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## A Radiant Sky

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A RADIANT SKY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Drama and Communications

by

Bradley Scott Philipson

B.A. Washington & Lee University, 1997  
M.A. Hollins University, 2003

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And he could not tell why the struggle was worthwhile, why he had determined to use to the utmost himself and his heritage from the personalities he had passed . . .He stretched out his arms to the crystalline, radiant sky. “I know myself,” he cried, “but that is all.”

**F. Scott Fitzgerald,**  
*This Side of Paradise*

From the moment I picked your book up until I laid it down I was convulsed with laughter. Someday I intend on reading it.

**Groucho Marx**

## Prologue

“Where we come from, you can get shot walking to school,” Christy said.

“No, you can’t,” Jake said. He was trying to keep hating her, but he felt kind of grown-up. He was walking down the street with a fifth grade girl, no parents around. He pulled on Eldon’s hand, and the toddler took a couple of quick steps to catch up.

“Ja-ake,” whined Eldon.

Jake gave him a stern look.

“You can too get shot,” Christy continued. “We lived only, like, four blocks from school, same as this, but my mom still drove me down there every day and picked me up.” She looked around at the surroundings. Jake wondered if she was waiting for something to jump out from behind one of the big, old houses. “Ashland Place is a lot like Uptown in New Orleans.”

Jake had hated her right away, from the moment they’d met earlier that morning. He didn’t care how long their parents had known each other. She was taller than he was. And she had on Reeboks, which his mom had told Jake he couldn’t have because sixty dollars was too much to spend on a pair of shoes he would outgrow in three months. She wore an alligator shirt, which Jake couldn’t have because the Kindler’s didn’t carry them. Christy always smiled, and Jake was sure it was fake.

They stepped up to the curb and looked frantically up and down Springhill before darting across. Eldon tried to run ahead, but Jake held his hand firmly. He let loose his grip once they were safely on the other side, but Eldon wouldn’t let go. Jake decided it didn’t matter. He was eight years old, walking with a pretty, older girl down the street,

even if he did hate her, and looking out for his two year-old brother. That made him a big kid.

“My mom walks me to school in the morning,” he said, “but the babysitter walks me home.”

“What are you talking about?” Christy asked.

“You said your mom drove you to school.”

“Oh. Why doesn’t she walk you home?”

“She works. She’s a teacher.”

“Here?” She motioned up to the looming red brick steeple of the St. Andrew’s chapel.

“Public School.”

“Oh.” She looked away.

“You can let go my hand now,” Jake told Eldon. He pulled away and started climbing up the low fence at the edge of the lower school playground, just next to the football field.

Christy hefted Eldon over to Jake and then followed. “Hey,” she called.

“What?” Jake had started toward the swing set. He didn’t turn around, but kept an eye on Eldon, who was running for the slide.

“You know what I said about the streetcar back at my house?” Christy asked.

“I don’t remember,” he lied.

“When you said that’s all you remembered from going to New Orleans and I said it was for public school kids and tourists? That’s just what my mother says. I don’t even know what she means.”

Jake sat down on the swing.

Christy sat next to him. "I did ride on the streetcar once. Someone from school rented one for a birthday party. We went all the way downtown and back."

Jake started swinging. Christy sat still.

"Look!" Eldon cried from the top of the slide before going down head-first.

"Don't do that Eldon," Jake called. "It's not safe."

"My mom says y'all are Jewish," Christy said.

Jake dragged his feet to stop the swing. "So?"

"My best friend in New Orleans is Jewish. I think it's neat."

Jake started swinging again. Eldon was sitting at the bottom of the slide, watching them.

"One time, when I stayed over on a Saturday night, I went to Sunday school with her. Do you know Hebrew?"

"No," he said.

"Do you wear that little hat when you go to services?"

"No."

"Are you going to have a Bar Mitzvah?"

"I dunno." Jake was getting tired of the subject.

"You know, a Bar Mitzvah is for boys, a Bat Mitzvah is for girls."

"I know," Jake said, though he really didn't.

Jake started swinging higher and higher, and finally waited until he had gone all the way forward before jumping off. He scraped his hands and his knee when he landed, and it hurt, but he pretended it didn't.

Eldon came running over and immediately inspected Jake's hands. He pointed at the scrape and looked up at Jake.

"I'm okay," Jake said, though he knew he had some tears welling up in his eyes.

"Are you okay?" Christy asked.

"Yeah," he said. He started walking toward the merry-go-round, holding Eldon's hand. Behind him, he heard Christy running to catch up.

She sat down on the merry-go-round just before Eldon climbed on. "Push us," she said.

Jake had been planning on pushing anyway, but he didn't want to look like he was doing it just because she said so. He sat down.

Christy folded her arms. "You're a jerk."

Jake hummed a little bit and pretended he didn't hear her. After what seemed like long enough to make it look like he wasn't doing just because she wanted him to, he got down and pushed. He got it going so fast he could hardly keep up, then jumped back on.

Christy put one of her arms around Eldon to hold him on, though she gripped the bar tightly with both hands. Finally, the merry-go-round slowed and the pony tail was lying flat back against her head. Jake was disappointed.

"Aren't you going to push again?" she asked.

"Gain, Jake, 'gain," Eldon giggled.

Jake didn't get up. "Why'd y'all move here?"

"My dad's law firm moved him to Mobile. Mom wanted him to quit, but he wanted to move. Mom said he just never felt right in New Orleans because he's from Kansas."



“Your dad’s from Kansas?”

“No, he’s from Chicago. I think Mom just forgets.”

Christy jumped down and got the merry-go-round going fast, and then jumped back on. Jake took his turn holding Eldon in.

When the merry-go-round slowed again, Jake felt a little sick. “Our dad grew up here. Our mom’s from Jacksonville.”

“Where’s that?” Christy asked.

“Florida.”

“We got to Florida a lot. My aunt and uncle have a condo in Longboat Key. That’s Florida.” Christy took Eldon’s hand and started leading him toward the school.

Jake followed “What’s a condo?” he asked.

“It’s like an apartment with a beach. Y’all have beaches here, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I love the beach.”

Jake stopped. “Where are we going?”

“Inside the school.”

“But it’s Saturday.”

“I know. That’s why it’ll be fun. You can run around and do whatever you want inside a school on Saturday.”

“How would you know?”

“We used to sneak over and do it all the time.” She continued with Eldon towards the building.

“I thought you would get shot if you walked to your school,” Jake pointed out, running to catch up.

“That’s just what my mom says. She’s always making stuff up. C’mon.”

It sounded like a really bad idea to Jake, like the sort of thing that would get him a spanking, especially since they were bringing Eldon. Then again, he thought, he was always getting spankings anyway, so he might as well earn this one. He followed Christy and Eldon through the heavy wooden doors.

They kept going up the stairs until they reached the top. It was the middle school, so Jake had never gone exploring there. He had barely even been inside this building before. “I didn’t know they had a fourth floor,” he said.

“It’s not the fourth floor, dummy.” Christy pointed to the sign on the door that said roof access.

Jake wanted to punch her. “So I guess we should go back down.”

Christy poked his arm gently. “Are you scared?”

Jake made a fist, but kept it at his side. “No, but it’s probably locked. He pushed against the door and immediately wished he hadn’t. A rush of warm air hit them.

“C’mon,” Christy said, leading Eldon outside.

“Da roof!” Eldon said, looking around in the blinding, overcast white glare.

Jake followed, then reached back and shut the door so no one would see it open and come catch them. He leaned back against it until he heard it click. It was windy on the roof, which was covered in pebbles. There were a bunch of empty beer cans lying around, which Christy started to pick up and shake.

“Sometimes, when Mom isn’t looking, Dad lets me take a sip of beer,” she said.

Jake didn’t have anything to really offer in response. “Eldon, sit there,” he said, pointing to the spot just in front of the door.

Eldon did as instructed.

Jake looked at Eldon for a few seconds to make sure he would sit still, then edged towards the roof’s end. He could see the whole of Ashland Place from there, and downtown Mobile, and even the bay. He heard some voices below, but he didn’t want to get close enough to look down.

Christy came up behind him and took his hand. She stepped closer to the edge and pulled Jake with her, stopping just short of the foot-high ledge that surrounded the roof. Jake bit his lip and looked down. The kids below were all fourth and fifth graders, six of them. No one from Jake’s class was down there, and, with the exception of Raj, who even the upper schoolers knew because he was the only Indian kid in the school, they were all the type of kids who Jake always assumed were all cousins. St. Andrew’s had a bunch of kids like that. They all hung out together, and their parents were friends, and they were always at each others’ houses.

They were playing football, three against three. Clay White was quarterback, even though he was kind of short for a fifth grader. Clay made Henry Collins, the fat kid with white hair, snap it to him, then he dropped back like the football players on TV. He dodged around as if people were trying to tackle him even though they were playing five-Mississippi rush. Henry was open, jumping up and down and waving his hands, but Clay waited until the Raj finished counting and came running at him before he threw the ball.

The throw was nearly perfect, a tight spiral with just a little wobble. When Jake threw the football, it always wobbled all over. He was better at baseball. The ball hit Henry right in the hands just as a fourth grader whose name Jake didn't know tackled him. The ball, the fourth grader, and Henry all fell to the ground.

The kid rolled on his back and looked straight up at Jake and Christy. He pointed. "Hey, Kindler's on the roof. Don't jump, Kindler," he yelled.

Jake thought it was cool that the kid knew his name even though he didn't know the kid's name. It made Jake feel like he had some kind of special power.

The kid kept going. "We'll shop at the store, Jake, we promise."

A few of the other kids laughed. Jake tried to spit on him, but it landed just a few feet from the building. Jake looked back at Eldon. He was playing with the pebbles in front of him, off in his own world. Jake wished he were with him.

"You dummy," Henry said, "he's up there with his girlfriend."

The fourth grader started in again. "Kindler's got a girlfriend, Kindler's got a girlfriend."

Christy let go of Jake's hand and made a fist with her middle finger sticking out. Jake had seen some of the big kids do that before. He didn't want to punch Christy anymore.

"C'mon Jake, let's go." She walked back to the door and pulled, while Eldon scurried out of the way. "Shit." She said it quietly, like it was a word she used all the time. "It's locked. Why'd you close the door?"

Eldon ran to Jake, took his hand, and looked up at him, as if waiting for his big brother to respond to Christy. Jake didn't know what to say. He wished he were in a

Marx Brothers movie and could say something really fast and mean. He sat down on the pebbles and Eldon sat in his lap. Just then, he heard the handle turn.

Clay stepped out, keeping his hand on the inside handle of the door to make sure it didn't close again.

Christy smiled at him. "My hero."

He blushed. "It doesn't shut all the way unless you really push it, but if you do that it locks. We mess around up here a lot."

"Well, thank you for saving us," Christy said.

She smiled at Clay in a way that made Jake want to punch her again, then she took Eldon by the hand and pulled him up from Jake's lap.

Eldon let her lead him through the door, just behind Clay. Just then, a breeze started to blow the door and Jake had to hurry to get through before it shut on him.

# 1

The wind did little to help the heat as I stared out across the expanse of Mobile to the bay. I was home again, for better or worse, and the wind brought with it the smell of this town: jasmine, magnolias in bloom, sea air and dumpster run-off. The smell wasn't necessarily good, but it was home, like stepping into my Aunt Ida's kitchen when she'd been cooking some foul stew all afternoon.

I shifted from foot to foot on the gravel of the middle school roof. St. Andrew's was home, too. After thirteen years, I knew every hiding place in its six acre grounds, every dark nook in each red brick building. The roof was just one of many, the place I had chosen to view what wasn't exactly my kingdom.

More than anything, I just wasn't quite ready to face the house. I was antsy, though a big part of that was the caffeine pills. I had had little sleep the night before, and I hadn't showered before I got on the road. My body stank of it. When the wind paused, I could smell my own stench, that of boozy sweat and fleeting embraces of half-strangers, a farewell party to four years of college. The pills had been necessary to make the drive, and now I could hear my heart pound, each beat sending off a new wave of smell. I stepped closer to the edge, hoping to catch more of a breeze.

Immediately before me was the football field, where a few young kids were playing. I did the math. They were likely in first or second grade when I graduated, probably too young to know who I was, even if they were baseball fans.

That was funny, the notion of fans. Like I had been something special. Ooh, look, the Kindler kid made second team all-metro.

Past the field, I looked across Springhill to the old houses of Ashland Place. A nice enough neighborhood, sure, but I had seen nicer. Hell, the Garden District in New Orleans put it to shame. Why then, did the area hold such power over me? Why did I care that our house was always so run down? A few others were like that; some even belonged to “good” families.

It doesn't matter now, I thought as I opened the door to the stairwell and kicked away the chunk of cement I had been using to prop it open. The house was all fixed up now, same as everything else in the neighborhood. But then, why did that bother me, too?

Back on the street, I climbed up into the Scout. The truck had been a battle with my parents. They had wanted me to use the money I had saved waiting tables to make a down payment on a Japanese sedan. They were willing to cosign. I wanted something with a little more panache and without a monthly payment. My mother had actually cried over this. My dad had caught himself yelling a few times. Jesus, old Jews could be a pain in the ass, I thought as I fired up the rumbling V8.

The Scout was a '79, actually a Scout II, from an age when SUV sounded like something you'd catch from unprotected sex. Large block engine, four-barrel carburetor, mud and snow tires, four wheel drive, only a few spots of rust, which I had sanded, Bondo-ed and primed. The brick-red coloring was already a pretty close match to the primer, so that worked out well. I had also covered the torn vinyl seats with custom-fit Mexican blanket seat covers and tracked down new interior door panels online. I had sanded the chipped enamel of the dash down to the steel and painted over it with clear acrylic, and put in a cheap CD player to replace the old CB. As I simultaneously rolled

down the window and pulled out into traffic, John Hiatt's gravelly voice blared from the half-blown speakers.

A few blocks up, I turned into Ashland place, a few feet of clearance on each side from the low cement walls designed to deter big trucks from cutting through. They weren't foolproof, and I don't think they were designed to be; Ashland place residents still expected delivery of whatever antique furniture they had ordered, or at least the pseudo-antiques of places like Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware. But the low walls were a pain in the ass to maneuver, and that discouraged undesirables from using the neighborhood for shortcuts.

I was a little self-conscious about the truck but for no good reason. A couple of people at Sewanee had them, and I knew they were fairly common vehicles to be kept as hunting trucks. Not that I hunted, but, you know, all part of the Southern gentleman planter tradition four years of Sewanee not so subtly pounded into my head.

I slowed up as I approached the Burroughs abode. I could make out the back of her head as she sat on the porch swing. Christy had given up on blonde a few years ago, and the change agreed with her. Despite the fact that everything I owned was in the back of the Scout, waiting to be unloaded at home, or maybe because of it, I stopped the car at the curb and hopped out.

"Man, even a neighborhood like this has women selling themselves on the street?" I called out as I stepped around the truck.

She looked up from her magazine, her face more gaunt than usual, her eyes a bit sunken. Somehow, the fact that she was less glamorous these days had made her even



more beautiful to me. After a moment, her face registered recognition, and she smiled, jumped up, and ran down the walk, leaping into an embrace.

She buried her face against my shoulder, and her arms squeezed around my neck tightly, but I was afraid to hug her back too hard, afraid she would bruise. The cast on her left wrist scraped against my skin. She seemed so fragile. I compensated by leaning backward, lifting her feet off of the ground for a few seconds before she released her arms.

“My God, you stink.”

Despite her choice of words, her voice reminded me of warm icing over sticky buns, its excited state allowing it to melt into crevices and flow towards open spaces, coating everything with sugar.

“Yeah, you suck,” I responded, allowing her to lead me by the hand back up to the porch swing. She was barefoot, and the dirty pads of her feet implied she had been walking around that way for some time. Her pale legs looked a little too skinny, and the cutoff jeans hung from her frame. I didn’t think anyone still wore cutoff jeans, but they looked good on her, especially with the white oxford she wore, clearly a boy’s size that was selected for its close fit.

“So funny. Would it have killed you to shower this morning?” She sat down and pulled me next her, bit her lip for a second, then pushed me toward the other end of the bench. “Stay downwind.”

“Yes, yes, I think it might’ve. Would it have killed you to withhold judgment just long enough for a ‘Hello, Jake. So glad to see you., Welcome back to town?’”

“Hello, Jake. So glad to see you. Welcome back to town.”

“Bite me.” I smiled.

“So good to see you, too, Christy,” she continued, “and it’s good to see you doing so well after your accident.”

I stopped smiling. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, Jake, don’t be so grim. I was just giving you shit.”

“Yeah, but that whole thing sounded pretty serious,” I said. “I left you like a zillion messages, at the hospital and with your mom.”

“I got them, thanks. I just wasn’t feeling phone worthy. Hey, I told you not to look so grim. It was just a thing.”

“It was more than just a thing.”

“Trust me,” she said. “It was just a thing. Situational psychosis. Coming down off a bad bender. I put all of that behind me.” She stood and stretched. “My body is free of both drugs and Clay.”

I wanted to believe her, but I had heard that too many times. Christy and Clay broke up semiannually, then they always got back together. And the drugs, well, the drugs had a pretty long streak going too these days.

“You talked to Thomas lately?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Not in months,” I said. “He was supposed to graduate, though. I need to call out to Willie and Ida’s to see when he’s getting back.”

A few moments passed quietly before she turned and looked at me. “Hey. What are you doing this afternoon?”

“I was going to unload and then run by the store.”

“Want to be a sweetie?”

“No, no, I really don’t.”

“I promised Henry I’d go to his crawfish boil. It starts at four.”

“Hmm, let me think.” I pretended to think. “No.”

“What, don’t think your car can make it out to his country house?” she taunted.

“Very funny. Need I remind you that it just made it all the way down from Sewanee? Thing’s a beast.”

“It most certainly is. C’mon, a bunch of people you know will be there, and there’ll be crawfish and beer, and I think Henry said something about a baseball game.”

“You mean softball.”

“No, Henry made a point of saying it would be baseball. He suggested I bring you. Don’t you want to throw the pigskin with the old team?”

“Pigskin is football.”

“Whatever. Pick me up in an hour. I’ll go to the store with you, and then we’ll head out.”

“No,” I said.

She looked at me with eyebrows scrunched, the same look that had made me feel so small for the better part of my childhood.

“I’ll go with you to Henry’s, but come with me over to the house first,” I said.

“Have you seen it since it was redone?”

“Yeah, I stayed with your parents my first few days out of the hospital. Mom and Dad were in New York.”

I wondered why my parents hadn’t told me that. “Good, you can show me around.”

“I have to change.” She motioned down at her clothes, and I tried not to look her body up and down.

I adopted my best Groucho. “Let’s not be drastic, dear. I like you just the way you are. Except for maybe the ears. I had a dog once, a wiener dog. We clipped her ears. Of course it worked out horribly, that darn wiener dog never fit the bun right again.”

She looked at her wrist where a watch would be. “Wow, you made it almost five minutes of being normal. Come up with that one on your own?” she asked.

”Yeah, how was it?”

“Eh.” She waved her hand in a so-so motion. “Late Marx-ish. Kind of like in that one you showed me with Lucille Ball.”

“*Room Service.*”

“Yeah.

“That one kind of sucked,” I said.

“I know.”

We pulled the Scout into the driveway of my parents’ house, a three-story Victorian that had been among the first homes built in the neighborhood. It had been renovated sometime in the 1950s and was badly in need of updating for the better part of my life, but my parents had just gotten around to doing so.

“Where’s your mom?” Christy asked as I opened up the door to the detached garage. She had traded her cutoffs for a pair of very short khaki shorts, almost invisible beneath the oxford.

“She still has another few weeks to work.”

“I thought school was out.”

“Principals get a shorter break.” I opened up the back door of the Scout and hefted out my grandfather’s old sea chest. Bracing it against myself, I hauled it to the back of the garage.

“What’s in there?”

“A few books, some pictures, winter clothes.” I set it down and shoved it against the back wall, amidst some cardboard boxes marked “Eldon.” I tried not to look at the boxes. Jesus, I should have been past this by now.

She leaned against the truck. “What can I grab?”

I walked up and handed her my leg.

“Yeah, this one never gets old,” she deadpanned.

“Fine, I’ll take it back.” I walked around to the open tailgate and pulled out a milk crate filled with CDs and movies. I extended it to her. “Take this if it’s not too heavy with your wrist and all.”

She snatched it from me. “It’s fine.”

I heaved a duffel onto my shoulder and she followed me to the back door. I was careful walking up the narrow rear staircase, already imagining my mother’s complaints about scratching up the walls. At the top, I closed my eyes as I walked past Eldon’s room, relying on memory to keep me in the center of the hall. It hadn’t been Eldon’s room for a long time now; it had been “the guest room,” or “Aunt Ida’s room” when my parents were out of town.

“I stayed in there,” Christy said. “It was kind of weird. I mean, I know it’s been like, what, seven, eight years? Still, it was weird.”

“I know what you mean.” I turned into what used to be my room. Technically, it was still my room. It was different now, though. My posters were all gone. No more Guns ‘n Roses or Cal Ripken. Not even Archie Manning or The Who. They had put up framed prints of beach scenes. The walls were painted a pale blue, with a seashell border up around the top. All that was left of my eighteen-year habitation was a single baseball plaque on the wall and a picture on the dresser. It showed Christy, me, and our parents at the Grand Hotel in Point Clear sometime in junior high. I think it was the summer after Eldon. Everyone in the picture was staring at the camera except me. I was gazing at Christy’s profile

I dropped the duffel to the floor and stretched out on the bed. Christy sat down on the floor opposite and leaned against the wall.

“I really need to get my own place,” I told the ceiling fan.

“Tell me about it,” Christy said, pulling her legs beneath her. “Hey, when are you going to start work at the store full-time?”

“I’m not.”

“No, seriously.”

“Seriously. I’m going to find something else.”

“Hello, Jake, I’d like you to meet the inevitable. Inevitable, this is Jake.”

“Okay, maybe I am. But I want to take a few months and make sure there’s nothing else first. Even if I do end up there, I’ve been telling my dad I probably want to get some other experience in.”

“Whatever. I give you three weeks, a month tops before you give in.”

I knew she was right, so I threw a sham-covered pillow at her. It hit the wall next to her.

“Speaking of testy, I’m going to go downstairs and watch some Oprah while you shower.”

“I don’t need to shower for a crawfish boil at Henry’s.”

“Honey, it’s not a matter of politeness at this point, it’s a matter of health. If you don’t clean yourself up, someone’s going to mistake you for a decaying corpse. I’d hate to see you shot because you were mistaken for a zombie.”

I looked at her, her beauty faded, her skin ashen, her eyes almost dead, and wanted to point her at the mirror. I felt sick inside thinking about what she had put herself through over the course of the last month. Quietly I stood, started towards the door, and beckoned to her. She followed me down the front steps and into the powder room off the front hall. Guiding her by the shoulders, I placed her squarely in front of the sink.

I leaned forward and whispered into her ear. “Hello, pot, nice to meet you. I’m the kettle.”

She laughed and elbowed me in the gut. “You’re such a dick.”

“I’m going to go shower now. Watch your Oprah.”

Standing in my room in my drawers, the last rivulets of water still running down my back, I stared at my open duffle. Finally, I blinked. Then a longer blink. I closed my eyes for a second and felt myself wavering back and forth. The caffeine pills were wearing off. I sat down in my desk chair and pulled out a threadbare pair of jeans, a white undershirt, and a faded navy Lacoste polo. Slowly, I weaved my limbs through each article of clothing and then stretched out on the bed. Just a quick catnap.

I wasn't sure where I was or what time it was when I woke up. It was daylight, but I wasn't sure if it was morning or afternoon. I blinked a few times. I was in my room. I was back from school. I was fully dressed. And I was leaning back against someone else in the bed.

I sat up and looked over my shoulder. Christy was curled up in a fetal position, eyes closed. The clock next to that side of the bed read 3:30. Daylight at 3:30 meant afternoon. I had been out less than two hours. I licked my finger and stuck it in Christy's ear.

She convulsed and kicked out at the air. "You jerk." She sat up. "What time is it?"

I motioned to the clock right in front of her.

"Perfect. Party starts at four. By the time we stop by the store and everything, we'll get there at five." She took my baseball glove from atop the dresser and tossed it to me.

"I wasn't planning on spending that long at the store," I said.

"I know, but it takes about a half hour to get to the farm."

"You didn't say it was at his farm."

"I so did."



The drive downtown to the store wasn't long. Kindler's Clothiers was located in a four-story building on Government Street downtown, flush between similar looking buildings which housed a law firm on one side and a smoothie shop, yoga gym, and the Society for the Preservation and Display of Confederate Army Officer Uniforms on the other. Mobile was so stuck on itself that even history fetishists had to find their niche market.

Like the law firm, we occupied all four floors of our building; men's on one, boys' and women's on two, formal wear and offices on three, storage on four. I parked in the alley around back and used my key to get in the back door. Mr. Paulie, a dandyish old man folding slacks and attaching price stickers to the designers' labels jumped a little when we walked in behind him.

"Hey, Mr. Paulie," I greeted him. We barely had enough room for all three of us to stand amidst the boxes in the small receiving room.

"Jake, you nearly gave me a coronary. Good to see you. Congratulations."

"Thanks. Hey, how you been? Do you know Christy Burroughs?"

"Of course I know Christy. How've you been, dear?"

"I'm good, Mr. Paulie." She kissed him on the cheek.

I looked around at the shipment. "You want help getting what you don't put out up to the fourth? I have a minute, and Christy can browse."

"Depends on whether or not your dad sent anybody home yet. If the boys are gone, I could sure use you. Check back with me in a bit."

"Sure. Good to see you."

“Good to still be seen.”

Christy and I slid out of the little room, through a curtain, and onto the main selling floor. Off in suits, a middle-aged guy was getting measured by Lawrence, an aging homosexual who had been one of my late grandfather’s hires back in the late fifties. His hands trembled as he held the tape, but a lot of customers insisted on him. This particular customer chuckled and shook his head as Lawrence measured his waist, stood back, and then patted the guy’s pot belly.

“So, tell me, David, when are you due?” he asked in a sincere effete drawl.

I bit my lip, and my hand shot to Christy’s mouth. I had learned this one as a kid. Lawrence could get away with saying whatever he wanted, as long as the joke was between him and the customer. Anyone else acknowledges it, and suddenly everything’s awkward. I put my other arm around Christy’s shoulder, and we walked quickly to the front staircase, where we raced up to the third floor. At the top, we both burst out laughing.

“How does he get away with that?” Christy asked.

“I have a theory. See, all these middle-aged guys want to feel attractive, right? They want to flirt with women, but they can’t, really, because so few women find them attractive. They could try and initiate it, I guess, but they could get in a lot of trouble. With Lawrence, it’s like perfectly safe flirting.”

“Nice theory. So all Mobile men are latent homosexuals?” Christy leaned back against the wall.

“It’d explain why they started Mardi Gras. All the costumes, all the pageantry. And who is the first city to copy us? New Orleans, a virtual Mecca for homosexuals.” I had made this last bit up as I went, but I liked the way it sounded.

“Sure, sure. You’re nucking futs, you know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know. Let’s go see my dad.”

I didn’t really want to have this meeting, but I had promised we’d have a talk about “my plans” my first day back. I had hinted at not coming to work for him at graduation, but he had seemed distracted. You can’t lead him on, I told myself. Break it to him right off.

The formalwear room was unmanned. June was wedding season with a few multi-debutante cocktail receptions thrown in, but it was nothing compared the debutante balls in August and December and the Mardi Gras season that usually lasted through the first three months of the year. Prom barely registered, as those high schoolers who would own their tuxes usually got them for the Mardi Gras sub-deb affairs and Kindler’s didn’t do rentals. I stopped to tie a black bow tie around my neck. Looking in the mirror, I caught Christy playing with a wedding veil out of the corner of my eye. I got a mental image of Christy as a bride, but the guy next to her was Clay, so I shook it out of my head.

We didn’t do dresses ourselves, but many regular clients bought them elsewhere and brought them to us for alterations. To keep them happy, we carried a number of accessories. Christy began flipping through a bridal magazine. I moved quickly to the office door. It was ajar, and I pushed it open to see my dad going over some papers. His close-cropped silver hair still showed no signs of thinning, and his tie was snug around his neck. He usually wore one of those shirts with two collar buttons, one above the

other, so that it rode high on his neck, Saville Row style. I knocked lightly. He looked up, looked back at the paper for a second and made a notation next to a column of figures, then stood and walked around the giant steel desk.

“Hey.” He kissed me on the cheek, stood back, and pulled on the end of the bow tie. It came loose, and he pulled it off and stuck it in the pocket of his suit jacket. “How was the drive?”

“A little rough, but I drank heavily the whole way, which made things easier.”

He didn’t smile.

“Don’t worry, I was popping amphetamines to even out the buzz.”

“Lovely,” he said, sitting back down in his chair. He picked up the receiver of the phone.

“Who are you calling?”

“Sewanee. I want to see if they’ll refund your tuition.”

I sat down in one of the wooden armchairs opposite the desk. “Funny.”

Just then, Christy entered. “Hey, Stan.”

Dad smiled. “Hey, Christy, how you feeling?”

“Super. You know, Jake just brings a truckload of sunshine with him when he comes to town.”

“Yeah, he brings a truckload of something.”

Score. Dad was unfunny again. The world was right.

“Well, I’ll leave you two to discuss man-things. Jake, I’ll be down in women’s looking at purses. I need something to go with this new dress Mom made me buy.” She slipped out

I had been hoping she would stay for the talk so things wouldn't get too serious.

"Jake, I want to talk to you about what you told me at graduation." He was no longer smiling.

"You know I was kidding about the Krishna thing, right?" I looked above Dad's head, at the picture of his father and grandfather in front of the original plate glass window reading "Kindler's Dry Goods. Est. 1938." I sat on my hands to make sure they wouldn't shake.

"I think you may be on to something," he said.

"If you say so, but I'm not sure about the shaved head and pony tail thing. The robes look freeing, though."

"Jake, be serious for a second. I've been running over the numbers again and again for these last few months, and I'm not sure I can really afford to take you on full time yet." He clasped his hands in front of him, looking at me, clearly waiting for a response.

I separated from myself, like I was floating somewhere in the back of my brain, watching through a telescope. I wasn't sure how to answer. This was supposed to be my call. Mine, not his. I felt like I had just returned from a war to find my childhood home torn down.

"I mean, eventually, when the new mall gets built and we have the satellite store, I'll have to risk expanding the staff. But that'll be next June. Already, I didn't replace Joseph when he quit in February, so payroll's lean, but not lean enough. That should give you an idea of how much the economy's hurting us. Right now, if I were to take you on full-time, I'd have to cut all four part-time Springhill kids. I'd be down to Lawrence,

Paulie and you downstairs, and that wouldn't leave me with a lot of flexibility. Look, kid, it's not like you hadn't planned on finding something else anyway, and I think that's a good idea. I never had another job outside of this store, and I tell you, I regret it. Who knows, maybe you'll find something you really like and make a career out of that instead."

I just kept nodding. He was consoling me about not coming to work at the store. *Dad* was consoling *me*. And it wasn't even an option?

"I mean, until you find something, I can probably throw you a few shifts here and there."

I stood. "Yeah, that's fine. I kind of have to get going. I told Christy I'd take her to this party."

"You don't have to rush off. Let's talk about this for a few minutes. What have you done so far to look? Is there anyone you want me to call?"

"Naw, I'm good. I'll figure it out." I reached behind me and found the door handle without turning. "Look Dad, I understand, business is business."

Dad closed his eyes and clenched his jaw for a moment. "Don't put it like that. You know you mean the world to your mother and me. We want you to do what's best for you, and, I gotta tell you, kid, putting the store in a tough financial spot isn't good for you. I know you don't want that. I mean, tell me, if that's what you want, I'll find a way to make it work."

"That's not what I want. Look, Christy's waiting."

"What time will you be home?"

"I don't know. Tennesh, maybe?"

“Okay, be careful. And be careful with Christy. No matter how brave a front she puts on, she’s really had a rough go of it lately.” He walked around the side of the desk and followed me out the door of his office.

“I know.” I ran my fingers through the dangling silk bow ties on the counter display as I walked past.

“I mean, even before the accident, well before the accident.” He centered the display on the counter.

When we got to the top of the stairs, I turned and faced him. “I know. I figure if she’s with me she’s less likely to fall into her old habits.”

“Let’s hope so.” He reached out and squeezed my forearm. “You really okay with this? I do think it’s for the best, Jake.”

I pulled away, taking a careful few backwards steps down. “Yeah.” I ran my fingers back through my hair. “It’s good.”

“Okay.” He eyed me wearily. “Now that you’re back in town and a college graduate, would it kill you to get a haircut?”

I found Christy down in men’s, talking to Lawrence. Apparently seeing my shell-shocked expression when I descended the stairs, she furrowed her brow in concern. I stood between her and Lawrence. Lawrence handed me his leg.

I knew my role. I pretended not to notice at first, then pulled away in mock anger, careful not to push him away hard enough to knock his frail frame to the ground. I couldn’t help but smile. “Christy, did I ever tell you Mr. Lawrence gave me my first set of Marx Brothers videos before I was old enough to read?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Personally, I always preferred Laurel and Hardy,” Lawrence drawled effete.

“Yeah,” I said, “and I’m sure that had nothing to do with the homoerotic undertones.”

Lawrence put his hand to his mouth and rolled his eyes back in exaggerated offense. “A bit over the top with the butch and fem, weren’t they?”

“As much as I hate to break this up . . .” Christy pulled me toward the back door by the hand.

“Bye, Mr. Lawrence,” I said, dragging my feet.

“Y’all behave yourselves, now.”

Paulie was nowhere to be seen when we got to the receiving room. Most of the boxes were still there, but remembering what had happened upstairs, I really didn’t want to hang around and help.

We climbed in the Scout and, after putting on my wire rims, I followed Christy’s directions westward.

“When did you get those,” she asked, pointing at my face.

I immediately regretted getting the cheapest frames I could find. “Last year. I just wear them when I need to watch for road signs or if I’m in class and need to see the board.”

“Very professorial.”

“Gee, thanks.”

The road stretched into wilderness as we left Mobile behind. The only noise was the buzz of the deeply grooved tires on the hot pavement.



“So what had you looking like you were going to lose your lunch when you came back downstairs?” she asked once we were out on the highway.

I went Groucho. “I give up, what had me looking like I was going to lose my lunch when I came back downstairs?”

“Jake.”

I thought of every time I had ever heard anyone ask Dad about business. No matter what was going on, how close the friend, the answer was always the same. “Could be better, could be worse.” When I was little I once called him on this. I could have been no more than ten or twelve, and we were at a restaurant. I started to ask him, right in front of the Burroughs, about how much trouble he was having with unpaid accounts, something he had talked about with Mom in the car. He cut me a look that shut me up straight away.

As soon as we were alone again, my mother tried to explain as sweetly as she could.

“We don’t talk about that sort of thing outside the family. If things are going well and you brag, no one likes you and, heaven forbid God hears it. If you’re complaining, no one wants to hear that either. Things can always get worse. Not to mention people who don’t have these troubles start to pity you.”

“But Ed and Margaret talk about that sort of thing,” I pointed out.

“Jews don’t, Jake. It’s the way we are,” Mom said.

I didn’t follow the logic, but the severity of her tone carried enough disapproval to shut me up.

I stared ahead at the road and told Christy what Dad had said in his office.

“That’s shitty,” she responded.

“Your capacity for empathy is overwhelming.”

She didn’t say anything.

“I guess it’s not that big a deal,” I said. “I mean, it lines up with my plans anyway.” I maneuvered around a tire tread in the middle of the road, the wheel a bit jerky in my hands. I gripped it tighter.

“Yeah, who knows. Maybe this is what you need,” she said.

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t know. Riddle me this though; how come they can afford to fix up the house?”

“How the hell should I know? Look, Jake, you got it pretty good with Stan and Leslie. You should try living with my parents.”

“I’ll pass.”

“No, really, it’s great. By now my mom would have you in law school. Probably someplace over your head where she’d have pulled strings to get you in. Those jeans would be in the trash by now, your hair would be about three inches shorter all around, and she’d have jammed a rusty nail into your foot some time ago.”

“I don’t get the rusty nail,” I said.

“Tetanus.”

I looked at her.

She thrust out her mouth in an underbite and drew out her vowels. “To ensure prep school lockjaw.”

“Okay, Christy, see this shirt? All I did was buy this shirt with my own money up at school a few years ago. I needed a shirt, no big deal. Do you know the hell I caught

parents' weekend for shopping a competitor? I was in another state. It was the most awkward dinner I've sat through in my life. Dead silence except when my mother sent her entrée back twice. When I got back to town, they had left store brand polos in six different colors on my bed with a note, 'take what you want and return the rest for store credit. Happy Hanukkah.' That was all I got that year, shirts from our own goddamned store."

She fingered her cast while she stared out the window. "You're breaking my heart."

## 2

Turning off the main road, we covered about three miles of well-graded gravel before pulling out into the vast open space of the Collins family farm. I had always liked to think of these country places as dating back to the plantation days, though I knew better; the houses were too modern. I found a certain continuity, though, in thinking that the relationships between the hired help around the farm and the landed gentry had been passed from generation to generation. I found myself regretting not having called my friend Thomas to see when he was coming back to town. I hadn't spoken to him since Christmas. Would have been nice to bring him along to something like this in order to have someone equally uncomfortable around.

I pulled the Scout in amidst the few dozen decidedly newer SUVs and entry-level luxury cars. Walking in, we passed the odd Accord or Camry, but such practicality seemed out of place. The crowd was centered around the front porch of the main building, a modest two-story brick house with a wrap-around porch. A few smaller examples of similar architecture were set back from there, behind the pool. Jimmy Buffet was playing from somewhere inside.

Christy turned, cutting off my path, and put her forehead against my shoulder. "Jake, I'm not sure I can handle this yet."

I put an arm around her and turned towards the car. "Works for me."

She resisted. "You're a jackass. You're supposed to say 'You can do this, Christy. I know you've been a recluse since the accident, but I think you're ready to face the world.'"

I turned back around and started walking towards the house with her. “I’d never say that. ‘Face the world?’ C’mon, I don’t traffic in clichés. By the way, are we really sticking with calling it an accident? I mean, I want to get the rules straight.”

She furrowed her brow at me.

“What? I just wanted to check.”

Henry Collins, with his considerable bulk and shock of white-blond hair, extricated himself from the crowd and lumbered our way. Christy quickstepped to him, hugged him, and gave him a peck on the lips.

“Hey, babe,” he said. “You look fabulous.”

“Liar,” she said.

“Never.” He released her and offered me his meaty paw. “Hey, Jake, what’ve you been up to?”

I shook his hand and tried to smile. “Just a squirrel in the world trying to get a nut.” I had copped the phrase from our waiter at Dominic’s, but I loved its ambiguity.

“Tell me about it.”

I chose not to. In the intervening lull, we could hear the hum of the crowd and the distant chirping of birds.

“Jake graduated last week,” Christy suddenly said with great excitement.

“That’s great, Jake.” Henry smiled. “Congratulations.”

