disparate elements together in a satisfying whole. He redefines realism itself.

But I mean something more by "inspired." I mean that Saunders writes like something of a saint. He seems in touch with some better being. He teaches us not only how to write but how to live. He sets the bar and also the example. He hopes we might see the possibility of our better selves and act on it. He seems sent—what other way to put it?—to teach us mercy and grace. And it all begins here, with *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*.

CIVILWARLAND

IN BAD DECLINE

Whenever a potential big investor comes for the tour the first thing I do is take him out to the transplanted Erie Canal Lock. We've got a good ninety feet of actual Canal out there and a well-researched dioramic of a coolie campsite. Were our faces ever red when we found out it was actually the Irish who built the Canal. We've got no budget to correct, so every fifteen minutes or so a device in the bunkhouse gives off the approximate aroma of an Oriental meal.

Today my possible Historical Reconstruction Associate is Mr. Haberstrom, founder of Burn'n'Learn. Burn'n'Learn is national. Their gimmick is a fully stocked library on the premises and as you can you call out the name of any book you want to these high-school girls on roller skates. As we walk up the trail he's wearing a sweatsuit and smoking a cigar and I tell him I admire his acumen. I tell him some men are dreamers and others are doers. He asks which am I and I say let's face it, I'm basically the guy who leads the dreamers up the trail to view the Canal Segment. He likes that. He says I have a good head on my shoulders. He touches my arm and says he's hot to spend some reflective moments at the Canal because his great-grandfather was a barge guider way back when who got killed by a donkey. When we reach the clearing he gets all emotional and bolts off through the gambling plaster Chinese. Not to be crass but I sense an impending sizable contribution.

When I come up behind him however I see that once again the gangs have been at it with their spray cans, all over my Lock. Haberstrom takes a nice long look. Then he pokes me with the spitty end of his cigar and says not with his money I don't, and storms back down the trail.

I stand there alone a few minutes. The last thing I need is some fat guy's spit on my tie. I think about quitting. Then I think about my last degrading batch of résumés. Two hundred send-outs and no nibbles. My feeling is that prospective employers are put off by the fact that I was a lowly Verisimilitude Inspector for nine years with no promotions. I think of my compensation. I think of how much Marcus and Howie love the little playhouse I'm still paying off. Once again I decide to eat my pride and sit tight.

So I wipe off my tie with a leaf and start down to break the Haberstrom news to Mr. Alsuga.

Mr. A's another self-made man. He cashed in on his love of history by conceptualizing CivilWarLand in his spare time. He started out with just a settler's shack and one Union costume and now has considerable influence in Rotary.

His office is in City Hall. He agrees that the gangs are getting out of hand. Last month they wounded three Visitors and killed a dray horse. Several of them encircled and made fun of

Mrs. Dugan in her settler outfit as she was taking her fresh-baked bread over to the simulate Towne Meeting. No way they're paying admission, so they're either tunneling in or coming over the retaining wall.

Mr. Alsuga believes the solution to the gang problem is Teen Groups. I tell him that basically what a gang is, a Teen Group. But he says how can it be a Teen Group without an adult mentor with a special skill, like whittling? Mr. Alsuga whittles. Once he gave an O-Tyme Skills Seminar on it in the Blacksmith Shoppe. It was poorly attended. All he got was two widowers and a chess-club type no gang would have wanted anyway. And myself didn't attend. Evelyn called me a bootlicker, but I attended. She called me a bootlicker, and I told her she'd better bear in mind which side of the bread her butter was on. She said whichever side it was on it wasn't enough to shake a stick at. She's always denigrating my pay stub. I came home from the Seminar with this kind of whittled duck. She threw it away the next day because she said she thought it was an acorn. It looked nothing like an acorn. As far as I'm concerned she threw it away out of spite. It made me livid and twice that night I had to step into a closet and perform my Hatred Abatement Breathing.

But that's neither here nor there.

Mr. Alsuga pulls out the summer stats. We're in the worst attendance decline in ten years. If it gets any worse, staff is going to be let go in droves. He gives me a meaningful look. I know full well I'm not one of his key players. Then he asks who we have that might be willing to fight fire with fire.

I say: I could research it.

He says: Why don't you research it?

So I go research it.

Sylvia Loomis is the queen of info. It's in her personality. She enjoys digging up dirt on people. She calls herself an S&M buff in training. She's still too meek to go whole hog, so when she parties at the Make Me Club on Airport Road she limits herself to walking around talking mean while wearing kiddie handcuffs. But she's good at what she does, which is Security. It was Sylvia who identified the part-timer systematically crapping in the planters at the Gift Acquisition Center and Sylvia who figured out it was Phil in Grounds leaving obscene messages for the Teen Belles on MessageMinder. She has access to all records. I ask can she identify current employees with a history of violence. She says she can if I buy her lunch.

We decide to eat in-Park. We go over to Nate's Saloon. Sylvia says don't spread it around but two of the nine can-can girls are knocked up. Then she pulls out her folder and says that according to her review of the data, we have a pretty tame bunch on our hands. The best she can do is Ned Quinn. His records indicate that while in high school he once burned down a storage shed. I almost die laughing. Quinn's an Adjunct Thespian and a world-class worrywart. I can't count the times I've come upon him in Costuming, dwelling on the gory details of his Dread Disease Rider. He's a failed actor who won't stop trying. He says this is the only job he could find that would allow him to continue to develop his craft. Because he's ugly and a sin he specializes in roles that require masks, such as Humpty-Dumpty during Mother Goose Days.