“Well, I mostly cheated my way through. My last professor was tough. I had to seduce her.”

Henry nodded, apparently uncertain as to whether or not I was joking.

Christy closed her eyes, waiting for the other shoe to drop, as it inevitably would.

“She was really old, though, and fragile. I was— ”

Christy had clamped her hand over my mouth. “Stick with Groucho, dear.” She removed her hand.

I slipped into Groucho voice. “Well, I never.”

“Well, maybe you should,” Christy said.

I looked at Henry. “I’m pretty sure that’s my line.”

“You’re both freaks. C’mon and get some crawfish. Y’all want anything to drink?”

“Water,” Christy responded.

“Same.”

We found our way over to a picnic table piled high with crawfish and were just about to dig in when the inevitable and dreaded happened. He was a lot smaller than I expected. I mean, when he graduated he was huge. Not fat, just cut. After he quit the football team at Bama he developed a gut, but he was still someone you didn’t want to start trouble with. Now he was tiny. His belt desperately tried to cinch up jeans a size or two too big, and he looked like a kid in his big brother’s shirt. He reminded me of an old picture of Eldon trying on my cub scout uniform.

Christy stiffened as he kissed her on the cheek.

He offered me his hand. “Jake.”

“Clay.” I got a decent grip on his hand but tried not to overdo it. I tried not to be intimidated.

“How are you doing? It’s been a while.” Clay smiled, showing a row of small, perfect teeth.

“It has. I’ve been good. You? Still working for your dad?” I picked up a crawfish and awkwardly tried to peel it without looking down.

“Yeah, nearly four years now. Finally don’t feel like the FNG.”

Sick of fumbling, I gave up and looked at the crawfish. “I guess you’ll be running the place soon.” I immediately felt like an ass, remembering Clay’s dad’s battle with cancer. Helping with the stevedoring company was what had brought him back from college early. I held the crawfish tail to my mouth and pulled the meat from the last bit of shell with my teeth. The briny meat fell apart in my mouth, the taste bringing back countless summer afternoons.

Clay chuckled. “Yeah, I wish. My dad’s got a pretty tight grip on things these days. At best, I’m second runner-up behind Lou Gottlieb. He’s been with us since before I can even remember. You know the Gottliebs, don’t you? They’re your people.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen them at the money-counting meetings,” I said.

Clay, Christy, and a few people standing nearby laughed. Even Henry slipped in a chuckle as he set down two bottles of water and scooted off. I didn’t laugh.

“C’mon, man, you know I didn’t mean anything,” Clay said. “He is friends with your parents, isn’t he?”

I ate another crawfish.

“Jake just graduated,” Christy volunteered as she twisted the top off of her water.

“That’s great, Jake, congratulations.” Clay smiled again. “You starting at the store soon?”

“I don’t know.” I smiled back. “You know, with a college degree, the world’s my oyster.”

“The world’s my oyster? I thought you didn’t traffic in clichés.” Christy poked me in the ribs.

I went Groucho. “Oysters, my dear, are crustaceans, not clichés. Although I see how you could get confused.”

She fluttered her hand. “Eh. So-so again.”

Clay watched patiently. He had seen us do this before. Nice for once, though, that he was the third wheel instead of me.

I tried again. “Funny you should mention traffic. I was just noticing a distinctive lack of junk in your trunk. Do you think, perhaps, dear, you could actually eat the meat from the crawfish you peel instead of just piling it up on the table?”

“See, now that wasn’t so much funny as nagging. More Margaret than Groucho,” she said.

“No points for sincerity?”

“None.” She pulled a few paper towels from the roll on the table and wiped her hands. “I have to go powder my nose. You two play nice.”

“Hey, I have an idea,” I said. “How about keeping the powder on the outside of your nose this time around.”

She gave me the finger without turning around as she walked away.

I ate another crawfish.

“Jake, can I ask you something?”

“It’s okay Clay, I’ll tell you. Yes, this is my real hair color. Clairol is doing some really subtle things with dyes these days, though, and if you just talk to your stylist . . .”

“C’mon, I want to be serious.”



I turned to Clay and found him standing uncomfortably close. He wasn't smiling, and he spoke in a low voice. "Are you and her, you know, together?"

"What do you mean?"

He clenched his teeth and glared. He knew I was enjoying this.

"Don't be an asshole. Have you slept with my girlfriend?"

"Yes. Just this afternoon." I waited for a fist to come up from my periphery, waited for the impact with my temple. Just then, I felt someone tugging on the back of my shirt. I stepped back and saw Henry.

"What are you two whispering about?" he asked.

"I was just telling Clay about how I slept with Christy this afternoon."

Henry half-smiled, waiting to be let in on the joke.

Christy appeared at my side. "What am I missing?"

"Jake here was just telling us about how you two slept together this afternoon," Henry ejected cheerfully, certain he was just missing the punch line.

Christy slipped an arm around my waist and kissed me on the cheek. "Big mouth."

Clay turned and walked away.

Christy started laughing and then gripped Henry's arm with her free hand. "Best nap I've had in a while."

Was Henry on our side? "Clay's really got to learn to phrase his questions more precisely," I pointed out.

Henry chuckled. "You're both jerks."

Henry had done a pretty decent job of chalking the field, or at least one of the family retainers had. Those not playing were lined up along the split rail fence, drinking beer and arguing about who had allowed their body to fall into the greatest state of disrepair. I had ended up out in the field first, tossing the ball around with the rest of the infield. The shortstop, first baseman and I had played together in high school, back when I owned the territory around third base. I vaguely knew the others. For the first time since I had left for home nearly twelve hours earlier, I was able to fully relax.

After a few throws, everything became automatic. Voices disappeared, the only sound the thump of and sting of the ball in my glove. The glove was a treasured fifteenth birthday present, the only possession I had in high school that was actually nicer than what my peers had. I listened to the whistling through the air as I sent the ball back to home or to first. Feet pattered on the turf. My legs moved, but I had no conscious knowledge of what they were doing. I may have been a little rusty, but this was what I knew.

Henry stepped up to the plate first. Sweat stung the corners of my eyes. I crouched, ready, on the balls of my feet. The pitch was a meatball, slow and right over the plate. Henry swung hard enough to crush it into the woods. He got a little under it, though, a fly ball deep down the first base line. The girl playing right field got it on one hop and hummed it to first quick enough to hold the hyperventilating Henry there.

When the next batter came up, the shortstop cheated left to be able to cover second. I moved into the gap. The guy popped up an easy foul that the catcher fielded without running.

Clay was batting third. He had changed into gym shorts, shimmering Bama crimson. I could tell by his stance that he was all wound-up kinetic energy, a rubber band pulled taut and ready for release. He crushed the first pitch, a would-be homer that fell foul in the woods. We got a fresh ball. The pitch was fast, and a little inside. The thing came off Clay's bat like a laser beam. I moved to my left, diving, nearly horizontal. I couldn't see the ball, but I knew instinctually where it would be. My glove reached out for it. The ball snapped into place, its velocity bending my arm back a touch the wrong way. I fell flat on the ground, the air forced out of me and my chin bumping off of the grass. I made it up to my knees. Out of one eye I saw Clay, standing halfway between home and first, mouth agape in disbelief. Out of the other, I saw Henry huffing it back to first. Then my own arm entered the vision. The ball made it from my glove to my right hand, and I fired a frozen rope to the first baseman. It was a little high, but he stretched and snagged it, his toe coming down on the bag just a split second behind Henry's. No double play, not that it mattered. The next batter struck out and the side was retired.

I came up to bat third, following a strikeout and a fly out. Clay was pitching. He had at least as much zing to the ball as he did in high school, if not a little more because he wasn't bogged down by his football bulk. I stepped into the batter's box and dug in my toes. Clay let loose a fastball high and inside that left me flat in the dust, ducking it. A few people laughed.

Henry, who was playing catcher, stood when he threw the ball back to Clay. "Funny, but don't do that again. We don't have helmets."

"It was an accident," Clay called from the mound. "Sorry, Jake. By the way, is that precise enough language for you?"

I brushed myself off and tried to spit out the grit. "I'm sorry, all I heard was 'Blabbedy blah blah I can't get it in the strike zone anymore.'" I stepped back in, now crowding the plate like a dumbass.

The next fastball was inside, but a touch lower. I tried to jump back, but it caught me on the inside of the forearm. At first, my arm felt like a sledgehammer had been lowered on that one spot, and then the pain spread. I clenched my teeth and waited for it to dissipate. After a second or two, I dropped the bat and turned to the mound.

"Sorry, Jake, my bad." Clay's voice was without inflection.

I felt Henry's hand on my shoulder.

"Please, Jake, it's like the last thing Christy needs."

A voice from the crowd called out, "Quit being such a woman, Henry, let 'em fight, let 'em play. It's all part of the game."

Henry gave the voice the finger. "Bite me, Seth." He turned back to me.

I shook my head and then trotted to first, my eyes locked on Clay's eyes the whole way. The next batter grounded out, retiring the side.

The subsequent innings were eventless save for a couple of misplayed balls on my part. My concentration was gone and, despite icing it with cold cans of beer between innings, my right arm hurt like hell. Clay returned to the plate with a runner on first in the fourth inning. The first pitch was slow and easy, but he let it go past. He clearly wanted a big hit to make up for the first inning. The next one was quicker and hittable.

Clay's shot was a worm-burner, closer to the shortstop than to me, but the direction of his dive made it easier for him to toss me the ball for the throw to first, just like I should have done earlier. Under normal circumstances, I would have zipped it to

second, forcing out the runner and leaving open the possibility of a double play. Instead, I took a couple of running steps and threw it at Clay, now just past halfway between home and first.

The field was a little smaller than regulation, and four years of skeet shooting at fraternity functions had gotten me good at aiming for moving targets. Probably affected by my injured arm, though, the ball sailed a touch higher than I wanted and caught Clay just behind the ear. He dropped.

I heard a “What in the hell?” from somewhere, but most people were silent as we all watched, praying for him to move. I was an idiot. I always had to be the kid who took the joke too far. After a split-second that seemed like an eternity, Clay writhed about and then rose to his hands and knees. Henry helped him the rest of the way up.

Clay’s face was beet red. His eyes found me across the field. A small trickle of snot ran from his nose, and he had a few leaves of grass stuck to his forehead. I took a couple of steps forward, waiting for him to rush me. He brushed himself off, turned, and walked back to the house.

### 3

I had just flipped on the coffee machine and was tuning in Regis when I noticed someone on our front porch swing. Through the living room window, I could see the pale brown hair enter from the right, then swing back out, enter from the right, then swing back out. I went upstairs and put on a t-shirt and jeans, then came back down and filled two cups of coffee. I left mine black and put cream and ten teaspoons of sugar in the other.

“Nice bed head,” she said.

I gave Christy her coffee and took a seat next to her on the bench. She put down her magazine.

“Thanks,” I said, “nice calling ahead to let me know you were coming over.”

“It’s not like I was coming to see you.” She slurped on her coffee. “Too sweet.”

“Must be the twenty spoonfuls of sugar.” I drank from my own cup, expecting more satisfaction than I got. Though still morning, the weather was too hot for coffee. My upper lip was perspiring. I needed air conditioning.

“Anyway, I didn’t come to see you. I actually figured you would be at the store.”

“Not likely.”

“Oh, yeah. I kind of forgot. Anyway, while you’re gone, I seek asylum on y’all’s porch whenever my mother is in one of her moods. Stan and Leslie get it.”

“Sure, they get it. They also get a restraining order to keep you at least a hundred feet away at all times,” I said, *Groucho voce*.

“So funny, Jake.” She pushed on my arm, spilling a few drops of my coffee on my leg.

“Ow. Burns.” It was actually just mildly warm. I was more hoping I hadn’t stained my best jeans, a pair of Levi’s Premiums I had snagged off a remainder list.

“Sorry. Want to burn me back?”

“Maybe later. So your mom’s being a pain in the ass?” I asked.

“Practically twenty-four-seven.” Christy looked down the street towards her house. “She calls up the shrink three times a day. ‘Should she be doing this?’ ‘It’s day twenty-two now, what signs should I be looking for?’ It’s constant.”

“Sounds like her intentions are good.”

Christy put her coffee down and looked away. “Whatever. Guilty conscience.”

“How’s your dad been?”

She blotted each eye with the heel of her hand. “The usual. When he finally comes home from work, he acts like nothing happened. I swear he still thinks I’m ten.”

I looked down at the dregs of my coffee, which I held in both hands. “Christy, um, in their defense, I’m still not sure how I’m supposed to treat the whole thing. Do you want to talk about it? Do you want to ignore it? Do you need help applying some ointment? I’ve never had to deal with what you’re dealing with.”

She took my coffee cup from my hands and set it, along with hers, on the porch, then held my hand in hers. Her cast was cool and rough. “First off, I’ll pass on the ointment. A lot of it was the drugs. I mean, things are kind of shitty in general, and then crashing after a binge was just so fucking terrifying. It made me feel like my life is going nowhere, like this endless cycle of fuck-ups leading to fuck-ups. But that’s over. I’m done.” She paused “Other than that, Jake, do what you’ve been doing. Be my friend, treat me like you always have. Be you, and leave Clay out of it.”

“Yeah, um sorry about that.”

“Make up for it. Remember my dreaded cousin Mary?”

“Refresh my memory.”

“The one who adopted the Vietnamese baby.”

“How is little Ho Chi Minh?”

“Jeffrey.”

“Whatever.” Mary had decided to forego the pain of childbirth as too much of a hassle, and had insisted on adopting an Asian baby solely because she thought they were the cutest.

“And what was that delightful husband of hers named? Steve?”

“Jeffrey Senior, jackass. They call him Big Jeff.”

“I bet they do.”

“Anyway, Big Jeff’s got a thing, but Mary and Jeffrey are coming to dinner Wednesday night, which means Mom pulls out the cloth napkins, we eat in the dining room, and Dad gets drunk.”

“You make it sound so enticing.” I really wanted to say no. I hadn’t been to dinner at the Burroughs’ house since Thanksgiving when I was fifteen. Seeing Margaret now, even in passing, put me on edge, like I was going to be chastised for using the wrong fork.

“There’s more. Mary’s a New Orleans relation, mind you. That means Mom will be all worried about what she reports back to the family and to their social circles there.”

Christy squeezed my hand. “Please come. I feel like a normal person when you’re



around, Jake. You're the only one who can do that for me right now. And that's also why I need you to go with me to this stupid deb thing on Friday."

"No."

She looked down and traced a fingernail in little circles on my forearm.

"No," I said. "I mean it. No way."

Christy rested her head on my shoulder.

I knew I should run. Instead, I opened my mouth again. "Goddamnit."

The cold water handle in the shape of a small brass mermaid sculpture seemed a little overdone to me as I shut off the water. Seeing no other means, I took a stiff floral paper hand towel from the stack atop the thick marble countertop. When I was done drying my hands, I crumpled it and threw it in the small wastebasket only to discover it was lonely. Apparently, those who had already been in the powder room hadn't bothered to wash their hands, including Margaret's increasingly bothersome niece. I used another towel to open the door, more for the feeling of smug superiority than out of any fear of contamination.

I came out to find everyone gathering around the immaculately set dining room table; Ed at one end, Margaret the other, Christy next to an empty spot for me, and opposite us Mary and a high chair containing the three-year-old Jeffrey. Ed hadn't been in the bathroom, and I couldn't remember whether or not Christy had, though it seemed incredibly important as I approached the table and took their extended hands. I had forgotten about this part. Even when I was a kid, dinner at the Burroughs' house had always meant a standing grace.

Christy's hand was cool and her father's warm. I bowed my head.

"Mary," Margaret asked, her blonde hair, as always, pulled back so tightly as to give her a look of constant astonishment, "please lead us."

"Gosh, Aunt Margaret, um, Thank you, Lord for this bounty we are about to receive, and thank you for keeping us safe and on the path and in your grace, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen."

"Amen," we all agreed.

Well, I outwardly agreed. Inwardly, I wanted to shout "fuck" at the top of my lungs, mostly because I had been warned by Christy upon my arrival that Mary became irrationally upset when anyone cursed in front of Jeffrey. I was almost sympathetic, but when Mary had already dropped a "golly," two "gees" and now a "gosh," all before dinner, I was really tempted to come down with a bad case of Tourette's Syndrome.

We ate our meager salads in candlelit silence, made all the more uncomfortable by the rigid ladder-backed chairs. Prompted by a curt nod, Christy joined her mother, disappearing into the kitchen to plate up the main course.

"Mary," Ed refilled his wine glass as he spoke, "you never told us how your weekend at Jonesville went."

I wondered if it was the wine that was contributing to the paunch on Ed's runner's frame.

"So-so. It was cloudy, but Jeffrey really liked the wading pool, and he got to play with John and Sandy's twins."

"They have a wading pool?" Ed asked. I got the impression Ed wanted her to do the talking so he could drain another glass or two while his wife was in the kitchen.

Jeffrey focused on his sippy cup. I focused on the reflection of the chandelier atop Ed's bald pate.

"Over behind Jimmy and Karla's place. They're thinking about adding a workout room, too."

"What are they up to now, eight houses?"

"Seven and the guest cottage."

Finally, curiosity got the better of me. "So, wait, Jonesville would be . . ."

Mary spoke with the tone of a kindergarten teacher explaining the difference between vowels and consonants for the thousandth time to a kid who rode the short bus. Fitting, since were it not for the couture linen shirt and slacks, she kind of looked like a kindergarten teacher. She was impossibly petite, with big, curly red hair.

"The Jones family farm over by Pensacola," she answered as Christy set a plate in front of her. "Isn't Jonesville just the cutest name?"

"Sure, but I certainly wouldn't drink the Kool-Aid." I wasn't much of a wine drinker, but I took a sip from my glass anyway.

"What? I don't get it," Mary said.

"Never mind, I was thinking of Jonestown," I said, and hid behind another sip.

"I still don't get it."

Christy set her father's plate down before punching me on the arm.

"Ow." I rubbed my arm.

"Ignore Jake, Mary." She set her cousin's plate down. "No one gets him." Christy returned to the kitchen.

After a moment, Margaret entered with plates for herself and Jeffrey. Christy followed with plates for herself and me. Each held a pork chop, a dinner roll, and a pile of green beans.

“Jeffrey eats pork, doesn’t he, Mary?” Margaret asked as if she cared.

“Loves it.”

What a good little Gentile. Jeffrey stabbed a chunk of precut meat with his junior-sized fork, and after banging it against his olive-skinned cheek a few times, made it into his mouth.

My steak knife, pretty as it was with the cherry wood handle and brushed steel blade engraved in Japanese, was about as sharp as a spoon. I had to pull the meat taut with my fork and press the blade down hard while sawing back and forth.

A faster cutter than me, across the table Mary tasted a small bite of her pork chop. “Jake, could you please pass the salt and pepper?”

“Certainly, dear.” I handed the two small porcelain shakers to Ed, who made a show of setting them down on the table for a moment before passing them to Mary.

“Why’d you set them down, Uncle Ed?”

He smirked. “My mother always taught me to set the shakers down on the table before passing the salt and pepper.”

I leaned in to Christy. “And my mother always taught me to wash my hands after passing water,” I whispered.

She rolled her eyes at the corniness.

“Get it? Because passing water means peeing?”

Still nothing.

After taking another sip of my wine, which I was starting not to mind so much, I went back to sawing at my pork chop. Despite being tough, it actually didn't taste too bad. A little sweet from the marinade, but in a good way, especially when I had the meat and the wine in my mouth at the same time.

“So, Jacob, I understand you're escorting Christy on Friday night?” Margaret had to be the only person left on the planet who called me Jacob on a regular basis.

I put my glass back down on the very thin, starched table cloth. It reminded me of the Irish linen handkerchiefs we carried in the store. “Yes, ma'am.” Through the tablecloth, I could see the custom-fit vinyl pads placed atop the antique table.

“I suppose you have the pick of the tux rentals.” She looked down at her own plate while she spoke, trying not to reveal the effort she was putting into cutting her pork chop.

“I have my own. Standard black, notch lapel, nothing fancy.” I had wanted to describe it as powder blue with a ruffled shirt, but out of respect for Christy I demurred.

“Really?” Margaret raised an eyebrow. I assumed she was wondering what a social border-dweller like myself would be doing with his own tuxedo.

Ed stepped in. “Remember whose kid he is, Margaret. Jake probably has a more extensive wardrobe than any of us. Tuxedos with different lapels, tails, dinner jackets. A regular Gatsby.”

I hated the character of Jay Gatsby when I read the book in high school. Groucho would have played Nick Caraway. “Not exactly. I just had my dad's old tux altered so I wouldn't have to rent one for stuff up at school.”

“I’m sure it’s *top-notch*. Or at least in *peak* condition.” Ed smiled, and I couldn’t help but giggle at the puns. He was pleased with himself, smiling behind his wine glass.

“Get it?” I poked Christy in the ribs. “Like a notch or a peak lapel?” There are some jokes only a guy who grew up in a clothing store would find funny. And, apparently, Ed.

Ed became thoughtful for a moment. “Say, when are you going to start full-time with your Dad?”

“I don’t know. We’re kind of trying to figure that out right now.” I wondered how many more times this would come up as I reentered the social world of Mobile.

Ed sipped his wine. “I tell you, kid, he’s been dreaming of passing the place on to you since before you were born.”

Could have fooled me, I wanted to say, but I bit my tongue.

Mary, feeling left out, tried to attend to Jeffrey. She lifted his sippy cup to his lips, but he pushed it away and opened wide to reveal a mouthful of half-masticated food. I laughed, and seeing this, Jeffrey laughed, too, dropping a little bit of food on his tray.

“It’s his way of saying he has food in his mouth,” Mary announced.

“He’s certainly a good chewer.” Margaret smiled approvingly, like chewing was some great accomplishment.

“He is, but I just can’t get him to swallow.”

I bit my lip hard. Even I knew a swallowing joke would be incredibly inappropriate.

Christy pinched my thigh under the table. I winced and leaned in to hear.

“Preemptive strike. I know what you were thinking.” She placed a single green bean in her mouth with her fork.

“Uncle Ed, did Christy and Aunt Margaret tell you about our lunch in New Orleans last week?” Mary put down her fork and knife and put her hands together in front of her like she was about to address the class.

“No, but I’m not especially looking forward to the credit card bills they racked up on their little spree.” Ed didn’t even look up.

“Edward. That’s gauche.”

“Sorry, dear. Please continue, Mary. About lunch.” He put a chunk of meat in his mouth, chewed a few times, then washed it down with wine. He needed lessons from Jeffrey.

“We went to the French place in the New Roosevelt Hotel. Oh my gosh, it was so good.” She closed her eyes on the “so” for emphasis. I think her pupils actually rolled to the back of her head.

“If you were going to go fancy, why didn’t you just go to Galatoire’s?” Ed asked.

“Nobody goes there anymore, Ed. Right, Mary?” If Margaret said it, it must be true.

“Not really, Uncle Ed. There are too many good places that take reservations to wait in line with all the tourists.”

“Well, excuse me.” Ed looked perplexed for a moment, then stood.

“Ed, don’t be an ass. Where are you going?” Margaret scolded.

“To get another bottle of wine,” he called back over his shoulder.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough?”

“It’s for Jake and Mary,” he called from the kitchen.

Margaret looked at me. I smiled and shrugged toward my empty wine glass.

When he returned, Ed topped off Mary’s glass, filled mine, then filled his own.

“So, Mary, you were talking about lunch at the New Truman Hotel.”

“Roosevelt.”

“Whatever.”

I’d have wagered he did that on purpose. He knew damn well what the name of the hotel was. My plate was empty, so I sat back with my wine to watch the show.

“Well we started off with Tuna Tartare as an appetizer, just split it for the three of us, you know.”

“How economical of you,” Ed said.

I loved Ed.

“Let me tell you, Uncle Ed,” she patted his hand “it is hands-down the best Tuna Tar-Tar on the Gulf Coast.”

Imagining the sort of door-to-door poll that would determine this, I tried to stifle a laugh and failed.

“What?” Ed looked at me in mock surprise.

“Sorry, I was just thinking of that top-notch joke from earlier. Killed me with that one, Ed.”

“I bet. Please go on, Mary.” Ed picked up a green bean and pulled it from the fork with his teeth.

“That was pretty much it.”



He swallowed the bean with a swig of wine. “Fascinating. So it was a good lunch, then?”

You’ve got to be kidding me, I thought. That was worth a story? I finished my wine, but waved Ed off when he tried to refill it.

“Absolutely.” Mary looked around for support. “Didn’t you think so, Christy?”

“Huh?” She was in her own world.

“Christy, I raised you better than to say ‘huh,’” Margaret corrected.

“Sorry, Mother. I apologize, Mary. I was zoned out. What did you ask?” Christy’s pork chop sat neglected, a single bite removed and sitting untouched at the top of the plate, impaled by the tines of her inert fork.

“I was just asking if you enjoyed lunch at the Truman the other day.”

“I thought it was at the Roosevelt.”

I wanted to throw Christy a life preserver, rescue her in some way from this maddening chain of banality, but I couldn’t think of how.

“Whatever.” Mary finished off the last of her wine, and Ed refilled her glass.

“Yeah, no, it was good. I liked the bread.”

“Bwed!” Jeffrey came to life, his eyes gleaming.

There’s my man, I thought.

“Jeffrey, that’s not how we ask. Say ‘Mommy, may I please have some bread.’”

“Bwed!”

“Jeffrey, say ‘please.’”

Jeffrey's face got red, his scalp, too, which showed beneath his stringy black hair. He crinkled his nose and squinted his eyes. "Bwed, Mommy!" He punctuated the demand with a threatening snuffle.

"That's a little better." She sighed and gave him half a roll. "Now what do we say?"

"Dank-oo." He ignored the bread and started to feed himself chunks of meat with his hands.

Bored with the tyke, I decided to play polite.

"So, Christy, what were y'all doing in New Orleans?" I asked.

"Shopping for gowns for the season, quality time with the fam." Christy didn't smile. She held a roll in her unbandaged right hand, flaking off the crust with her thumb, turning it, flaking off more crust.

"Didn't already have enough gowns?" Leaning forward, I flicked her leg under the table

She looked up and rolled her eyes. "Not my call."

"It's important to keep up with changes in fashion, dear. Besides, the doctor said you should return to your normal routine," Margaret declared.

Please let her end there, I thought.

"After your little stunt and all."

No such luck.

The table fell silent except for some unintelligible squeals from Jeffrey. A few uncomfortable beats passed before Christy whispered in my ear.

"New endurance record. She actually held it in for eighteen minutes this time."

I took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze beneath the table before trying to steer the conversation back to the mundane. That's what these people were supposed to be good at, good, old-fashioned repression. "You do have to keep up. Can't exactly show up in a green and yellow dress with shoulder pads, can you?"

"You can if you're a Green Bay Packer." Ed shooting from downtown, and he nailed it. He pushed his plate away and replaced it front and center with his wine glass.

When I stopped laughing, mostly out of relief, I sat back in my chair to try to include the whole table. "Did y'all find anything nice?"

"Mom and Mary found like, three or four each, and they talked me into one."

"Christy, it looked lovely on you. You should wear it this weekend."

Mary nodded her head. "It really was nice, this little light pink wool crepe thing that really brings out her skin tone."

Christy still didn't look at anyone else. "It makes me feel like an extra in a John Hughes movie."

Margaret folded her arms. "You look perfectly lovely in it, dear and . . ."

"Enough." Ed raised his glass unsteadily. "Let's not bicker. We should have started off with a toast, and I forgot."

Christy raised her water and everyone else their wine.

"To our newest college grad: welcome back to Mobile, Jake. May you find happiness here. And may Christy follow in your academic footsteps, sooner or later."

"Here, here." Christy clinked her glass against mine.

Not one to leave well enough alone, Mary decided to pick at that scab. "So wait, Christy, are y'all the same age, or is Jake older?"

Christy crushed the now crustless roll in her hand. “Jake’s two years younger.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, is that a sore subject? I mean, him graduating first and all?”

I put down my wine and leaned forward, a little grin on my face. “Shit no, Christy’s just . . .”

Mary’s hands shot to Jeffrey’s ears, and Margaret threw me a hard glare. Jeffrey looked scared. Clearly, something bad had happened.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mary, I didn’t mean to . . .”

“We just have to watch it around Jeffrey.” She took her hands from his ears. “He picks things up so easily.” Mary refilled her own wine glass, then Ed’s and my own.

Margaret set her fork and knife down, a small corner of pork and a few string beans left on her plate. “Mary, you keep up with the gossip back home. What’s this I hear about Kevin Hewlett and his wife breaking up? I swear I’m so out of the loop since we moved here.”

Mary put down her wine. “Oh my god, Aunt Margaret, it’s horrible. Lorraine was cheating on Kevin with her brother-in-law for, like, a year. I swear she is a total nympho. She was like that all through high school and college, I don’t know why Kevin thought she was going to change. She’d have sex with just about anybody.”

Jeffrey was now fascinated by his bread. I looked at Jeffrey, then at Ed, back at Jeffrey, back at Ed. Ed shrugged.

I leaned in to Christy. “Think you can get me that chick’s number?”

She pinched my leg, hard, while I tried not to react.

“I’ll have to make a point of not mentioning anything if Kevin and his dad come to the ABA event here next week.” For whatever reason, Ed clearly wanted to remind us of his leadership role in the local Bar Association.

Christy was eager to take the thrust of the conversation away from her cousin.

“What kind of event is it, Dad?”

“Just a continuing legal education day. Pretty boring, a bunch of classes and a box lunch from that new deli on Dauphin.” He put down his empty wine glass, finally done. I think he was just too chicken to try and sneak a third bottle past Margaret.

Margaret stood and began clearing plates. “I’ve been meaning to try that place. I know you said it’s good. What do you usually order?”

“I like the turkey club, but I won’t have much choice on Tuesday. We got a deal on pastrami on rye for all, take it or leave it.”

“On rye? I don’t get it, are most of the people at this thing Jewish?” Mary batted her eyelashes and tried to take a sip from her empty wine glass. A doe caught in a poacher’s scope and she didn’t even know it.

“Oh my God.” Christy, beneath her breath. She tapped my hand to make sure I was paying attention.

Margaret stopped half-in, half-out of the kitchen, a look of exaggerated horror on her face. She looked to me and tried to read my smirk.

I crossed my arms and waited to see how this played out.

Margaret came back and put the plates down. “Mary, honey, why would you say that?”

“Only Jewish people eat rye bread.” There was no malice in her voice; clearly she was just that oblivious. Like the guy from Birmingham I knew in college who was convinced that all mulattos had blue butts.

“That’s not true at all.” Margaret was sincerely trying not to scold.

“Do they use their fangs to eat it, Mary, tearing it apart with their claws and buttering it with the blood of Jesus?” Ed asked matter-of-factly.

There’s my boy, I thought.

“Ed!”

“I’m sorry. Did I say that out loud?”

“Excuse me.” Mary set her napkin down next to her plate, stood, and left the room, heading towards the front door, hopefully just to get some air on the porch and not to abandon her child. Margaret followed.

Jeffrey started to turn red and his eyes crinkled, so Ed scooped him out of the high chair. “I think somebody wants to play on the swing set.” He took him out towards the backyard.

Christy stretched in her seat. “Well, that was quite a show.”

“Was that my fault?”

“No. Mary and the hubby are having issues. I think she’s on meds,” Christy explained. Christy scooted her chair closer and put her head on my shoulder.

I put my arm around her. “I didn’t know. Sounds rough.”

“Things are rough all over.” She ran her finger along the edge of her cast.

## 4

Jake nestled in the Barcalounger, sipping a barely spiked Coke. A large woman shifted around, her back to him, blocking his view of the rest of the room.

“Eldon was always the favorite,” she was telling somebody. “I can’t imagine what they’re going through.”

She obviously doesn’t know who I am, Jake thought. People should know better than to say stuff like that. Jake didn’t know who she was, either, but he wasn’t mad. He thought to himself how he kind of liked Eldon better, too.

“The older one is always getting in trouble, and he runs around with that Burroughs girls who’s such a holy terror. Twelve years old and he’s already got this gigantic chip on his shoulder with the other children at St. Andrew’s,” the lady continued.

I’m thirteen, Jake thought. He found himself staring at her humongously fat arms. They were big sacks of flour hanging from the shoulders of her sleeveless black dress. She was moderately obese otherwise, but those arms were huge. Jake wondered if maybe they couldn’t fit into sleeves. Maybe the dress came with sleeves and she had to cut them off. It had to have been a medical condition.

Jake sat there trying to make it all seem real. His seven-year-old brother was dead. Eldon no more. No middle school Eldon going through the awkward pimply thing. No high school Eldon, that Jake could come back and pick on when he was off at college, though he’d grudgingly admit the boy was starting to come into his own. No Jake and Eldon as grown ups, quarterbacking teams of their own children. Eldon was gone. Eldon would not ever grow up. It still didn’t seem like it had actually happened.

No one is fully formed at seven. A seven-year-old is the cute kid who entertains the salesman at the store with his detailed recounting of Power Rangers episodes. He's the one who sometimes skips Power Rangers to watch his older brother at baseball practice. A seven-year-old is the kid you dress up as Zeppo on Halloween because he's that devoted to his older brother and doesn't care if he's getting the short end of the stick. A seven-year-old is a prop, the cute little kid you take to the St. Andrew's Bazaar with you because you don't know how to talk to girls other than Christy yet, but if he's there, they all come running up and she gets territorial.

Jake wondered where his parents were. Scanning the crowd, he couldn't see them. He tried not to let his eyes stay too long in one place, fearing eye contact. Damn it. He had messed up. Mr. Gottlieb had seen him and was approaching, his short, broad body shifting back and forth as he walked. The fat-armed lady stepped aside a little to let him by.

"Hello, Jake. I'm real sorry for your loss, kiddo. I can't even imagine what this must be like for you, but I can tell you that people have been amazed with how mature you've been. You may not realize it, but it has to have helped your parents a great deal."

The lady looked over her shoulder, saw Jake, opened her mouth to speak, then shuffled away quickly, her arm fat jiggling. Jake bit his lip to avoid smiling, and somehow heard Margaret Burroughs's voice inside his head telling him to stand and take Mr. Gottlieb's meaty paw.

"Thank you," Jake said. He had always liked it when the Gottliebs came over for dinner.

"Please, sit down, sit down," Gottlieb's voice rumbled.



Jake did as told.

“How are you holding up? I mean, aside from staying strong for your parents, of course. Is there anything you need, anything I or my wife could do for you?”

“I’m okay, I guess. Thank you for asking.” Jake stared up at the reflection of the table lamp in Mr. Gottlieb’s thick square glasses.

A moment passed in silence, but it felt to Jake like a moment between two adults, not an adult and a kid. Jake looked down and took a long sip of his spiked Coke, which tasted pretty normal. Maybe a little like cough medicine.

Out of nothingness, Christy appeared, perched on the arm of the chair. Jake thought of the Cheshire Cat.

“Hi, Mr. Gottlieb.”

“Hello, Christy. Well, Jake, I just wanted to check in with you. You think of something, let me know.”

Jake half stood and shook Mr. Gottlieb’s hand again. “I will. Thank you.”

Gottlieb faded back into the crowd.

Christy pinched Jake’s arm. “I saw you pour the Wild Turkey in your Coke.”

Jake tried to ignore her. He didn’t feel up to Christy. Instead, he sought out the lady with the really fat arms fifteen feet away. Considering how carnival-like she was, Jake decided she actually had nice skin. A little pale, but clean, free of any blemish. Jake could just make out three small moles, like Orion’s Belt, just above her elbow.

“You know there’s twenty-five year-old Scotch up there,” Christy said.

Jake looked up at her. They had been the same height for many years, but Christy had shot up last year, kind of late for a girl, but still. She had grown her hair long, and

dyed it almost as blonde as her mother's, and now she had boobs. Not big ones, but enough to make it clear to Jake she wasn't a kid any more. Grown-up sized boobs. If Jake didn't already know her, and if she didn't have that patch of pimples on her forehead, he might have thought she was an adult, especially in the little black dress she wore.

Jake didn't say anything.

"Timmy, that's the bartender, he told me that's the difference between Jews and Gentiles. When Gentiles throw a party, they buy cheap liquor, and drink lots of it. When Jews throw a party, they buy expensive liquor and hardly touch it."

"This isn't a party." Jake's voice cracked a little when he spoke and he regretted opening his mouth. It didn't crack because he was going to cry; it cracked because he was thirteen and it did that sometimes. He wasn't sure which was worse for Christy to think. He looked for the fat arms again, but they were gone.

"Don't kid yourself, Jake, everything's a party. You know, Milton Berle said Jews don't like to drink too much because it gets in the way of their complaining."

"Do you even know who Milton Berle is?" Jake asked, vaguely remembering a TV special about a man in a dress.

"I think he's some guy my dad knows."

Jake didn't correct her because he wasn't absolutely certain she was wrong.

"You want to get out of here?" Christy stood and set a beer bottle down on the end table, the label partially hidden by a cocktail napkin.

Jake looked around. The house was over a hundred years old, but he couldn't imagine it had ever held so many people. They were everywhere, perched on the furniture he wasn't allowed to sit on, taking up every square foot of floor space, looking over the

pictures on the walls and the books and knick knacks on the shelf. He knew a few of them, but other than the visit from Mr. Gottlieb, they all seemed uninterested in him now.

Jake took Christy's extended hand and hoped she wouldn't notice how sweaty his palms were as they darted between bodies. No one seemed to notice their passing. Jake thought she was leading him out the back door, but instead she turned at the last second and led him upstairs, and immediately into Eldon's room at the top of the steps. Jake paused at the doorway not wanting to go in, but he let Christy pull him through.

Jake thought back to the first time he had gone into the room to see Eldon, after his parents had brought him home from the hospital. Stan had lifted Jake up the side of the crib, and there was Eldon, his face all scrunched up, his light, downy hair matted against his pink scalp. He looked like a tiny old man. Leaning over the crib, Jake's stomach was pressed against the railing so hard it hurt, but he didn't want Stan to put him down.

Then there was just the other night. Eldon had had a bad dream and crawled into Jake's bed while Jake was sleeping. The first time this had happened, Jake had pushed him out and he slept on the floor. After that, Jake had learned to bring him back in his room and take the other bed. Hardly a week passed that Jake didn't spend at least one night in Eldon's spare bed.

Even for a seven-year-old, the room was plain. No posters, just a couple of framed needlepoints of farm animals passed down from whomever. Christy sat down on Eldon's bed, and Jake sat across from her, on the bed he slept in when he was in here.

"Here." She patted the animal-themed bedspread next to her.

Jake came over, wandering what she had in mind. He tried not to sit too close to her, but with the way he sank into the soft mattress, their thighs were touching. Jake could feel her warmth through his pants leg. He wondered if she was going to take his virginity. Sex and a dead brother, both five months shy of his fourteenth birthday. He wondered if that would make him cool or just some kind of freak, like the girl in his class that got sent off to rehab in sixth grade.

For a second, Jake thought Christy was starting to lie down, but she was just reaching behind the pillow for something she had apparently stashed earlier. She sat back up, a glass and a bottle of caramel-colored liquid in her hand.

“The Macallan, Anniversary Malt, twenty-five years old,” she read from the label. “I didn’t think anyone downstairs would miss it. Here, open it.” She handed him the bottle.

Jake studied the top of the bottle a moment before figuring out how to pull the little tab around and remove the foil top. He started to unscrew it, then realized it was sealed by a plastic-capped cork which came out rather easily. After handing off the bottle, he smelled the wet cork and almost wretched. “People drink this? I mean, by choice? It’s supposed to taste good?”

“It’s an acquired taste,” Christy said.

“Have you acquired it?”

“I’m working on it.” She splashed some into the glass, filling it about a third of the way, and wrapped Jake’s hands around it. “Drink up. It’ll do you good.”

Jake put the glass to his lips and slowly tipped it back, taking a small sip. It didn’t taste so much as burn. He grimaced and swallowed, looking to Christy for approval.

“More than that, junior.”

He tipped the glass back further, but too much came out. Two little streams ran down the sides of his mouth and dripped on his white dress shirt. His mouth was full, more than he could take down in one swallow, so he gulped twice in quick succession to get rid of the burning on his tongue and cheeks. That didn't work out so well, either, though, because his throat was on fire and his stomach was churning like mad.

“Atta boy, Jake,” Christy said. She took the glass from him and took a long pull, taking down what was left like it was water. She smiled, examining one of the needlepoints on the wall.

“I think I'm going to throw up,” Jake said quietly.

“No, you're not,” Christy said, refilling the glass up to the halfway mark. She took the cork from Jake's free hand and stuck it back in the bottle. Nestling the Scotch in the crook of her arm like a football, she scooted back against the wall, up near the headboard. “Just keep swallowing your spit and think of something else,” she said. “Like me. Think about me. Think about what I would look like naked.”

Jake's face was burning, though he couldn't be sure if that was because of the whisky or because of what Christy had just said. He scooted back next to her and tried to look her in the eye. “I've seen you naked before,” he lied.

She slapped his knee, lightly. “No you haven't.”

“Yep, that time at the beach.”

“What time at the beach?”

“You know. That time.”

“Oh my god.” She smiled and covered her mouth with her hand. “Did you really?”

Jake smiled back at her.

“You’re just messing with me,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“Jerk.” She punched him on the arm. It hurt a little, but not much. She was still smiling.

Jake took the glass from her and drank more carefully. It still didn’t taste good, it was bitter and smoky, but at least it didn’t burn as much, and this was better than sitting downstairs trying to look the right amount of sad. Jake kicked off his shoes and let them fall beside the bed. Christy did the same and then reached over, loosened Jake’s tie, and unbuttoned the top button of his shirt.

“There,” she said. “Now you’re relaxed. Loosened tie, expensive Scotch. Today, my son, you are a man. Drink up.”

Jake took another long sip.

“You want to tell me something,” she asked.

Jake drank again now, the burning completely gone as long as the sips weren’t too big. Instead there was a nice warmth rising up from somewhere in his chest. “Sure,” he said, wishing his voice was deeper.

“Why didn’t you cry,” she asked.

“I dunno.” Jake looked around the room, hoping to find some object that could steer the conversation in a different direction.

“C’mon,” Christy said, “I cried like a baby when my mom told me, and at the funeral, too. Even my dad cried at the funeral. Your mom told my mom she hasn’t seen you cry once.”

Jake looked down at the glass and didn’t say anything.

“I don’t think anyone who had ever met Eldon didn’t cry at the funeral. His teachers were crying, your teachers were crying. Not a sniffle from you.”

Jake closed his eyes and pretended he was talking to an empty room instead of Christy Burroughs. “Mom and Dad were sobbing like little kids up there, in front of everybody. At home is one thing, but in front of everyone they know? And the other people, the people who barely knew him, they were crying and he wasn’t even their kid or their brother. He wasn’t all of theirs to lose. It’s bullshit.”

Jake wasn’t used to cursing, but the word felt right coming out of his mouth. It definitely didn’t feel like she was going to kiss him now. He wondered how that had happened when things had seemed so perfect before.

He looked down at the glass, nearly empty, pearly white smudges from the fingers that held it, a few drops of Scotch down at the bottom, rolling along the curve of the base. He held out the glass for Christy to pour more in, but she took it away from him, set the glass and the bottle on the floor, and then scooted back against the wall again.

Jake thought back to the other time he had kissed a girl, at the party with all of the ninth grade St. Agnes girls. She had even told him he was a good kisser, and he had felt gentlemanly enough not to tell her that her mouth tasted like cigarettes.

Christy took Jake's hand and held it, fingers intertwined, resting in the crevice between his thigh and hers. She looked at him. "Okay, then, by your logic, you had a right to cry and the rest of us didn't. So why haven't you cried?"

He pulled his hand away. "That's none of your fucking business!" I'm getting better at the cursing, Jake thought, but then he quickly worried that someone downstairs might have heard him. He felt sick again. He swallowed his spit and tried to think of Christy naked, but all that came to mind was that short little coffin. Like a play coffin, or something. He tried to at least imagine the body, but he could only remember giving Eldon two for flinching when he had dropped him off at the classroom that morning.

Christy squeezed Jake's knee. "There, is that so hard? You're allowed to be human, Jake."

Jake was crying. Not sobbing, but the tears were running down his face. He turned his head and saw Christy, saw the tears streaking her face. He closed his eyes and leaned in to kiss her. They bumped chins. She put her arms around him and hugged him closely.

"I'm sorry, Jake. I am."

Jake's whole head burned. He pushed her away. "Just leave. Go home."

Jake stood. He was dizzy, but once he caught himself he walked out of Eldon's room and down the hall. He shut the door of his room behind him and lay face down on his own bed, letting the cool pillow absorb the saltwater from his face, as he had for much of the last two days while his parents were busy with other things.

He heard a knock on the door.

"Jake, I'm sorry. Can I please come in?" Christy asked.



Jake didn't answer.

"I'm coming in," she said.

Jake still didn't answer, but the door opened and, a moment later, the mattress shifted as Christy sat down next to Jake's feet.

"I was worried," she said.

Jake wasn't crying anymore, but he kept his face in the pillow.

"I don't know what it's like to have a little brother. I mean, you're the closest to it I've got, I can't imagine what it would be like to lose you, Jake."

Jake tried to decide whether or not she wanted to leave. It wasn't like she was one of them downstairs. She was here, now, because of how she felt about Jake, not Eldon or Stan or Leslie. Jake's parents seemed to have countless friends. Jake had one fifteen-year-old who wouldn't shut up.

"Leave me alone," he told his pillow.

He felt Christy get up from the bed, and the door closed. He cursed himself in his head for never knowing the right thing to say.

The room was almost dark when Jake woke up. He looked over at his alarm clock. Five-eleven. He had been asleep for an hour and a half. He wondered if anyone had noticed him missing. Stretching, Jake realized his shirt was up around his chest. He pulled it down and sat up. He needed to brush his teeth. His mouth tasted like it did first thing in the morning. His head hurt. He was about to put his feet down on the floor when he discovered a figure curled up beside his bed. They didn't have a dog.

He carefully stepped over Christy. She lay on her side with her knees drawn up, her arms crossed beneath her head. The waning light from the window glistened in the drool running down her cheek. Jake thought about the fact that if he turned on the light, he could probably see right up her skirt. Instead, he took the comforter off of the bed and spread it over her, carefully tucking it in around her shoulders.

In the bathroom, Jake wet down his hair and gargled mouthwash. His head throbbed, but it wasn't too bad. He thought about going back and getting his shoes and the stashed Scotch, but he couldn't bring himself to go into Eldon's room alone.

He took the front stairs back down. The crowd had thinned, but a few dozen people were still scattered about, including Ed and Margaret and some of the guys from the store. Mr. Paulie and Mr. Lawrence each patted him on the shoulder when he passed them, though they did not break conversation with the dad of one of the kids in Jake's class.

Jake walked without lifting his feet, sliding his socks along the hardwood like he was still little. He passed through the living room and into the den, where some of the young salesmen were watching the Saints on TV. They were cheering and jeering in whispers. Seeing Jake, they each nodded to him, as if afraid to speak out loud. They shifted to make room in front of the screen. Bobby Hebert dropped into the pocket and pumped the ball once, twice, and then got sacked by the San Francisco defensive end.

Jake thought back to when Stan and Ed had taken him and Eldon to a Saints game in New Orleans the previous year. By the end of the second quarter, Jake was watching the clock more than the game, and Eldon had fallen asleep up against him. All of the players seemed so far away. Jake liked minor league baseball better.

Jake left the TV and wandered into the kitchen, where his Aunt Ida was sitting on a stool, talking to the Burroughs's maid, Marion. Marion was a younger, lighter-skinned black woman, much lighter than Ida. She had come over to help out for the afternoon and was working her way through a giant pile of dirty dishes. Ida was here for the family, not to work, but Jake figured she didn't find anyone worth talking to out front.

Seeing Jake, Ida raised up her heavy frame. "Come here, baby."

Jake did as told and she swept him in, holding him close against her surprisingly rigid bosom. Ida smelled. She smelled the way Jake imagined all large, older black women from out in the country would smell. Like flowers, but flowers that had been left in the vase too long. Or maybe like a giant bowl of lavender. Sweet but pungent, like a Sunday afternoon. Comforting.

"You know you're my baby, don't you Jake, sweetie?"

"Yes'm."

"And don't you worry none about little Eldon. He's in a better place and he's happy, It's his turn to watch over you."

"Yes'm."

She let go and Jake felt alone again.

"Set down on that stool right there and I'm going to make you a plate."

Jake climbed up on the stool and Ida set about making him a sandwich.

Just then, the door half-swung open and Ed Burroughs peeked in.

"Found him," he called back over his shoulder.

Jake wondered who was looking for him.

“He should know,” Ed continued saying to whoever was in the other room. He strode the rest of the way in and squeezed Jake’s shoulder. “How you holding up, champ.”

“Okay.”

“Good, good. You seen Christy?”

“Not in a while.” Jake looked over at Ida.

She caught his glance. “Ed, get out of here and leave Jake be. I got him,” she somehow managed to say sweetly.

“Yes, Miss Ida.” Ed retreated towards the door. “Marian, why don’t you go ahead and take tomorrow off, unless you need the hours. I imagine you’ll be here pretty late.”

She didn’t turn from the dishes. “Yes, Mr. Burroughs.”

“Yell if you need, me Jake,” Ed said and stepped back out of the room.

“That man tries me,” Ida said, though Jake had no idea why.

She handed Jake his sandwich and then poked Marian gently in the ribs. “And you. ‘Yes, Mr. Burroughs.’ Hmph. Something else.”

Marian smiled but she didn’t say anything.

The plate was piled high with three slices of untoasted white bread, sliced ham that had turned a funny color from sitting out all day, lettuce, and gobs of mayonnaise. Jake’s stomach turned again, but for Aunt Ida, he was willing to give it a go.

Ida set her hands on her hips and looked down at him. Jake felt his chin quiver a little, and the tears started to well up in his eyes. He sniffed back his snot and took a big bite of the sandwich.

“You’re going to be all right, baby, I promise,” Ida said. She wasn’t smiling, and her voice was solemn. “And it’s okay if you ain’t all right yet. I lost two sisters and a brother in my years, and not a single time did it hurt any less. Take your time, as much time as you need, This day here, and everything that’s happened in these past few days, that’s always going to be a part of you. Time’s going to pass, though, and little by little, it’ll get to be a smaller part of you.”

A tear escaped down Jake’s cheek, the ceiling fan evaporating its trail and leaving his face cooled. The sandwich tasted horrible, sour and slimy, but he swallowed and took another bite.

Ida turned away and started putting away the things she had used to make the sandwich. “I remember reading in high school a long time ago,” she said, “how we’re just boats against the current, sweetie. We got to keep on.”

## 5

This wasn't my first rodeo. Well, had it been a rodeo, it would have been my first, but since it was a Mobile debutante function, I could say it wasn't my first rodeo, and by rodeo mean uptight black tie affair at Tanglewood Country Club. I still wished for a horse, as when I was all ready to go I couldn't get the Scout to start. First I flooded the engine with the damn manual choke. I pressed down the pedal to let the gas out of the carburetor, then tried again. No, I was doing everything right, the bugger just wouldn't start. I debated looking under the hood for something obvious but couldn't think of anything I could do, even a simple jump start, without getting my white dinner jacket dirty.

The white dinner jacket was just showing off, I knew, but I had always admired the look and had reasoned that a June formal event was the exact occasion such attire was created for. It was actually more of a cream color than white, as wool could not be dyed a full white. I had guilted the old man by explaining that the sleeves on his old tux were too short, and it would be so embarrassing for the son of a clothier to show up in ill-fitting tuxedo. Mr. Lawrence had taken in the body and sleeves on the dinner jacket while I waited, meaning that the jacket was cut for my precise measurements on the day it was to be worn. I had even made him take the measurements with the flask in one pocket and my wallet in the other.

Rather than a traditional tuxedo shirt, I had gone with an expensive herringbone-textured Robert Talbott white dress shirt with French cuffs and a spread collar. A recent issue of *GQ* had said that the foregoing the pleated tuxedo shirt in favor of something more understated was the thing –no need for shiny studs down the front of the shirt, and

certainly no novelty attire. For cufflinks, I went with my grandfather's monogrammed silver pair, a gift to him from his father upon the opening of the store. They had been special-ordered from Tiffany's. I wore a black bow tie and my grandfather's black silk cummerbund, which had hooks for adjusting the size rather than elastic. My shoes were my dad's old Johnston & Murphys, but I had polished the patent leather loafers to a high shine. I did the math on the retail cost of my getup and was satisfied that I was dressed pretty damn nicely. I actually felt like the gentile romantic lead instead of a Marx.

My parents were already out to dinner and had taken Dad's Buick, so I left a note and snagged the keys to Mom's station wagon. It didn't go with my outfit, but I didn't have much in the way of a choice. I backed it out of the driveway and coasted down the street to Christy's. After ringing the doorbell, I buttoned my jacket and stuck one hand in a pocket while looking off in the distance. An affected pose, but Christy would have gotten the irony had she answered the door instead of Margaret.

"Jake, you look so nice." She sounded surprised and I followed her eyes as she looked me up and down before offering her cheek. I couldn't believe Margaret Burroughs was checking me out.

I gave her a quick peck. "I thought you and Ed were going tonight," I said, gesturing to her silk bathrobe.

"We are, just not for a little while. They don't want the old folks in these pictures."

"Pictures?"

She shook her head. "Of course Christy didn't tell you you were going early to pose for society page pictures. Why would she have that simple courtesy? Come in, sit

down.” She gestured past her to the fabric covered bench in the front hall. “Christy was just trying to match her earrings to her cast.”

I waited for Margaret to smile before I chuckled.

“I’m sorry I can’t wait with you, but we’re a bit behind schedule, and I haven’t put on my face yet.” She closed the door behind me and headed up the stairs. “I’ll try and light a fire under Christy’s behind.”

I chuckled again and sat down on the bench. I could count on a half-amputated hand the number of times Margaret had treated me like an adult before. It was always in the middle of a crisis, like with Eldon or that thing with Christy in high school. She certainly never joked around with me. As soon as she was gone, I fished out my flask and took a long pull of Jameson. The pale Irish whiskey burned just a touch, but the warmth grew from my stomach back up my throat. I took another pull and then shoved it back in my pocket.

Looking again for the perfect pose, I slouched as much as I could so that I could keep the jacket buttoned without stretching it too tightly across my abdomen. I put both hands in my pockets, straightened my legs and crossed my ankles. The way this pose pushed up my jacket exaggerated the v-shaped opening, which accentuated the breadth of my shoulders. The straight legs and the additional flash of black pants, especially with the grosgrain stripe down the side, made me look taller. As I went over this in my head, I did a quick inventory of my trials and tribulations with women to reassure myself that I was still straight. I knew way too much about clothes.

Any self-doubt about my sexual preference was quickly erased when Christy descended the staircase in a backless black dress with an uneven hemline. Oddly enough,



her pearl earrings and necklace did match her cast. Her makeup seemed to erase the recent gauntness of her face, and, at that moment, I couldn't imagine a more beautiful woman in the world.

She smiled when she saw me. "You look nice."

I stood. "I know. Hey, you're not wearing that, are you?"

She gave me the finger. "Bite me. I look hot."

"Yeah, you do." I put my hand on the small of her back, just where her dress began, and kissed her cheek.

"I was about to change into something simpler when Mom said this dress was a touch too slutty for a cocktail reception. Pretty much had to wear it at that point."

"Sure, sure." I opened the door for her.

She spied the station wagon at the curb. "What's with the family truckster? Where's the Scout?"

"I thought it would be too tough for you to get in and out of with heels on," I said.

"Jake, really? That's sweet. And unlike you."

"I'm lying. Wouldn't start and I look too pretty tonight to mess with it."

She poked me in the ribs. "That sounds more like you."

I did take Christy's becasted hand to help her down the porch steps and opened the car door for her. When I sat down in the car, however, my butt felt that same becasted hand where the seat should have been and jumped back up.

"How about a little sweet talking first, honey?"

"Don't get your panties in a bunch," Christy said. "I was just checking to see if you were holding. I gave you the damn thing for a reason, now fork it over."

I fished the flask out of my pocket. "I thought you weren't drinking."

"My doctor and I agreed that a drink or two at a social occasion can be healthy. It's supposed to promote discretion and responsible decision-making."

I held onto the flask. "Horseshit. Your doctor's an idiot."

Christy stopped smiling. "Listen, Jake, I'm going to drink tonight whether you want me to or not. Since there's nothing you can do about it, you may as well try not to be an asshole."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "Do what you want." I tossed the flask in the backseat and got back in the car.

Christy climbed halfway back over her seat to get it. "Hey, way to be a dick."

I didn't answer as I pulled away from the curb. As I was navigating the streets of Ashland Place, Christy tried to hand me back the flask.

"Keep it," I said.

"Won't fit in my purse."

I tried, I really tried to stay quiet, but the Groucho voice came out. "Surely, my dear, you can find another dark enclosure on your person in which you can store this item."

She laughed. "There it is. First decent line you've had since you've been back."

"Needed to warm up."

"For a week?" she asked.

"Hey, when were you going to tell me about the pictures?" I asked.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice. It’s totally not my fault, but I guess it’s my turn or something. I even pointed out that my date was a nonmember, and they asked who it was, and they said you’d be fine.”

“And ‘they’ would be . . .”

“You know,” she looked out the window, “Mom’s friends. The mothers of the debs, whoever.”

Reaching the edge of central Mobile, I turned down a broad, live oak-lined drive.

“Why did you never debut?”

“Believe it or not, they never asked me.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Apparently, some of my youthful indiscretions were a little too indiscreet. I think the fact that I had a DUI arraignment in New Orleans scheduled three hours before the May Day banquet gave them pause. It’s bad Fung Shui to appear on the Society page and the police blotter on the same day.”

“Imagine that.” I passed up the valet and parked the truckster myself. I was too embarrassed to ask Christy whether or not I would have to tip the guy. During my first round of these, junior year of college, I had made the mistake of trying to tip the bartender. The guy had awkwardly refused, and a couple of people nearby had chuckled. Thanks to my luck, Margaret Burroughs was close enough to see it and politely correct me. Two years later, passing once again through the massive white columns of Tanglewood Country Club beneath a not-quite-setting sun, I still wasn’t sure why it was so wrong.

When we entered the main room, the band was setting up sound equipment, having not yet donned the white jackets that were strewn about. I hoped people would take notice that the band's jackets were a bright, eggshell white, not cream-colored like my own. A big-haired woman in a sequined, heavy shouldered dress was posing three couples on the dance floor for the photographer, careful to get the dormant fireplace as a backdrop rather than the empty bandstand.

The woman lifted elbows, straightened clothing and ties, even occasionally grabbed someone by the hips to shift their position, and the sons and daughters of old Mobile money were as compliant as Franklin Mint dolls in her hands. Despite the absence of music, she posed a few couples as mid-jitterbug, not that anybody jitterbugged at these things.

As eighth graders, everyone took lessons from this old Austrian lady, the very same lady who had taught our parents in an old Victorian house a few blocks down from the store. Each school had an assigned day of the week, and we would carpool down to be taught how to foxtrot and jitterbug. At the end of the year, all of the schools attended a big cotillion to show off what we had learned. Then, like our parents before us, we promptly forgot everything we learned. When the occasion came up, everyone just took hold, waddled around, and threw out the occasional spin.

When it was our turn with the photographer, the lady posed us at one of the banquet tables. It occurred to me that she was maybe trying to differentiate and make clear that Christy wasn't just dancing with one of the guys from the band. I had not seen any other guests in white dinner jackets. We had to sit back from the place settings to hide the fact that the meal wouldn't begin for another ninety minutes. She set my right

arm across Christy's seatback, tilted Christy's head against my shoulder, and set the hand with the cast on it beneath the tablecloth, where it rested on my knee. She stepped back, looked at us, stepped up and straightened my tie, then stepped back again.

"Hey," I whispered to Christy. "What are people going to think your left hand is doing?"

Christy smiled and started rhythmically knocking her cast against the bottom of the table.

"Please be still," the lady from the paper instructed.

"What?" Christy asked. "I'm not doing anything."

"I can see your arm moving. That is vulgar."

"Just take the goddamned picture," Christy said without breaking her smile.

The lady had the photographer do as instructed and then stormed off, probably to complain to someone. Christy finally stopped knocking.

"I will be so impressed if you get us bounced," I told her.

"That's not bounce-worthy, just gossip-worthy. I like to call it spin control. Now we know what she'll be gossiping about, and we won't have to guess."

"How sad for you," I said.

"C'mon." Christy stood. "Let's get a drink."

As the debs lined up in a receiving line, Christy and I huddled in an alcove with our cocktails.

"This kills me," Christy said, leaning back against the wall and stirring her gin and tonic. "Almost every one of those girls has done something worse than me. But just

because people don't feel compelled to whisper when they talk about what I've done, I get passed over."

"It's not like you really wanted to be a part of all this, anyway." I looked down and watched the melting ice form wavy lines in the amber whiskey of my glass.

"Yeah, but I would have loved the satisfaction of telling them to bite me. I mean, look at Sarah. She's had two abortions. One of them was freshman year of high school."

"I didn't know about that one," I said.

"After you were off at Sewanee, before I dropped out of Tulane. Okay," she said, "look at Mary Catherine. You think her nosebleeds are really from allergies?"

I smiled. I couldn't help myself. I wanted to play. "What about Mary Stuart's basketball player fixation. I hear she's almost through Bama's starting five."

Christy laughed. "Let's not forget the tragic AIDS death of Mary Stuart's dad. What'd they call it? Pneumonia coupled with a heart condition? Like anyone thought he was straight."

"You know," I said, "just because he was boning dudes doesn't mean he died of AIDS."

Christy looked at me and rolled her eyes.

My turn again. I eyed the reception line. "What about that bitch Louise. I can't believe her and all her, her," I said it with pure hate in my voice, "*charity work*. Oh, I want to help the homeless, I want to start a soup kitchen, I want to join the Peace Corps when I graduate."

"Yeah," Christy laughed. "Who is that bitch fooling? Clearly, she's covering up for a massive heroin addiction."

“Or a dwarf fetish,” I offered.

“Or a heroin-addicted dwarf fetish,” Christy explained. “And then there’s Amy the Pre-Med. You know, working that hard becomes self-indulgent. She’s no better than a masturbating monkey.”

Just then, Henry completed the receiving line and made straight for us. Henry seemed completely at home in his tux, almost unaware he was wearing it. The peak lapel and working cuffs identified it as a limited edition Hickey Freeman we had carried for one season a couple of years back. Presumably, when Henry bought it, it wasn’t so tight across the midsection. Uncle Willie would have called him ten pounds of manure in a five-pound sack.

He kissed Christy’s cheek and shook my hand.

“Hey, Henry, sorry about the other day, I . . .” I began.

“No worries, man.” He patted me on the shoulder and winked. “People get drunk and things go too far, That’s what makes it a party.”

He was being too gracious for me to explain that I hadn’t been drinking.

“Hey,” he said, “I like the jacket. I thought about wearing the same thing, but I didn’t have the sack.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m thinking I might slip onstage later and play a set with the band.”

“Yeah? What do you play?” Henry had missed the joke.

“Skinflute,” Christy answered for me.

Rather than fight back, I decided to run with it. “But I’m very picky. I’ll only play my own.” I looked at Christy. “Care to help me tune my instrument, dear?”

Henry was still at a loss.

“Watch this,” Christy said, looking at me and tipping her head towards Henry.

“Wait for it, wait for it.”

Henry slapped his hand to his forehead and started laughing.

“There it is,” I said.

“Y’all are horrible. I’m going for a drink.”

Henry excused himself just as Clay walked through the door, a sunken-eyed wisp of a girl on his arm. She looked to be about seventeen, at best.

“There’s your boy,” I pointed out to Christy.

“Yeah, there’s my boy. I’m ready for a refill. You?”

The middle-aged couple behind Clay noticed us and cut us off as we made for the bar. I flipped through my mental rolodex and identified them as Mr. and Mrs. Gottlieb, first names long forgotten. She wordlessly offered her heavily-powdered cheek, he his meaty hand. I shook it gladly, feeling like I had found a new ally in this foreign land. We exchanged pleasantries and Gottlieb instructed me to pass along greetings to my parents.

I assumed Clay’s parents had brought the Gottliebs along for business reasons. He was Big Clay’s chief financial guy or something, as if that wasn’t a stereotype. We finally moved passed them to the bar, where we stood finishing our drinks and refilling them as quick as we could. A few people stopped by and asked Christy in a very general way how she’d been, though her accident seemed to be something that was being swept beneath the hand-woven Persian rug.



Christy and I waited until everyone was seated before snagging the last two spots at a table full of geriatrics in the corner who turned out to be Ohio relatives of one of the debs. Before I knew it, I was buzzed and chewing on fork-cut pieces of bland, rubbery chicken while Christy filled everybody in on her semester abroad in Paris. She held my hand in her lap beneath the table, and I tried to tell myself that she was in a delicate state and I would not let things go too far tonight.

“We stayed at this wonderful little hotel three blocks from the Champs-Élysées. This old woman ran it, I mean so old she told us how she had to put up Nazi enlisted men during the war. She had the cutest accent! Every morning she had café au lait and pastries waiting for petite déjeuner, and we could eat as much as we wanted as long as we listened to her stories.”

I was very impressed at Christy’s uncharacteristic lack of vulgarity. She was actually being nice, like she really enjoyed these strangers’ company.

“The classes at the Sorbonne were so difficult. Can you imagine trying to learn about the Franco-Prussian war *in French*? All I ever took was Spanish, so I was trying to pick up things as I went along and . . .”

She had been going on for some time before I remembered that she had never actually taken a semester abroad to Paris.

“Christy, you sound so fond of it all now, need I remind you of what you used to say about that lady? What was the word?”

Christy looked nervous, as if caught. She squeezed my hand beneath the table.

“You called her a collaborator for cooperating with the Nazis. You were ready to write off to the war crimes tribunal if she didn’t install air conditioning.”

A few of the Ohioans laughed nervously.

Now she dug her nails into my hand.

“You did. When I came to visit you even told her I was some kind of investigator for The Hague.” I drank down my wine while Christy’s nails dug further into my hand.

“Jake likes to kid. Jake, dear, I think the band’s starting up again. Let’s dance.”

I let her pull me away from the table.

“You’re a jerk,” she said as we wove through tables. “You always have to be the most offensive one, don’t you. Can’t let someone else carry the banner for a minute or two.”

“You’re pathological. But that was nothing. Did I not hear someone just say viaduct?” I asked.

“No, no one said viaduct.”

I stopped still holding her hand. “Oh yes, they did.”

“Jake, don’t.”

I turned to the table nearest me, mostly parents of debs, and leaned in. “Why a duck? Why a no chicken?”

They chuckled. “This was chicken,” one of the mothers said. They seemed sure they were missing some pop culture reference that all the kids were saying these days rather than a reference to a Chico Marx line from a seventy-year-old movie. At least I had chosen the table with the only other white dinner jacket in attendance.

Christy finished pulling me away just as the band Began the Beguine. Only a few other couples littered the floor, but I figured this was a good chance for Christy to start

practicing that discretion thing and for me to sober up so I could eventually drive home. Not that I felt drunk so much as emboldened.

I had forgotten most of what I had learned in eighth grade, but a Myrtle Beach girl up at school had taught me a few shag moves that I had honed pretty well. They always looked impressive in a ballroom. First taking both hands, I flung Christy out until both our arms were fully extended, careful of her cast all the while. Then, I pulled her arms straight out to the sides, bringing her in just to the left of me, meeting her eyes and turning us slightly. I repeated that two more times, changing direction each time, and on that third time pulled our arms over and behind our heads, stepping back and letting my right hand slide along her extended arm until our hands met, spinning her behind my back, switching her hand from my right hand to my left hand while she was back there. Then I took both her hands and spun her into an embrace that led to a dip.

She smiled. "I forgot you could do that."

"Baby," I said, lifting her back into shuffle position, "I can do all sorts of things."

She cackled. "You so can't."

"You're right, but I felt cool saying it."

Over Christy's shoulder I spied Clay with his date, huddled over in the alcove, faces inches away from each other. Just when I was about to turn Christy so that she caught a good glimpse, Clay's date scurried off, and he headed in the other direction.

By the time Henry finally cut in, the Shag routine had become pretty blasé. To my surprise, though, a few of the debs were clamoring for a chance to learn it. I pretended to select Amy the Premed randomly. She wasn't necessarily the best looking, but I had been pretty sure she had a crush on me in high school. I danced with a few of them while

Henry stuck with Christy. Finally, I excused myself and raised my eyebrows to Christy. She met me over by the bathrooms.

“Look at you,” she said, “the belle of the ball.”

“You mean the Berg of the ball. Or the Stein of the ball. Or the Steinbergwitzkrantz of the ball,” I replied.

“Whatever. You need to let that stuff go, you’re the only one who thinks about it.”

“Bite me. You ready to bail?”

“Yeah,” she said, then bit her lip and took my hand. “How much do you love me?” She asked, and I knew I was in trouble.

“Almost as much as my proctologist.”

“You don’t have a proctologist.” Christy always knew when to play the straight man.

“But if I did,” I said *Groucho voce*, “you’d be right up there.”

She laughed a little too hard. “C’mon. Everyone’s going to the Flora-Bama.”

“I thought it washed away in a hurricane.”

“That was last year.” She wrapped her arms around my waist. Her face was only inches away with a look of dire sincerity. “It’s totally rebuilt, and it’s only been reopened for a month so the bathrooms haven’t gotten too gross yet.”

I kept my arms limp by my sides, feigning aloof. “I really don’t want to drive all that way,” I said.

“I’ll drive.”

I smiled. “Yeah, cause the last beachfront drive you took worked out so well. I’ll drive.”

You can take I-10 most of the way to the Flora-Bama, but even at night it's much cooler to drive along the coast. I avoided the Interstate and cut south, through Fairhope, past Point Clear. Once we were out of the city I rolled down the windows as I always did whenever I was close enough to the sea. The warm thick air blows through the car, whipping your hair around, attaching itself to the individual strands and curling them, slicking them, the scent living within, leaving its permanent mark on you. Anything ugly about returning to Lower Alabama disappeared when I inhaled the fresh Gulf air.

## 6

Jake stared out into the incomplete darkness of his room. The street lamp filtered through trees and the curtains, leaving an uneven pattern of pale, dim light across the rug and dresser. He flipped his pillow over to the cool side, turned over, and stared at the red digital numbers of his clock. 12:48. He had been in bed nearly three hours.

Jake had to go back to school tomorrow. His parents had told him that at dinner the previous night. He was supposed to meet with the school counselor first thing in the morning, but he was going to skip that. Ms. Weinstock's office reeked of her perfume. They had made her talk to him when he was failing sixth grade math. She asked about how things were at home and why he never played with the other kids unless they were playing baseball.

"I'm good at baseball."

"But Jake, you need to open yourself up. How are you going to make friends when you shut yourself off like this? People will think you hate everybody."

Jake didn't answer.

"I think you'd be surprised at how much people will respond if you just play what everyone else wants to play." Her breath reeked of cigarettes and peppermints, and Jake was sure her heavily made up face was about to melt off.

"I thought I was in here because of Math."

Ms. Weinstock sat back in her chair. "Jake, if you think everything's fine and dandy and you don't need to be here, by all means, there's the door. But if you want to work through your problems and make things –where are you going?"

Jake stopped halfway through the door. “You said I could go. I’ll do better in Math, I promise.”

Jake went straight to his Math teacher, Mr. Akins. He was only a few years out of college, but already balding. Jake liked him; he just hadn’t felt like doing his homework that quarter. Jake stood at the open door until Mr. Akins stopped teaching and walked out in the hall, a grim look on his face.

“What can I do you for, Jake?”

“If I get an A on the test Friday, will you promise never to send me back to her?”

Mr. Akins started to laugh but put a hand to his mouth. He regained his composure. “Throw in doing your homework every night and you got a deal.”

Jake hadn’t been back since. He had made a point of keeping his grades just high enough to not get noticed. No way was he going back to Ms. Weinstock now.

He turned the pillow over again. He wasn’t tired.

He missed Eldon.

He wanted to walk down the hall and wake his little brother up and play Uno.

That was never going to happen again.

Jake threw back his covers and rolled out of bed. He felt dizzy for a second, but it cleared. He wished it didn’t. Dizzy was better than missing Eldon. He got the extra blanket out of the closet and slipped down the back stairs, careful to walk close to the wall so they wouldn’t creak too much and wake his parents.

He found leftover onion soup in the fridge and poured some into a pan. He didn’t want the microwave to beep. The rule about not using the stove had never been officially

dropped, but he had used it a few times in front of his parents, and they hadn't said anything, so he figured it was okay.

He paused for a second before turning it on. No, he decided, they wouldn't be mad. Whatever he did, he didn't want to do anything wrong now. Not ever again. It would be okay.

He pulled a stool up to the stove and watched the soup, stirring every minute or so. When it started to bubble, he set a bowl in the sink and carefully poured in the soup. He set the leftover back on the stove and turned off the burner.

In the den, he spread the blanket on the Barcalounger to catch any soup that might drip, set the bowl down on a placemat on the coffee table, and put a Marx Brothers tape in the VCR. He started with the volume almost silent and carefully raised it enough so that he could hear the lines.

Jake sipped the soup as Groucho as Dr. Hackenbush arrived at the sanitarium, an unlikely savior for the hospital's money troubles. Harpo and Chico joined in. Jake laughed.

When he was done with the soup, he pulled the blanket up around himself. He made it all of the way through *A Day at the Races* and was about thirty minutes into *Duck Soup* when he finally drifted off to sleep.

He woke to *A Night at the Opera* playing with the sound off. He didn't remember changing the tape. Looking over to the couch, he saw his mom, in her robe, with an empty bowl in her lap, staring at the screen blankly.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey, sweetie. Do you want me to turn this off?"



“No,” Jake said. “Can you turn up the volume a little bit?”

She did. “You sure you don’t want to go upstairs and go to bed?”

“No. I’m good. Hey, do I really have to go see Ms. Weinstock tomorrow?”

“Not if you don’t want to,” his mom said.

“I don’t want to. I’ll be okay, Mom. I’m ready to go back.”

“If you’re not, you know you can really wait a little longer.”

“Yeah, no, I don’t want to miss more school,” Jake said.

“Okay, sweetie.”

Jake watched Chico and Groucho argue over a contract, finally tearing it down to a tiny strip of paper.

“All that’s left here is the sanity clause,” Groucho said.

“Ah, you can’t-a fool me,” Chico replied. “There’s-a no sucha thing as Sanity Clause.”

Jake laughed quietly. He looked over at his mom. She was watching him and, for the first time in over a week, she was smiling.

## 7

Across the street from the Flora-Bama, a crowd gathered in one corner of the crushed shell parking lot. From beyond, the night pulsed with the red-blue flash of a cop car. I parked the family truckster down the street at a restaurant closed for the night. After shrugging off the dinner jacket, I walked around to the other side to help Christy out.

“Looks like somebody’s in trouble with the po-po,” she said.

“Yeah. Want to go point and laugh?”

She was a little unsteady, but it might have been the high heels on uneven ground.

“Of course.”

Hand in hand, we weaved through preppies, rednecks, middle-aged condo-dwellers, and every other type of derelict drinking on the Gulf Coast at one in the morning. On the other side of the crowd, a police car, lights spinning, sat parked next to an unmarked Chevy pickup. Three cops, one uniformed female and two plain-clothed men with badges on their belts, stood there talking. A girl was in the back of the car, and two guys sat in the bed of the pickup. We worked our way around the edge of the crowd to get a better view of the guys. First a tuxedoed shoulder came into view, then that shock of white-blond hair. Clay and Henry both sat with their hands behind their backs, staring intently at their own navels.

Christy squeezed hard enough to cut off my circulation and make my hand tingle.

“Do something.”

“What do you want me to do?” I asked.

“I don’t know, something.”

“Well, when you put it that way,” I said. “Wait here, Drunky McGee.”

I shoved my hands in my back pockets and approached the cops as meekly and self-effacingly as I could. “Excuse me, uh, officers? Um, those guys are friends of ours. Is there anything we can do?”

One of the plain-clothes chuckled. He couldn’t have been much older than me, but with a shaved head and a thick gold chain around his neck, he looked older. And sleazier. They should have given us a course in dealing with yahoos like him at Sewanee.

“How’d you know them?” Baldy asked.

“From high school. I played ball with the little one.” I knew I was implying football, but I figured baseball didn’t have the same street cred. “And then we were all at the same party earlier this evening”

“Really?” Baldy asked. “Mind if I search your car?”

I couldn’t tell if he was kidding. “If you promise not to mess up my mom’s school papers in back. She’s a principal and she’d kill me.”

All three cops looked at each other and laughed. “Look, son,” Baldy began.

My fist clenched at the condescension, mostly because I had brought it on with the mention of my mom. I forced myself to unclench it.

“Those guys there were in a car with a considerable amount of powder cocaine and an underage girl from Birmingham they had just transported across a state line.” He pointed to the yellow line that ran across the street demarking the start of Florida. “We’re going to take them into town and book them. Maybe they’ll be available for bond tonight, maybe not until tomorrow.” He handed me a slip of paper with the jail’s address and phone number on one side and the number for a bail bondsman on the other. “You know that girl?”

“No, not formally.”

“Well, that girl there is sixteen years old, and she’s not going nowhere with nobody unless it’s her daddy. I’m guessing you ain’t her daddy.”

Not as far as she knows, no, I wanted to say. “No, sir.”

Baldie’s face got stern and he straightened. “Then I believe we’re done.”

“So what, should I follow you down there?”

He remained straight. “Oh, I’d give it two, three, maybe four hours, assuming they ain’t a flight risk.” He patted me hard on the shoulder, then walked off to the truck.