I report back to Mr. Alsuga and he says Quinn may not be much but he's all we've got

Quinn's dirt-poor with six kids and Mr. A says that's a plus, as we'll need someone between rock and a hard place. What he suggests we do is equip the Desperate Patrol with live ammo and put Quinn in charge. The Desperate Patrol limps along under floodlights as the night's crowning event. We've costumed them to resemble troops who've been in the field too long. We used actual Gettysburg photos. The climax of the Patrol is a re-enacted partial rebellion, quelled by a rousing speech. After the speech the boys take off their hats and put their arms around each other and sing "I Was Born Under a Wandering Star." Then there's fireworks and the Parade of Old-Fashioned Conveyance. Then we clear the place out and go home.

"Why not confab with Quinn?" Mr. A says. "Get his input and feelings."

"I was going to say that," I say.

I look up the Thespian Center's SpeedDial extension and a few minutes later Quinn is bounding up the steps in the Wounded Grizzly suit.

"Desperate Patrol?" Mr. A says as Quinn sits down. "Any interest on your part?"

"Love it," Quinn says. "Excellent." He's been trying to get on Desperate Patrol for years. It's considered the pinnacle by the Thespians because of the wealth of speaking parts. He's so excited he's shifting around in his seat and getting some of his paw blood on Mr. A's nice car chair.

"The gangs in our park are a damn blight," Mr. A says. "I'm talking about meeting force with force. Something in it for you? Oh yes."

"I'd like to see Quinn give the rousing speech myself," I say.

"Societal order," Mr. A says. "Sustaining the lifeblood of this goddamned park we've all put so much of our hearts into."

"He's not just free-associating," I say.

"I'm not sure I get it," Quinn says.

"What I'm suggesting is live ammo in your weapon only," Mr. A says. "Fire at your discretion. You see an unsavory intruder, you shoot at his feet. Just give him a scare. Nobody gets hurt. An additional two bills a week is what I'm talking."

"I'm an actor," Quinn says.

"Quinn's got kids," I say. "He knows the value of a buck."

"This is acting of the highest stripe," Mr. A says. "Act like a mercenary."

"Go for it on a trial basis," I say.

"I'm not sure I get it," Quinn says. "But jeez, that's good money."

"Superfantastic," says Mr. A.

Next evening Mr. A and I go over the Verisimilitude Irregularities List. We've been having some heated discussions about our bird-species percentages. Mr. Grayson, Staff Ornithologist, has recently recalculated and estimates that to accurately approximate the 1865 bird population we'll need to eliminate a couple hundred orioles or so. He suggests using air gun or poison. Mr. A says that, in his eyes, in fiscally troubled times, an ornithologist is a luxury, and this may be the perfect time to send Grayson packing. I like Grayson. He went way overboard on Howie's baseball candy. But I've got me and mine to think of. So I call Grayson

in. Mr. A says did you botch the initial calculation or were you privy to new info. Mr. Grayson admits it was a botch. Mr. A sends him out into the hall and we confab.

“You’ll do the telling,” Mr. A says. “I’m getting too old for cruelty.”

He takes his walking stick and beeper and says he’ll be in the Great Forest if I need him.

I call Grayson back in and let him go, and hand him Kleenexes and fend off a few blows and almost before I know it he’s reeling out the door and I go grab a pita.

Is this the life I envisioned for myself? My God no. I wanted to be a high jumper. But I have two of the sweetest children ever born. I go in at night and look at them in their fair expensive sleepers and think: There are a couple of kids who don’t need to worry about freezing to death or being cast out to the wolves. You should see their little eyes light up when I bring home a treat. They may not know the value of a dollar, but it’s my intention to see that they never need to.

I’m filling out Grayson’s Employee Retrospective when I hear gunshots from the perimeter. I run out and there’s Quinn and a few of his men tied to the cannon. The gang guys took Quinn’s pants and put some tiny notches in his penis with their knives. I free Quinn and tell him to get over to the Infirmary to guard against infection. He’s absolutely shaking and can hardly walk, so I wrap him up in a Confederate flag and call over a hay cart and load him in.

When I tell Mr. A he says: Garbage in, garbage out, and that we were idiots for expecting a milquetoast to save our rears.

We decide to leave the police out of it because of the possible bad PR. So we give Quinn the rest of the week off and promise to let him play Grant now and then, and that’s that.

When Visitors first come in there’s this cornball part where they sit in this kind of spaceships and supposedly get blasted into space and travel faster than the speed of light and end up in 1865. The unit’s dated. The helmets we distribute look like bowls and all the paint’s peeling off. I’ve argued and argued that we need to update. But in the midst of a budget crunch one can’t necessarily hang the moon. When the tape of space sounds is over and the walls stop shaking, we pass out the period costumes. We try not to offend anyone, liability law being what it is. We distribute the slave and Native American roles equitably among racial groups. Anyone is free to request a different identity at any time. In spite of our precautions, there’s a Herlicher in every crowd. He’s the guy who sued us last fall for making him hangman. He claimed that for weeks afterwards he had nightmares and because he wasn’t getting enough sleep botched a big contract by sending an important government buyer a load of torn polyliners. Big deal, is my feeling. But he’s suing us for fifty grand for emotional stress because the buyer ridiculed him in front of his co-workers. Whenever he comes in we make him sheriff but he won’t back down an inch.

Mr. A calls me into his office and says he’s got bad news and bad news, and which do I want first. I say the bad news. First off, he says, the gangs have spraypainted a picture of Quinn’s notched penis on the side of the Everly Mansion. Second, last Friday’s simulated frontier hunt has got us in hot water, because apparently some of the beef we toughen up to resemble buffalo meat was tainted, and the story’s going in the Sunday supplement. And finally, the verdict’s come in on the Herlicher case and we owe that goofball a hundred grand instead of fifty because the pinko judge empathized.

I wait for him to say I'm fired but instead he breaks down in tears. I pat his back and hand him a drink. He says why don't I join him. So I join him.

"It doesn't look good," he says, "for men like you and I."

"No it doesn't," I say.

"All I wanted to do," he says, "was to give the public a meaningful perspective on the historical niche I've always found personally fascinating."

"I know what you mean," I say.

At eleven the phone rings. It's Maurer in Refuse Control calling to say that the gangs have set fire to the Anglican Church. That structure cost upwards of ninety thousand to transport from Clydesville and refurbish. We can see the flames from Mr. A's window.

"Oh Christ!" Mr. A says. "If I could kill those kids I would kill those kids. One shouldn't desecrate the dream of another individual in the fashion in which they have mine."

"I know it," I say.

We drink and drink and finally he falls asleep on his office couch.

On the way to my car I keep an eye out for the ghostly McKinnon family. Back in the actual 1860s all this land was theirs. Their homestead's long gone but our records indicate that it was located near present-day Information Hoedown. They probably never saw this man or his buildings in their entire lives. They don't realize we're chronically slumming, they just think the valley's prospering. Something bad must have happened to them because their spirits are always wandering around at night looking dismayed.

Tonight I find the Mrs. doing wash by the creek. She sees me coming and asks if she can buy my boots. Machine stitching amazes her. I ask how are the girls. She says Maribeth has been sad because no appropriate boy ever died in the valley so she's doomed to loneliness forever. Maribeth is a homely sincere girl who glides around mooning and pining and reading bad poetry chapbooks. Whenever we keep the Park open late for high-school parties, she's there for her glory. There was one kid who was able to see her and even got a crush on her, but when he finally tried to kiss her near Hostelry and found out she was spectral it just about killed him. I slipped him a fifty and told him to keep it under wraps. As far as I know he's still in therapy. I realize I should have come forward but they probably would have nut-hutted me and then where would my family be?

The Mrs. says what Maribeth needs is choir practice followed by a nice quilting bee. In better times I would have taken the quilting-bee idea and run with it. But now there's no budget. That's basically how I finally moved up from Verisimilitude Inspector to Special Assistant, by lifting ideas from the McKinnons. The Mrs. likes me because after she taught me a few obscure 1800s ballads and I parlayed them into Individual Achievement Awards, I bought her a Rubik's Cube. To her, colored plastic is like something from Venus. The Mr. has kind of warned me away from her a couple of times. He doesn't trust me. He thinks the Rubik's Cube is the devil's work. I've brought him lighters and *Playboys* and once I even dragged out Howie's little synth and the mobile battery pak. I set the synth for carillon and played it from behind a bush. I could tell he was tickled, but he stonewalled. It's too bad I can't make an inroad because he was at Antietam and could be a gold mine of war info. He came back from the war and a year later died in his cornfield, which is now Parking. So he

spends most of his time out there calling the cars Beelzebubs and kicking their tires.

Tonight he's walking silently up and down the rows. I get out to my KCar and think ojeez, I've locked the keys in. The Mr. sits down at the base of the A3 lightpole and asks did you see the fire and do I realize it was divine retribution for my slovenly moral state. I say thank you very much. No way I'm telling him about the gangs. He can barely handle the concept of women wearing trousers. Finally I give up on prying the window down and go call Evelyn for the spare set. While I wait for her I sit on the hood and watch the stars. The Mr. watches them too. He says there are fewer than when he was a boy. He says that even the heavens have fallen into disrepair. I think about explaining smog to him but then Evelyn pulls up.

She's wearing her bathrobe and as soon as she gets out starts with the lip. Howie and Marcus are asleep in the back. The Mr. says it's part and parcel of my fallen state that I allow a woman to speak to me in such a tone. He suggests I throttle her and lock her in the woodshed. Meanwhile she's going on and on so much about my irresponsibility that the kids are waking up. I want to get out before the gangs come swooping down on us. The Parking Area's easy pickings. She calls me a thoughtless oaf and sticks me in the gut with the car keys.

Marcus wakes up all groggy and says: Hey, our daddy.

Evelyn says: Yes, unfortunately he is.