I had hardly noticed his partner. The guy was maybe thirtyish, with close-cropped hair and a day’s stubble. “Two hours, three max. You’re going to want either a ton of cash or a bail bondsman. If you want the bondsman, though, don’t bother calling one before eight in the morning.”

“Thanks, officer.” I started to step away.

“Yeah. And since you’re so worried about the girl . . .”

I stepped back. “Yeah, um, sorry, what about her?”

“We made some calls. The officer’s going to drive her back to her parents’ hotel. You boys better either clean up your act or get used to the back of police cars.”

“Yes sir,” I said. “Thanks for your help.”

He patted me much more lightly on the shoulder and then climbed into the driver’s side of the truck.

I noticed Christy leaning over the bed of the pickup, whispering frantically to Henry. She jumped back with a start when it began to pull away. Behind me, I turned at

the blip of a siren as the marked car edged through the crowd. Christy ran up, tripping just in front of me. I caught her, but not before her knee scraped the shells.

I looked down. "You're bleeding."

"Metaphorically?" she asked.

"Yes."

"What'd they say?" she asked.

"We can go try and bail them out, but not for a few hours."

She took my hand and we started towards the bar. "I need a drink."

"Yeah, you do. About the same way I need to hammer an ice pick up my nose until I can't see colors," I said.

"I don't get it."

I looked both ways before we crossed the street. "Neither do I. Hey, what did Henry say?"

We entered a small lobby with a gift counter to the right. "That Clay wasn't doing anything with the girl."

"Well, I'm relieved." I paid the cover, and we entered the first of the five bars in the Flora-Bama complex.

Christy turned and took both of my hands. "Don't be a jerk. I'm with you tonight."

"And can I tell you how honored I am to be a placeholder. Would it be easier if you just called me Clay?"

She pulled my arms behind her so that she was pressed up against me. Looking up into my eyes, her face was stern. "You're not a placeholder. I'm with you because I want

to be with you.” She gave me a peck on the lips. “Now let’s go dance. After we get a drink.”

We made it through the tightly-packed main room, past exposed wood walls already re-covered since the rebuild with magic marker scribblings, and out to the back deck. The warm breeze off the Gulf hit us with some force, and I paused for a moment to stare off in the darkness to where I knew blue-green waves were invisibly crashing onto the white sand. A Motown cover band was just starting up beneath the concert tent to our left. Amidst the sailors in dress whites, none of whom had been interested in the hullabaloo outside, the retirees escaping the nearby high-rise condos, and the countless stages of redneck debauchery, the formally attired deb ball refugees gathered to debrief each other on the Clay and Henry situation.

Christy was gossiping when this guy Jeff pulled on my elbow.

“Hey, did you try throwing something at the cop to help out?”

“You heard about Henry’s?” I looked around. No one seemed to care what we were talking about.

“Yeah. That’ pretty funny. I heard he sort of had it coming, though.”

“Sort of,” I said, not entirely convinced.

“You know, it’d be awesome if you’re the one to pick him up. A whole ‘the bigger man thing.’”

I shrugged. Thanks to Christy, I had already assumed I was on the hook.

I let Christy gossip with them for a few minutes before I pulled her away to the bar, throwing a few shoulders along the way to get us there.

Christy drew the bartender's attention with a smile. "Four bottles of Bud, four shots of vodka and four shots of orange juice."

I leaned to my left and looked over Christy's right shoulder, and then over her left.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"The crowd whose drinks you're getting," I said.

"Shot of vodka, shot of juice, repeat, double-fist the beers so we don't have to fight our way back to the bar."

"And your mother doubts your grasp of etiquette."

The bartender set the shots down, and we started working our way through them. Once done with the antiseptic-tasting vodka and the too-sweet orange juice, I set both hands against the bar, leaned over, and stared at the sand-strewn cement, willing the bile back down.

"C'mon, lightweight." Christy burped. "Pay the man."

I looked up to see the four plastic sixteen-ouncers and a muscular bartender with his arms crossed. "Thirty-six," he said.

I took two twenties from my wallet, all I had, and handed them over. He turned around and put the money in a cash box, uninterested in offering change or even waiting for me to tell him to keep it.

I waited for a second. "Hey, you're welcome. You have a good one, too."

He moved on down the bar, fixing shots for a line of college-aged kids in t-shirts and flip-flops.

“Let’s go, Rockefeller,” Christy said, grabbing her bottles and heading towards the music.

I followed. The wind seemed to move the air around without cooling the space surrounding the packed, sweating bodies. I took a swallow from each beer, set them in my front pockets, then removed my grandfather’s cufflinks and slid them in my back pocket. My sleeves rolled up, I took my beers back in hand and danced with Christy to the Temptations’ *I Can’t Get Next To You*. I could feel the bass in my chest. The horns punched through at irregular intervals. The band, sweltering beneath gold-sequined jackets, took turns singing the different parts while the piano rolled up and down. It felt good to be back on the Gulf. To a guy like me, I told myself, LA will always stand for Lower Alabama.

My buzz finding its way back, I crept closer to Christy. She had first taught me to dance at Homecoming, freshman year. I remembered her breath as she stood behind me, hands on my hips, moving me back and forth.

“It all starts with your hips,” she told me, moving me in time with the rhythm. “Let your body follow your hips.”

I stood behind her, now, closer and closer as the band worked its way through the song. She looked over her shoulder at me on occasion and smiled, biting her tongue ever so slightly. I wanted a free hand, so I took a long swig from my beer and then tossed the half-full bottle for the trash in the corner. It spilled on a few people as it sailed by, but I pretended to look around with everyone else for whoever had thrown it.

The band slowed without stopping into a Sam Cooke number. I reached around Christy, spun her, and pulled her into me. She drank down the last of her first beer and



sent it for the trashcan. It missed, but it was empty and plastic, so no one cared. She clasped her hands around my shoulders, her remaining beer cold against the back of my neck, immediately soothing the places where her cast scratched at me. I wrapped my arms around her waist, my beer resting against the small of her exposed back. She leaned up against me as we swayed, resting her head against my chest and staring out to the sea.

I wondered if she was thinking about Clay and Henry, but I was afraid to ask.

By the time the band took a break, I was wiped. I had never finished that last beer, but I twice had to take bathroom trips when Christy went for shots so I wouldn't be expected to pay. When she took her bathroom visits, I waited outside the door like a lapdog. She returned from her final trip to the ladies' swaying back and forth. I took her hand, and we made it through the waning crowd and out to the car. I walked her to the passenger side and opened the door for her, then took her hand to help her in. She wrapped her free arm around me, clunking me on the back of the head with her cast, and kissed me, forcing her tongue into my mouth. She tasted acrid and bitter. I jerked back, and she fell into the car.

"Did you just puke without even rinsing out your mouth?" I spat on the ground.

She smiled and nodded.

"You're disgusting."

She folded her arms. "Whatever. Like you care. You've been waiting for me to do that for years."

I didn't answer, but walked around to my side and climbed in. I started the ignition and accelerated towards Pensacola.

“Let’s go get your boyfriend.”

“We’re here to pick up Henry Collins and Claiborne White.”

The cop behind the safety glass partition looked up, raised an eyebrow, then, as if it were some great burden, exhaled as he punched the name into an antiquated computer in front of him. He had to have been pushing retirement at least as hard as his paunch was pushing out against his too small uniform. He found something on the computer, rifled through some forms in a metal tray in front of him, then finally looked up.

“This is going to take a few minutes. You may want to have a seat.”

I sat down next to Christy in one of the cracked plastic chairs that looked to be refugees from a school lunchroom. Soothed by the asylum blue of the walls and a dangerously high blood alcohol content, Christy had already passed out.

It had taken us an hour to find the county lockup on K Street, and then another half-hour to find an ATM, empty our checking accounts, and return. I looked at my watch. Four o’clock.

“All right,” the pokey little piggy began, his words tumbling lazily from his mouth in an upcountry drawl. “Henry Collins and Claiborne White can both be released on a four hundred dollar bond.”

As I stood and counted out the twenties, I wondered if this guy had been pulled from the street because his apathy as to his own fate was too easily read in his drooping expression.

“Which one you want,” he asked, counting out the bills.

“What? That’s four hundred.”

“It’s four hundred each,” he said, sliding some forms my way.

“We only have six hundred.”

He looked at me and blinked.

“What if we call a bail bondsman?”

“Won’t get here before eight,” he said.

I already knew that. Damnit. What if we picked up Henry, called it a night, and they could come back tomorrow for Clay. I looked at Christy slumped in the chair, legs splayed, head hanging to one side. No.

“Can we check to see if they have it on them?” I asked.

“No.”

I stared at him blankly. The guy had to give me something.

“They don’t have access to their personal belongings,” he paused here to sigh, “until they’ve been processed back out.”

I leaned on the short counter and stared down at the dusty, lime green vinyl tiles of the floor. What I wanted to do was walk out the goddamned door, drive straight home, and go to bed. Leave Christy here to deal with her coked up friends. Why the hell was this my problem? Did I think I was going to fix her and she’d be my girlfriend and we’d live happily ever after? Less than a month ago she was trying to drive her car off a pier in Long Beach. Were it not for the pilings sticking up at the end of the pier, she’d be dead. Submerged. And I’m supposed to fix her? By bailing her coke buddies out of jail?

“Look, son,” the cop began in a kind voice.

It was at this point I realized that I had been mumbling aloud.

“What you can do, I mean, what some people do, is bail out who you can, then that person helps you get the money to bail out the other. Would that work for you?”

I smiled. “Yes sir, that’d be perfect.”

“Here,” he said, passing me a small yellow pad. “Why don’t you write them a note and see who can get the cash easiest.”

“Convicts,” I scribbled on the pad. “We’re two-sixty short of getting you both out. Let us know which one of you has the money, and we’ll get you out first. Or, if neither of you do, shoot for which one of you wants to stay here and get buggered. Love, Jake.”

Twenty-five minutes later, after various forms and procedures were completed, Henry emerged from behind an orange-painted metal door. His hair was mussed, his eyes bloodshot, and his red, puffy cheeks overwhelmed his already almost non-existent chin. His tuxedo, however, was perfect. Seeing us, he smiled. “Who wants breakfast?”

Christy woke up, ran to Henry, and hugged him, kissing him on the lips. I should have been jealous, but I was too tired.

“You bastard,” she said. “What were you thinking?”

“You’re one to talk.” He poked her gently in the ribs and she rolled her eyes.

“Right now,” he continued, “I’m thinking I’m hungry as hell. Who wants IHOP?”

“Think maybe we should get Clay out first?” I asked. I really wanted to go to bed.

“Can’t. I got forty bucks on me. We’ll hit the ATM, throw down a short stack, and he’ll still be there after we eat. It’ll be fine, he’s sleeping. My treat.”

“You’re goddamned right it is.” I decided it might be worth going if only to let Clay rot for a little while.

Christy took us both by the hand and led us out the door. “Pancakes, let’s go.”

By the time Henry had pulled out enough to bail out Clay, pay me back, and pay Christy most of what she had put in minus what she already owed Henry, it was past five o'clock. We found an IHOP near the interstate, but Christy, sleeping beneath my new dinner jacket, was immovable. I didn't want to take the jacket away, but I readjusted it away from her face so she wouldn't drool on it.

Henry and I took a booth in the cleanish, nondescript pancake house. A few other tables hadn't been to bed, but most of the other customers, what there were of other customers, appeared to be truckers. The coffee was weak but hot. We put in a to-go order of a short stack and bacon for Christy, then each ordered the same for ourselves.

Staring into the coffee grayed by room temperature half and half, I thought of how full-time work at the store would have meant an end to all-nighters. Saturday is the big day in retail, and you need Sunday to rest. A job at the store would have meant worrying less about having enough cash to run around with Christy. Then again, if this night was any indication, running around with Christy was going to burn through a lot of cash.

I realized that Henry and I hadn't spoken to each other since we'd sat down. I had no idea what to say the felon across the table. He offered no guidance, studying the desserts on the table tent.

“So, Henry, you're a felon.”

For a second I thought he was going to cry, but he cracked a smile as he poured a mound of sugar into his coffee. “Yeah, well, we all have our burdens.”

Another few beats passed in silence.

“You want to tell me what happened?” I asked.

“Not much to tell. Clay was driving my truck, I was in back with Dolores.”

“Dolores, huh?” I laughed. Henry was cuckolding Clay. That was awesome.

“Not like that, man. She’s sixteen.”

I rolled my eyes.

“And she’s Clay’s cousin. He’d kill me.”

Now I laughed loud enough to draw the attention of several truckers. Here I thought Clay was out raising hell, corrupting underage girls, living the dream, but the only date he could get to the ball was his teenage cousin.

“He’s probably still going to kill me,” Henry continued. “Don’t laugh. Anyway, so on the drive out here, Lo tells me . . .”

“Lo?”

“That’s what she goes by. Lo tells me how much she loves popping pills, and how she’s always wanted to try coke, but none of her friends can get it. So when we get to the Flora-Bama, I set us up a couple lines on the back of the owner’s manual . . .”

“And what’s Clay’s role in all of this?” I asked.

“He’s the smart one. Yelled at me, said it was a bad idea, didn’t want Lo doing it.” Henry carefully stacked sugar packets in front of him.

“But y’all did it anyway,” I said and slurped my coffee.

“Hell, Clay broke down and did it too. We just got lucky the ground was white,” he said as he held up his coffee for the waitress to refill it.

“How’s that?” I asked.

“They snuck up on either side of us and opened both doors at the same time. Most of the coke blew out. Probably had enough there to bust us for intent to distribute otherwise.”

“You’re an idiot,” I said.

Henry shrugged, then fished his cell phone out of his pocket. He looked at the display and pushed a few buttons. “Seth called like nine times. We were supposed to meet him at the Flora-Bama. You see him there?”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“Friend of mine from Springhill. He was at the baseball game. Curly haired guy, wiry, kind of on the tall side.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” I said as the waitress set down our plates.

Henry immediately drenched everything in front of him with syrup and then pasted on the butter. Fully sober now, the sight of it made me a little sick, so I just nibbled on my bacon.

“How was the pen?” I asked.

“Jail, man, just jail,” Henry said with his mouth full of pancake. “It wasn’t too bad. We had a non-smoking cell with a view of the alley. Well, not so much a cell as a big room filled with drunks passed out on metal benches and a TV playing infomercials.”

“Sounds lovely,” I said.

He swallowed a large lump of food. “You should see it during the season.”

“Mmm,” I said and took another sip of my coffee, wondering if that implied Henry had, in fact, seen it during the season.

“Anyway, man,” Henry continued. “I really appreciate y’all coming to get us. I really didn’t want to have to call someone down from Mobile. You know how those people love a fresh carcass.”

“Those people?” I pushed away my plate, having hardly eaten anything.

“You know, the country club set. Old Mobile. They’re going to have a field day with this. You know what all those people remind me of?” He didn’t seem to mind talking with his mouth full. “Jackals. I was watching this thing on TV last week about jackals. They’re like wild dogs or wolves or something. They got ‘em all over Africa. All jackals do is hunt. They do it in packs, in pairs, by themselves, whatever. But they don’t go after anything that poses a real threat. They eat whatever’s easy to kill, like rodents.”

I looked out the window to the family truckster and the hint of sunrise looming over the horizon. “That’s fascinating.”

“It is. But it gets better. Jackals are scared of anything bigger than them, but they like nothing better than to find something already dead, or at least wounded enough so it can’t get away.”

I stiffened. Something rang eerily true in what he was saying. I imagined a ballroom, identical to the one in which we had occupied eight hours previous, but transformed, all of the evening gowns and tuxedos filled out by wild dogs. The patter of conversation turned to yapping, froth from their mouths dripping into their gin and tonics.

Henry continued. “These things see an antelope, a lion, any animal dead or crippled, they’ll jump in and go nuts, tearing it apart, ripping all the meat off the bones. They’ll even eat one of their own if it’s hurt. Man, Mobile is full of jackals.”

“Yeah?”



“Yeah. Worst part is, once you’re one of them, there ain’t a damn thing you can do about it. I can sit here and tell you this, but, if the roles were reversed, even if someone did convince me to stick around and pick you up, I can guarantee you I’d be telling the story over a round of golf Sunday afternoon.”

“That’s lovely,” I said, standing.

“Ain’t me, man, it’s the world were living in.” Henry stood and threw down a twenty.

I picked up the box for Christy, though I knew she wouldn’t eat it. “Let’s just get Clay and call it a night.”

We emerged bathed in the pale orange light of the rising sun, enjoying the victory that dawn washes over you after a long night of revelry. Whether the night was good or bad, just surviving it, being among the last standing as it stretches into a new day, is a badge of honor. Like war heroes made heroes merely by virtue of living through a ferocious battle, regardless of the valor they did or did not display, we had persevered. Sometimes it’s the lack of valor that distinguishes those who survive.

## 8

Jake turned over and over in the incomplete pre-dusk darkness. He couldn't sleep anymore. He looked at the clock. The red digits glowed eight-seventeen. He was too warm, even sweating a little. Blinking at the ceiling, he tried to find his bearings. The events of the day, his last day as a high school sophomore, crept back into his mind. As far as he knew, he was in the clear. Anderson had called everybody in, one by one, over the intercom, but Jake had gotten away. He wished he could go back to sleep until he was sure the other shoe wasn't going to drop.

No lights were on in the house. He heard the small television on his parents' dresser, but entered to find the room empty. He shut off the TV and wandered down the front steps. A check lay on the table in the front hall, made out to Frank's Pizza. The amount was blank. It was attached to a Post-it.

*Mom wanted to let you sleep. If you don't want pizza, there's leftover meatloaf in the fridge. We'll be home by eleven. Leave us a note if you decide to go out, but remember that you're working tomorrow and exams start Monday. We need to leave the house in the morning by eight sharp. Love, Dad.*

Jake looked at the handwriting on the check. He could easily turn the F into a J, combine the r and the a, turn the n into a k and make the k an e. Turning "pizza" into "Kindler" would be tougher. The z's would screw him up. He cast aside the idea of emptying his parents' checking account and taking off for Mexico. It would have been too tough without a car, anyway.

He left the check on the table and made it all of the way back to the kitchen before he flipped on a light. He took the receiver from the cradle of the old pea green rotary phone on the wall and dialed a familiar number. It rang three times before anyone picked up.

“Hello.” The voice was without emotion, distant.

“Hi, Margaret. It’s Jake. How are you?” He wondered if she knew yet.

“I’m well, Jacob, thank you. And yourself?”

“I’m good, thanks.” He calculated that this was the proper length of exchange. “Is Christy available?”

“Not at the moment, dear. Would you like me to tell her you called?”

Margaret knows, Jake thought. He had to be sure, though. “Please do. Did she end up going out?”

“Oh, Jake.”

Jake resisted the urge to hang up the phone. Margaret had actual emotion in her voice, perhaps even panic. How much did she know?

“What am I going to do,” Margaret continued. “What can I do with her? Did Ed and I raise her all that differently than your parents raised you?”

Jake desperately wished his parents were home. He wanted to hand off the phone. Adults were not supposed to treat sixteen-year-olds as equals. And if they were, it wasn’t supposed to be like this. He thought about confronting Margaret. Well, you can be a bit passive aggressive, he wanted to say. Christy never knows where she stands. And Ed isn’t actually around all that much.

“No, Margaret, not that I know of.”

“Well why is it that Christy is constantly getting herself in these situations? Why doesn’t she have better judgment, like you?”

Jake stifled a laugh, immediately feeling guilty. “I don’t know that we’re all that different. It’s just bad luck, really.” What, bad luck that she got busted and he didn’t? Why didn’t he just admit his guilt?

Jake decided to change his tack and go for a different truth. “I mean, since Eldon, I’ve always tried to keep my parents from having to worry too much. I’m not trying to be good, I just try not to screw up.”

“Of course,” Margaret said. Her composure came back. “And I know they’re very proud of you. We all are. Everyone seems to be doing so well that I sometimes forget what you went through. That’s horrible of me, I’m sorry. I’m afraid you’ve just caught me at a bad time, Jacob. Do give my parents your best.”

“Shit!” Jake jumped back, startled.

The face pressed against the glass of the kitchen service door was ghostly white. Jake was already glancing around the room, looking for the biggest knife he could find, before he realized it was just Christy with her nose smushed at a weird angle.

She stepped back and laughed while Jake unlocked and opened the door.

“Jacob, are you okay?”

Jake had forgotten about Margaret on the other end of the phone.

“I’m fine. Sorry, I just stubbed my toe kind of hard.”

Christy walked past Jake, heading for the fridge. “Tell Mom I say hi,” she whispered.

Jake covered the receiver with his hand. “Don’t tempt me, I will.”

“Does it look bad?” Margaret asked. “Do you need us to drop you at the hospital on the way to this party? We’re already running late, another twenty minutes won’t hurt.”

“No, thank you, I’m okay now. Wiggling and everything.”

Christy held a can of beer up near Jake’s face and opened it. He felt the spray.

“Coca-cola will fix it,” he told Margaret. It fixes everything.

“Well, be sure to ice it.”

Christy hopped up on the counter and started prodding Jake with her feet.

“I will.”

“Good night, Jacob.”

“Night.”

Jake hung up. “You’re a jerk,” he told Christy, taking the beer from her and forcing himself to try a small sip. He didn’t really like the taste of beer, but he was practicing.

“You know my parents will notice this missing, right?” He gave it back to her.

“Tell them I took it.”

Jake pulled a chrome and vinyl chair back from the Formica topped dinette and sat down. “Yeah, there’s a good idea. You should get in more trouble.”

“Like Stan and Leslie care.” She took a long pull from the beer. “This tastes kind of stale. How long has it been in there?”

“Since that Fourth of July party.”

“It’s almost June.”

“I know. Anyway, my parents aren’t your parents. As far as they know, I never ever drink.” Jake walked to the fridge and pulled out a Barq’s.

“They know you drink.”

“No, they don’t.” He cracked open the root beer and sat down. He felt bad not matching Christy’s willingness to get horribly busted and keep pushing her luck, but he liked Barq’s better than beer anyway. Besides, he had slid by once already today.

“They don’t know about the time you and Thomas got drunk on wine coolers after the baseball game and both made out with St. Mary’s girls, but they know. Hey, what was her name?”

“I don’t remember,” Jake lied.

“You know, a little elective surgery and she’d be cute.”

“Funny.”

“Or a grease paint mustache and she’d looked like Groucho. Is that why you hooked up with her?”

“I’m cracking up. Really. How are you so sure my parents know I drink?” He set the soda on the table and ran his finger around the rim of the can.

“I told them.” She tossed her empty can into the trash, sending a few drops of remaining backwash through the air. She threw Jake the roll of paper towels from the counter.

Jake tore off a sheet and wiped the floor. “No you didn’t.”

“Couple weeks ago. I was sitting in your den, waiting for you. What is it with you, anyway? Why does it take you so long to get dressed? What, are you like one of those chicks who tries on five different things before she settles on what she’s going to wear?”

“No,” Jake said. Almost never five. He sat back down. “You didn’t seriously tell them, did you?”

“It’s not a big deal. While you were making yourself pretty, I was shooting the bull with Ed and Margaret. Casey, the girl in New Orleans I knew when I was little had just gotten killed in that accident. It was totally the wrong topic of conversation, because your dad got all weird and distracted, and your mom started talking about how worried she gets when she doesn’t know where you are.”

Jake knew the routine. It was the same routine that led to a randomly enforced eleven o’clock curfew. “So you figured you make them worry more. Hey, thanks.” Jake slumped in his chair.

“What they would assume is much worse than what I told them. I said you barely drink, and you never drive when you do, and you never smoke, and you don’t do any kind of drugs.”

He was willing to wager this had left his parents in tears after he left. “Well, as long as you told them I wasn’t shooting heroin. I can’t believe they’re still letting me out of the house.”

“Jesus, will you relax? You got to admit to the small stuff so they don’t suspect the big stuff.”

“What big stuff, Christy?” Jake stood. “Jesus, I’m not you. I have no big stuff. I’m not sneaking off to the parking lot to smoke pot. I’m not fucking my boyfriend in the locker room.” He walked out into the living room, unable to look at her face after what he had just said. He couldn’t figure out how he had lost his temper so quickly.

She followed. “So now you’re fucking high and mighty? Who was the one who jumped to come along today at lunch? Who had the fucking ID? Every last goddamn one of us covered for you, and you’re going to sit here and judge me? Are you kidding me, Jake? Where the hell do you get off?”

Jake sunk into the ancient Barcalounger. “What do you mean, you covered for me?”

“I told Anderson I bought, and I made Clay and everybody say the same.” She stood over him, arms folded.

Jake’s voice softened. “You didn’t have to.”

“I know I didn’t have to. Clay and I were busted anyway, and Henry and those guys drew the attention to themselves. Believe me, though, it was as much for Stan and Leslie as for you.” She flopped down on the couch.

“That was so stupid of me today. It’s the last thing they need.” Jake stared off across the room at the old photo of the four Kindlers. “Hey, is this going to screw you up at Tulane?”

“No, they’re not going to notify the colleges. Senior transcripts were already printed.” She sat up. “You know, Jake, maybe it’s been long enough. Maybe they could use you getting in a little trouble.”

“How? How could that possibly be a good thing?”

“I don’t know, relieve the tension a little bit. Get everyone off the tightrope and down in the net where it’s safe.”

“Are you still drunk?” Jake asked, laughing.



“I wish. You know, though, it wasn’t the booze that did me in today.” Christy looked at Jake and bit the corner of her bottom lip. “Promise you won’t freak out.”

“What?”

“Just promise.”

“Fine.”

“Okay, remember last weekend, when Clay and I went up to Bama?”

“No. I am incapable of remembering anything beyond the last forty-eight hours. It’s this condition I have.”

“Shut up. So we went to this football party, and we ended up in this room where people were doing coke.”

“Clay made you do coke? Are you kidding me?”

“You said you wouldn’t freak out. Besides, Clay wouldn’t try it. Not until I got him to do it this afternoon.”

Jake closed his eyes and reclined the chair. He tried to imagine himself someplace else. Anywhere else. He was on a desert highway, the middle of nowhere. He had never been in the desert, but he imagined a warm breeze. Clay and Christy were driving off in a pale blue convertible leaving him in the dust. Next, he suddenly found himself in the boys’ locker room shower. Clay, Christy, naked. The butterfly. He opened his eyes to make the image go away.

“Say something, Jake.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. What would Groucho say?”

“Who are you?” Jake asked.

“I don’t know, the pretty blonde, I guess. Groucho saves the farm, makes sure the young hero gets the girl, right?”

“No. I mean, who are you? What happened to make you so, so . . .”

“What, Jake? Fucked up?”

Jake pushed the Barcalounger back up. “No, not that. I mean, what happened to make you and me so different?” He paused. “And before you say it, not just Eldon. We were headed different ways before that.”

Christy walked over to the liquor cabinet, squatted down and opened the door. She didn’t take anything out, just stared. “We’re not that different. We’re friends, aren’t we? We’re both kind of pissed at the world. That’s not an Eldon thing with you, it’s been as long as I remember. We just handle it differently.”

Jake walked over and sat on the floor, leaning against the wall. “What do you have to be pissed about?” he asked.

“What have you got?”

“Seriously.”

“You mean ‘surely you can’t be serious,’” Christy said. She closed the cabinet and sat on the floor next to Jake.

“Don’t tell me what I mean. And I would never call you Shirley.”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “You always have to have the punchline, don’t you?”

“Better than having the punch. I think it turned.”

A moment passed before she laughed. “It’d probably work better if you do the voice. It’d say right away, ‘watch out for the corny pun.’”

“Everyone’s a critic.”

“Jake,” Christy said.

“Yeah.”

“Promise me you’ll never hate me, no matter how bad I fuck up.”

Jake weighed this. He decided it wouldn’t really cost him anything. “I promise.”

“Thanks.”

“Crack whore,” he deadpanned.

“Dickhead,” she replied, equally emotionless.

## 9

The Scout was missing from the driveway when I got home from dropping everyone off, but my dad's Buick was still there. I found my mom in the living room, the coffee table spread with brown vinyl lesson plan books she was reviewing. It seemed like the longer she was married to a clothier, the more determined she got that she was not a slave to fashion, as evidenced by her lime-green track suit.

“Before you tear into me . . .”

I couldn't finish. My mother was standing up, turned around, and I could read the rage in her face. Her dark brow, which had not turned salt-and-pepper with her hair, furrowed, her skin flush. I pitied the kid who dropped cherry bombs in the toilets at her school. For a squat little woman, she sure seemed capable of a lot of rage.

“You have absolutely no consideration. I don't know what it was like at school, but when you live under our roof you will come home at a reasonable hour, and failing that, you will at the very least call to let us know where you are. Ed and Margaret didn't know, and they of course apologized profusely as if it were Christine's fault which it's not . . .”

I smelled it coming.

“We called the police this morning and every hospital in Lower Alabama, and then we started calling your friends . . .”

There it was. By friends, she would mostly mean the people I hung out with in high school, none of whom were more than casual acquaintances now and very few of whom were at the ball. She would have probably called Thomas up in Birmingham and we hadn't spoken in months. The tears were going now.

“. . . and none of them knew where you were and then finally about an hour ago Ed called. He had heard from God knows where that you stayed overnight in Pensacola to bail people out of jail. Jail. What kind of people are you hanging out with, Jake? And what were you doing in Pensacola? Is this how you help Christy get better?”

That was a low blow. “Mom, there’s nothing I can say that can justify staying out all night without calling. I’m sorry.” This was exactly what I needed on no sleep and a sixty minute drive with Henry, Christy, and Clay all passed out while I had poured Coke after Coke down my throat to stay awake. An entire six pack was now bulging my bladder.

Spent, Mom sat back down on the couch. “This sure as hell better not be a new lifestyle for you.”

“It’s not, it was just a bunch of freak things happening in a row.”

She sighed. “Sweetie, I love having you home, but I’m not sure it’s the best thing for us all to live under one roof.”

Was she talking to me? This was the same mother who wouldn’t let me sleep over at someone else’s house until I was twelve. I went Groucho on her. Shifting back and forth to hold my bladder added to the mania of my performance. She always loved it when I went Groucho. “You don’t have to move out, Mom. You know Dad can’t cook for himself. I’ll tell you what. We’ll paint a line down the roof and pretend it’s two roofs. I live under my roof, you live under yours. I’ll do the painting myself, of course, with only the slightest surcharge over standard union rates.”

She didn’t smile, but I could tell she wanted to. She loved corny.

“I’ll try and find a place as soon as I start working,” I said. Not that I could afford a security deposit. “I take it Dad has my truck?”

“Well, I couldn’t be without a car on a Saturday. Daddy called Uncle Willie last night to come over and fix it this morning. That was before we knew what an ingrate you were.”

Okay, then, moving on. “What was wrong with it?”

“Willie said he adjusted the carburetor and it started fine. He didn’t want to charge us anything.”

“Y’all didn’t pay him?”

“We tried. He wouldn’t take it. You know how he gets.”

I smiled. “Yeah, I do. So Dad drove the Scout to the store.”

She picked up the nearest plan book. “I certainly wasn’t going to drive around town in that thing. I only hope he parked it in back.”

“All right, I’m gonna jump in the shower, take a nap, then run by there. Thanks, Mom.” I kissed her on the cheek and ran upstairs.

Upstairs, after urinating for what felt like ten minutes, I turned on the shower in the hall bathroom, then went in my room to undress, thankful for the solitude. The previous hour had been painful. Clay had barely said a word when he got out of jail, a mumbled “Thanks for picking us up” and then he passed out until I dropped him off at his parents’ house a few blocks from me and Christy. He and Christy hadn’t acknowledged each other’s presence.

I stripped to my shorts, grabbed the nearly-dry towel off of the desk chair, and crossed to the steam-filled bathroom. I was pretty sure Christy was faking being asleep

for a good part of the ride, but she had never answered when I spoke to her. Stepping into the shower, the hot water felt good against my skin. It washed over me, chasing away the previous night's toxins. I stood underneath it long after I was done washing, until the steam set off the smoke detector in the hall. Dashing out to get it, I slid on the tile floor, wrenching my back and almost falling. The towel around my waist drooped in back to expose my mother, at the top of the stairs, to what it would be like to have a son in plumbing as I reached up, removed the smoke detector, and flicked out the nine volt with my thumb.

“Sorry. Just the steam again.”

“You’re ruining the wallpaper in there. You’re going to destroy this house after we spent all of that money to fix it up.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, just don’t do it.”

“Okay.”

“And Jake, ignore what I said downstairs.”

“About stay- . . . “

“No, not about staying out all night, about moving out. We’d love to have you here as long as you’d like.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Within reason. And assuming you don’t destroy everything.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“We just all need to re-adjust to each other.”

“Mom, I’m freezing.”

“Go dry off. And remember about the wallpaper.” She shooed me away with her hands.

The damned wallpaper was in need of ruining. There was nothing wrong with the bathroom before it was remodeled, but now it was filled with decorative soaps, towels I wasn't permitted to use, and pretentious safari-themed wallpaper that would have been out of place in the home of a big game hunter, let alone that of my mild-mannered parents.

Still damp from the shower, I turned on the ceiling fan and lay back on my bed. I couldn't escape the light breaking through the curtains, and something in me couldn't sit still. I turned over on my side and started replaying the night in my head. I wanted to relive so many parts of the evening: Christy in Paris, dancing with Christy, the other girls lined up to dance, the band at the Flora-Bama. But then the other parts poked through to haunt me: the arrest, the cops, Christy so worried about Clay's date, that horrible, horrible kiss. I turned over on my other side. I wasn't going to fall asleep.

I found a pair of khakis in the back of my closet and dressed in those and a polo shirt. I wanted to look presentable in case I had to stay and wait on any customers. With any luck, though, I'd just pop in, say hello, and pop back out.

It was over ninety degrees by that point in the day, so I left the windows up and let the Buick's V8 engine blast the cold a/c over me. Within ten minutes, I was back down on Government Street, parking across from the store. Sweat had already beaded on my forehead and upper lip by the time I crossed the threshold of the smoothie shop. I



needed something for lunch, but I wasn't sure my stomach could handle anything complicated.

A wave of cool air hit me when I opened the glass door of the store, slurping on some icy strawberry concoction I decided I couldn't finish. I leaned back outside and pitched the remains into the trashcan on the street. Three points. Maybe that was an omen. Dad was going to change his mind. The ball would be back in my court.

The men's department was dead. I slid a quarter into the machine near the door and retrieved a Barq's in one of those old-fashioned bottles with the criss-cross pattern in the glass. The machine wasn't retro; it had just been there that long, the kind where you open the narrow glass door and pull out your drink.

When I was small and Mom used to take Eldon to some activity group I hated, Dad would bring me in with him most Saturdays. I used to beg him all morning for a quarter. He stood his ground, though, never letting me have a root beer before lunch, and then only one. Luckily, the guys working the floor usually got a kick out of me running around, being such a pain in my dad's ass. Most of them were willing to play Harpo to my precocious Groucho imitation. They called me "Little Stan" and they'd throw me the occasional Barq's quarter just for the entertainment value of the ensuing interrogation:

"Jake, where did you get the money for that drink?"

"Found it on the ground."

"I see. Tell me, how do you manage to find a quarter on the ground almost every time you come in here?"

"I look for 'em."

"You're not begging the customers or salesmen for them, are you?"

“Nope. Find ‘em.’

“Jake.”

“I do!”

I waved or nodded to the assorted half dozen salesmen spread around the floor, Paulie and Lawrence included, straightening and pretending to straighten pleats, creases and collars, smoothing wrinkles, restacking, sorting belts and adjusting the height at which the neckties were hanging. Other than the two old dandies dedicated to sartorial sales, we had a hodge-podge of college kids from Springhill and Bama Southern and guys fresh from college unsure of what to do with themselves yet. If there were more than three people on the floor and it got slow, my dad sent guys home so he didn't waste wages. This was the usual busywork scam so they could eek out the hours.

I had always got on well with the staff. When I worked at the store in high school and college, I was the one employee my dad never hesitated to dump on. If he was stressed, he took it out on me, berating me a thousand times faster than he would another. It sucked, but whether intentionally so or not it earned me credibility with the guys. A year ago, at least half the salesmen would have given up the façade of working to shoot the bull. I'd hate to think they now felt they needed to show me how diligent they were. Maybe they wanted to be sure I didn't rat out a slacker to try and get the job. That's assuming they even knew I had been shown the door. I felt like the condemned prisoner let out into the general population one last time.

I jogged upstairs, knocked lightly on the door, and entered without waiting for an answer.

“Que pasa, Stan?”

He put aside the shipping order and motioned for me to sit down across from him.

“Everything go okay, everyone safe?”

“Yeah.”

“You had us worried sick this morning.”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“I take it your mother already read you the riot act.” One hand rested palm-down on the blotter, his thumb gently tapping.

“Yeah, but not with the same vigor she used to. I think she’s going soft.” Judging by the emptiness of his desk, I decided the shipping order was just my dad’s way of pretending to be doing something.

“Not likely. You want to tell me what happened?” Turning fully towards me, he brought his two hands together.

“I’d rather not, if that’s okay.”

He sighed. “What are you up to tonight?”

“I think Christy and I are gonna see a movie.” I picked up the old steel table lighter from his desk and started flicking it. There was never any fuel in it. My great-grandfather had been the last Kindler to smoke.

At this, my dad smiled and leaned back in his chair. “Be careful with her. When I talked to Ed he made it seem like y’all might be dating now. That accurate?”

I had lost count of the number of times I had heard this question in high school from my father, both in jest and in earnest. I tried my best to be nonchalant about the fact that the answer had finally changed, and hoped I was right that it had. “No. We’ve been

hanging out a bunch, but I don't think it's going anywhere. I don't know. You need any help around here rest of the day?"

Dad smiled for a second, then returned to boss mode. "No, the guys are already fake-straightening things. I don't think the girls upstairs are faring much better. We're in for a slow couple of months till school starts."

The "girls" were the two senior citizens who ran the boys' department on the second floor. "So I imagine you need to get rid of some overstock." I put down the table lighter and picked up his little Chamber of Commerce plaque. It was heavy. I ran my thumb over the lettering.

"What did you want to steal?"

"Couple pairs of shorts."

He sighed, either at the inescapable permanence of carrying overstock or at the slow months ahead of him.

"Take a look in the attic and see what you can find. We just got in a box of athletic socks you might want to raid, too." He changed tacks. "You planning on getting your hair cut anytime soon?"

"I like it this way."

"It looks greasy."

"It's still wet, I just showered."

"Get it cut."

I put down the plaque and held my hands in my lap. "I'll get a trim this week."

That exchange was inevitable. "You and Mom doing anything exciting tonight?"

“New episode of *Walker*. But speaking of anything exciting, keep your plans clear for tomorrow night. We should go out to a nice dinner to celebrate graduation.” He stood, looked out the door, then closed it.

“Y’all know we don’t have to.”

“I know, but we’d like to take you out. Not to change the subject, but I’ve been giving a lot of thought to what you’re going to do now that you’re back.” He sat back down behind the desk. “Jake, you know I’d like nothing more than for you to come to work with me in the store. I’ve been going over it again and again since I first told you it couldn’t happen yet. My concern, budget or not, is that if you come to work here I don’t want it to be out of a sense of obligation or because of a lack of options.”