Just after lunch next day a guy shows up at Personnel looking so completely Civil War that I immediately hire him and send him out to sit on the porch of the old Kriegal place with the butter churn. His name's Samuel and he doesn't say a word going through Costuming and at the end of the day leaves on a bike. I do the normal clandestine New Employee Observation from the O'Toole gazebo and I like what I see. He seems to have a passable knowledge of how to pretend to churn butter. At one point he makes the mistake of departing from the line of Then-Current Events to discuss the World Series with a Visitor, but my feeling is, we can work with that. All in all he presents a positive and convincing appearance, and I say so in my review.

Sylvia runs her routine check on him and calls me at home that night and says boy do we have a hot prospect on our hands if fucking with the gangs is still on our agenda. She talks like that. I've got her on speakerphone in the rec room and Marcus starts running around the room saying fuck. Evelyn stands there with her arms crossed, giving me a drop-dead look. I wave her off and she flips me the bird.

Sylvia's federal sources indicate that Samuel got kicked out of Vietnam for participating in a bloodbath. Sylvia claims this is oxymoronic. She sounds excited. She suggests I take a nice long look at his marksmanship scores. She says his special combat course listing goes on for ten pages.

I call Mr. A and he says it sounds like Sam's our man. I express reservations at arming an alleged war criminal and giving him free rein in a family-oriented facility. Mr. A says if we don't get our act together there won't be any family-oriented facility left in a month. Revenues have hit rock bottom and his investors are frothing at the mouth. There's talk of outright closure and liquidation of assets.

He says: Now get off your indefensible high horse and give me Sam's home phone.

So I get off my indefensible high horse and give him Sam's home phone.

Thursday after we've armed Samuel and sent him and the Patrol out, I stop by the Worship Center to check on the Foley baptism. Baptisms are an excellent revenue source. We charge three hundred dollars to rent the Center, which is the former lodge of the Siala utopian free love community. We trucked it in from downstate, a redbrick building with a nice gold dome. In the old days if one of the Sialians was overeating to the exclusion of others or excessively masturbating, he or she would be publicly dressed down for hours on end in the lodge. Now we put up white draperies and pipe in Stephen Foster and provide at no charge a list of preachers of various denominations.

The Foleys are an overweight crew. The room's full of crying sincere large people wishing the best for a baby. It makes me remember our own sweet beaners in their little frocks. I sit down near the wood-burning heater in the Invalid area and see that Justin in Prep has forgotten to remove the mannequin elderly couple clutching rosaries. Hopefully the Foleys won't notice and withhold payment.

The priest dips the baby's head into the fake marble basin and the door flies open and comes a racially mixed gang. They stroll up the aisle tousling hair and requisition a Foley niece, a cute redhead of about sixteen. Her dad stands up and gets a blackjack in the head. One of the gang guys pushes her down the aisle with his hands on her breasts. As she passes she looks right at me. The gang guy spits on my shoe and I make my face neutral so he won't get hacked off and drag me into it.

The door slams and the Foleys sit there stunned. Then the baby starts crying and everyone runs shouting outside in time to see the gang dragging the niece into the woods. I panic. I try to think of where the nearest pay phone is. I'm weighing the efficiency of running to Administration and making the call from my cubicle when six fast shots come from the woods. Several of the oldest Foleys assume the worst and drop weeping to their knees in the churchyard.

I don't know the first thing about counseling survivors, so I run for Mr. A.

He's drinking and watching his bigscreen. I tell him what happened and he jumps up and calls the police. Then he says let's go do whatever little we can for these poor people who entrusted us with their sacred family occasion only to have us drop the ball by failing to adequately protect them.

When we get back to the churchyard the Foleys are kicking and upbraiding six gang corpses. Samuel's having a glass of punch with the niece. The niece's dad is hanging all over Sam trying to confirm his daughter's virginity. Sam says it wasn't even close and goes on and on about the precision of his scope.

Then we hear sirens.

Sam says: I'm going into the woods.

Mr. A says: We never saw you, big guy.

The niece's dad says: Bless you, sir.

Sam says: Adios.

Mr. A stands on the hitching post and makes a little speech, the gist of which is, let's blame another gang for killing these dirtbags so Sam can get on with his important work.

The Foleys agree.

The police arrive and we all lie like rugs.

The word spreads on Sam and the gangs leave us alone. For two months the Park is quiet and revenues start upscaling. Then some high-school kid pulls a butter knife on Fred Moore and steals a handful of penny candy from the General Store. As per specs, Fred alerts Mr. A of a Revenue-Impacting Event. Mr. A calls Security and we perform Exit Sealage. We look everywhere, but the kid's gone. Mr. A says what the hell, Unseal, it's just candy, profit loss minimal. Sam hears the Unseal Tone on the PA and comes out of the woods all mad with his face painted and says that once the word gets out we've gone soft the gangs will be back in our heartbeat. I ask since when do gangs use butter knives. Sam says a properly trained individual can kill a wild boar with a butter knife. Mr. A gives me a look and says why don't we let Sam run this aspect of the operation since he possesses the necessary expertise. The next day Mr. A offers to buy him lunch and Sam says no, he'll eat raw weeds and berries as usual.

I go back to my Verisimilitude Evaluation on the Cimarron Brothel. Everything looks super. As per my recommendations they've replaced the young attractive simulated whores with uglier women with a little less on the ball. We were able to move the ex-simulated whores over to the Sweete Shoppe, so everybody's happy, especially the new simulated whores, who were for the most part middle-aged women we lured away from fast-food places via superior wages.

When I've finished the Evaluation I go back to my office for lunch. I step inside and turn on the fake oil lamp and there's a damn human hand on my chair, holding a note. All around the hand there's penny candy. The note says: Sir, another pig disciplined who won't mess with us anymore and also I need more ammo. It's signed: Samuel the Rectifier.

I call Mr. A and he says Jesus. Then he tells me to bury the hand in the marsh behind Refreshments. I say shouldn't we call the police. He says we let it pass when it was six dead kids, why should we start getting moralistic now over one stinking hand?

I say: But sir, he killed a high-schooler for stealing candy.

He says: That so-called high-schooler threatened Fred Moore, a valued old friend of mine, with a knife.

A butter knife, I say.

He asks if I've seen the droves of unemployed huddled in front of Personnel every morning.

I ask if that's a threat and he says no, it's a reasonable future prognostication.

"What's done is done," he says. "We're in this together. If I take the fall on this, you'll eat the wienie as well. Let's just put this sordid ugliness behind us and get on with the business of providing an enjoyable living for those we love."

I hang up and sit looking at the hand. There's a class ring on it.

Finally I knock it into a garbage sack with my phone and go out to the marsh.

As I'm digging, Mr. McKinnon glides up. He gets down on his knees and starts sniffing the sack. He starts talking about bloody wagon wheels and a boy he once saw sitting in a creek slapping the water with his own severed arm. He tells how the dead looked with rain on their faces and of hearing lunatic singing from all corners of the field of battle and of king-size

rodents gorging themselves on the entrails of his friends.

It occurs to me that the Mr.'s a loon.

I dig down a couple feet and drop the hand in. Then I backfill and get out of there fast. I look over my shoulder and he's rocking back and forth over the hole mumbling to himself.

As I pass a sewer cover the Mrs. rises out of it. Seeing the Mr. enthralled by blood she starts shrieking and howling to beat the band. When she finally calms down she comes to rest in a tree branch. Tears run down her see-through cheeks. She says there's been a horrible violent seed in him since he came home from the war. She says she can see they're going to have to go away. Then she blasts over my head elongate and glowing and full of grief and murder. That gets sucked off.

All night I have bad dreams about severed hands. In one I'm eating chili and a hand comes out of my bowl and gives me the thumbs-down. I wake up with a tingling wrist. Evelyn says if I insist on sleeping uneasily would I mind doing it on the couch, since she has a family to care for during the day and this requires a certain amount of rest. I think about confessing to her but then I realize if I do she'll nail me.

The nights when she'd fall asleep with her cheek on my thigh are certainly long past.

I lie there awhile watching her make angry faces in her sleep. Then I go for a walk. As usual Mr. Ebershom's practicing figure-skating moves in his foyer. I sit down by one of the subdivision's fake creeks and think. First of all, burying a hand isn't murder. It doesn't say anywhere thou shalt not bury some guy's hand. By the time I got involved the kid was dead. Where his hand ended up is inconsequential.

Then I think: What am I saying? I did a horrible thing. Even as I sit here I'm an accomplice and an obstructor of justice.

But then I see myself in the penitentiary and the boys waking up scared in the night without me, and right then and there with my feet in the creek I decide to stay clammed up forever and take my lumps in the afterlife.

Halloween's special in the Park. Our brochure says: Lose Yourself in Eerie Autumn Splendor. We spray cobwebs around the Structures and dress up Staff in ghoul costumes and hand out period-authentic treats. We hide holograph generators in the woods and project images of famous Americans as ghosts. It's always a confusing time for the McKinnons. Last year the Mr. got in a head-to-head with the image of Jefferson Davis. He stood there in the woods yelling at it for hours while the Mrs. and the girls begged him to come away. Finally we had to cut power to the unit.

I drive home at lunch and pick the boys up for trick-or-treating. Marcus is a rancher and Howie's an accountant. He's wearing thick fake lips and carrying a ledger. The Park's the only safe place to trick-or-treat anymore. Last year some wacko in a complex near our house laced his Snickers with a virus. I drove by the school and they were CPRing this little girl in a canary suit. So forget it.

I take them around to the various Structures and they pick up their share of saltwater taffy and hard tasteless frontier candy and wooden whistles and toy soldiers made of soap.

Then just as we start across the Timeless Green a mob of teens bursts out of the Feinstein

“Gangs!” I yell to the boys. “Get down!”

I hear a shot and look up and there’s Samuel standing on a stump at tree line. Thank God, think. He lets loose another round and one of the teens drops. Marcus is down beside me whimpering with his nose in my armpit. Howie’s always been the slow one. He stands there with his mouth open, one hand in his plastic pumpkin. A second teen drops. Then Howie drops and his pumpkin goes flying.

I crawl over and beg him to be okay. He says there’s no pain. I check him over and check him over and all that’s wrong is his ledger’s been shot. I’m so relieved I kiss him on the mouth and he yells at me to quit.

Samuel drops a third teen, then runs yipping into the woods.

The ambulance shows up and the paramedics load up the wounded teens. They’re all still alive and one’s saying a rosary. I take the boys to City Hall and confront Mr. A. I tell him I’m turning Sam in. He asks if I’ve gone daft and suggests I try putting food on the table from my jail cell while convicts stand in line waiting to have their way with my rear.