“It wouldn’t be.”

“If you want to stay in Mobile, I could make some calls, get you an interview with the bank or something. In the meantime, if we get busy, I’ll use you to fill in. But it will be a day or two a week, if at all. You’re going to need to find something else.”

Leaving Mobile hadn’t really occurred to me until he said it. Every time I gave this serious thought, the numbness came back. I wasn’t about to go work for the bank, and construction hadn’t even started on the new mall we would expand to. “I don’t know, Dad . . .”

“We’ll find you something, somewhere.”

Yeah, this was the conversation I needed when I was hung over and too tired to sleep.

After a few beats passed in silence while Dad avoided eye contact, he straightened up. “Now, back to dinner on Sunday. I was thinking maybe Dominic’s. Or would you rather seafood?”

“Dominic’s is good. I can handle a steak.” I still couldn’t feel my body.

“I’ll call and make a reservation. Why don’t you bring Christy?”

“Maybe. I’ll ask her.” I stood. “So you don’t need any help around here today?”

“Depends. I could use some help with my kidneys. ”

“How’s that?”

“What did you drive over here?”

“Buick.”

“Good. Give me my damn keys and take that godforsaken truck of yours. I feel like James Bond’s martini riding around in that thing. Ever hear of shocks?”

I looked at him, hating when I missed the joke.

“Shaken, not stirred,” he said.

I shook my head, pretending it wasn’t funny. I wasn’t in the mood for funny.

## 10

I went through the back door of the office and took the rickety stairs up to the fourth floor, my heart racing a bit more with each step. I felt as if the steps themselves were going to suddenly disappear from beneath my feet and I would plummet with a soundless scream into some giant abyss. I tried to tell myself it was just the lack of sleep getting to me. I tried to summon the image of Dad sitting across the desk and not get angry. Spending the week with Christy had almost made me forget how mad I was over not being offered a spot in the store.

The storeroom was hot, humid, and smelled of mothballs. I glanced around the room. The old framed photograph of my grandfather and great-grandfather standing in front of the freshly painted plate glass window, Kindler & Son Quality Dry Goods Store, hung squarely in the middle of the far wall. My grandfather was over fifty years old when my dad was born. He died and left my father the store soon after I came along.

The sunlight coming in from the high, circular window lit up thousands of dust particles. I stretched out on my stomach in a push-up position on the unfinished floor, but found myself too tired to push. I closed my eyes, rested my forehead against the warm, dusty floor, and tried to weigh my options.

I was not exactly thrilled by the prospect of jumping into the Mobile business world. Any job with any kind of future meant going to work for those “jackals.” Outside of the more successful black businesses, whose new-hire profile I didn’t quite match, the jackals pretty much ran the town. Working at the bank meant dealing everyday with the sort of people Henry was so afraid of. But maybe it was necessary. If things were going somewhere with Christy, I certainly wanted to stay in town.

I rolled over and looked up at the window. The light was starting to take on a late afternoon hue; the heat would be abating. I stood and brushed myself off. There was grime up and down my shirt and khakis. The long night and lack of sleep washed over me as I considered trading out the khakis and shirt for fresh clothes. Changing required too much energy. I grabbed the shorts and socks and slipped out the rear exit at the bottom of the stairwell to avoid looking at anybody.

Socks and shorts tossed on the backseat, it felt good to hear the roar of the Scout's engine. It was a V8, same number of cylinders as the Buick or the truckster, but a much bigger, louder V8. You could feel the vibrations under the floorboards, hear the engine firing, belts spinning. The Scout's engine was a symphony of sounds. Those comparatively late model American cars were just harmonic.

I drove down to the bay and got on the Interstate. Coming out of the tunnel and ascending the bridge to Spanish Fort, a tear evaporated against my cheek. Must have been the cold a/c drying out my eyes. I turned the blower off, then rolled down the window and slid Big Brother and the Holding Company into the cassette deck.

I didn't know where I was going until I got off of the Interstate onto Highway 98 in Spanish Fort and turned right at the frozen custard shop. I was almost to the house when I realized I needed an excuse, so I turned back out on 98 to run down to the auto parts store. It took out a good chunk of my Christy budget, but I bought a set of plugs and wires for the Scout, supplies for elective surgery I had been postponing, then a pecan pie from a roadside stand.



Willie and Ida were sitting on the front porch of their well-maintained shotgun cottage, rocking and listening to the Braves game on the radio. Willie was listening; Ida was more focused on her crossword puzzle. I pulled in behind the small Ford pickup. They stood to greet me when I stepped out of the truck onto the pea gravel driveway.

I made it to Aunt Ida first, who engulfed me in a giant hug. I thought I was going to disappear into her bosom. I planted a kiss on her ebony cheek, then turned to get the pie from the truck.

“Jacob, honey, you didn’t need to bring me anything.”

“C’mon, Aunt Ida, I spent all day baking this pie.”

“You lie like a rug. I heard about you and your running around, worrying your poor mom sick.”

“Leave the boy alone, Ida.” Uncle Willie, always quick to come to my defense. “He’s young. He’s supposed to be irresponsible. Don’t you dare pretend your kids were any better. You’re just lucky Thomas ain’t back yet to be running around with him.”

I had kind of figured that to be the case. Thomas would have called when he got back to town. He was better about that stuff than me. I was just as happy to spend the time with Willie and Ida.

Ida slapped Willie’s arm. “You know better than to talk to me like that. Just for that you’re not getting any pie. Now I’ll leave you men to it.” She walked off in a mock huff.

Willie shook my hand. “Never mind her, she’s always been sweet on you. You look good, boy, grown up. I like your truck. Start okay this morning?”

“Yeah, thanks for coming by. I was gonna try and change the plugs and wires today. Thought maybe if you’re not busy you’d kind of watch and make sure I don’t screw up.”

“I suppose I got the time. Set tight a minute, and I’ll get the right wrench. I’d offer you a pair of coveralls, but I’d be a little late. You been rolling around in the dirt?”

I looked down at my dirty prep attire. “Yeah, something like that.”

He disappeared inside. I looked around the neighborhood. A few houses down, a dog of indiscriminate breed confined behind a chain link fence harassed two girls playing jump rope. A bare-chested man mowed his patchy lawn at the end of the block, picking the absolute hottest time of day to do it. I had a plain white undershirt on, so I took off my polo and threw it in back, then popped the hood and laid out the new wires along the front seat.

My mom first brought Willie home when I was in the second grade. I remember, because we had just read *The Cay* in the advanced group and he was the spitting image of the guy on the cover. It was the story of this little white kid who gets shipwrecked on an island with an old blind black man. The picture on the cover shows a black guy in his sixties with white hair and a white beard and just about the kindest eyes you’d ever seen, blind or not.

I eventually figured out that Uncle Willie couldn’t have been past his early forties back then, but the picture stuck with me. He drove a bus for my mom’s school, and they used to chat when she was just an ordinary teacher with bus duty. She was having trouble with the previous incarnation of the family truckster, a ’79 Chevy with faux wood paneling, and he offered to come by on his day off to take a look at it. Over the years, he

turned into an all-around handyman and mechanic, the go-to guy when anything was broken at home or at the store. Aunt Ida taught preschool. When my parents were both out of town for some reason, she would come over and babysit, leaving Willie to tend to their kids.

At first, Ida had seemed more like a type to me. All the kids at St. Andrew's seemed to have the large black women from out in the country taking care of their houses and babysitting when their parents were out of town. But since Eldon, I had grown more and more attached to Ida. Especially once I was in high school and started hanging out with their son Thomas more, I saw her as something unique, something worth making up excuses to come out to Spanish Fort. I loved my mom, and I knew Mom loved me, but her affection had never seemed quite as unconditional as Ida's. Ida didn't limit that affection to her own children. I saw myself as the fourth kid Willie and Ida never had. I wanted Thomas and Teddy and me to be triplets, with Sarah teaching us about girls. I never felt like I had to prove anything to Sarah the way I did with Christy –it'd have made me feel a lot better if I had grown up with a surrogate sister whom I wasn't attracted to.

Ida brought out a tray of lemonade in plastic glasses. She gave me one, set one down on the step for Willie, then took the tray with her back to the porch where she resumed her crossword.

I thanked her, but I didn't mean it. Ida made the worst lemonade known to man. It wasn't that it was too sweet or too sour. It was both. She used more lemon juice and more sugar than you would think could possibly fit into one glass. I had to look away when I drank it so that she wouldn't catch my facial contortions.

Willie came out in a dirty work shirt, a two-foot long breaker bar hanging from his hand.

“Woman, please tell me you are not forcing that boy to drink your lemonade. Not one of your children ever drank it, what makes you think that boy’ll drink it?”

“Jake always liked my lemonade.” She smiled and nodded.

“It’s good. Tart.” I grinned.

Willie picked up his own glass and emptied it into the bush. “Don’t ever tell the truth, do you?” he muttered, handing me the wrench. “You know how to use this?”

“I’ve seen it done.”

I set to work, removing a wire, unscrewing the plug, screwing in the new plug, then replacing the wire, a dab of silicone at each end. I had helped a buddy tune up his car at school one time, and we made the mistake of taking all the wires off at once, then reconnecting them to the distributor cap willy-nilly, not thinking it mattered. Turned out, the pistons fire in a certain order, and each plug has to be connected to a certain spot on the distributor, or the engine misfires. We got stuck in rush hour traffic in the middle of Chattanooga. My friend was about to plunk down some cash on a tow truck when it occurred to us to go over how the owner’s manual instructed you to replace the plugs and wires.

I made conversation while I worked. “How’re the kids? Haven’t seen Teddy or Sarah in a while. Hell, haven’t even talked to Thomas on the phone since a little after Christmas.”

“Thomas’ll be in town a week from Thursday. I’m sure he’d like to see you. Sarah’s unit moved her to Germany in late January. She thinks she might marry this other sergeant she works with. Don’t tighten that too much, now.”

“I won’t. That’s a good thing, right, Sarah getting married?”

“I imagine so, but I’ll wait and see. She’s been saving up to bring us over for a visit in August. I’ll withhold judgment until then. Good, good, not too much silicone, good.” He stood on the opposite side of the engine, nodding his approval.

“What’ve the twins been doing? Last I talked to Thomas he had just sent off his law school apps.” Thomas and Teddy, fraternal twins, were near identical and in the same grade, a year ahead of me. A solid duo at shortstop and second base, respectively. Thomas and I hung out a lot, and I played baseball against both of them in high school. Teddy was the stronger hitter, and it was rumored that they sometimes switched jerseys in the locker room so that he could bat twice. Not that it mattered. Their team was horrible.

“He’s going to Southern next year.”

I switched to the other side of the engine, as did he. Of the two boys, I had always felt far closer to Thomas. Teddy always seemed older, more distant. He rarely came along when we’d go fishing or running around in town.

“That’s fantastic,” I said “Y’all psyched?”

“I s’pose. At least he got a scholarship this time. I don’t know if he told you, but he was working thirty hours a week at that cold storage plant these last two years.”

“He told me he was working there, but he never told me he was working those kind of hours. That’s something else.” University of Alabama at Birmingham wasn’t that

far from Sewanee, but I could never convince Thomas to come visit. I , until about a month ago, had no car to go visit him.

“Yes, indeed,” Willie said. “He’s been working pretty hard. That one gonna reach?”

“It should.” I pulled the wire almost tight, but I needed the longer one for the last plug. “What about Teddy. He still shrimping?”

“No indeed. He’s earning some good money. Been on with the oil rig since March. Don’t see him much, does two weeks on, two weeks off, but he finally bought himself a house for him and his wife. She’s due in August, so they needed the space.”

I connected the last wire, then gathered up all of the old parts in my arms. “All right if I throw these in your trash?”

“Go right ahead. There’s some orange soap on the outside sink there, you want to wash the grease off your hands.”

I did as instructed, then picked up my lemonade, now a little milder for the melted ice. We all sat down on the porch.

“Don’t see how you much needed my help. Seems like you learned a thing or two up in Tennessee.”

“I guess I didn’t need help so much as company. Figured I was due for a visit out here.”

“That’s all right, Jake.” Ida reached out and patted my knee. “You come out whenever you like. We’re always glad to have you.” She looked at her Mickey Mouse watch. “Oh my, I better get supper started. Would you like to stay? I know you like my baked chicken.”

I really wanted to stay. I felt fat and happy sitting on the porch with Willie and Ida. I was safe and I was loved, but my spirits couldn't afford to suffer the reversal staying for dinner would bring about. Ida's baked chicken was always undercooked. Not just mildly undercooked, but still pink. I was not up for secreting away chunks of meat in my pocket, especially without Thomas there to trade off creating diversions. It was amazing this family had escaped salmonella so long.

"Thank you, Aunt Ida, but I have to get back. Don't want to get my folks in a huff again wondering where I am."

Willie looked at me deadpan. "Run, boy. Run while you still can."

I decided to call my parents from Christy's when I got back to town rather than go home for dinner. When I pulled up in front of her house, I parked on the street behind a Mercedes sedan. Henry, in baggy Bermuda shorts and a woven-silk camp shirt, rose quickly from beside Christy on the porch swing, as if he had been caught at something. Christy, sitting cross-legged, didn't move.

Henry met me halfway down the walk, Willie and Ida's work wasted. "Hey, Jake. Thanks again for everything, man."

"Yeah, sure. You off to that banquet they're having tonight?"

"Just heading off to return my mom's car and change at her place."

Christy watched from the porch.

I made my Groucho voice. "Escorting a young lady?"

I knew he wasn't, not if he didn't have a date the night before.

"Naw, man, just going with Clay."

I patted him on the arm as I moved past him, backing away. “Yeah, well, maybe if you sweet talk him, you’ll get a little.”

“Dare to dream, Jake. I wish I could stay back and hang with you two.”

I returned to twenty-something Jewish tough mode. “I know nothing would make me happier.”

Henry face was blank, trying to decode my sarcasm. I grew impatient.

“Later, Henry.”

“Yeah, see ya.” He turned and half-jogged to his mom’s car.

I was still backing away when Christy goosed me. I jumped about ten feet in the air. “Jesus, don’t you want to buy me dinner first?”

“Be nice to Henry.” She turned back up the steps to the porch.

“I am.” I followed her, eyes fixed on the smooth pale skin of the back of her thighs.

“You’re not. You’re an ass.”

“Yeah, but you dig me.” We went inside.

“Yeah, um, not so much.” Christy took a sharp left into the family room and flopped down on the khaki sectional. The family room was the only room in the Burroughs’s house in which I could sit comfortably without fear of breaking a knick-knack or a chair named for a dead monarch.

The first time I had played a home video game was beneath the framed Crawfish Festival posters of the Burroughs’s family room, Thanksgiving right after they moved to town. I had beaten the pants off Eldon in some tennis game, mostly because he was two. Not that that stopped me from taunting him at the time.



Sitting down next to Christy now, I thought back to the last Thanksgiving I had spent there, when I was in tenth grade, two years after Eldon, before we started doing separate dinners. The meal done, we had left the tots with the adults and the older cousins who were too inebriated to mind and escaped to the family room to watch TV.

We sat a good three feet apart, and we were watching some made-for-TV movie about a lawyer stalking his ex-wife. There was a semi-graphic love scene, about as racy as basic cable got, and the upstanding if a little psychotic lawyer had this huge tattoo of a tiger on his bicep.

This was during a bit of a dry patch in our friendship, and I was desperate to start a conversation. “I don’t think I could ever get a tattoo.”

Christy’s eyes stayed on the screen. “Hurts too much?”

“No, buttwipe.” I threw a little round pillow at her and missed. “I don’t think there’s anything I’d be willing to keep on my arm or whatever for the rest of my life. I mean, what can you get that wouldn’t seem silly in a few years?”

“A butterfly.” She kept her eyes on the screen.

“Nope, pretty sure that’d seem silly too.”

She finally turned from the TV. “No, dumbass, that’s what I got, a butterfly. Destin, spring break.”

“Liar.”

“Fine.”

“Okay, show me.”

“I’m not showing you, it’s on my butt.”

“I knew you were lying.”

Within seconds, her butt cheek was only a few feet from my face. She just pulled down the side of her pants. I didn't see much crack or anything, but at fifteen it was the second most sensual thing that had ever happened to me. The four-inch orange, red and black butterfly, a striking contrast to her milky flesh, appeared to be floating toward her nether parts. After just long enough to make me uncomfortable, her pants went back up and she sat back down, now only about a foot and a half from me. I held a pillow in my lap, which made her smirk.

My face had to have turned bright crimson, but I tried to cover. "Do your parents know?"

"My dad's heard about it, my mom's seen it. She was unthrilled."

"Yeah, I bet."

Before the next commercial, Clay honked and she ran off. I imagined they were going somewhere the butterfly could fly free.

Now I felt confident enough to come right out and question what the hell Henry wanted.

"He just came over to talk."

"I see. So why didn't you go to the banquet with him?" I wanted to shine a harsh light in her face like a TV cop would.

"He didn't invite me."

I clenched my teeth, hoping that was a joke to punish me for getting possessive. Christy didn't smile.

The phone rang, and Christy took it from the charger and went into the hall to answer it. She came back in, extending it to me. "It's for you. Your mom."

Damnit. “Hello?”

“Were you going to call us this time?”

“I was just about to.”

“Yeah, right. Are you coming home for dinner?” she asked.

I looked up at Christy, who stood with her arms crossed and the long-awaited smile on her face. “Am I going home for dinner?”

She shook her head.

I tried to not register satisfaction. “Nah, I’ll grab something with Christy.”

“What time will you be home?”

“I don’t know, one, two at the latest.”

“Call if it’s any later.”

“Okay, Mom, I got to go, they have another call.”

“Okay, bye, love you.”

“Love you, too. Bye.” I hated looking like a momma’s boy. Ever since the first time I spent a night away from home after Eldon, I had this deep-seated fear that any time I hung up with one of my parents could be the last time. I clicked off the phone and tossed it to Christy to put back in the charger.

“That was sweet.”

“Shut up.”

“No, it was. Your voice goes up an octave and down a few decibels when you talk to your mom.”

“Shut up.”

There wasn't anything good playing at the multiplex, so we got take-out Chinese food and rented a couple of teen comedies. Over General Tso's Chicken and feigned Hollywood angst, I brought up the issue of the store again. I wanted Christy to beg me to stay in town, to tell me how much my being here meant to her. I desperately needed her to show some a little of the compassion she had found to be so elusive as of late.

"You should get the hell out of here." She said it with the same measured nonchalance she had used to tell me about the tattoo and her "accident."

"Excuse me?"

She muted the TV. "Leave, Jake, leave Mobile, leave Alabama, but leave. The only reason you came back here anyway is because you were too lazy to think of anything else to do."

"Now I don't have much choice." I crushed the fortune cookie still in its wrapper, then emptied the pieces into my mouth and pulled the fortune from my tongue. *Don't take any wooden Yen.* I got cheated. I was pretty sure Yen weren't even Chinese.

"Jake, you don't belong in Mobile. You're an outsider, you'll always have a tough time of it here."

When they got to town, Mrs. Burroughs had a few society connections and Mr. Burroughs had my dad, his freshman-year roommate. That was it. And I was the outsider. I was not about to wait for her to not say it. I closed my eyes and could have sworn I felt her pushing me away with both hands and feet. When I opened them, though, I found she hadn't moved.

"So now we're on the Jewish thing," I said. "I can never be a part of the tribe because I'm a member of the Tribe."

“You would just love if that were it, wouldn’t you? Don’t try and play the Jew card with me.” She gathered up the trash from dinner and put it back in the bag. Halfway down the hall, she called back. “You know that’s not why you’re an outsider.”

I followed her to the kitchen, ready to get indignant at her inability to confront her own anti-Semitism. I sat down on a stool. “Tell me, then, wise one, why am I an outsider, why do I need to get up on outta Dodge?”

She rinsed out the glasses and utensils in the sink. “Know what a ‘JAFO’ is?”

“I thought you said this wasn’t a Jew thing.”

“Shut up, jack ass. ‘JAFO.’ Just Another Fucking Observer. You don’t do anything. As long as I can remember, you’ve been sitting on the side, watching it all go by.”

“That’s not true.”

Christy wiped her hands with the dishtowel and then returned it to its chrome ring. “Yes, it is.”

“No, don’t hold back, tell me how you really feel.” I had damn good reasons for trying to stay above the fray. Christy had no idea what it was like to sit *Shiva* for an entire adolescence.

She climbed up on the stool next to me. “No, Jake, you got better. When you went off to school, and you’d come back and work sixty-hour weeks at the store and you and I would go for a drink or two a couple nights a week, just the two of us. Night and day difference. Ever notice that was when we started hanging out so much more?”

“Taking credit again?”

“No, but that was when you started to get more than kid brother status in my eyes.”

I might have blushed. I felt validated.

“So believe me when I tell you to leave. This town is bad for you. You’re starting to slip back into it again. I can see it when you talk to Clay or to Henry. You’re in awe of them. I don’t think that’s gonna change. You need a fresh start, a new town, new people.”

I tried to follow her logic. She and I weren’t talking about the same thing. “What the hell makes you so superior, Christy? You’re twenty-four, you live at home, you occasionally go to school, and I won’t even go into what happened in Long Beach.”

She set her hands on the counter and looked at the floor. “Fuck you, Jake. Like I need that from you. What,” she started, but her voice cracked. She took a deep breath and started again. “What do you want me to do about it, Jake? My life sucks, okay. I’m trying to tell you yours doesn’t have to.”

“Okay, then leave with me,” I said. “We’ll go somewhere together.”

“I don’t know, Jake.” She wiped at her eyes, then started back for the family room. I followed.

“Let’s set it aside for now. Listen, Henry knows some guys in his firm’s Atlanta office, and a few in Jacksonville. He could get you an interview. Maybe even in New Orleans.”

Great. Slinging stocks for a living, cold-calling total strangers in a foreign town. “Not in Mobile?” I sat down, lining my arm along the back of the sectional. Not that I wanted to try and get involved with the finances of the parents of the people I barely spoke to in high school. I looked up at Christy, trying to gauge where I stood.

She took the bait, snuggling in beneath my arm. “Jake, you’ve lived here all your life, but you’re not tight with the right people. That’s worse than being new. Start fresh.”

I really wanted the conversation to end. More than anything, I just didn’t want to have to worry about the future anymore. I wanted to crawl back into the inebriated womb of college. “I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I ask.” She kissed me, a light peck, her lips soft and welcoming. Then she looked at me, expectantly. My mind raced, trying to come up with a good reason why kissing her right then would be a bad idea, how it could possibly turn out against me.

I decided to give up thinking for a while.

## 11

Despite my long run without sleep, I woke up a little before eight Sunday morning, immediately thinking of what had happened the night before. It had been a long time coming and was awkward as hell, but it had finally happened. The bumping of noses, the knocking of limbs, the quick finish. But at least it was over. The barrier was crossed, and my relationship with Christy would be forever different.

For whatever reason, though, it felt empty. Like some sort of Pyrrhic victory. What I had gained felt like an empty husk of what I had spent so many years pursuing. I felt as if the only reason I finally possessed her was because there was nothing left to possess.

I decided I was just tired. Things were going to be great. Christy and I were meant to be together from the time we were little kids. Smooth sailing. It was just new, it was going to take a little getting used to.

My parents were still in their bedroom, so I decided to go pick up the bagels. It was normally my dad's job to get the bagels, but only after another Sunday morning ritual of my parents I was loathe to interrupt.

Once, I couldn't have been more than eight or nine, I had decided to stroll on into their bedroom to wake them up. I was up early, and I was sure this would impress them. They never locked their door for fear of me or Eldon really needing them in the middle of the night. I saw my dad's wrinkly bare ass, lying atop my mother. He hollered over his shoulder to get out, and I obliged. I knew they were fooling around in some way, but it was a long time before I understood exactly what they had been doing.



My first time back from college, I woke up early one Sunday and decided I would go for bagels. This time I knocked, then heard some shuffling around.

“Come in.” My dad.

“That’s okay. Just wanted to tell you I was going for bagels. It’s only six bucks, right?”

“Come in and get some money off the dresser.”

Against my better judgment, I opened the door. The ceiling fan was on, but the room still smelled of sex, humid and sickly sweet. I felt nauseous. Avoiding eye contact, I grabbed a ten off of the dresser and ducked back out. “Back in a jiff.”

This time, a few years wiser, I knew better. I pulled on jeans and a cap and left a note on the kitchen counter.

The outside air was not all that different from what it had been inside my parents’ bedroom that time. Warm, sticky, an invisible fan occasionally stirring up an occasional breeze. I fired up the Scout and rolled down the windows, then found the Sunday morning jazz show on the radio.

It didn’t feel all that early to me, but the streets were still asleep. No lawn mowers going, almost no other cars, just me and the occasional jogger. The bagel place was down on the other end of Old Shell Road. It was a family-run place, and my dad knew the owner. Once I had spoken the order, six plain, five sesame seed, well-done with extra seeds, two onion, the kid’s immediate response was “Stan’s order, right?”

“Yeah.” I got a cup of weak coffee to sip on the ride home.

Tradition. Every week my parents got enough bagels on Sunday to toast for breakfast each weekday. Countless years, the same order. Same bagel place, long before

bagels were trendy, certainly before McDonald's sold them. When we went to Dominic's, we would have the same waiter that used to wait on my grandfather when he was alive, and the waiter would prepare the same appetizers himself, just like he had for my grandfather.

The first weekend of July, my parents took their annual four-day trip to the Grand Hotel in Point Clear, where they still served high tea every day. Come Christmas time, they attended the same parties they did every year. Eventually, I would settle into my own round of holiday parties, maybe with a wife. Maybe we'd set our own time for an annual trip to the Grand Hotel. We'd have a kid or three. We'd find them playgroups, sit and drink coffee with other young couples while the children drooled on each other. The kids would go to St. Andrew's. We'd sit down to pay the bills every Sunday night, wondering where the money was all going. We'd argue. The kids would hide in their rooms. We'd find a temporary solution. We'd be happy. Then maybe one of the kids would die.

Christy was right. I had to get the hell out of Mobile. I loved the city, the smell of it, the live oaks, the oldest Mardi Gras in the country. I loved my parents, I loved the store. But I had to get out of the town. It was a terminal disease. I was a JAFO here because I felt like I had no other choices left open to me. I needed to get off my ass, quit daydreaming and go somewhere. Jacksonville. Atlanta. Somewhere without my mother interpreting every little cough as a warning sign of tuberculosis, somewhere without the jackals judging every move.

My hypothetical wife was faceless. Heading up to my room later that morning, I wondered if it could be Christy. I imagined what she would look like in ten years: a few frown lines, cute little crow's feet, a slight widening of the hips. She was the kind of girl who would look better in her thirties than she did in her twenties. In twenty years, the lines of her face would grow deeper, her hair would gray. She wouldn't dye it, not after the way she had sworn off being a blonde; she would instead flaunt the silver, defiantly beautiful as she sneaked up on fifty. Despite the absence of the severe yellow hair, she'd look like her mother in some of those more forgiving pictures, right down to the piercing eyes. I imagined what our kids would look like.

*Damnit.*

I was not going to let myself get all worked up over her yet again. I was going to be legitimately cool this time, not just pretending.

Not in the mood to risk talking to her parents, I called Christy's cell phone.

"Mmm. What do you want?" I had woken her.

"It's Jake."

"Oh, hey, sweetie." Slightly more awake. "What do you want?"

"Such a lovely way with words." Wasn't I supposed to call the next day? I had done this before. They get pissed if you don't call.

"Bite me," she said.

"Christy, it's a little early for propositions, don't you think? Listen, I forgot to ask you last night, my parents are taking . . ."

"Come over here and ask. I wanted to ask you something, too."

Christy answered the door in gym shorts and an oversized v-necked t-shirt, no make-up. The bags were evident under her eyes, but she was smiling. She gave me a quick peck on the lips then led me by the hand to the family room. Some short, Greek, traitorous, former presidential advisor was talking on the muted television screen. Last night's videos sat on the coffee table, the second one unwatched.

Sitting down opposite me, Christy started in. "So Henry came by last night a little after you left."

I started to feel nauseous.

"Don't get that look on your face again, Jake. Jealousy is not very becoming."

I tried to steel myself. Maybe they had hit upon more helpful insights into my future. "So, did y'all sign me up for the French Foreign Legion?"

"Close, actually. I told him what you said about me leaving with you . . ."

That had not necessarily been one of my wiser ideas, but having put the option out there, I was ready to accept the consequences. Rash, but it certainly played into the fantasies. I leaned back, putting my arms up along the back of the sectional, and caught a whiff of my armpits. Remembering that I hadn't showered or put on deodorant yet, I put my arms back down.

"He thought it was a good idea, I mean, especially after the last couple weeks. Change of place, change of influences."

"Chemical and otherwise," I mumbled.

"Huh?"

"So Henry's your new therapist."

“Jesus, Jake, if we’re going to be together, you’re going to have to get over the fact I have guy friends. Quit grinning like that.”

She had said “together.” I scratched my contented belly.

“Anyway, I think we should give it a trial run. I have a little money saved. Let’s figure out a place to go, and just go. We’ll start over. Maybe New Orleans. I was never unhappy in New Orleans. I should’ve stayed at Tulane.”

I paused. She had failed out of Tulane. I decided to let it go. “You expect me to support you?” I asked.

Christy sighed. “I can work, Jake, and maybe transfer back to Tulane. That’s not the tough part. The tough part is that I don’t want to leave Henry here by himself just yet.”

Now this was getting just plain weird. What the hell was I supposed to make of that? “I don’t know, Christy . . .”

She put her feet on the cushion next to me, stretching out her legs. Her curled toes tugged at my jeans, pulling them taut against my leg.

“He’s having a hard time of it with his family after Friday night, and he’s going to have to undergo this big review at work because of it. It’s not like Clay is exactly sympathetic. C’mon. Bear with me a little while longer?”

“Fine.” I was a little inwardly panic-stricken and willing to agree to anything that would give me time to figure out an excuse not to move away with her. I wracked my brain, unable to figure out exactly why this all sounded so horrible. Maybe because it was sudden. Maybe I just needed the idea to sink in before I could get excited about it.

Christy slid over next to me and kissed me on the cheek.

“Thanks, sweetie. I promise it’ll be fun.”

I found I didn’t seem to have to try so hard to stay aloof. “By the way, I was supposed to invite you to a graduation dinner with my parents tonight. We have seven-thirty reservations at Dominic’s. Think you can come without Henry?”

Dad had been sitting downstairs by himself a while before I came down, but we were both ready before Mom. Seeing me, he walked over and retrieved the bottle of Jameson from the cabinet beneath the bookshelves. I always called them bookshelves. Not many books on them. A few suspense hardbacks, a set of World Book Encyclopedias. Mostly framed pictures and knick-knacks, like little wooden clowns, and a porcelain statuette of a turn-of-the-century peddler and his wagon.

Dad held the bottle up to the light. “I thought there was more in here.” He knew where it had gone, but I played along.

“Yeah, I filled my flask from it the other night.” I sat down on the sofa.

“Jake, why would you need a flask?” He didn’t bother to wait for an answer.

“Care for a drink now?”

“I guess.”

“Shocker. You’ll have to take it in a glass. I don’t know if you can handle that.”

“Funny, Dad.”

He went into the kitchen, and I heard ice clink in a couple of glasses. With the tip of my finger, I played with a tiny quill of goose down poking through the brown tapestry sofa cushion. The tiny stem poked sharply into the flesh of my finger, then broke and gave way. I carefully pushed it back inside the fabric. The new sofa had to cost almost as

much as my Scout. As much as one month's salary for me at the store. Couldn't afford to bring me on, my ass. Maybe they wanted to make sure I met with a certain degree of hardship. Make a middle class Job of me and steel me for the tragedies of adulthood.

Dad returned with the whiskey. He handed me mine, then held up his glass for a toast. "To the future and whatever it may hold." Not exactly worthy of a Friar's Club Roast, but I supposed he meant well.

"Up the academy." I clinked my glass against his.

The doorbell rang.

Christy was there, made-up and in high heels, off-white cigarette pants and a navy blue silk blouse. My father and I each kissed her on the cheek, and she came into the living room and sat down next to me on the couch, legs crossed.

I could see on Dad's face that he wanted to offer her a drink, but he thought better of it and sat down in the loveseat opposite us. "So, Christine, how's school?"

"It's good, I guess. I've been thinking of transferring back to Tulane. Maybe going at night and working during the day."

"That's fantastic," Dad said. "What do your parents think?"

"We haven't discussed it yet, but my mother's been nagging me to give it another try ever since I left." She rested a hand on my knee.

I pretended not to notice.

Dad continued. "Would you stay with your family down there?"

"No, Jake and I would get a place," Christy deadpanned.

She looked at me, waiting for me to jump in, but all my energy was spent resisting the urge to wrap my hands around her throat and squeeze. Dad was expressionless.

Christy turned back to Dad. “Just kidding.”

Dad chuckled. I tried to do the same.

“I’m trying to talk a girlfriend of mine into going down with me to share expenses. It’s all still in the planning stages.”

Christy had no girlfriends.

We suffered a few good beats of awkward silence before my father stood. “I’d better check on Leslie.”

Sidled up to the long mahogany bar of Dominic’s Steakhouse, we had to greet about a half-dozen couples and families as they entered the ceremonial waiting room where insides were lubricated with single malt Scotch in preparation for the grisly steak forced down poor, unsuspecting gullets. Luckily, when they did seat us, they placed us in an oxblood leather banquette along the back wall, beneath sketches and watercolors of “old” Mobile. I don’t think I could have stood being near the hostess stand, smiling at everyone who looked even vaguely familiar.

As Christy made small talk with my parents, I watched the condensation from my Scotch glass form a ring on the starched white tablecloth. I hadn’t managed to finish it before we sat down. Using my Scotch glass in tandem with my water glass, I shifted the placement every few minutes or so in an effort to make the Olympic rings.

Christy squeezed my leg under the table. Looking up, I realized that my parents had been trying to get my attention. Before Dad could speak again, though, the waiter interrupted.



Buddy, the man without a last name or a pair of pants that fit, always looked like he was on stage. He was so pasty-faced that he appeared as if he had a layer of pancake makeup over his acne-scarred cheeks, with stage lights causing a layer of sweat on his forehead that would any minute make the Grecian Formula run like mascara.

My father's face lit up. "Hey, Buddy, how ya been?"

"You know me, Mr. Stan, I'm just a squirrel in the world, tryin' to get a nut."

I couldn't help but smile at the trademark phrase.

"Of course you are," Dad said. "Been staying away from the casinos?"

"Best I can, Mr. Stan, best I can. Your ladies look lovely this evening, I must say. Isn't this the Burroughs girl you got with you?"

"Hi, Buddy." Christy smiled sheepishly. My dad had sent her parents to Buddy immediately upon their arrival in Mobile.

Buddy put his hand on my shoulder, obviously trying to remember my name.

"How 'bout you, son, how's school?" He failed.

"Good, just graduated."

"That's fantastic. Guess I'll be seeing you at your dad's store a lot more."

At this, Mom took charge. "How're the oysters tonight, Buddy?"

"The best, Mrs. K, the best. Y'all want a couple orders of the Rockefeller for the table?"

A few nods led us to a consensus, and Buddy was off.

Mom turned to Christy. "Stan and Jake have decided that now wasn't the right time for Jake to come into the store. He needs to try some other things first."

Christy nodded, not letting on that she already knew anything.

Dad intertwined his fingers on the table in front of him, squaring his shoulders in my direction. “Have you given any more thought to what you’d like to do?”

“I don’t know yet. Everything I’ve thought of so far looks pretty dull.”

Mom tried to help. “Didn’t you have some interviews at school? What was it, commercial real estate? Banking?”

“Both, but I didn’t get either.”

Double-teaming now, back to Dad. “Well, couldn’t you look into that some more?”

“I don’t know, seems kind of boring. I was glad I didn’t take those jobs.”

Back to Mom. “I thought you said they didn’t offer.”

“They didn’t, but I don’t think I would have taken either,” I said.

At this point, Buddy returned and offered a second round of drinks. We all declined. Christy asked for another Diet Coke and I longed desperately for Buddy to be suddenly and inexplicably replaced by Chico Marx.

Mom started in again, and now Dad let her have the reins by herself. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“Because they looked boring,” I said.

“Jake, did you turn down the jobs?” She locked her eyes on mine, and I was afraid to look away.

“No, they didn’t make offers. You think I’d lie to you about that?” I tried to sound wounded, but the truth was that if I’d had the opportunity to turn down those jobs, I *would* have lied about it.

“Did you sabotage the interviews?” she asked.

“Jesus, Mom, is that what you think of me?” I felt like a punching bag now. She just kept jabbing away.

Christy found my hand resting on my knee and took it in hers.

“I just don’t understand why you wouldn’t want a perfectly good job,” Mom said. “When did you become so intent on working in the store?”

“I didn’t turn them down because, I mean, I don’t.” I closed my eyes and exhaled. “It’s not the store. It’s that I want to do something satisfying. I don’t want to slave away the rest of my life just for a paycheck.”

“That’s what a career is,” Mom said. “You work hard to make money to provide for a family. If you want fun, have it on the weekends.” She finally looked away to butter a piece of roll.

“Yeah, fine, but I want to wake up in the morning and not dread getting out of bed,” I said. “You can’t tell me you don’t like your job, Mom. You had to feel some calling to go into education.”

Mom swallowed the bread, leaned in and lowered her voice. “It’s work, Jake. If work was fun, they wouldn’t call it ‘work.’ They’d call it ‘fun.’ You wouldn’t get a ‘paycheck,’ you’d get a ‘funcheck.’”

I couldn’t tell if she was still trying to be serious, but I laughed and Christy and Dad cracked smiles.

“Jake.” Dad looked down at his shrimp fork and stroked his chin. “Do you really think working at the store would be any better? You’ve spent a lot of time there. You know how much there is to do everyday.”

“I know. But it’s different. I wouldn’t just be working for money.” As I spoke, I started to wonder if I was expressing things I honestly felt and hadn’t really articulated, or if I was just trying to win the argument. “There’s something idyllic about going into the family business. And what happens to the store in twenty years if I don’t come in?”

“We’d sell it and retire. Set up a college fund for your kids.” My mother had thought this through.

I was winging it, but I could compete. “So someone else would run Kindler’s after all these decades? Dad, you grew up in that store just like I did. Do you really want to see that happen?”

It suddenly occurred to me that maybe they weren’t just postponing my coming to the store. They had seemingly already decided against it ever happening. No, I thought, there’s no way.

Dad closed his eyes for a full two seconds before opening them again just as Buddy set down the oysters. “Sometimes, Jake, things come to an end.” He smiled and nodded at Buddy before turning back to me. “Things come to an end. It’s not necessarily good or bad, but they just do.”

## 12

The call woke me from a perfectly nice dream about having six toes on one foot. The condition didn't worry me, though, because my second pinky toe was obviously diseased and would fall off on its own.

Assuming it wasn't a telemarketer, I could think of two possible explanations for the ring, and neither would be something I wanted to rush into. "I'll be there in forty-five minutes." My voice was raspy.