At this point I send the boys out to the foyer.

“He shot Howie,” I say. “I want him put away.”

“He shot Howie’s ledger,” Mr. A says. “He shot Howie’s ledger in the process of saving Howie’s life. But whatever. Let’s not mince hairs. If Sam gets put away, we get put away. Does that sound to you like a desirable experience?”

“No,” I say.

“What I’m primarily saying,” he says, “is that this is a time for knowledge assimilation, not backstabbing. We learned a lesson, you and I. We personally grew. Gratitude for this growth is an appropriate response. Gratitude, and being careful never to make the same mistake twice.”

He gets out a Bible and says let’s swear on it that we’ll never hire a crazed maniac to perform an important security function again. Then the phone rings. Sylvia’s cross-referenced today’s Admissions data and found that the teens weren’t a gang at all but a bird-watching group who made the mistake of being male and adolescent and wandering too far off the trail.

“Ouch,” Mr. A says. “This could be a serious negative.”

In the foyer the kids are trying to get the loaches in the corporate tank to eat bits of Styrofoam. I phone Evelyn and tell her what happened and she calls me a butcher. She wants to know how on earth I could bring the boys to the Park knowing what I knew. She says she doesn’t see how I’m going to live with myself in light of how much they trusted and loved me and how badly I let them down by leaving their fates to chance.

I say I’m sorry and she seems to be thinking. Then she tells me just get them home without putting them in further jeopardy assuming that’s within the scope of my mental powers.

At home she puts them in the tub and sends me out for pizza. I opt for Melvin’s Pasta Laid. Melvin’s a religious zealot who during the Depression worked five jobs at once. Sometimes I tell him my troubles and he says I should stop whining and count my blessings. Tonight I tell

him I feel I should take some responsibility for eliminating the Samuel problem but I'm hesitant because of the discrepancy in our relative experience in violence. He says you mean you're scared. I say not scared, just aware of the likelihood of the possibility of failure. He gives me a look. I say it must have been great to grow up when men were men. He says men have always been what they are now, namely incapable of coping with life without the intervention of God the Almighty. Then in the oven behind him my pizza starts smoking and he says case in point.

He makes me another and urges me to get in touch with my Lord personally. I tell him I will. I always tell him I will.

When I get home they're gone.

Evelyn's note says: I could never forgive you for putting our sons at risk. Goodbye forever you passive flake. Don't try to find us. I've told the kids you sent us away in order to marry a floozy.

Like an idiot I run out to the street. Mrs. Schmidt is prodding her automatic sprinkler system with a rake, trying to detect leaks in advance. She asks how I am and I tell her not now. I sit on the lawn. The stars are very near. The phone rings. I run inside prepared for grovel, but it's only Mr. A. He says come down to the Park immediately because he's got some horrific news.

When I get there he's sitting in his office half-crooked. He tells me we're unemployed. The investors have gotten wind of the bird-watcher shootings and withdrawn all support. The Park is no more. I tell him about Evelyn and the kids. He says that's the least of his worries because he's got crushing debt. He asks if I have any savings he could have. I say no. He says that just for the record and my own personal development, he's always found me dull and he kept me around primarily for my yes-man capabilities and because sometimes I'm so cautious I'm a hoot.

Then he says: Look, get your ass out, I'm torching this shithole for insurance purposes.

I want to hit or at least insult him, but I need this week's pay to find my kids. So I jog off through the Park. In front of Information Hoedown I see the McKinnons cavorting. I go closer and see that they're not cavorting at all, they've inadvertently wandered too close to their actual death site and are being compelled to act out again and again the last minutes of their lives. The girls are lying side by side on the ground and the Mr. is whacking at them with an invisible scythe. The Mrs. is belly-up with one arm flailing in what must have been the parlor. The shrieking is mind-boggling. When he's killed everyone the Mr. walks out to his former field and mimes blowing out his brains. Then he gets up and starts over. It goes on and on, through five cycles. Finally he sits down in the dirt and starts weeping. The Mrs. and the girls backpedal away. He gets up and follows them, pitifully trying to explain.

Behind us the Visitor Center erupts in flames.

The McKinnons go off down the hill, passing through bushes and trees. He's shouting for forgiveness. He's shouting that he's just a man. He's shouting that hatred and war made him nuts. I start running down the hill agreeing with him. The Mrs. gives me a look and puts her hands over Maribeth's ears. We're all running. The Mrs. starts screaming about the feel of the scythe as it opened her up. The girls bemoan their unborn kids. We make quite a group. Since I'm still alive I keep clipping trees with my shoulders and falling down.

At the bottom of the hill they pass through the retaining wall and I run into it. I wake up on my back in the culvert. Blood's running out of my ears and a transparent boy's kneeling over me. I can tell he's no McKinnon because he's wearing sweatpants.

"Get up now," he says in a gentle voice. "Fire's coming."

"No," I say. "I'm through. I'm done living."

"I don't think so," he says. "You've got amends to make."

"I screwed up," I say. "I did bad things."

"No joke," he says, and holds up his stump.

I roll over into the culvert muck and he grabs me by the collar and sits me up.

"I steal four jawbreakers and a Slim Jim and your friend kills and mutilates me?" he says.

"He wasn't my friend," I say.

"He wasn't your enemy," the kid says.

Then he cocks his head. Through his clear skull I see Sam coming out of the woods. The kid cowers behind me. Even dead he's scared of Sam. He's so scared he blasts straight up in the air shrieking and vanishes over the retaining wall.

Sam comes for me with a hunting knife.

"Don't take this too personal," he says, "but you've got to go. You know a few things I don't want broadcast."

I'm madly framing calming words in my head as he drives the knife in. I can't believe it. Never again to see my kids? Never again to sleep and wake to their liquid high voices and sweet breaths?

Sweet Evelyn, I think, I should have loved you better.

Possessing perfect knowledge I hover above him as he hacks me to bits. I see his rough childhood. I see his mother doing something horrid to him with a broomstick. I see the hate in his heart and the people he has yet to kill before pneumonia gets him at eighty-three. I see the dead kid's mom unable to sleep, pounding her fists against her face in grief at the moment I was burying her son's hand. I see the pain I've caused. I see the man I could have been, and the man I was, and then everything is bright and new and keen with love and I sweep through Sam's body, trying to change him, trying so hard, and feeling only hate and hate solid as stone.

The first great act of love I ever witnessed was Split Lip bathing his handicapped daughter. We were young, ignorant of mercy, and called her Boneless or Balled-Up Gumby for the way her limbs were twisted and useless. She looked like a newborn colt, appendages folded in. She lay on the velour couch protected by guardrails. Leo and I stood outside the window on cinder blocks, watching. She was scared of the tub, so to bathe her Split Lip covered the couch with a tarp and caught the runoff in a bucket. Mrs. Split Lip was long gone, unable to bear the work Boneless required. She found another man and together they made a little blond beauty they dressed in red velvet and paraded up and down the aisle at St. Caspian while Split Lip held Boneless against him in the last pew, shushing her whenever the music overcame her and she started making horrible moaning noises trying to sing along.

Maintaining Boneless cost plenty. Split Lip's main job was cop but on the side he sold water purifiers. When the neighborhood changed, the purifier business went belly-up. Split Lip said the niggers didn't care what kind of poison they put in their bodies. Truth was, the purifiers were a scam. Inside was a sponge and an electric motor connected to nothing. But without the purifier money he couldn't afford the masseuse who eased Boneless's bad pain and couldn't afford to have Mrs. Cavendish in. So before leaving for work he'd put Boneless on the floor with a water bottle and her lunch and a picture book. Halfway through his shift he'd call home and she'd jerk the phone to the floor by the cord and make a certain sound that meant she was fine. In her simple way she understood poverty and never asked him to leave work, and time and again he came home to find her shivering on the floor in soiled pants.

By this time the panic-sell was in full bloom. Old Poles and Czechs were losing their assets and leaving treasured flower gardens behind in a frenzy. Local industries failed left and right. The stockyard downscaled and Dad was reduced to pushing a gutcart for minimum. Even the nuns went racist after the convent was reappraised and it seemed their pension fund was in jeopardy. Dad resolved to sell. But it was too late. The moment was past. A big loss was the cards. The realtor came over and said ten thou. Dad sat looking at him.

"I pour my life's blood into this place," he said, "and you offer me half what I paid?"

"Market forces at work," the realtor said. "But all right, all right. Call me a saint walking the face of the earth: ten thousand five."

"Get out," Dad said.

"Fine," the realtor said. "Live among the savages forever if you want."

"What's happening to me is a goddamned shame," Dad said, and threw a scratch pad at him.

"Agreed," the realtor said. "But don't blame me. Blame the spades."

Then it was spring, and flowers bloomed in the park.

Then it was summer and the lagoon scummed over and race riots broke out and tear g

blew over the trees as Leo and I fished for carp.

One day in June, Split Lip came into the clearing leading a black teen by the ear. We squatted in the reeds. Officer Doyle nudged the teen's little brother with his billy club. We knew the little brother. He was Norris Crane. He played cornet with me in school, Amazing Marching Falcons. He was an altar boy whose skin tore like paper. The nuns said that because of his affliction he didn't have to kneel through Stations but he did anyway and offered it up to the Lord whenever he bled through his pants.

Officer Doyle said let's interrogate. Split Lip said I'll show you interrogation. He pushed the teen into the lagoon and held him under. With his club Doyle made Norris watch. The teen's hands slapped and slapped. Then Split Lip stood up and the dead teen floated.

Now that's interrogation, Doyle said.

Split Lip said to Norris: Tell a soul and I'll take it out on your fat-butt mom in a heartbeat.

We ran home crying. Dad said shut our mouths about it forever. Ma said pray continual and try to forget. But who could forget? Every day on the way to school we saw Norris outside Spritzer's, becoming the world's youngest wino. Old lady Spritzer sold to anybody. She was a bitter crone with a thick mustache and big arm veins who'd lost two sons to the Koreans and one to an aging Rush Street queen who brought him back by the neighborhood on weekends in a tremendous purple Lincoln. We'd see Norris puking into the sewer while talking nonsense about the blood of the Lamb and vowing in his high-pitched voice to wash Split Lip. Who would have believed him? He was twelve. He was a sweetheart who biology had hired Earl Dimps to carve up his fetal pig. Every Halloween he came to school as an Apostle and proudly placed his papier-mâché staff in the aisle. Dead brother or no dead brother, his was a kind heart that would never allow him to do anyone harm.