"Do you know where you're going?" Whoever it was sounded distinctly younger than my dad and significantly less girly than Christy.

"Oh, I'm sorry, who is this?"

"It's Henry, man."

I wondered how much Christy had told him. "Hey. How's it going?"

"Good, good, n'you?" he asked.

"Sleeping. What d'you need?" I contemplated whether hanging up would be impolite.

"Naw, man, it's what you need. We're out at the farm. Don't bother showering, just throw on some old clothes and get out here. You remember how?"

"This isn't an Amish barn-raising, is it?" I asked.

"We're just gonna have some fun. It's Saturday. What are you, waiting for Christy to beckon, or waiting to see whether or not your old man needs you at the store?"

I hated that I was that predictable. I said nothing.

"Christy's gone shopping with her mom," he said. "I already talked to her. And it's June, your dad'll be fine. Get your butt out here."

I ran through it in my head. If I stayed at home, I would either end up getting called in for a pity shift, or I would waste most of the morning in bed and most of the afternoon in front of the TV. Or worse, Christy would come by and talk for hours on end, alternating between bitching about her parents, bitching about her therapist, and making plans for New Orleans, which I still hadn't found my excitement over. Nothing really bad would happen, but nothing really good, either. Whatever Henry had in mind at the farm would most likely be kind of sucky, but it could be pretty fun, or, better yet, horrendously bad. Screw it.

"I'll be there in a bit, man."

"Awesome."

I followed the sound of gunshots. When I pulled up next to Clay's Toyota SUV, Henry was setting off the skeet launcher while Clay was attempting to shoot the clay pigeons out of the sky. Best I could tell, the area about 150 yards past us on the downward sloping field was littered with orange shards.

Clay broke the breech, dumped the shells and handed the gun to Henry, who was just loading a twenty-gauge cartridge into each barrel when I approached.

"There he is." Henry's face lit up in greeting.

Henry had to know. Christy told him everything. Or maybe she didn't want to tell him because she didn't want to make him think she was abandoning him. Or he'd feel guilty that she was staying for the disposition of the coke charges. No, he had to know. But had he told Clay? "Hey, Henry. Clay."

Clay half-smiled and nodded. He knew. He had to know.

“You ever shot skeet?” The breech still open, Henry extended the stock of the gun.

That was the point to this. Me being with Christy must’ve made them feel they had to initiate me in some way. “A time or two.” I took the gun and shut the breech, keeping the barrels angled at the ground. The stock was a honey-colored oak, and the nickel plating above the trigger bore an artistic etching of an eighteen-point buck.

Clay, kneeling by the launcher, looked up at me. “Whenever you’re ready.”

I braced the heavy stock against my shoulder and sighted down the barrel at some point distant in the sky. Then, remembering proper etiquette, I lowered the barrel.

I looked down at Clay, unable to read anything in his face. Turning back toward the sky, I tried to clear my head. “Pull.”

The pigeons slung forward and I jerked the barrel toward the sky, looking desperately down the sights to try and find the shrinking black dots. Damnit. They were getting away from me. I squeezed off one shot, the explosion half-deafening my right ear and slightly bruising my shoulder, but it was too late.

I lowered the gun. “Goddamnit.”

“It’s all right, Kindler, can’t be good at everything.” Clay stood, smiling.

“Here.” Henry extended his arm for the shotgun. I broke the breach and handed it to him.

“This isn’t why I called you out, anyway. We were just killing time till you got here. I’m gonna shoot one last time . . .”

“Let me go one more time after that. I swear I don’t suck that bad.” I hated the pleading in my voice.

Clay was reloading the orange and black clay discs. “C’mon, man, it’s okay to suck ass. Really.”

“I’ll be right back.” The pleading was gone, replaced by an increased bass. I jogged back to the Scout and in my glove box found the wire-rimmed glasses I never wore.

I heard the pow-pow of two shots in rapid succession. As I returned, Henry and Clay were high-fiving.

Clay chuckled when he saw the glasses. “You really think those’ll help, Annie Oakley?”

He had to know. Screw him. “Load the pigeons, Buffalo Billfold.”

Henry laughed at both of us, broke the breech, dumped the empty shells, and handed me the gun. I took two cartridges from the box on the ground and loaded them. Closing the breech with a satisfying click, I turned downfield. “Pull.”

“Just a second.” Clay finished setting the launcher. “Okay.”

I hocked up a little phlegm and spat on the ground at my feet. Swallowing back what was left, I looked downfield and pulled my Sewanee Intramurals ballcap around backwards. “Pull.”

Once again, the launcher slung the discs forward and I jammed the stock in my shoulder, trying desperately to sight the shrinking dots. POW. The first one disintegrated, but a beat passed while I was looking for the second, *damnit, it’s getting away*. POW. I fired again, but no disintegration, only a cleaving, a hunk of the pigeon separating as it descended down into the distant field.

I lowered the gun, broke the breech, and dumped the smoking shells.



Clay stood and slapped me on the back, a little bit hard. “There you go, Kindler, you got one.”

“I got ‘em both.”

“Yeah, but you only nicked the second one.”

Henry took the shotgun and was fitting it back into a soft-sided camouflage case. “Competition rules, he got both. That’s how they’d call it at The Greenbrier.”

I had no idea what or where The Greenbrier was, but I liked it.

“Okay, okay, you got two.” Clay handed me the half-empty box of pigeons, then picked up the launcher. He looked over at my smiling face. “The Greenbrier’s in West Virginia. It’s like The Grand Hotel, but up in the mountains and much more exclusive.”

I did my best to keep the smile. “I know what The Green Briar is, jackass.” I needed more credibility. “My ex-girlfriend’s family used to go there for New Year’s.” Total bluff, so I moved on quickly as I followed Clay to the back of his car. “We going to pick up the shells and the pigeon shards?”

Henry was a few steps behind us. “Naw, the guy’ll do that on Monday.”

We loaded everything into Clay’s car. Clay was extremely careful to keep everything on the cargo mat.

“I’ll ride with Jake. We’ll meet you back to the house, Clay.” Henry walked ahead of me toward the Scout, only to find the passenger door locked. I climbed in, then reached across and pulled up the lock.

Thankfully, I didn’t have to toy with the manual choke much to get the engine to start. With a puff of smoke from the tailpipe, the V8 roared to life. Henry cranked down

his window, and I backed out onto the gravel road for the half-mile drive back up to the house.

Now that I had Henry on his own, I needed some counterintelligence. I tried to work out an angle so that I could find out what he knew without giving away anything.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“I love your truck, Jake.”

“Thanks. What’re we doing?” I was really hoping this wasn’t a prelude to either talking in blunt terms about Christy or asking me to testify as a character witness.

“Oh, yeah, sorry. We’re going mudding.”

Fear of a broken axle drove thoughts of Christy away. “Henry, man, I just spent six months getting this thing running right.”

“No, Jake, no worries, we’re going to take my little brother’s new Jeep. He’s not back from school yet.”

“Where is he?” I asked.

“Exeter, finishing up his sophomore year. He’s too good for St. Andrew’s.” Henry smiled at the mock insult to our alma mater.

I had forgotten that Henry had a brother Eldon’s age. I seemed to recall that they might even have been friends, the Collins kid coming over to our house a time or two to play. “I guess my little brother would have been getting his license about now, too.”

Henry didn’t say anything.

Clay and I flipped a coin for shotgun while Henry ran inside. I lost the coin toss, which did little to answer the question of whether or not he was going to sucker punch

me when I least expected it. Between us, we found nothing to talk about, the two most obvious subjects, Christy and the arrest, seeming off-limits. The baseball incident seemed dwarfed by comparison to these events. The silence was not graceful.

I walked around the shiny new Rubicon Edition Jeep Wrangler, not sure exactly what I was looking for. “We going to leave the top on?” I asked, still new to off-roading for sport. Off-roading to get to a party, a campsite or a swimming spot, yes. But going off-road without a destination in mind struck me as pointless self-gratification akin to masturbation.

“Not unless you want to come back covered in mud.” Henry was returning from the house with a small cooler. “Beer?”

Clay took one.

“It’s a little early for me,” I said, careful not to slip into *Groucho voce*. “How ‘bout bourbon?”

“It’s back in the house. Want me to get it?” Henry asked.

“That was a joke.”

“Oh.”

The Marx Brothers would be lost on these people. I climbed in the back. Henry handed me the cooler, then he and Clay settled in front. They put on their seatbelts, so I did the same.

It took Henry a few seconds to find reverse, but once he did we backed out onto the gravel road, then headed down towards the woods. After about a mile, he turned onto a rough, tire track road leading into the brush. I waited for him to slow down, but that wasn’t happening. He hurtled along at forty miles an hour, the Jeep’s back end sliding

from side to side and getting launched in the air when we went over humps while small branches scraping against the windshield. I felt thankful that Jeep had finally converted the rear seatbelts to shoulder harnesses, because it was only a matter of time before we were really buggered.

After a few minutes, I calmed down a bit, confident in the vehicle's safety features and the fact that it wasn't my car that was going to get crushed into a tree. Of course, for some reason that only led me back to wondering how much they each knew about Christy and me. To cover, I joined in Henry and Clay's laughter when we survived particularly horrendous dips, bumps and slides. It hadn't rained in several days, but the overhang had prevented some of the deeper puddles from evaporating, so there were a few big splashes, higher than the height of the jeep.

"This still y'all's property, Henry?" I asked eventually, holding on to the roll bar to avoid getting tossed around too much.

"Naw, mostly state land. There are a few hunting camps off in the woods."

Coming out of a giant puddle, we skidded for about eight feet and came within a yard or so of hitting a tree. Their laughter sounded just as put on to me as mine, but I persisted. We didn't slow.

"You ready to turn it around, give someone else a go?" Clay asked.

For a brief, irrational moment, I thought he was talking about Christy and me.

"Let's see how much further we get." Henry swerved to avoid the roots of a fallen tree, then found the road again.

That would have been my answer, too, I thought.

“This is already farther than we normally go.” Clay’s smile was shrinking as he looked away from Henry and ahead at the trail.

Oh, how the parallels keep coming, I thought.

We had slowed considerably as the tires struggled to find continued traction.

“C’mon man, I don’t want to hike back if you get stuck.”

I wasn’t sure how that related, and I almost asked, but then I remembered that they weren’t talking about me.

“I won’t get . . . sonuvabitch.” Our forward progress had ceased. The wheels were spinning, sending dark mud flying six feet in the air.

Clay hopped out, and I followed, shutting the door behind me. First, we tried the front. I put my shoulder up against the grill and Clay his back. At our mark, or rather, a few moments after, Henry put the Jeep in reverse. We pushed, digging our feet into the ground and exerting all of the force we could, at least until I slipped and fell to my knees in the warm mud, staining the lower half of my jeans black. We all laughed our fake laugh.

I suggested we try the other direction. We repeated the effort from behind the Jeep without any further success. We laughed again, though less convincingly so. Remembering something I had learned one drunken night in a pasture, I prompted Henry and Clay to help me gather some branches, about thumb width. We jammed them in underneath the tires from behind. For some reason, I recalled it being harder to wedge the branches in the last time, but I figured that must have been because we were all drunk.

Henry found reverse again, Clay and I pushed, and the wheels spun. We didn’t bother laughing. I tried to look underneath, but couldn’t see anything from the front. I

walked around back and lowered myself down in push-up position, straining to keep my chest off the mud.

Seeing our problem, I chuckled, sincere for the first time.

Clay came around and lowered himself next to me. "That's not funny."

I laughed harder. Clay spit off into the woods.

Henry got out the Jeep. "What, what do y'all see?"

We stood. Clay spoke first. "I told you I'm not walking back."

"What, what's wrong?" Henry slipped a little in the mud and caught himself. I chuckled again.

"The tire ruts are so deep, and the tires sunken so far in," I explained, "that the frame is resting on the hump in the middle. There's almost no weight on the tires, so no way are they going to catch."

Clay folded his arms and leaned against the muddy spare tire mount. Then his feet slipped and he fell, ass first, in the mud.

I bit my lip so I wouldn't totally lose it.

Henry hitched up his shorts, then helped Clay up. "I can go back, but you have to give me your car keys," Henry said.

"You're not taking my truck back here, jackass, I just waxed it. Besides, I didn't get the tow package." Clay wiped his hands off on Henry's t-shirt, which didn't seem to bother Henry, though it made me want to box Clay's ears.

"You don't need the tow package, we can just hook a chain to the frame," Henry pointed out.

Clay didn't say anything.

“I have a chain beneath the seat of my truck, came with it,” I offered.

“My truck’s not coming back here. It’s a company car. My dad would shit.” Clay tried to say this in a manner that didn’t completely emasculate him and failed. “You got people working out here, Henry, borrow a truck.”

“Dude, it’s Saturday. They get the weekend off.”

Well, goddamn the Emancipation Proclamation, I waited for Clay to say.

“We had to lose the damn Civil War,” he muttered. I had been close. He needed fewer syllables.

On that note, I surrendered. “Okay, pansies, we can use my car.”

Henry held out his hand for the keys.

“No way in hell, junior,” I said. “I’m driving.”

“All right, I’ll walk with you.”

The marching whistle from *The Bridge Over the River Kwai* distracted us from the mosquitoes for a good five minutes. I strained to come up with a way to broach the subject of Christy and her escape plan, or at least the current status of Florida v. Claiborne White IV and Henry Collins, Jr., but couldn’t think of anything. Finally, Henry couldn’t refrain from conversation.

“Clay’s pretty pissed,” he said.

There it was. The coke bust was as much Clay’s fault as anyone else’s, so he had to be talking about Christy and me. It was out there. “I’d imagine, but that’s really the least of my worries. We don’t need his permission or anything.”

“We’d need his keys. And someplace to hide afterwards until he calms down.”

I stopped walking for a second and replayed the exchange in my head. Oops. I started again.

“What’s wrong?”

Quick wit failed me. “Nothing. I thought you were talking about something else.”

Henry smiled. “You thought I was talking about you and Christy, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Don’t stress. He figures it’s temporary.”

I hated that word. It made me feel disposable. Maybe the move to New Orleans would be a good thing.

“Don’t worry, though, man, that’s not what Christy thinks. She can’t stop going on about you.”

It seemed like the perfect time to get some advice on the New Orleans move from the only person who might have some insight into it, but something held me back. I couldn’t bring myself to confide in Henry.

“Clay may resent you a little bit, but he’ll get over it,” he said. “C’mon, we’ve all known each other too long not to get over petty stuff.”

I wanted to point out that first, though we had known each other most of our lives, we had never exactly been tight, and second, stealing someone’s off-and-on girlfriend of eight years was not petty. I started kicking a small rock ahead of me like a soccer ball.

I took off my hat and ran a hand through my sweat-drenched hair before breaking my silence. “Y’all really have been friends awhile, huh.” I hoped to draw to his attention the fact that my entry into this inner circle was recent and tentative.



“Long as I can remember.” He tried to steal the rock from me with his foot, miscalculated, tripped and recovered. “Man, I’m a ‘tard.”

He was silent for a few beats, pondering that. “I know you don’t like each other much. It’s stupid, because you aren’t that different. If Christy wasn’t in the middle of everything, I bet you’d get along.”

“Henry, if it weren’t for Christy, you’d both be some distant high school memory to me,” I said.

“I guess you’re right, but that’s always the way you wanted it right? Too cool for school and all?”

“What do you mean,” I asked.

“You know, the Jake Kindler swagger. The cool detachment.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. It didn’t feel right; I had always sort of wanted to be part of things. Nonetheless, it accorded me a certain respect. Like assuming someone shops at the Goodwill as a stylistic choice. Maybe he was just kissing my ass for Christy’s sake.

“Is that really my rep?” I asked.

“More or less,” Henry said. “I appreciate you coming and hanging out anyway, though, Jake. It’s good form.”

“Good form? What is this, cricket?”

Henry smiled. “Bite me.”

I made Henry go inside to get newspaper for my floorboards. Instead, he came out with a white bed sheet.

“Couldn’t find paper. This’ll do the trick.”

I started to tell him not to bother, that even if it survived getting stomped all over without getting torn up, the sheet would be permanently stained. Then I remembered that the cost of a bed sheet to him was probably equivalent to the cost of a newspaper to me, and even if it wasn’t, making an issue of a wasted bed sheet would only highlight my relative poverty.

“Whatever. Give me the sheet.” I took it from him and spread it out on the floor of the Scout, fitting it around the gearshifts.

Having cooled, the engine took a little longer to start this time. After thirty seconds or so of fiddling and having to push the peddle down to drain the gas back out of the flooded carburetor, I got it going. We stopped at the head of the tire track road where, after hopping out to lock the wheels, I shifted from 2WD to 4WDH and slipped the transmission into reverse. It was only the second time I had done this on the Scout, so I hoped I was doing it right. I wasn’t exactly sure how I would know if I had done it wrong.

“What’re you doing?” Henry asked, wondering if I had decided to make Clay wait a while longer.

“Engaging the four wheel drive.” I backed up about fifteen feet, stopped, and then slipped back into drive. The big secret of the Scout was, though it looked like a stick, with the giant unmarked gearshift sticking out of the transmission hump, it was really an automatic. The original console that marked P, R, D1 and D2 had been removed by a previous owner. I was loathe to admit it, but I was miserably bad at driving a stick shift.

“Man,” Henry observed, “what a pain in the ass. Mine’s just got a push-button four wheel drive.”

“Of course it does.” I turned onto the trail, keeping my speed down to twenty miles an hour, slowing for dips, humps, puddles and curves. I knew the paint already had a lot of scratches, but I still cringed at the branches scraping by. Every time we passed a clearing big enough to use as a turnaround, I made a mental note. I had absolutely no recollection as to how far in we had left Clay over an hour ago. Luckily, he turned out to be only a hundred yards or so past a sizable clearing.

When we pulled up, he had the top down and was lying across the backseat with his shirt off, radio blaring, trying to catch a tan through the trees. The only sign he was alive was that he kept having to slap at mosquitoes.

He clearly couldn’t hear us over the music. Borrowing from Harpo, I laid on the horn and his head shot up, bouncing off the padded roll bar.

He leaned over and turned off the radio. “Asshole.” He smiled. He could appreciate a dick move, even when he was the victim. He stood, stretched, and put his shirt back on.

We hopped out of the Scout, leaving it running, and I reached under the seat to pull out the heavy, slightly rusty chain with hooks on either end and carried it over to Henry by the Jeep. Reaching beneath the bumper, he found a tow point and hooked on the chain, then gave the other end back to me. I carried it back to the Scout, discovering I had to lay the chain on the ground and bring my truck forward a few feet so it would reach.

Henry stood back and presumably tried to imagine every worst-case scenario. “Put the top up on the Jeep, Clay, just in case the chain breaks, I don’t want it flying at the back of our heads.”

He complied, giving Henry more time to think of potential tragedies. “Jake, I’m going to leave the Jeep in neutral. Watch out for when I do put it in gear, so I don’t come flying back at you.”

I gave a thumbs up.

Clay, finishing latching down the top, grabbed the cooler, walked back past me and climbed in the passenger side of the Scout. “Seems safer,” he offered, rolling up his window before opening a fresh beer.

I climbed in, shifted to 4WDL, and put it in reverse. Slowly, I pressed on the gas. The engine revved higher, but nothing. I pressed a little harder and the wheels caught, moving backwards, pulling the chain taut. Then nothing, just revving. I pressed down a touch harder and we started to move back, a foot every couple of seconds. I was tempted to slam on the gas and see how fast we could tear through the woods in reverse, towing the little Jeep. I refrained. After we had pulled the Jeep back about ten feet, I stopped, and at Henry’s beckoning moved forward a few feet to give the chain slack. I hopped out, looked beneath the Jeep and unhooked the chain from the frame. “I think you’re clear.”

I heard Henry jamming at the gearshift and scrambled out the way just in advance of him finding reverse and hitting the gas. He slammed on the brakes, skidding to a stop a few feet from the Scout.

Henry looked out the window. “Oh shit, Jake, were you back there?”

I bit my lip and nodded my head.

“See what I mean.” Clay had rolled down his window. “Safer in here.” He rolled it back up.

I gathered up the chain, climbed in, and drove in reverse the hundred yards back to the clearing, backed in, slipped back to drive and 4WDH, honked, and took off down the trail, at a steady, though not reckless, clip, still slowing for obstacles.

Clay handed me a beer, presumably a prelude to some serious talk. I set the beer between my knees and opened it, then lifted it to my mouth and slurped off the foam.

“You think he’s going to know where to turn around?” Clay looked back over his shoulder for Henry.

“Not too worried.” I’m sure I sounded like a jerk, but I was still a little pissed about him almost running over my head.

“Fair enough.” Clay made a face like he had something to say, then flipped on the radio and found a classic rock station.

We stopped once we got out on the gravel and, after I had reset the wheels, pulled off to the side to wait.

The lack of conversation was making me nervous, so I decided to try and relate to Clay on common ground. “What do you figure for the over-under?” I asked.

“I’d say five minutes.” Clay took a five out of his wallet and set it on the dash.

I did the same. “I’ll take the over.” We both looked at our watches. “Clock starts now.”

After about thirty more seconds of silence, I turned up the radio. Credence was playing out of a Biloxi station, and we both sang along. I considered bringing up the subject of Christy. Maybe even telling him about New Orleans. Maybe he’d have a lead

on a job for me. Clay wasn't such a horrible guy. One minute. Two. Journey? What kind of station went from "Down on the Corner" straight to "Open Arms?" I fiddled with the dial and found Hank Williams, Jr. Not my favorite, but it'd do. No. I couldn't ask Clay for advice on his ex-girlfriend. No wonder he hated me. Clay lost Christy, he's faced with felony drug charges, and I'm expecting sympathy? I was a jerk to even consider it. Three minutes. We both cracked fresh beers. No amount of beer would ever make Clay and me friends, regardless of Henry's efforts to reach out. Four. Alan Jackson. And damnit.

Henry tore out of the woods in reverse, twenty seconds shy of making me five dollars. Clay smiled and took the money off the dash.

Henry backed up next to us. "Did y'all see a turnaround?"

Clay leaned forward to holler over. "Nope, we backed all the way out. Did it a helluva lot faster'n you, though. Been waiting damn near fifteen minutes."

Henry looked at his watch. "Sorry, I uh, stopped to piss."

"For fifteen minutes?" I asked.

Clay and I both smiled at him, an uneasy alliance. Henry looked confused for a minute before realizing that we were making a joke at his expense. He didn't know exactly what the joke was, so he just gave us the finger, then hit reverse again, quicker this time, and tore down the gravel road backwards at about thirty miles an hour.

## 13

Christy's face, whether because of the proximity or some trick of the eye, looked horribly asymmetrical to Jake. Or maybe it was the music, he thought, the sound waves bending the waves of light that bounced off her face in the dark Sewanee, Tennessee bar. Maybe it was a rift in time itself; an image of, say, her chin traveled to his optic nerve faster than that of her nose, so an imperceptible shift in position made her appear all askew. Or maybe, Jake realized, he was just a little drunk.

A mere couple of weeks remained in Jake's junior year of college as they sat in front of a dim, multi-level bar called McSwill's, the only seats in the entire place on a bench against the wall, pressed up against the plate glass front window, too close to a guy with a guitar and a drum machine trying to sound like U2. Jake sat praying that the flashing Neon sign advertising Mad Monk Beer above him would send the performer into an epileptic fit.

Jake and Christy had to sit close together to be able to talk, his hand testing on the bench behind her, her bringing her mouth close to his cheek to tell him some story about something horrible Margaret had done. Jake really didn't want to hear it. Luckily, he didn't have to; the music was loud enough for him to tune her out. It was nice having her attentions to himself, like the times during the summer they used to run off alone for a meal or a few drinks before Christy would drop Jake off and go meet up with Clay. Unfortunately, Christy's timing of her visit was horrible.

Jake felt bad about ignoring her, but he was tired. It had been a long day, and he had had little warning she was coming to town. Finals started in a few days, and he had carefully arranged to make second semester of junior year especially tough so he could

coast as a senior. On top of the looming exams, he had gotten up at five that morning to write a paper for a cross curricular course called “Zero Sum Games in Environmental Economic Policy.” It was supposed to close out the Ethics requirement for his Philosophy major. Not that he cared whether corporations were encouraged to clean up their runoff with sanctions or incentives, whether they could trade coupons allowing a certain level of contamination or even whether or not Tennessee tap water was clean. His ethical stance leaned much farther towards the do no harm/cover your own ass school.

And then Christy called. She was taking off to visit her aunt, Ed’s baby sister, in Chicago. She was leaving late and wanted to know if she could crash. At least she’d be out of Alabama, she had said. It was already after two. Jake was getting ready to leave for a ninety-minute Kierkegaard lecture. Fine. Whatever.

Jake was eager to end the semester. He had given up on distinguishing himself academically. As long as he got B’s, his parents didn’t worry. An occasional A, maybe one a semester, but not enough to qualify him for any honor societies or anything. He just really wanted to get through the semester and on with his senior year. Classes like Intro to Drawing and Theater Appreciation. Geology for Non-Majors, also known as Rocks for Jocks. To get to that point, though, he needed to get through the next few weeks. To get through the next few weeks, he needed to get some sleep. To get some sleep, he needed Christy to stop talking.

He turned to face away from her, the crooked visage disturbing him too much, and moved his ear closer to her mouth to try and make her think he was listening.

He was half-listening, at least to the patterns of her speech. Rote detail, rote detail, this action followed by that action then this reaction and summation and interpretation.



The inflection of her voice told him when he should nod or say things like “Really?” or “Then what did you do?”

The couple that had been sitting on the other side of the table left in a huff. He couldn’t hear the argument, but the look on her face seemed to have the equivalent effect of chemical castration: brow scrunched, lips pursed so tightly Jake worried they would start to bleed.

Across the room, Nicole sat huddled with her little friends. Jake knew she had seen him when he and Christy walked in, because she immediately conferred with her council of overly-fashion-conscious advisors, a flurry of hushed tones back and forth. He had tried to find someplace to sit upstairs, but it was dollar draft night and the place was packed. He assumed they could just ignore Nicole. Bono was on break at the time, otherwise Jake would have been willing to walk to the other side of town to find another bar. By the time Irish McIrish came back on, Jake’s credit card was down and he was too embarrassed to close it out after just two drinks, especially when Christy was drinking the dollar draft. Cash was not an option this long past the exhaustion of his summer savings. Once again, Jake found himself trying to conceal his financial limitations from Christy, as if she hadn’t spent enough time in his house to know exactly where he stood. Lately, of course, his parents had been talking about renovating the place. Maybe he would step forward as well and actually get a part-time job his senior year.

Nicole had to have recognized Christy. In the four months she and Jake had gone out, he had caught her looking at the pictures on his dresser at least a dozen times. Jake and Christy in bathing suits at the beach, sporting the distended bellies of the young, the even younger Eldon standing between them, held steady by a tight grip on both of their

hands. Jake and Christy together at a party in high school, his beer hand hidden behind her back, her flaunting a large go-cup filled with some purple concoction. Some of the pictures had nothing to do with Christy, of course. Various fraternity formals and semiformals, which were about the only times Jake made it down to the house; a picture of Jake in high school with Thomas, Teddy and a few guys from the baseball team, all beside a vast, dark bayou, all clad in scum-coated waders and holding up useless under-regulation-sized perch; a picture of a half-dozen couples in seersucker and cocktail dresses attending a horse race. Nicole was in that one, but she was always very clearly drawn to the pictures of Christy.

Christy shifted in closer. Still not touching, but closer. Jake looked down at her crossed legs, which for some reason appeared impossibly thin in the dark indigo jeans she wore. Her knees seemed to form a sharp point. Her hands gripped the edge of the bench as if she feared falling off, but her eyes were locked on Jake's face. Jake tried to remember when Christy had given up being blonde. After high school, he was sure of that. A year ago? Maybe two? Three?

He wanted to care about what she was saying. He really did. Maybe caffeine would make his mind focus. He considered ordering coffee, but by the waitress came he had rationalized that Guinness had a little coffee flavor in it. Christy ordered another draft. Jake decided it was best not to tell her that, despite the Budweiser and Miller Lite taps, on dollar draft night the taps flowed with nothing but National Bohemian, the cheapest kegs they could get. If you wanted a beer that didn't give you the shits, you had to order it in a can or bottle.

Fifteen feet away, Nicole met Jake's eyes again then looked away. It's not like she wasn't a cute girl. Skin fake-baked to smooth perfection, blonde hair styled perfectly to whatever trend had last graced the cover of the fashion magazines. She was wearing the polo shirt Jake had gotten for free after an internship interview, an incentive to accept the job with the epidemiology firm outside of D.C. Clearly, they were wasting their time. First off, Jake couldn't afford to live in D.C. for the summer off of eight dollars an hour. And clearly you don't send the son of a clothier a two sizes too small poly-blend polo embroidered with the company logo. Nicole had taken it without asking, and Jake hadn't minded.

Finally acknowledging Jake looking at her, she pointed to the logo on the shirt and smiled. Jake smiled back and nodded. Christy stopped talking, following Jake's gaze.

"Is that her," Christy asked.

"Is that who?"

"Is she the one who dumped you?"

"It wasn't like that," Jake said, taking a pull on his Guinness and sitting back, turning to Christy.

She had scooted a little further back, and the change in perspective had straightened out her features. "Why did she break up with you, anyway? Were you cheating on her?"

"No."

"Were you cheating on her with one of her closest friends?" Christy sipped her Natty Bo and smiled.

"No."

“Were you cheating on her with two of her closest friends, and you made both of them wear grease paint mustaches?”

“That’s funny,” Jake said. “No, really, it is. Laugh at my pain.”

“Poor, poor Jake.” She squeezed Jake’s knee and shook it back and forth. “How you suffer. Don’t worry. She wasn’t right for you.”

“How do you know,” Jake asked.

She left her hand on his knee. “Cut me some slack, will ya? I’m trying to console you.”

Just then, Nicole screwed up the courage to approach, arms folded across her chest. Margaret Burroughs’s voice in his head had Jake standing on his feet to greet her, taking her hand and leaning across the table to kiss her on the cheek. It had been two weeks.

“Hey,” Jake said.

“Hey,” Nicole replied.

Christy stood and introduced herself.

Nicole half-smiled. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“All lies,” Christy said, running her fingernails up and down my back. “Sit down, join us, at least until Sinn Fein here starts up again.” She motioned to the empty spot across the table and Nicole accepted.

This time, Christy sat almost directly on top of Jake, as if the bench was barely big enough for two people.

“Christy was on her way to Chicago,” Jake said. “She’s just crashing at my place tonight. Jake accepted a fresh, unasked for Guinness and thanked the waitress.

Nicole pointed to her drink and the harried server went to fetch her another vodka cranberry. “Who’s in Chicago?” she asked. “Is that where your boyfriend is now?”

Christy scooted a few inches away from Jake. “Going to see my Aunt Lizzie.” She took a sip from her Natty Bo.

Jake found himself feeling defensive. “Where’s Jeff,” he asked.

Nicole stiffened for a moment. “He’s coming out later. We’re not really together anymore.”

Jake knew that one. It was code for “He cheated and I dumped him, but we’re still hooking up, at least until I have the energy to replace him.”

Christy leaned forward. “So, you dated our little Jake. I’ve always suspected he has quite the romantic side.”

“At times,” Nicole said. “He’d make me dinner, light candles and all that. Of course, that would be followed by a long and involved conversation where he drifted off into his own world.”

Christy laughed. “I hate when he does that. I’ll think he’s listening intently, hanging on every word I say, and then he’ll respond with something like ‘Do new shoes always make your feet hurt?’”

“Wait a second,” Jake said. “I’ve never said that.”

Nicole took her vodka cranberry from the waitress and paid cash. No tip. “I’d totally believe it,” she said. Smiling, she reached across the table and flicked Jake’s hand.

“Other than the obvious, why was it that y’all broke up,” Christy asked.

Jake shifted uncomfortably. This was his worst-case scenario. The two worlds colliding. Please be cool, Nicole, he thought.

“I don’t know,” Nicole said. “I guess we just figured we’d be better off as friends than we would be dating. I mean, going into senior year you either have to be totally serious and, like, all on marriage track, or else a relationship has this looming expiration date. Now we don’t have to spend senior year stressing about how things would end.”

What a load of crap, Jake thought. He hoped Christy would buy it.

“That makes sense,” Christy said. “It sounds like a mature decision.”

Nicole had taken Jake to a sorority party out at a rented barn in the country. A couple kegs, bad mix tapes, smell of recently shoveled manure in the air. Sweaty from the crush of bodies and loud with the shrieks of Tri-Gams, Jake had endured despite himself by managing a medium buzz. Nicole, on the other hand, had gotten tore up from the floor up.

When the two returned to Jake’s studio apartment, Jake behind the wheel of Nicole’s ancient Volvo, she passed out on the bed. Jake yanked off her boots and pulled her jeans off, down over what she liked to call her “ghetto booty.” Her thong started to come off with them, but he reached around pulled it back up, ignoring the impulses of his inner demons. He decided to leave on her shirt, an old, threadbare Oxford, but was unable to resist the urge to check the tag. Robert Talbott with a boutiques store label. Kindler’s carried the same line under the “made expressly for” label.

All of this action woke Nicole enough that she opened her eyes, but she seemed unable to move on her own. She watched Jake and smiled.

Jake unknotted the shirt from where she had it knotted up above her navel, then buttoned it the rest of the way down so it would make for a comfortable nightshirt. She

closed her eyes again, and Jake rolled her to one side, folded back the covers, then rolled her back and tucked her in.

He was still awake and a little wired, so he took the cordless phone into the bathroom and dialed Christy's cell. She didn't answer, so he left a message.

At four the next morning Jake and Nicole were asleep with their legs intertwined when the phone rang. Jake felt comfortable and content, so he let the machine pick up the call.

"Hey, sweetie, it's me. Just got in. Bar was too loud to hear anything. Sorry your girlfriend's a drunkard. Call me."

Nicole's eyes popped open. She turned over, pulling her legs away from Jake and facing the wall, then went back to sleep.

Jake woke three hours later to a gentle flicking of his forehead. He blinked away the sleep, and Nicole slowly came into focus, standing over him, fully dressed. Her breath smelled of toothpaste. His tasted like ass.

"Hey, I'm leaving," she said.

"Okay," Jake replied, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"I think we should break up," Nicole said.

Jake sat up, scooting against the headboard. "I agree. Yoko's ruining the band."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Nicole asked.

"What the hell are you talking about, Nicole? Things are going great."

"You're in love with that Christy chick." She sat down on the end of the bed, her beer mug-sized Louis Vuitton purse hanging from her shoulder.

Jake paused for a moment, taken entirely aback. How the hell was he supposed to handle this? Was this a fight he even wanted to have? On the one hand, he liked Nicole. He worked long and hard to make sure she would say yes when he finally got around to asking her out. Well, not so much ask her out as kiss her while the two were dancing at a DJ part in a fraternity basement. And not so much say yes as just not slap him.

“That’s ridiculous,” Jake said. “She’s just a friend. And she’s been dating the same guy for, like, a decade.”

She looked at him. She didn’t appear angry or sad. Maybe resigned, her facial muscles slack.

Jake really did want to win this argument. He just didn’t know how. “You’re breaking up with me because of one middle-of-the-night phone call?” he asked.

“You know it’s been more than that,” she said. “And it’s not just because of her. I also don’t see the point of continuing if we’re not long-term compatible.”

“Compatible?” Jake knew he should cut his losses, but he couldn’t refrain from slipping into *Groucho voce*. “How difficult is to insert tab A into slot B? Certainly they offer classes in such things. Don’t worry, we’ll get you help. First, bring me a bottle of Scotch and a standard ratchet set. Wait, no, make the ratchet set metric. Wait, wait, better replace the ratchet set with an ice bucket and a glass. Well? What’re you waiting for?”

Nicole closed her eyes, clenched her fists and exhaled. She opened her eyes again. “I’m going to forget you said that. I’d like to pretend we handled this maturely.”

Jake felt the ground firm up beneath him. She shouldn’t have done that. She shouldn’t have let him know he could get to her by taking the joke too far. She’d seen



him like this before, but she used to be one of the few people who could rein him in. Only now, she had forfeited that right. And now he was angry, too angry even for Groucho.

“I think this went smoothly,” he said. “I mean, I know this guy who, when it was time to break up with a girl, and he didn’t want to make a big thing of it, would just sidle in through the back entrance without knocking, if you know what I’m saying.

Relationship over, and she’d be too embarrassed to tell anybody why. His reputation remained unblemished.”

A tear ran down Nicole’s cheek. Groucho would have been more subtle, sure, but she had started this with a surprise attack. Jake was tempted to speak again, but instead rolled over and pretended he was going back to sleep. She may have started the fight, but he had ended it, and ended it bloody. No way was she getting up from that.

Nicole had the door open, flooding the room with sunlight, when she spoke again. “I told Jeff you’d react like this.”

Who the hell was Jeff?

Christy made for the bathroom as soon as they got back to Jake’s place. Jake thought of the short ‘n curlies and pee stains around the rim of the seat, but decided she would have to make do. Having suffered Natty Bo’s revenge in the past, he knew she was probably beyond caring.

Not for the first time in his life, he spoke to Christy through the bathroom door. “I’m gonna take the couch, you can have the bed.”

She unsuccessfully tried to cover a fart with a cough. “Don’t be silly. We can share the bed.”

“I really don’t mind the couch,” Jake said.

“Quit being such a baby. I don’t bite. And my butt’s not nearly as big as Nicole’s, so there’ll be more room.”

Undressing, Jake realized that sleeping in the same bed raised some issues. It was one thing to share a bed with a girl with whom he’d been hooking up, almost entirely another to do so with Christy and everything she represented in his head. Namely, he worried about a certain morning wood issue, the mortifying possibility that the traditional salute at dawn might seek out daylight, or, worse, take a few jabs at the body next to him. It’d be a horrible repeat of the same kind of awkwardness as in Eldon’s room after the funeral. He pulled on sweatpants over his boxers. Realizing he looked a little silly in sweatpants and no shirt, he pulled a fresh t-shirt out of the drawer and put it on.

Christy emerged, carrying with her the smell of massive amounts of air freshener. Jake locked himself in the bathroom, figuring that brushing his teeth and taking a leak would give her the chance to change in privacy.

“You don’t have to sleep in sweatpants, Jake,” Christy called through the door.

Jake aimed his stream along the inside wall of the toilet bowl to minimize sound. “I get cold.”

“Then turn down the air conditioning.”

“Then I get hot.”

“How old are you?”

Jake ran some water over his hands, then brushed his teeth. When he emerged, Christy sat fully clothed on the bed. Jake wasn’t sure what she was waiting for, so he climbed in and scooted to the far side of the bed, against the wall.

“Can I borrow a T-shirt to sleep in?” she asked.

“Yeah, top drawer.

She selected a faded red St. Andrew’s Phys Ed shirt with cracked white lettering and held it up. “Nice,” she said, then set it back on the dresser.

“Thanks.”