Or so we thought. Then he came up with a gun. He showed it to us behind the Dumpster where Hal Flutie had lost his arm to the crushing blade.

"I can't live with it anymore," he said. "I'll sneak in there this morning and wait all day for him to come home."

"You won't," Leo said.

"I will," said Norris. "Nine o'clock tonight he dies."

At ten to nine Leo and I walked in the odd autumnal dark to Split Lip's sagging home. From the stockyard we could hear the Czechs inducing cows into the deathhouse with tongue clicks. When the tongue clicks didn't work they ran out extension cords and used the prods. We mounted the cinder blocks. Inside, Split Lip was doing I'm a Little Teapot, making a handle of his left arm and a spout of his right. Boneless applauded by pounding her wrists together. Overcome with love, Split Lip gathered her up in his arms.

"My darling girl," he said. "We'll stay together forever and every day will be fun like this. Would you like that?"

"Yunh," Boneless said.

"Would you like that my honeylamb?" Split Lip said.

"Yunh," Boneless said.

Norris stepped out of the closet, a frail kid in sneakers. He raised his gun and Boneless began to wail.

“Please no,” Split Lip said. “Who will care for my child?”

Norris paused, thinking, then blew his own brains out across the yellow wall.

We ran. We ran to the train tracks and lay on our backs, sick in our guts as the guiltless stars wheeled by. After no dance would we look up at them happily now. Norris’s soul whizzed through the highgrass. Chills broke out on my arms.

The Cranes moved back to Mississippi without a trace, reduced to a family of daughters.

Dad went almost blind, and evenings I’d guide him home from the stockyards telling him what color the sky was. Then one night Ma came home from Trini’s Market with a broken arm and no groceries. Dad said take one goddamned guess at the race of the guys who do this. Leo and I sat there in the kitchen with big eyes as Ma made fruit salad one-handed.

Sick with rage, Leo joined the Nazis. Dad wept and said nobody liked the jigs, but that was no reason to go off the deep end. The next summer Leo cracked one in the head with a baseball bat and Dad said enlist quick before they throw your ass in the clink. Leo lied about his age and soon sent from Parris Island a postcard of a hick woman with missile breasts.

I’m so fucking lonely for you, man, he wrote. *Join up yourself and we’ll go over and kick some ass together.*

But Dad had pledged me to Split Lip. They were old school pals. Since the shooting Boneless had been a mess. Unless someone was there all the time she wept nonstop. Dad said that someone was to be me. By now he was a crazy blind guy stinking up the parlor. How was I supposed to tell him no?

So every morning I biked over and made her eggs and Split Lip went off to work, biting his lip in gratitude and offering me unlimited rides in his squad car. I came to care about her. She tried so hard. I read to her and taught her to type using a stick held between her teeth. I brushed her hair until it shone and made sure her smocks were clean.

Leo came home with a Baggie full of human ears and asked why was I wasting my life baby-sitting a tard. I said don’t call her a tard. He said as long as I was being so pure, why not give her the real scoop on her old man? I said because it would crush her. Boo hoo, he said.

Finally Split Lip died in his sleep. Father Delacroix read aloud the eulogy Boneless wrote. People wept at the level of her devotion and her beautiful choice of words.

Leo sat next to me half-crocked, whispering: Murderer, murderer.

With Split Lip dead the maw of the state home gaped. There invalids were frostbitten in their beds and lunatic women became pregnant without known lovers. Dad begged Ma to take Boneless in. But Ma said: Look at you, look at me, look at our son who’s got no life, let her go where she can get proper care.

So in she went. Holidays we visited. At Thanksgiving Leo came along wired on speed and while I was out fetching turkey slices from the Olds told her all. I came back in and Ma was wringing her hands like a nut in the corner and Dad had Leo by the throat, asking where the hell he’d left his sense of decency.

Leo pushed him off and said: Lies serve nothing. The truth serves God.

Dad said: God my foot, you buttinsky, you’ve broken her heart.

She looked up at me so sweetly I couldn’t lie.

Thus was God served: a sobbing girl in a wheelchair, photographs of a dead man gathered

up and burned, a typing stick used less often as the months went by, finally the cessation of all typing and a request that I visit no more.

Months passed. Nights I sat home, hearing gunshots and cackling addicts in the alleys waiting for any hopeful thing to sprout in my heart. Finally I thought: What can she do to throw me out? So I went over. When she saw me her eyes lit up. She typed and I talked until the sun rose and the halls filled with oldsters and lunatics hacking and grouching their way into consciousness. Then an ex-con with a head scar brought her a dish of eggs that looked like he had spent the night on a windowsill and I thought: Jesus Christ, enough is enough.

By then I was selling the hell out of Buicks at night. So I got a little place of my own and moved her in with me. Now we're pals. Family. It's not perfect. Sometimes it's damn hard. But I look after her and she squeals with delight when I come home, and the sum total of sadness in the world is less than it would have been.

Her real name is Isabelle.

A pretty, pretty name.

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