She kicked off her shoes, then, facing away, pulled her camisole over her head. She wore a pink bra, though Jake could only see the straps sectioning off her long, graceful back. She reached behind with both hands and undid the clasp, then shrugged it off and set it on the dresser.

Jake shifted his position in the bed. She had to know he was watching, had to feel his eyes on her back, that long, narrow V of a back with the slightest swell where her hips began.

She slipped into the T-shirt, and the hem fell just below her buttocks, at least until she lifted it to unbutton her jeans. Jake caught a brief glimpse of sheer baby blue panties before the shirt fell back down and she stepped out of her jeans.

Jake bit the inside of his cheek.

She climbed into the bed.

Jake clapped twice to turn off the lamp.

Lying on his side, back against the wall, he could just make out the outline of Christy’s face, ten inches away. Her breath smelled, not entirely unpleasantly, of cheap beer and toothpaste. Jake thought of their knees for some reason. They had to be nearly touching.

His mind traveled up their bodies, contemplating proximity, thinking of how easily the T-shirt would slip off of her. She was right there, nothing between the two of them but a few inches of warm air.

All he had to do was lean forward and kiss her, or maybe place a hand on her hip. Maybe she wanted him to.

“Well, um, goodnight,” Jake said.

“”Night, Jake.”

His eyes now adjusted to the dark, Jake could see Christy looking at him, eyes wide open. He counted off the seconds in his head.

Twenty-four.

Twenty-four full seconds before she sighed, blinked heavily, and turned over.

## 14

“You are being such a Judy right now.”

“Oh, my God, am I really? I didn’t even notice.”

“Absolutely. Totally Jewish.”

I had no idea how I came to be sitting between these two girls. They weren’t strangers. I had gone to school with them since I was in kindergarten. One of the two, Jen, had even been a year ahead of me at Sewanee. Both were cute, both had brown hair with blonde highlights, though the one with whom I hadn’t gone to college, also named Jen, had much straighter, shinier hair, was taller and had a better body. Both in black cigarette pants, though wearing different style white shirts. Not that I was checking out the Jens. They had been sitting on either side of me for several minutes on someone’s couch. I wasn’t sure exactly whose. Some guy, also the year ahead of me, whose parents had shipped him off to St. Stanislaus for boarding school after eighth grade. The name was familiar-sounding when I remembered it, which I was having trouble doing, but I had yet to match the name to a face

Hunched over, I ran a finger along the nailhead trim running beneath the soft microsuede cushion. We had started carrying microsuede shirts in the store, but they for some reason struck me as sleazy. I was biased against anything trying to be something else. It seemed like microsuede should be found only at places like Wal-Mart.

I didn’t want to ask about the Judy thing. I really didn’t want to ask. I wanted to stay quiet long enough to make the Jens uncomfortable so they would leave.

“What’s a Judy?”

Both Jens laughed. Tall Jen put a hand on my knee. “Oh my God, you have to know what a Judy is. I mean, Christy’s a Judy, don’t you think?”

I assumed the immediate reference to Christy meant the hand on my knee was intended as a drunken conversational gesture, not an advance. While looking at Sewanee Jen, I took Tall Jen’s hand from my knee and gently set it back in her own lap. I’d score my leverage where I could.

Sewanee Jen answered the question, a sly smile as her eyes followed my gesture. Sewanee Jen had an engagement ring on her finger now, and I had no idea why that bothered me.

“Well, slut,” Sewanee Jen said, “I think Christy was a Judy for, like, the longest time, then she lost the Judy, but I think maybe she’s getting it back. I’ve seen definite flashes of Judeness since she’s been with Jake.”

Tall Jen looked pensive. “Except I think maybe she looks too gaunt now to be a Judy. We really should try and feed her.”

“I don’t know. The starvation thing is pretty Jewish.”

So much for these people being ultra-polite. I looked down at the can of beer in my hand and imagined twisting it into a small spear that I could use to shove up my nose and carve out my frontal lobes. Anything to end this conversation. Then I remembered that I could just as easily kill the Jens as kill myself, and I would enjoy it a lot more.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” I said. “What, exactly, is a Jen?”

“A Judy,” tall Jen corrected. “We’re Jens.”

“Whatever.” I was getting impatient, but I had promised Christy I’d make an effort to be social. I couldn’t believe that this was the thing I had always been so afraid of

doing, this inane little party conversation. I mean, I was right to avoid it, but not because of the fear of a humiliating inability to keep up, which was only partially true, but more because of the fact that I was pretty sure the conversation was actually making me dumber with each passing moment.

“A Judy,” Sewanee Jen explained, “is like Selma Blair in that movie.”

“What movie?” My head swiveled back to hear Tall Jen’s answer.

“You know, the funny one.”

“Well, any Selma Blair movie, really.”

“Except that one.”

“Which one?”

I felt like a spectator at a ping-pong match.

“You know. The one with the kiss.”

“That was a great kiss”

“Yeah, but it was so not Judy.”

“I don’t know, I think she was kind of a Judy-in-the-making in that one.”

“So we’ll call it a state of pre-Judy.”

I chugged my half-full beer. “Well, I’m empty. Can I get y’all a refill while I’m up?”

They both offered up their yellow plastic cups.

“Vodka cranberry.”

“Same.”

“Of course.” Why did they all drink vodka cranberry? I took both cups in one hand and went out on the patio toward the bar. The crowd of J.Crew catalog shoot extras

seemed to part. Well, a mix of J.Crew extras and Kindler's store window mannequins. Once on the patio and out of sight, I dumped the Jens' cups and my can in the trash, went out the back gate, then circled around the row of townhouses so I could come back in the front door. I entered without knocking. Christy wasn't in the front hall, or the dining room. I feared her absence in the kitchen, which would force me to go back to fetch the Jens their drinks.

I found her sitting at the glass and iron kitchen table, Henry on her left, some Indian guy in a faded UVA ballcap on her right. The Indian guy wore a polo shirt with a crawfish insignia, the trademark of a store that's market share in our target demographic had scared us away from expanding into New Orleans.

The Indian guy was asking Henry something, and Henry was responding with something about hoping for a suspended sentence. What fun. The fourth chair at the table was missing, so I walked up behind Christy and took her by the elbows.

She jumped a little, then turning around and seeing it was me, allowed me to guide her into a standing position. I scooted the chair out, sat down, and then Christy sat on my knee.

Henry looked especially glad to have me join them. "Jake, do you know Raj?"

I half-stood, forcing Christy to stand, and shook Raj's hand.

"Jake Kindler, good to meet you."

Raj had a firm handshake and a thick, slightly upstate Alabama accent. "Hell, I remember you from St. Andrew's, Jake. It's been a while."

I sat back down and finally connected the dots. "Oh, shit, Raj, I'm sorry. It's been so long I couldn't connect the name and face." Raj Miller, not Roger Miller. It was his



place. No wonder I hadn't been able to spot him. I had been looking for a pasty-faced white kid, not a half-Indian who talked like he had a supporting role in a Tennessee Williams play. "You have a beautiful house."

"Thanks, man. I just moved in a few months ago, still trying to get everything straight. A few weeks vacation and an extra fifty grand, I could really make something of it."

Henry shook his head. "Man, you keep scoring 401(k) plans, you're gonna have the money easy." Henry turned to me. "Raj was the top performing rookie broker in the firm this year. He brought in more gross in his first six months than I did in my entire first year."

"Impressive." At least I wanted to be impressed.

Christy leaned back against me, and I wrapped an arm around her waist.

Henry hunched forward on the table, both hands clutching his empty yellow plastic cup. "We're trying to get Jake to interview with the firm."

"I didn't think we were hiring." Raj slapped me lightly on my back. "But hell, Kindler's got my vote. Looks like he's got the killer instinct. At least that's what everybody at the baseball game said."

The table was quiet.

"C'mon, Jake, I can't poke a little fun?" Raj asked.

"I've never poked a little fun myself," I said, surprised that the Groucho voice was coming out in a foreign environment. "I poked a little schnauzer once. Darn thing turned around and bit me."

More silence. Christy turned around and gave me a peck on the lips. “I thought it was funny,” she said.

Raj grinned. “Look, Jake, think of it this way. At least you came at him from the side. In jail they’ll probably come from behind and . . .”

“We’re not hiring here,” Henry interrupted, answering a question that had long been left to die. “But Jake and Christy are moving to New Orleans.”

“Henry!” Christy punched Henry on the arm, kind of hard, then turned to Raj. “Don’t tell anybody. We’re still hammering out details.”

“Me? Got nobody to tell. That’s great, though. Wait a second, though, Kindler, what about your dad’s store? You’re not sticking with the family business?”

I ground my teeth against each other. Everything was now out. Henry did know, and pretty soon everyone else would know. Nobody to tell, my ass. I let the arm holding Christy drop to my side. “I don’t know, man, we’re still trying to figure some things out. I’m considering a bunch of different options right now.” I knew the effort to temper the rumors would be fruitless.

“What about, well, never mind, that’s none of my business.” Raj took a pull from his beer.

“What?” Christy asked, sounding a little annoyed. “What were you going to ask?”

“Nothing. I forget.” Raj raised his beer. “To Kindler’s bright future.”

Henry met Raj’s toast with his empty glass. Neither Christy nor I had drinks.

A couple of awkward beats passed before Raj spoke again. “Henry, what’s Clay up to today?”

I bit my lip hard. He knew exactly what he had wanted to ask. He wanted to ask how Christy was casting off her boyfriend of eight years to run off with a nobody like me. A Jewish nobody, no less, the brown on the outside, redneck on the inside bastard wanted to say.

Henry looked away, off at the stainless steel fridge. “He’s over at his parents’ house. His dad’s starting chemo again tomorrow.”

Henry hadn’t told us this.

Christy shifted around on my knee.

Raj offered profound sympathy. “That sucks, going through that on top of everything else.” Another beat passed. “I mean, that the thing at the Flora-Bama, then this.”

I gently pushed Christy up off my lap. “I just remembered that I promised the Jens I would fetch them a drink twenty minutes ago.”

“Which Jens?” Christy asked.

“Like I can tell the difference.” I knew their last names, but I really didn’t care to call them to memory. “They kept yapping about someone named Judy.”

“That would be Jen Lautrec, my fiancée, and her buddy Jen McMann.” Raj explained.

I tried to pretend I hadn’t just been condescending. “You and Jen? That’s great. Everyone up at Sewanee always had a crush on her,” I lied. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.”

I walked briskly through the living room to avoid eye contact, then fixed the Jens Vodka cranberries from the bar set up on the patio. I grabbed two cans of beer for myself, then found the Jens where I had left them on the couch.

I passed them their drinks. “Sorry it took so long. Traffic.”

“Traffic?” Tall Jen looked confused.

“Okay, I’m lying. I had to use the bathroom.”

Still, two blank stares.

“Number two.” I cracked the first beer.

They smiled politely.

I had found a way to shut off the Judy yapping. Feeling compassionate, I took control of the conversation. “Jen, I just heard while I was in there about you and Raj. That’s great. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. We’re really excited.” She smiled and wrapped her hand around her yellow cup in a way to show off the ring. “Wait a second. You heard that in the bathroom?”

I felt completely lacking in self-control. “Not exactly. The bathroom was full, so I dug a hole just outside the back gate. Someone was talking about it on the other side of the fence.”

They both made horrified faces and scooted towards the ends of the couch. I heard the word “disgusting,” but I couldn’t tell which side it came from.

“Don’t worry, I went in the kitchen and washed my hands before I made the drinks. Here, smell.” I raised my index fingers up under their noses.

Tall Jen shrieked, Sewanee Jen batted my hand away and stood. “I have to go check on something. Jen?”

I decided now would be a good time to chug the rest of my beer for effect.

“I’m good.” Tall Jen kicked off her mules, pulled her legs up underneath her and shifted so that she was facing me.

After the shriek, all eyes were on us. I called after Jen as she walked away.

“What, was it something I said?” I held out the can. “Could you at least throw away my empty?”

There was a mix of giggles and whispers. I remembered what Henry had been talking about that day at IHOP. Jackals, all of them. They were licking their chops, deciding who was most worthy of a feast. I found myself suddenly appreciative of Sewanee Jen’s forthrightness, and a little jealous of Raj.

“That was so gross.” Tall Jen took the empty from my hand and set it on the coffee table.

I had forgotten about Tall Jen. What the hell was she still doing there?

“You’re still here?” I asked while opening the second can.

“I’m not spooked that easily.” Her head bobbed a little bit, I thought back to that old joke about the University of Alabama sorority girl mating call—*I’m sooo drunk*.

“I’d appreciate you not using racial slurs in my presence.” I was not settling for a tie. If she was determined to hang around, I was determined to elicit tears. I would offer her up to the jackals. I made girls cry often enough unintentionally, I thought; I should be capable of doing it on purpose.

“Racial slurs?” She lunged a little bit and patted my knee. “Oh, I get it. Spook. That’s funny.”

Damnit.

She kept going. “And spook that rhymes with gook and that stands for pool. Whites-only pool.” This one was a gamer.

I couldn’t believe the words that were about to come out of my mouth and to whom they were directed. “I don’t get it.”

“That’s from the KA-Tri-Delt production of *The Music Man*. Every year at Bama Southern in honor of Martin Luther the King Day. I played Marian the Nymphomaniac Librarian two years in a row.”

I realized I very well could have been in over my head. “Only two years?”

Jen leaned back, her elbows on the arm of the sofa, her tailored blouse drifting up to reveal a tiny belly-button ring. “I was at Georgia freshman year.”

An opening. “Failed out?”

“No, jerk.” She lunged and slapped my arm before leaning back again.

“Transferred so I wouldn’t have the long commute for deb stuff.”

I scooted back against the other arm and sat Indian-style, facing her. This would require concentration. I noticed the dried mud on my boots, but I decided the cleanliness of Raj’s sofa wasn’t my problem. “So that’s three years of Bama Southern and only two as Marian the Dipsomaniac Librarian.”

“Nymphomaniac.”

“Gesuntheit.”

She scrunched up her face. “You’re funny.”

“You’re an idiot.”

She stuck her tongue out at me, and I started patting my pockets as if looking for something.

“What’re you doing?”

I stopped and looked up. “Seeing if I have my pocket knife with me to cut off your tongue.”

“You’re such a . . .” She furrowed her brow. “What’s that word for someone who hates women?”

“Gynecologist.”

Her damn smile wouldn’t go away. “That’s what you are, a Gynecologist. Wait. No. A gynecol-”

I cut her off before she could finish the thought. “I don’t hate women. I just don’t particularly care for you.” It was at this point that I noticed two things. First, that I had been smiling along with her for the entirety of the conversation, and second, that at least five or six of the jackals had ceased their own conversation and were now watching Jen and me as if we were putting on some kind of performance. They were even laughing and groaning at the appropriate times, not even pretending to not watch. The jackals were circling.

I realized that I had the opportunity to offend several people at once now. “So you only played a crack whore two of your three years.”

“Nymphomaniac Librarian. And it was a singing role, a pretty big deal.”

“Whatever.”

She glanced around a little at the crowd. “They’re watching us.”

No one turned away. I was on to something now. “You’re hallucinating. That happens the first few months after a partial lobotomy. Keep going.”

“There was a spy at the dress rehearsal senior year. We got reported and they revoked our charters.” Her smile was actually gone for a moment, but it returned. “I don’t know why. It was all in good fun.”

“Sure, racial slurs and blackface always are.”

“I didn’t tell you about the blackface.” She leaned forward unsteadily.

“Lucky guess. And I bet for the Asians, y’all walked around pulling your eyes back so they looked slanted?”

She laughed. “You had to’ve been there. It was hilarious. We had a guy in a turban, and a Jewish peddler with a giant nose.”

The jackals’ laughter ceased for a second, waiting for my reaction.

“I can’t believe y’all dug up my dead grandpa. I hope he was well-compensated.”

A collective sigh of relief with a few chuckles.

“You Hebes, always thinking of money.” Jen twisted around so that she was lying on her stomach, feet dangling in the air, chin propped up on her hand, looking up at me. I couldn’t force myself to be offended, she was too good-natured, but I was unsure who the jackals would feast upon first. They would only eat their own if she was wounded. I longed for a pocketknife.

“You white people, always trying to keep a brother down.” I wanted to get back to trying to make her cry, but I couldn’t find a promising angle.

“Like you’re not white.” She waved her bare feet back and forth in the air in a lazy scissors kick.



“Jews aren’t white, dumb ass. We’re something in between. Like khaki.” I looked down at my pants, hating the fact that Christy had talked me into ditching my jeans for Duck Heads.

“What-ev-er.”

Things had gotten way too comfortable. “If we were white, y’all would let us into the club.”

She looked puzzled. “You so know that’s not true.”

There it is.

“Jews are allowed in the club now,” she declared.

“Allowing us admittance to certain functions on the condition that we wear armbands and promise not to impregnate your women doesn’t count.”

A few uneasy laughs from the jackals, whose numbers had nearly doubled.

“Okay, mister moral superiority.” She didn’t seem so drunk anymore. “Like y’all didn’t refuse to join just so you could stay on your high horse.”

It occurred to me, among this confusion, that Jen may not have been quite the empty vessel I had thought. I expected her comment to silence the jackals, but it actually got a few laughs.

I kept smiling. “What’re you talking about?”

“You know, that time they invited y’all and the Gottliebs to join?”

“You mean that was legit?” I tried to sound like this wasn’t a total shock to me. “I think we assumed it was like one of those parties where whoever brings the ugliest date wins a prize. You’ve been to those, right? As a guest? Did you win?”

The jackals were at ease again, and Tall Jen had stopped wavering back and forth. “I hear they’re changing the motto of the JCC: A place for those ethically opposed to country clubs but who can’t afford them anyway.”

That one even made me laugh. “To quote a great man, ‘I would never join any club that would have me as a member.’” I leaned back so her face wouldn’t be so close to mine. She was really cute.

“You are such a Judy right now,” she said.

“How can a guy be a Judy?” Damnit, I had been swept in. Seeing me tamed, the crowd was dispersing.

“I don’t know, but you’ve managed it.”

“I am so not a Judy. If anything, you’ve reached the pinnacle of Judity.” I suddenly felt like Elvis circa 1975. I had been great once, but I was now drenched in shame, a staggering dinosaur. I always believed Elvis needed to either die in 1972 or at least live long enough to regain his dignity, like Groucho on “You Bet Your Life,” going out in style. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the jackals dispersing.

“Whatever, He-Judy.” She was swaying back and forth again, feeling the liquor.

“Bite me,” I said.

“Keep sweet-talking me.”

Of course this flirtation never would have happened if I wasn’t seeing Christy, I thought to myself. Not only because I likely wouldn’t have even known about this party, and wouldn’t have attended if I had, but because God hated me. My life was a zero sum game. If a beautiful woman wanted to hook up with me, there was always some reason

why it wouldn't happen, or some horrible price to pay in the end. Of course, it would be so easy to just go with this moment.

"You're kind of slutty, aren't you?" I asked. There was no way that would work.

"No!" she slapped me on the arm. "Maybe a little bit." Her voice had dropped to a whisper. "But you'd have to ditch Christy to find out."

It was at that moment that I realized I was in the presence of pure evil. I stood. "I'll tell you what. Let me go find her, tell her I have another ride home, and I'll be right back. Don't move an inch."

Christy and Henry were perched on the bottom stair in the front hall. I squeezed in between them just as Henry looked at his watch.

"You got somewhere to be?" I asked.

"Told Seth I'd stop by his party later. Y'all want to come?"

"Nah," Christy said. "We have to get home so I can sneak Jake up to my room before my parents get in. It is so fun living at home again. Tell me, Jake darling, was this whole thing as bad as you expected?" She took my hand.

"I will give either one of you a thousand dollars to put a bullet in my brain right now." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized that they might be construed as insensitive to Christy. I couldn't shove the words back in my mouth, though, so I decided to run with it. "Okay, two thousand, but you have to supply the gun."

Henry made a gun with his thumb and forefinger. He aimed it carefully at my temple, paused, then quickly switched to his own temple, mimed pulling the trigger, and slumped against the wall, eyes staring off into space. He stayed that way.

Christy explained. “Henry’s getting a little sick of talking about the coke charges. He’s already apologized for letting the cat out of the bag about New Orleans.”

Caught up with the Jens, I had already forgotten about that. “No biggie. Always willing to fall on a grenade for a friend.” I put an arm around Christy, and she put her head on my shoulder. “Can we get the hell out of here yet?”

Christy looked up. “What’s wrong? I heard you were the life of the party back there. You and Jen.”

“Which one?”

“McMann. Jen Lautrec thinks you’re a pig.”

“As well she should.” This further confirmed my respect for Sewanee Jen. “You and McMann aren’t close, are you?” I asked.

“No, why?”

“Because I’m pretty sure she’s been sent by Satan to bring down the race of man.”

“Quite possibly.”

Henry sat up. “She was always after Clay.” Immediately realizing that bringing up Clay inevitably threw a wet blanket on an already sullen moment, Henry mock-shot himself again and slumped back against the wall.

I put another mock-shot into his chest to make sure he was dead. His body convulsed, then went limp again. I turned back to Christy.

“Jen said something interesting, though. Are the Gottliebs members of the club?”

“Yeah, they were invited to join the same time as y’all.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“About the Gottliebs?”

“Either. I didn’t know we were invited to join.”

Christy sat up straight. “Are you kidding? It was this huge deal. Daddy and Big Clay started this whole movement to quell any blackballs. It was, like, as soon as our junior membership was up.”

I could sort of picture Ed as the moral crusader, but Clay’s dad didn’t quite fit the mold. He must have had a hunch about his own mortality. “When was that?” I took my arm from around Christy’s shoulder.

“I don’t know, when did we stop doing Thanksgiving and the Grand Hotel together? Six, seven years ago?”

“Your parents were that pissed?”

Christy stood, turned around, then offered me a hand up. “Not their call.”

I took it and let her pull me up. “It’s all news to me.”

“I can’t believe they never told you.”

I looked back down at Henry, still slumped against the wall, still pretending to be oblivious. “Think we can get his car keys out of his pocket without messing up the crime scene?”

“I got a better plan.” Christy grabbed a handful of Henry’s hair.

“Ow.”

“The dead don’t speak.” She continued to pull him up until he was almost standing.

Henry straightened out, grinning. “Sorry. I thought a Kindler would be too good to be driven around by a fascist, elitist wasp.”

On instinct, I made a fist and sent it towards Henry's jaw, stopping short a few inches away. Then I opened my hand and gave him a light slap on the cheek. "Just this once. Consider yourself privileged. Home, Jeeves."

## 15

Christy didn't know I was going. I couldn't believe I was going. I had told my parents about it much in the same way you're supposed to show proof of looking for work to get unemployment benefits. Waiting tables with the townies up at school had given me some insight into the working world.

As soon as I hit Louisiana, the road deteriorated, and every pothole reverberated through my truck like I was getting battered by Kraut shrapnel. I finally made it to the bridge over Lake Pontchartrain and rolled down the window, hoping to get some sea air. Finding humidity without aroma, I rolled the window back up and tried to fix my hair in the rear view. I really didn't like the hair cut, even if I had needed it. I straightened my tie, which, according to the label, was "made exclusively for Kindler's by Ike Behar." Dad had made me pay for it, but he only charged me wholesale.

I followed the signs that led me toward Metairie, New Orleans' giant proletarian suburb, past the local newspaper's headquarters and the razor wire of the city jail. I fought the instinct to wave to Henry and Clay, knowing they were not only up for charges two states over but were also still out on bond.

Nearing Metairie, I considered how the elitist New Orleans Country Club was located somewhere to my left, an institution that made Tanglewood back in Mobile look like Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, especially in light of recent revelations. I still hadn't asked my parents about that.

At least in New Orleans, I thought, I would be less conscious of this world of which I would never be a part. Then I remembered Christy's cousin Mary, and her

incessant gossip. As a returning prodigal, Christy's membership in this world would be inescapable. The gin-and-tonic-soaked jackals would never let her go.

I passed the acres upon acres of cemetery, new and old, with their raised graves, thousands of tiny little whitewashed stone houses. My feelings for Christy really were an albatross around my neck. Only the sex was probably better than it would be with a giant dead bird. Maybe not by much. Every time, I couldn't get over the feeling of being outside of myself somehow. I knew that this was what I wanted, but I couldn't get comfortable. Everything felt so precarious.

I took the Bonnabel Road exit, turning onto Veterans Boulevard, passing countless fast food chains and mattress discounters before finally reaching my destination, the out-of-place Heritage Plaza tower. I checked my watch: Twenty-five minutes early.

I took the parking ticket and stuck it in my shirt pocket, making a mental note to ask for validation. Why, I thought in *Groucho voce*, oh why must I always seek validation?

That thought repeated over and over as I donned my suit jacket, grabbed my leather folder and entered the granite-floored, high-ceilinged lobby. It got funnier every time. Puns always do. I almost laughed out loud at the thought while I waited for the elevator. The strain of holding in my guffaws actually made me pee a little. Just a drop. I checked my pants. Thanks to the satin lining, no stain. The realization that I had just pissed myself, however faintly, in the lobby of an office building, did make me laugh out loud, garnering a few stares from passers-by around the lobby. I tried to turn my laugh into a cough, but the disturbance I was causing made me laugh even harder.



Finally, the elevator opened, I entered, and I was alone. I pressed six and slumped against the back wall, letting my giggles subside on their own accord. I wondered what the hell was wrong with me. Something about the gravity of going to a job interview in an office tower made me feel like a little kid, like Eldon when I used to tickle him to try and make him pee his pants. Man, that was always funny, I thought. When the tone sounded, I got out and strode down the hallway like I knew where I was going.

I passed the glass double doors for an accounting firm, proceeding down the grey carpet, between the beige walls, beneath the acoustic ceiling tiles, postulating that this must have been precisely what the inside of an accountant's brain looked like. Then I felt bad for drawing such a generalization about an entire career field. I passed an old pale, skinny white guy in a dark suit. Then a slightly younger version of the same. Then their female counterpart. Nope, I thought, I was right.

I finally managed to find the bathroom, grinning at my own bizarre snobbery as I entered. That proved not to be such a good thing, as the pale skinny guy at the urinal seemed incredibly uncomfortable, perhaps thinking that he held in his hand the source of my disdainful smile. He rushed out, but not before washing his hands, which I took to be a good sign. I figured that he wouldn't have taken the time to be sanitary if he was rushing off to call security.

Setting my folder down on the counter, I stepped over to the urinal to relieve myself, then left my trousers undone as I stepped back to the sink and tried to use a paper towel to dry out the silver dollar-sized wet spot on my drawers. I took another paper towel and reached down my pants and wiped the few dribblets along the lining, disappointed to see that a small drop had shown on the outside of the pants leg. It had run

down the lining and appeared just below the knee. I reasoned that if such a drop were interpreted as urine, it would only impress the interviewer as it made me appear to be something of a tripod.

I started when someone walked in the door behind me, but kept my left my arm shoved well-down my pants. I didn't know these people. Whoever it was left immediately. I carefully tucked in my shirt and fastened my trousers. I took my time washing my hands, then gave myself a once over in the mirror. I really hated the haircut. It was neat, none of the loose tangles or curls hanging over my ears or drifting across my forehead. I couldn't figure out a way to move a single hair out of place without it looking weird. I tried several times, but it just came off as silly. I tried shifting my tie to a slightly off angle, but that didn't work. Running the back of my hand along my jaw, I regretted shaving that morning, thinking I should have done it the night before to allow a little regrowth.

There was really nothing I could do to regain some of what I had always considered my most endearing characteristic, my slightly-rugged, slightly-reckless but not threateningly-so charm. I couldn't help but speak to the mirror. "Good morning. My name is Jacob and I'd like to speak to you about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints."

I checked my watch. Damn it. I was running two minutes late. I closed the folder and shoved it under my arm, speed-walking past the elevator to the door leading to the stairs.

I took the steps three at a time, bounding up to the eighth floor. Once there, I turned the door handle and yanked. When it failed to open, my hand slipped off the

handle and I stumbled backwards, barely catching myself on the railing. I looked behind me. Nothing like falling on your ass down seven flights of stairs to ruin your day. Finally, I noticed a small sign on the wall, next to the door. “No re-entry except on first floor.” I knocked on the door, hoping for mercy. No such luck.

God definitely hates me, I thought as I began bounding back down the steps, slipping and catching myself a few times, punishment for my blaspheme. I was six minutes late when I made it back down to the lobby. Eight minutes late when the elevator came. Only now I wasn't alone. Three other suits boarded, all getting off on different floors, all below the eighth.

I was still sweaty from the stairs when I stepped out on the eighth floor. Across from me were the double glass doors of Southeastern Mutual Investment Advisors. Not exactly as prestigious as Henry's firm, but it'd do. I wiped the sweat from my brow with my hand, then, looking around to make sure no one was watching, dried my hand on the seat of my pants.

Once across the grey hallway and through the glass doors, the lobby was dimly lit by several table lamps, and filled with conservative leather club chairs and matching sofas and coffee tables strewn with various business magazines. The smell of fresh-baked cookies filled the room. An attractive pregnant blonde about my age sat at a large antique-style desk. Of slight build and JC Penney-model-bland but flawless features, she smiled as I approached.

“Hi, Jake Kindler here to see Bill Lee. I'm a few minutes late.” Eleven, to be exact, I thought.

The girl made a quick note on a clipboard, then half-stood and offered her hand. “Hi, Jake, I’m Glinda. Bill’s expecting you.”

Her hand was soft but cool, a gentle grip. Remembering an impromptu etiquette lesson Margaret Burroughs once offered, I tried to return precisely the same grip. “Nice to meet you.” I noticed that she didn’t wear a ring on her left hand, then stole another glance at the swollen belly and shook thoughts of flirtation out of my head.

“You certainly look sharp. Why don’t you have a seat, and I’ll let Bill know you’re here.”

“Thank you.” I took my place in a club chair, at first flattered by the compliment and then questioning its motivation. Sharp? Who talks like that? Did I have something in my teeth? I hadn’t eaten any breakfast. I discreetly checked my fly, but found nothing amiss.

Glinda set the phone down. “Bill will be just a minute. Can I get you anything? Coffee? Coke? Cookie?”

How about you fetch me a brandy and come have a seat on my knee, I thought *Groucho voce* before remembering that she was pregnant. “I’m good, thank you.”

I picked up a magazine and pretended to read, not that I really cared about fiscal forecasts. Taking this as a release from hostess duties, Glinda turned back down to whatever she was working on at her desk. It looked like homework. Three minutes passed. Then six. That bastard, I thought. He wants me to wait as long as I made him wait. I tried to decide whether I respected that or resented it. At seven minutes, it occurred to me that there should have been more traffic coming through this lobby. Not a

soul had entered or exited the offices of Southeast Mutual Investment Advisors since I had arrived.

At eight and a half minutes, Bill Lee appeared. Based on his last name, I had expected the scion of an aristocratic Southern family, a middle-aged man who would be only a beard and a gray woolen uniform away from looking like a Civil War general. I certainly didn't expect an Asian guy in a shirt three sizes too big who appeared not much older than me.

The striped pima cotton shirt was a little too trendy for Kindler's, the slim plain-front pants were probably of a respectable but moderately priced New York fashion label. If I had to guess, I'd have wagered Kenneth Cole, maybe Calvin Klein. Definitely not Ralph Lauren or Nautica; the cut wasn't preppy enough. Well, maybe Nautica. The clunky black shoes definitely looked like Kenneth Cole or someone knocking off Kenneth Cole. Man, I thought, I really have to stop thinking like a clothier. Either that or turn gay. Nah, recurrent failures with women were too much a part of my identity. I couldn't give that up.

I definitely had to get the store out of my head. I never wanted to work for Kindler's to begin with. Desperate to find the right mindset for the interview, I tried to recall which of those fashion companies were publicly traded, only to realize that I hadn't the slightest clue about such things.

"Jake?" Bill called from across the lobby, confident and loud.

I was a little annoyed that he had interrupted my reverie. "Yes." I stood, extending my hand as I crossed to him.

He took my hand in a firm grip. “Bill Lee, good to meet you.” His voice was almost accentless. He spoke with a slight heaviness to his consonants that implied English was his second language, and yet still had a hint of a discernable Southern twang to his vowels.

“Same. Sorry I was late, I got stuck behind an accident near Biloxi.”

“No worries, appreciate you driving all this way. Come on back.” He didn’t apologize for making me wait.

I followed Bill and his giant shirt down a corridor off the lobby, the textured wallpaper absent any decoration, the smell of new carpeting just perceptible as the fresh-baked cookie aroma faded. When we arrived at Bill’s corner office, he took a seat in a large mesh-backed chair that accentuated his slight build.

“Have a seat.” He motioned to the leather armchairs opposite the broad desk too large for the office. “Nice suit, by the way.”

“Thanks.” I tried to keep my eyes on Bill and not the near infinite view of Lake Pontchartrain behind him. We were high enough to be able to make out the far shore, some twenty miles distant, but even from eight stories up the water looked depressingly gray.

Bill regained my attention. “We generally try and go with a dressy business casual here. It’s our way of distinguishing ourselves from the old downtown firms.”

“Got it.”

“Not that there’s anything wrong with a suit, if that’s how you’re more comfortable.”

“Hmm.” I really didn’t have a better answer than that.

Bill opened a manila folder in front of him and looked down at my resume. I noticed a few scribbles in red pen here and there. “So, Jake, tell me about yourself.”

I crossed my legs, for some reason not really caring whether or not I would be accentuating the pee stain, and suppressed the urge to make up a long story about how I was born an orphan with a deadbeat dad long-gone and a mother who died in childbirth, being adopted by a family of black sharecroppers, an adolescence spent preaching at tent revivals. Groucho could have pulled it off.

“I was born and raised in Mobile.” I let my accent loose, figuring a good ol’ boy image would be an asset. “My family owns a clothing store there, and I got an early training in sales working weekends and summers. I recently graduated from Sewanee with a BA in Philosophy, with a few business classes mixed in.” A few meaning two.

“Great. That’s great.” Bill took up a fountain pen and made a note on my resume. The gold-tipped pen in his slight hand accentuated just how much he appeared to be a kid playing grown-up. He looked back up from the file. “And what draws you towards a career as an investment advisor?”

Time to get into character, I thought. “Hmm. I guess I’d have to say the idea of self-determination, for one. I like what your website says about determining your own destiny. Also, and I know this sounds a little corny, but I really want a career that helps people, you know? I want to be able to look back and feel like I’ve done some good.” I smiled, trying to look self-effacing, knowing this response, though off-the-cuff, would score me some points. It even felt almost true, like some justification for such an otherwise uninteresting career.

Bill smiled and leaned back, obviously pleased. “That’s great. That’s exactly what we try to do. It’s all about helping people. If you take care of the client, everything else will fall into place.”

I was on a roll, now, method acting like I was lying to my parents, believing my own load of bull. “I’m glad to hear you say that. Corporate ethics are really important to me, and I’d really like to work someplace with, you know, a common mission. I want a company that believes in what I’m doing, and I want to believe in what I’m doing.” I sensed Bill backing off, and it was time to go in for the kill. “Of course, I want to be able to make money at it, too. If all I was worried about were good deeds, I’d be a social worker. But I want a long-term career that will one day provide for my kids the same opportunities I had growing up, maybe more.”

I saw the gleam in Bill’s eye and felt immediate remorse. I had just sold him a giant bill of goods. My own ethical philosophy was more like a “prevent defense” in college football. It’s about not screwing up, not giving up the big plays. I was less concerned about helping people than I was about no one, including me, getting hurt.

Bill leaned forward. “That’s great to hear you say. That’s exactly the combination of reasons that brought me to Southwest Mutual, and I can tell you I’ve been very pleased with my experience.”

I was tired of my own charade, so I jumped on the opportunity to get off the hot seat. “How did you come into the company?”

Bill leaned back again and crossed his legs, obviously pleased to talk about himself. “I’m originally from Houston. My parents run a dry cleaning business there. They work hard, really hard. I got into Rice on scholarship, had a really good experience,



and came out determined to make a more secure life for myself than my parents had. Maybe buy them a fancy car one day.”

“That’s great.” Like I cared.

“Southwest Mutual was interviewing on campus, and this was a few years ago, when they had just created this whole separate Investment Advisor division. I went, just to check it out, and when I heard about all of the opportunity in this market, I was sold. I started out in the Houston office, worked as an advisor for a few years, then moved up into management. Our office was one of the top-producing offices in the region, so about six months ago they asked me to move out here to open up New Orleans.”

I suppressed a yawn. “How has the expansion gone?”

“Once we got out here and took a close look at this particular market, we decided to go with slow growth. We’re trying to build our client base on the newer wealth, and we’re generating leads in that area as we speak. We have the capacity for a very large office, but we want to make sure that’s built on a strong foundation, not just playing it fast and loose to bring in the numbers. There’s really unlimited potential.”

I squinted, as if adjusting my vision would help whatever he had just said make sense.

“You look concerned.”

I tried to smile. “No, just listening. It really sounds like there’s a lot of opportunity here.”

“Absolutely, Jake, absolutely. Look, we don’t need to draw this out. I think you’d be a great fit for this company. You’re well-spoken, you’re intelligent, you’re mature, something we don’t always see in applicants fresh out of college. Most importantly, you

have what we like to call swagger. It's a matter of confidence. You come across as believing in yourself, and to be perfectly honest, in some places it might even be called cocky, but here, that attitude is essential. It's a matter of pride, and drive, and a determination to succeed. Clients see that in us and trust us."

I could feel myself start to blush a little. I hated flattery. Not that he was on the mark with his assessment, but I was flattered that my clever ruse had worked. I so wanted him to pull out a contract just to be able to go through the clauses and tear them out like Chico and Groucho in *A Night at the Opera*. All that would be left would be the sanity clause. Then I could go all Chico and say "you can't-uh fool-uh me, there is no Sanity Clause." Then Bill would look at me blankly, and I'd have to say "Get it? Because to Chico, Sanity Clause is how he would say Santa Claus?"

"So, are you interested?" Bill asked.

"Absolutely. Show me where to sign." Come on, I thought, pull out a contract, pull out a contract.

Bill chuckled. "If it was entirely up to me, I would. We're not quite there yet. The company requires you to take a compatibility quiz. Would you mind stopping by the independent testing service after this? It takes about forty-five minutes, and it's on your way out of town."

"Sure, no trouble."

I sat behind the wheel of the Scout in the parking lot, in plain view of the scurrying workers on the other side of the test center's glass front. I was debating whether or not to go in. On the one hand, I had been totally fake for the entire interview. On the

other hand, this was basically a sales job, and I had done a damn fine job of that on Bill. Maybe I was cut out for this career. I tried to imagine myself working the phones, glad-handing clients, feigning interest in the plight of retirement funds and market trends. It felt like an agonizingly slow death to choose. I looked at my watch. One o'clock. I was hungry. Screw it. No, wait, I needed to go in. I couldn't let a momentary decision shut down a long term prospect. I mean, what the hell else was I going to do, go work for a New York fashion house? Help develop newer, preppier lines of seersucker? I started to open the door. I put my foot on the ground. The heat seeped into the car. No, go with my gut. I pulled my foot back in, shut the door, and turned the key.

## 16

In the dream, I was having sex with Christy and slowly came to realize that she was the man and I was the woman. Not only that, but she was wearing a grease paint mustache. I was lying in bed, half-asleep, half-awake, trying to reassure myself that the dream was perfectly normal, when the phone rang.

“Hello?” I surprised myself with how alert my voice sounded, excited to get my mind off of the dream.

“Good, you’re awake,” Dad said. “You want to come in for a few hours, make a few bucks?”

I thought of the twenty-two dollars in my wallet and the thirty-seven dollars remaining in my checking account. “I’m open to doing some consulting work.”

“Great,” he said. “I need you to consult your ass up to the storeroom and make room in the overstock for the back-to-school shipments. I don’t want one of the floor guys getting all sweaty.”

“Seventy-five bucks, three hours max?” I asked.

“That’s one idea,” Dad said. “Or how about seven and a half an hour, like I always pay you, and you work until the job is done?”

This adult thing really wasn’t turning out like I planned. “C’mon, Dad, I have a college degree.”

“You’re right. Seven-seventy-five it is. I’ll give you an hour to shower and shave and get down here, then maybe you could get done by six.”

I really had nothing better to do. “Hour and a half so I can eat breakfast?”

“You’ve really got me over a barrel, here, Trump. Fine, I give in. Hour and a half. But don’t finish off the bagels.”

The storeroom was an oven. I had worn an oxford and tie down to the store, just in case, but I immediately took them off and hung them on a spare hanger amongst the zipper-bagged suits. I paused to look at myself in a mirror, my arms not quite bulging from beneath the too-short sleeves of my white undershirt. I tried a couple of push-ups, but it was too hot. Standing, I assessed the room. Piles and piles of half-folded clothes, some wrapped in clear plastic, others not so much. The air was filled with the kind of dust that makes snot turn black.

First I cleared everything off onto one side of the room. Then I swept, wiped down all the shelves, made new little notecards to label where everything went, and started replacing what went where. Once I’d done that best I could, I shifted everything onto the other side of the room and cleaned up the rest.

I had worked up a good sweat by that point, yet found the image in the mirror no more macho than before. This isn’t so bad, I thought. If I could keep myself busy like this, I could put up with working at the store. Then I remembered that it wasn’t my call anymore. I was going to be a stockbroker. Then I remembered that that wasn’t so much my call anymore, either, having no-showed on the compatibility quiz. I started to put everything back in its place. I sorted out-of-style and damaged merchandise into three boxes: one box for the sale rack, one for items to be returned to the wholesaler, one for the thrift shop. It was almost three o’clock when I finished.

I decided not to stop and tell Dad I was done. If he thought it was an all-day job, let him assume it took all day. I knew I wouldn't stick to that plan, perennial Jewish guilt forcing me to tell him the exact time I left before he cut me a check.

Slipping out the back door, I started to feel a little pissed off. I was good at this stuff. It wasn't rocket science, but I'd have liked to see him pull anyone else off the floor who would've gotten that work done in under three hours, and done it right. I knew the business. Even if it wasn't exactly fulfilling a wild dream, I would do a great job at the store. It should have been my call.

Before getting into the car, I slipped around to the gas station on the corner to use the pay phone. Emerging from beneath the canopy of live oaks, I felt the heat radiate up off the concrete of the gas station lot. I nodded through the plate glass to the Middle Eastern guy who owned the place. He and his wife had been there at least since I started working in the store as a teenager, even came by the store and charged things to an account, but I had never bothered to remember their names. That bugged me a little as I dug out fifty cents and dropped the coins in the slot. My sweat smudged the shiny metal of the phone.

It rang six times before Christy's voicemail picked up. I hung up and tried Christy's cell to the same result. I looked over and saw the Middle Eastern guy watching me from behind his neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper mustache. I smiled and exaggeratingly wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. He nodded and turned away, the smug bastard. Life must be easy when you're married and run a successful business. His life was set. I grinned at the realization that my own

uncertainties about Christy and my career had me envying the guy who ran the gas station.

Half-slamming the heavy receiver back in its cradle, I turned and started back to the Scout. I stared down at the ground as I walked, weary of meeting those same accusatory brown eyes again. I was certain he was watching me, wondering what I was doing wrong if I had to leave the store to use the phone.

I climbed into the Scout and fired up the ignition, letting the vents blow the hot air off the engine for a while before turning on the a/c. I couldn't think of anywhere to go. The house would be empty and quiet, and I knew too many people in town to wander around the mall. Then they'd ask what I was doing and I'd have to say absolutely nothing but Christy won't return my calls and I really can't face the big empty house. Running through the various R&B stations on the radio, I considered the beach. White expanse of sand, grey-blue sea, maybe pick up a detective novel at a drug store. I rolled down the window and spit. With my luck, I'd drive all the way to Pensacola and still run into somebody and have to explain why I was alone. I rolled the window back up.

Shifting into drive, I lurched out onto Government Street, making a Volvo stop short, and started away from the store towards Spanish Fort.

Someone was rocking on the porch of the shotgun cottage when I pulled up. There was no car in the driveway, so I pulled around the Toyota in front of the walkway and parked along the curb, only running the tire a few inches onto the grass.

Thomas or Teddy, whichever one it was, stood as I approached the walkway. I tried my best to figure out which. Too many months had passed. They had the same

athletic build, but Teddy ended up a few inches taller. It would be easier if they were side by side. I felt like a big white dummy.

I could see his face relax when he recognized me. My mind groped around frantically as I tried to do the same. I used to be able to tell them apart, but it had been a long time. This one had thickened a little, and wore sandals, khaki shorts and a polo, dress indiscernible from the guys at Raj's house. It was Thomas, law student-elect. But Willie had said Teddy was making good money, so he could easily be adopting the accoutrements of the upper middle class, and he could just as easily have thickened like Thomas had. No, too relaxed to be Teddy. Had to be Thomas. He spoke as soon as he clasped my hand.

“Thomas.”

“I know.” The skin of his palm felt dry and thick. A little guilty and wanting to make up for the lack of intimacy Thomas's need to introduce himself implied, I pulled him in for a quick half hug. “It's good to see you.”

Thomas sat down and motioned to the other rocker. “Good to see you, man, it's been a while. Sorry 'bout that. I forgot you were one of the few who could always tell the difference. Teddy and his wife were up for graduation last week and everybody but Mom and Dad kept getting us confused. Man, you'd think we'd have outgrown that. I'm waiting on Mom and Dad now. Should be home any minute.”

I sat down in the familiar rocker. “Locked out?”

“Naw.” He dug a set of keys out of his pocket and waved them. “But I just got back in town. I don't know, feels like I'd be intruding. They're supposed to be here soon. I'm a little early.”



I smiled and nodded. A lawn mower started up in the distance. Why were people always working on their lawns around here?

Thankfully Thomas spoke again. “Hey, congratulations on your graduation. Four years and done, pretty good. Wish I was sharp enough to do the same.”

I remembered what Willie had said about the cold storage job. “Well, you know, I, uh” I thought about saying something cocky, just as a joke, but aborted. “I, uh, hear congratulations in order for you, too. Not just graduating, but you got that scholarship you wanted at Southern. That’s impressive.”

Thomas looked off at a bumblebee buzzing around the edge of the porch. “Yeah. Mom’s pretty happy about that.” He sounded deflated. “So you finally got a car. Looks like a junker. I like it.”

“Whatever, Toyota-boy, we can’t all be sensible.” I hunched forward. We were falling into our old rhythms. “Back to the law school thing. You don’t seem thrilled.”

He leaned back and rocked a few times. The bumblebee buzzed around his head, but he ignored it and after a few passes it went away. Thomas’s head tilted back, I saw his adam’s apple bob beneath his razor-bumped skin. He didn’t lift his head when he spoke again.

“I am, Jake, I am thrilled. It’s a great opportunity. Everything I ever said I wanted.”

“Gee, Teddy, you’re bowling me over with your enthusiasm.” I realized immediately that I had called him by the wrong name. I decided to ignore the blunder and hope he wouldn’t notice it.

“It isn’t so bad, really. I mean, I’m not thrilled with the idea of being a lawyer, but I can’t think of anything else. It’s not like I can tell my parents I feel like bouncing around a year or two, waiting tables while I figure something out. I owe them more than that.”

I had no argument, so I dug my gum out of my pocket and offered him a stick. He passed, and I tried to think of what Groucho would say in a moment like this. I had nothing.

“I got nothing, Thomas. I don’t know what I would do in your spot. You could always disappoint Willie and Ida.”

He turned his head to me and rolled his eyes.

“Or not.”

“Well, tell me this,” he said. “What are you doing now? You going to work at the store?”

I had been afraid of that question. “No, I, uh . . .”

“See, you had the courage to stand up on your own, try and figure things out. What are you going to do?”

“My dad can’t afford to take me on.” It felt nice to not put up any kind of a false front for once. I hadn’t told Christy that money had been a factor. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

He shifted around towards me. “I’m sorry, man, here I am dumping and—“

“No, it’s all right. I went on an interview with a brokerage firm in New Orleans yesterday. Of course, after that I . . .”

Just then, Uncle Willie's little red pickup turned the corner. Thomas and I both stood.

He turned to me. "Look, Jake, if we can just keep this between us."

"Same here."

We touched fists like we used to. We even used to do it between each inning when my St. Andrew's team played his Spanish Fort team in baseball. High school seemed like a lifetime ago.

I had finished helping Thomas and Willie unload the Toyota while Ida made dinner. Thomas said he had sold what meager furniture he had in Birmingham, and was going to save up for the summer, working odd jobs with Willie, so he could buy new things when he got to Baton Rouge.

"I tell you, Jake," he said, handing me the second-to-last box, "this'll be my first summer back here. I'm kind of excited."

I took the box from him. "It'll be fun. You should come into town when you can. Maybe we can crash the golf course at the country club." I felt a light smack on the back of my head.

"Don't even think of trying to get my boy in trouble just because you're an old hand at posting bail, now." Willie's voice came from behind me. "You two look like you got this covered. I'm going to go try and hide the lemonade from that woman."

"Thanks, Dad."

"But, Uncle Willie, you know I like Aunt Ida's lemonade."

Willie gave me a brief, mean stare. “The way you lie it’s a wonder you haven’t spent any time on the inside yourself.”

We set the last boxes down in Thomas and Teddy’s old room, a clutter of sports paraphernalia and books. Thomas opened up a box, dug around in it, then looked in another. Finally, he found what he was looking for and pulled out his worn chestnut-colored baseball glove. He took the rubber band from around it and a baseball fell to the floor with a thud.

I picked up the ball. “I take it you never made the team at UAB?”

“That’s funny.” He took the ball from me. “You want to see if we can find Teddy’s glove?”

“I got mine in the back of my truck.”

Out on the street, we started out about thirty feet apart but slowly moved back. I’d fling the baseball as hard and accurately as I could, then Thomas would catch it, pretending it didn’t hurt his hand, and fling it back. He had never been accurate, but he could throw hard. I tried to catch it in the webbing as often as possible, but it hit the ball of my hand a couple of times and stung like hell. Once we got about eighty feet apart, I found myself standing right next to our cars. I was watching the ball, but out of the corner of my eye I caught Thomas’s face as I leaned over the hood of the Toyota to catch one of his throws before it went into the windshield. I was fully extended, so the force of the throw banged my elbow against the glass.

“Ow.”

“You all right, man?” Thomas hollered from down the street.

“Ow.” I nodded.

“Sorry about that.”

“You want to switch sides?” he offered. The street was empty down by where Thomas was standing.

“You’re that willing to admit you suck?”

“Naw, man, I’m that willing to admit you can’t handle the heat I’m sending.”

We jogged towards each other and touched fists when we crossed. I spun my already sore arm around a few times before extracting the ball from the glove, hoping he hadn’t notice that I had cut the distance back. When I did throw, I was careful to try and keep it on the opposite side of the street from our cars.

“Say, Jake, you know what’s haunted me every time I’ve put on this glove since high school?”

“What’s that?”

“The rumor.”

“What rumor?” I knew what rumor. Damn, the ball stung.

“About Teddy making him and me being on the team a package deal.”

The ball landed on the sidewalk to my left, just ahead of my glove. It started skipping down the walk, and I had to chase it down.

“Jackass,” I hollered back between breaths as I walked the ball back closer. “Even if that were true, they wouldn’t have started you. You had a quick glove.” I flung the ball back.

He caught it without having to move his feet. “And nothing else.”

“You’re forgetting, Thomas. Spanish Fort sucked.”

He threw the ball. “Oh, yeah. I forgot.” He smiled as I turned around to chase after his overthrow.

About a dozen throws after I was ready to quit, Thomas decided he’d had enough. We entered the house to the deceptive smells of Ida’s cooking. Thomas looked at me over his shoulder. “What do you think tonight? Overcooked or undercooked?”

“Don’t plan on waiting around to find out.”

We walked into the kitchen, and Thomas sneaked up on Ida, who was tending to something on the stove, and gave her a kiss on the cheek. She exaggerated being surprised, even jumping a little.

“Boy, you know my nerves can’t take that.”

“Sorry, Mom. Can’t help myself. How long until dinner?”

“Half hour, forty minutes.”

“Mind terribly if Jake and I run and get custard?”

She turned. “Why don’t y’all just set out on the porch and have some lemonade. Custard’ll spoil your dinner.”

She had obviously assumed I would be staying. I tried to think of a way around it.

“Mom,” Thomas half-sang, “I’ve been hurting for custard ever since Christmas. I promise to clean my plate.”

“I suppose it’s all right.”

I stepped forward and kissed Ida’s cheek. “I’m going to take my car and leave from there.” I couldn’t glance at my watch and name a time to be home for dinner, so I blurted out the first thing to come to mind. “I got to get back for a date.”

Ida looked me up and down. “That Burroughs girl is going to get you in real trouble, and then she’s going to have to answer to me.”

Teddy and I parked next to each other at the frozen custard stand.

“You and Christy, huh? That’s a long time coming.”

I blushed. “It’s not a big deal.”

“I always told you she dug you.”

I remembered another reason Thomas and I were friends. “Yeah, but it’s kind of weird. She’s been through a rough patch, and she and Clay broke up. I don’t know. It all feels kind of tenuous.”

We got in line behind a fat, sunburned family on their way back upcountry from the beach. The mother held a toddler of indeterminate gender in her arms and read the flavor menu aloud while two boys of about eight and ten bickered and slapped at each other. The dad, hidden behind giant dark glasses, just smiled. I wondered if he was drunk.

Thomas took off his sunglasses and shielded his eyes with his hand. “Tenuous because she’s so screwed up, because you lack any emotional depth, or both?”

I looked down and toed the white shells at my feet. I knew he was right, but I didn’t like that he said it aloud. I guess I liked that he felt he could say it aloud. “I don’t know. I like her, I do. Something just doesn’t feel quite right. I can’t get comfortable, you know? And she’s talking about the two of us moving to New Orleans together.”

We shuffled forward with the line.

“Tell me about it. My girlfriend turned down getting a Masters in Nursing at UAB to go to some no-name school in Baton Rouge.”

“Ya’ll going to live together?” I stepped forward and ordered from the pimply teenage girl at the window. “Chocolate cone with nuts.”

She nodded, wiping her hands on her dirty blue apron, and set about fetching my custard.

“No, none of our parents would go for that. Her dad’s got some cash, so he’s setting her up with someplace nice. I’m going to find something cheap for me. I figure I’ll be spending all my time at her place or in the library.”

“Fair enough.” I handed the girl two bucks and waved off the change. “How long you been going out?”

“Eight months. This is the one I was so excited about at Christmas.” He turned to custard girl. “I’ll have the same. What about you and Christy?”

“Three weeks. But you know, there’s history.”

He chuckled. “Sure, sure.”

Custard girl stood with her hand on her hip, waiting for Thomas to fish the money out of his pocket. He came up with a crumpled twenty after a moment.

The girl gave Thomas some bills, then poured a few dollars change into his hand sheepishly. We started back towards our cars.

“We should spend some time at the JCC this week,” I said. “See if we can’t sneak onto a softball team.”

“Yeah. Hey, we should go to the beach, too. I need to soak up some saltwater. Been too long inland,” he said.

“Tell me about it. I’ll give you a call.”

We touched fists and went our separate ways.



## 17

I stared at the kitchen phone while I sipped my coffee. The newspaper was spread out in front of me, and I had been trying to read about the oppression of some underclass in Haiti or Detroit or somewhere like that, but the phone was taunting me.

Dad didn't need me at the store, I had several resumes out across the Gulf South and no fresh leads, and Christy hadn't returned my calls in three days. I was ignoring Bill Lee's e-mails.

It's over, I told myself. You knew she was going to ditch you. It was only a matter of time. You didn't really want to move to New Orleans and play house with her did you? She'd drag you to parties you'd hate, pushing you forward into a thousand social deaths. She'd wheedle out every last bit of attention you have to give, needy as she is. And she'd be forever teetering on the edge, an extra drink or a snort away from trying to drive another car off another pier. With your luck she'd use the Scout.

The phone refused to ring. Ten-thirty. She was always up by now. Margaret wouldn't let her sleep past ten. Four damn days. Ninety-six hours. I had tried to turn to my Brothers Marx for support, but the bastards felt hollow. Watching *Duck Soup* the other night, I had realized for the first time that they all looked alike. Different wigs, different get-ups, but they were all the same: short, big-nosed, bug-eyed and skinny. Ugly curs, down to the man.

I flipped to the classifieds, skimming down the column for new ads. I was on autopilot. Nothing, at least nothing I noticed. If she called I could get this over with.

The phone returned my baleful stare, the beige plastic son of a bitch. I switched to the Sports section. The Braves had lost. I closed my eyes and tried to reel off their new

pitching rotation and failed. I hadn't been following them. I not only couldn't remember who was on the injured reserved, I couldn't nail down what trades they had made during spring training.

I took another sip from my coffee, but it had gone cold. I couldn't sit still anymore. I stood up and walked out the back door in a t-shirt, gym shorts and sheepskin slippers. By the time I reached the end of the driveway I realized that I was being a child. I turned around and went back inside, then up to my room.

The shower felt comforting at first. Warm and engulfing, soothing. I was already fully lathered when I was overcome with a sudden need to get the hell out. I couldn't rinse the soap off fast enough. Dry, I put on a pair of khakis and a t-shirt. Then I realized I was overdressed in khakis and switched to board shorts and flip flops. A more casual approach would make the stopover seem less psychotic.

I had to have been imagining all of this. Margaret had to have been keeping her busy, away from the phone. Lunches at the club, tennis games, stuff like that. Going over would just ease my conscience, I thought. I could say hello, we could make some plans for the weekend. Maybe I could scam some money out of my parents and take her out to Destin for the Fourth of July. We could stay in a cheap motel, spend all day on the beach, sneak over to a nice resort for drinks and fireworks in the evening. That was a plan. I was just going over to see if she wanted to go to Destin. I made it a few steps out the front door and into the blinding June sun before going back inside to get sunglasses.

I was sweaty by the time I made it to Christy's house and had to use the hem of my shirt to wipe down my forehead and upper lip. Margaret's white Lexus was in the driveway. I crossed my fingers, hoping Christy had dropped her off somewhere so she

could use the car. I plastered on my best casual grin as I hopped up the steps, removed my shades and knocked on the door.

The cool air hit right away, and I had to squint and blink a few times to adjust to the dimmer light inside. When I could distinguish the features on the face, I realized Margaret had answered the door, not Christy.

“Come in, Jake.”

I followed, not sure what was different about her, immediately feeling like an idiot when I realized this was the first time in fourteen years I had seen her with her hair down. The over-dyed, frail tresses rested stiffly against the shoulders of the tailored button down shirt, her hair refusing to sway much like the phone had refused to ring. I tried to will the hair to move, but the hair and the phone seemed to be in league with each other.

“How’ve you been?” I asked, a little too late considering I had entered the house and followed her halfway back to the kitchen before uttering a word.

“To be perfectly honest, sweetie, I’ve been better. Would you like some coffee?” She motioned to the kitchen table and I took a seat.

“Sure. Um, is Christy up yet?”

Margaret took the insulated carafe from the coffeemaker and refilled her delicate teacup before pulling down a heftier mug for me. “She spent the night at a friend’s house last night. How do you take your coffee?”

Friend? Christy didn’t have any friends. Other women hated her. “Black, please.” What the hell was I still doing here?

Margaret set the mug down in front of me. “It’s coffee and chicory. Have you had that before?”

“Not that I know of, but I’m sure it’s good.” I slurped a sip, conscious of how loud I was. I scalded my tongue and the bitter, syrupy liquid almost made me wretch. “I like that. Do you get it here?”

“They have it at the Winn-Dixie, but I usually stock up when I go to New Orleans. It’s cheaper there.” Her hair fell across her face and she brushed it back. She seemed younger, softer with her hair down, or at least would’ve without the bags beneath her eyes that her makeup couldn’t cover.

I tried to tell myself that everything was on the up and up, that Margaret was just feeling particularly friendly, perhaps a little lonely. She couldn’t have been hiding anything. “Whose house did Christy stay at?” My voice sounded surprisingly cold to me, too obviously disbelieving.

Margaret looked down for a moment, then took both hands and pulled her hair back into its customary ponytail. She held it back with her left hand while her other hand rooted around in her jeans for something to keep it in place. “Screw it,” she said after a moment, letting her hair drop back down and slumping in her chair.

“She’s back in St. Jude’s, Jake, and she’s goddamned lucky she’s there.”

I was immediately relieved, then remorseful for the small smile that may or may not have crept onto my lips. She wasn’t ditching me, she was just hospitalized. This was good. My girlfriend being in the psych ward was a good thing.

“I’m so sorry,” I said and reached over and patted Margaret’s arm. Hey, look at me, I thought. I’m being a sensitive, caring adult. “What happened?”

Margaret stood and went to refill her coffee. When she got to the counter, she looked down and saw that it was still full, so she left the carafe and the teacup on the counter and sat back down. “Jake.” She stared into her clasped hands, resting on the table. “I probably haven’t been as nice to you as I could’ve been. Believe it or not, I saw you as her best hope.”

I couldn’t believe she was going to bullshit me at a time like this. And what was with the past tense? And when did she stop calling me Jacob?

“I may have resented you a little for that, and I’m sorry. I just wasn’t thrilled that the only person she seemed to want to be around these last few weeks was you. Wait. I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with you, but just that she would hardly speak a word to Ed or myself.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I wasn’t even sure what she was trying to say. “What happened? How’d she end up back in?”

“She went with Clay and Henry to their hearing the day before yesterday, just to be there when they pled. A friend of Ed’s is handling it.”

I had forgotten about the hearing. Christy had said something about wanting me to go with her, but she was supposed to call with details and never did.

“Christy was caught by a sheriff’s deputy using cocaine in the ladies room.”

I realized where Christy had learned her matter-of-fact way of thumping down big revelations. My mind drifted away and I imagined the whole scene.

*Henry and a faceless thirty-something lawyer sit next to Christy on the long pine bench of a courthouse, listening to some drawling judge lecture a single mother on responsibility, awaiting their turn.*

*Christy whispers something to Henry, next to her, who just gives her a stern look. "Not here," he mouths, or maybe "No, we quit."*

*She nudges him, and he stares straight forward. She nudges him again, but to no avail.*

*"Fine, you're right. I don't know what I was thinking," she whispers, crossing her arms and slumping against the back of the bench. The judge continues his lecture, but Christy gets fidgety. She shifts back and forth in her seat. She uncrosses her arms and drums her fingers against her knees.*

*Just then, Clay returns from the bathroom, smiling and manic. He wedges himself down on the bench between Henry and Christy, puts his arms around their shoulders.*

*Henry recognizes the look in his eyes first. "You didn't. Not here."*

*Clay beams.*

*Christy bites her lip, unsure. Her angels and demons have donned their tennis togs and are nearing the end of a long set.*

*Clay reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small brown vial. Cupping it in the palm of his hand, he first brings it close to Christy's face so she can see what it is. Then he "accidentally" drops it, and it falls down the front of her blouse.*

*Christy squeals and tries to grab after it, but it's down there. Realizing she's drawn attention to herself, she gives Clay a cold glare then gets up to go to the ladies' room and fish it out. The faceless lawyer stares blankly ahead, oblivious.*

*Christy enters the ladies room, heels clacking on the black and white checkerboard tile. One of the faucets drips loudly into an old pedestal sink. All of the fixtures are old, like out of some mob movie. The sinks each have separate cold and hot*

*water faucets, and the drips from the far one have long ago stained their trail in the basin yellow.*

*Christy starts to reach into her shirt, then, glancing at the door, thinks better of it. She hears voices approaching and ducks into one of the stalls, actually separate little rooms with full length doors, the toilet tanks suspended high on the walls. She turns and tries to lock the stall door, but the tumbler is empty—no lock.*

*She quickly unbuttons a few buttons on her blouse, fishes around a little, then comes up with the brown glass vial. She's just extracted it and holding it up in the air when the door opens. Christy freezes.*

*The heavysset female bailiff is actually looking back over her shoulder, talking to someone else in the room. "Man, I got to ten-200 like you would not believe."*

*Christy's unable to move.*

*The guard turns, her expression quickly changing. She pulls her gun and Christy drops the vial to the floor, the brown glass and remaining coke scattering across the checkerboard tile.*

I put my head in my hands. "I'm sorry, Margaret. If I had been there, Clay couldn't have done this to her. He wouldn't've gotten close enough to give it to her."

She shook my forearm. "What makes you think Clay gave it to her? The boys were going straight from court to get drug-tested."

"But she wouldn't've . . ."

"Sweetie, you're in more denial than Ed. Of course she would've. I don't know if she ever stopped, convincing fabricator that she is."

I sat back in my chair. Consoling me seemed to give Margaret more strength, and she sat erect now.

“Need I remind you, they got her for using, not just possession.”

I rewound the story in my head to the moment Christy fished the vial out of her blouse. I still didn't buy the notion that she could've gotten it anywhere other than from Clay.

*Christy stares at the little brown vial. The angel-demon Davis Cup inside her has reached a frenzy. It's the final game of the final set of the final match, and John McEnroe, playing for the devils—no, Boris Becker, playing for the devils, Aryan bastard that he is, has the ad over McEnroe, improbable leader of the angel team. He's running poor Mac up and down the main court of Tanglewood Country Club, and the jackals are all up in the stands, cheering Becker on and sloshing around their gin and tonics. A jackal removes a platinum skull-and-crossbones cufflink and pelts it at McEnroe, hitting him atop his skull. He glances up, slowing for a half-step, which is all Becker needs to nail a shot to the back corner. McEnroe dives and misses.*

*A small grin seeps across Christy's face. Just this one time, she thinks, and then I'll be good. This final good-bye to the old me, and then I move on and be with Jake and become the person he wants me to be.*

*She sits down on the toilet and unscrews the top to the vial. She pauses, but only for a second, while Becker accepts the trophy and McEnroe argues with the club board. Making a fist with her right hand, she leaves her pinky extended and dips it into the open vial, coming out with a tiny mound of the white powder.*



*She raises the powder to her slightly upturned nose, her exhaling breath carrying away only a few granules. Just as she pauses, questioning what in the hell she's doing, the guard with the full bowels opens the door. In reaction, Christy sharply inhales, taking in the coke.*

I swallowed and looked down at my coffee. "I should have been there. Why didn't she call me like she was supposed to?"

Margaret stood as if remembering something, strode across the kitchen, and extracted a hair clip from a wicker basket filled with junk mail. Holding the clip in her teeth, she pulled back the stiff yellow hair and then cinched it in place. "Jake, honey, I don't know if you've heard, but Big Clay, Clay's daddy, his cancer's come back, and this is a rough time for their whole family. Clay and Christy have a lot of history, sweetie, whether you and I like it or not."

I wished she would answer my question. I stood. "I'm going to see her."

"I don't think that's a good idea, Jake. I wasn't even supposed to tell you where she is." Margaret was looking out the window.

I was certain she was on my side.

She sat down and motioned for me to do the same. Seeing I had no intention of doing so, she shrugged. "Really, sweetie, just give her a little time. Let's give her a chance to try and kick this thing, then she and you and Clay can hash this all out. Let's just skip any unneeded drama for now."

## 18

I had driven by St. Jude's ivy-covered walls countless times, never tempted to stop but always curious about what went on inside. The walled part of the hospital took up a large city block, with a few smaller buildings across the street marked by "outpatient clinic" signs. Those signs taunted me as I circled the block in the Scout. I imagined that I was looking for a secret way inside, though that was totally unnecessary. An open gate and another sign clearly indicated room for visitor parking inside the compound. Finally turning in, I found the lot nearly full, mostly with luxury cars and soccer mom SUVs.

I took my time walking up to the large red-brick main building, going over the events at the courthouse again as I had imagined them. A crow cawed loudly, lording his gloom over the verdant courtyard, and I longed for a pellet gun. Beneath the live oaks, I saw three or four teenagers with their parents, all dressed like Visitors' Day at St. Andrew's or Parents' Weekend at Sewanee, though perhaps with more piercings and tattoos. A few couples wandered around as well, the patients indiscernible from their visiting spouses, but all wandering the yard like they were afraid to quit moving.

The automatic doors led me into a lobby like that of an ordinary hospital, where a pleasant-enough looking nurse-type sat behind a reception desk. Signs offered the visiting hours, ten to twelve, thirty minutes left, and an admonishment against bringing drugs, alcohol or weapons onto the premises. No wonder no one's shot the crow, I thought to myself. They've posted a stern warning against firearms.

I plastered on a smile. "Hi. I'm here to see Christine Burroughs." Having changed into khakis and a polo, I had to have looked just as respectable as the concerned parents out in the courtyard.

The nurse-type's pink scrubs rustled as she looked up from her crossword and apparently appraised the level of respect I should be accorded. "Just a second, let me see." She clicked on the keyboard for a moment. "Burroughs, right? Burroughs, Burroughs. Here she is, baby, room 412. Fourth floor's an open ward, she can see you, but that's ladies only. I'll have to call her down here. What's your name?"

I was struck by a sinking feeling that Christy wouldn't want to see me, that she would be too ashamed. I couldn't let that happen. I wasn't going to let her ditch me like that. Face to face, we figure it out. Regardless of what would happen between the two of us as a couple, I'd stand by her and make her quit her addiction.

"Hugo Hackenbush," I told the nurse-type, and spelled it. "Tell her Dr. Hackenbush is here to see her. I'm a friend of the family. Hey, while I'm waiting, could I use y'all's restroom?"

"Sure, 'Doctor,'" she said skeptically as she picked up the phone, "right down the hall. Hit the elevators and you've gone too far."

I nodded and slipped down the corridor, striding past the restrooms. I hit the button for the elevator, and was waiting nervously, snapping my fingers at my sides, when I noticed yet another sign: "Be efficient. When traveling one floor up or two floors down, use the stairwell."

I am nothing if not efficient, I thought to myself, more than efficient, and ducked into the door marked stairs. I bounded up the cement steps three at a time. On the fourth floor landing, a young overweight woman in sweats sat huddled, smoking a cigarette.

She looked up at me. "I'm sorry, I'll put it out. Am I in trouble?"

I quelled a smile. She must have thought I had some kind of authority. Or she was nuts. Or both. I made my best concerned face and shook my head, leaving it to her to decide whether I was being disdainful or telling her no, she wasn't in trouble. I entered the door to the fourth floor. The vinyl tile floors and pale blue walls were uninspiring, but at least the hall appeared empty. I could hear some movement down at a nurse's station, but the coast appeared clear. I walked confidently to the end of the corridor and around the corner, looping almost all the way back around to the nurses before I found room 412. I knocked on the wood grain finish of the broad door. No answer. I heard some muffled sounds inside, and the phone ringing. I was struck by the mental image of Christy having overdosed on laxatives or something, writhing around on the floor in horrible pain but unable to reach the phone. I slowly opened the door, trying to focus on the goings on in the dark room.

The light from the open door illuminated a figure on the bed, naked from the waist down, thrusting, scrawny ass so pale it was almost blue, arms suspending the frat party t-shirt-clad torso a foot or so above the mattress. Clay turned his head, squinting in the light.

Before I knew what I was doing, my hand groped along the wall and found a light switch. Fluorescent beams filled the room, and I saw Christy beneath him, entirely naked, her small breasts appearing almost nonexistent, her face contorted in that familiar mid-coitus grimace.

She opened her eyes and looked at me. "Get the fuck out!"

\* \* \*

I had lost my sunglasses somewhere along the way, and I squinted against the afternoon sun. My hands stung with every contact. Each time the hard rubber ball struck the aluminum bat, sometimes a little high, sometimes a little low, usually too far inside from the sweet spot, the impact would reverberate up through the bat to my hands. I hadn't brought batting gloves with me, but I had quarters. Three rolls. Ninety minutes in, and I still had plenty left.

I swung my tired arms around, relying more on momentum than strength at this point, finally nailing one right. The black netting caught the ball before it could make for the Gulf and sent it back down to the sloping cement, where it bounced a few times before rolling into the center bin to be recycled back through the machine.

I loved batting cages, but I hadn't been back to one since I was a kid. Somehow, though, it seemed the perfect thing right now. Eye on the ball. Feet set. Don't choke up too much. Step into the swing. My arms were beginning to shift from sore to numb, but I didn't want to stop. I dinged off another foul. Then another. All I had to do was keep my eye on the ball, I told myself. Relax. You don't need to think about how to swing, just swing. My bat speed was definitely slowing, but I was making better contact with the ball. Nailing the sweet spot more and more. Nearly two hours in and I was finally finding my groove.

Don't think about what you're doing, just watch the ball. Follow your instincts. Eye on the ball. Ding. That's it, eye on the ball. Ding.

I slid *A Night at the Opera* into the ancient VCR, turned the sound off, kicked off my shoes and flopped down on the couch. My eyelids got heavy, slowly falling, but just

as soon as they did the image of Christy and Clay came back to me. The first few times, I managed to wake myself back up, but then I was trapped. They were going at it, his pale ass pumping, her legs bent impossibly back, both of their faces mutating through various contortions that no longer seemed human, a constant yapping, barking and laughing somewhere in the background. I turned and tried to leave the room but the door was gone. And I knew it was a dream, but I couldn't make myself wake up, and Clay kept pumping, and Christy was moaning, and somewhere the jackals were yapping, barking and laughing, and I couldn't wake up, and then I heard a doorbell and a knocking.

Everything was dark. The doorbell again. I opened my eyes. I was sweating. Another knock. My mouth tasted like I had been asleep for hours, but judging from the fact that Groucho and the boys were still in Italy, it hadn't been more than ten or fifteen minutes.

By the time I made it to the front door, Henry had already started back to his SUV, parked at the curb with the engine running. Some curly-haired guy sat in the passenger seat, primping in the vanity mirror. The passenger looked like the type of guy who always stank of too much cologne and went after women with rail-thin bodies and crooked teeth. I didn't call after Henry, just walked out and sat down on the front step. The sky was still blinding.

As Henry opened the car door, his friend motioned back to me, and Henry turned around and jogged up the steps. "Hey, man, thought you weren't home." He offered his hand, but I ignored it. "You sleeping?"

"Yeah."

“You got pillow marks on your face.” He smiled, gave up on the handshake and sat down next to me. “I heard about this morning, man, I’m real sorry.”

“You weren’t the one fucking her.”

He laughed, then stifled it. “No, no I wasn’t. Clay feels like shit, believe me, he didn’t want this to happen.”

“I’m sure.”

“No, really, he was trying to stay away from her. He was. Then this shit with his dad started again, and she kept coming over to console him and stuff.”

“How long?”

“Week, ten days” he answered too quickly. “I mean, it’s been, uh, building for a week, and, uh.”

“So she was going back and forth between the two of us for a stretch. I guess I should have known that was coming.” I picked up a small stone by my feet and flung it down the walk. It skipped along and hit off one of Henry’s hubcaps. Curly looked up, then went back to fiddling with the radio. “It was just me and Clay, right?”

“Dude, you got to understand that Christy’s a messed up chick. I mean, I love her to death, but we’ve been trying forever to get her clean, and, like, without fail, she cheats on Clay like every other month with some random dude. You were a huge improvement. For a little bit there even Clay was hoping you could straighten her out.”

“That’s sweet. Really, it is. Hey, remind me how you got arrested again?”

“I know, we all do stupid shit. But Christy, man, Christy just doesn’t know limits. She has to do everything full bore, push it until it starts to really destroy her, and then push it past that point. You’ve known her longer than any of us. You know how she is.”

I flung another stone down the walk.

“Look man, a couple weeks before you got back to town, she even tried to kiss me.”

I looked at him, and he was grinning wide. “Why is that funny?” I asked, every last notion of my jealousy and mistrust for the last month confirmed.

“Dude, I’m gay.”

“Funny.”

“No, seriously. Homosexual. Pillow-biter. Butt pirate. Sword swallower.”

I examined the earnestness in his face and the dam finally broke, I started laughing so hard my stomach hurt, the kind of laughing where you have those long pauses, and you can’t catch your breath and you wheeze like a borscht-belt comedian with emphysema. I was a total, oblivious idiot. I should’ve been able to tell. Or is it worse, I thought, to think I should’ve been able to tell. My unfamiliarity with this sort of thing was laughably naïve to me.

“My lifestyle choice is funny to you?”

I finally reined myself in. “Let me guess, the kid in the car?”

“That’s Seth. We’ve been together a year and a half.”

I started laughing again. “Henry, that’s awesome.”

“Look, I didn’t tell you so you could shout it from the rooftops. I was going to see if you wanted to come out to the farm with us for the Fourth, and I didn’t want you to get weirded out. I mean, it’s not like a gay thing, just a family get together, a few friends. No Clay, no Christy. You need some open space. Jen McMann’ll be there. She totally digs you. You could get some rebound loving.”



For some inexplicable reason, I felt like I had seen daylight for the first time since I had woken up that morning. “No, thanks, man, I’ll have to pass.”

“I understand. You don’t have to be comfortable with it.” He looked off down the street, appearing genuinely hurt. “I have plenty of friends who don’t feel right seeing me and Seth together.”

“No, it’s not that. I’m not going to lie, it’d be weird, but that’s not it. I just have some things to figure out away from the old Mobile crowd.”

We both stood, and Henry offered his hand. I took it and pulled him in for a hug. “Thanks for coming by. Appreciate it.”

“Take care of yourself, Jake. Everything’ll be for the best.”

Stepping back, I could feel a tear starting to build in my eye and a slight shakiness I hadn’t known for many years. “Whatever.” I smiled and turned away. “Drive safe.”

## 19

I would probably do better if I called my dad, I thought. He would've known how to handle this guy, but I wasn't ready to face him. The only thing I had going for me was that it was the end of the day and this sleazebag wanted to go home.

I ground my feet into the puke colored shag carpeting and leaned forward, offering the grumpy old white guy my best half-grin. "I understand you have to make money off this thing, but you have to understand my position, too. I need to get up north and take care of my girlfriend's aunt's funeral and settle all her business up there. Every penny I had, that's over seven thousand dollars, went into this truck."

He furrowed his brow, reached back and scratched his brush cut, then leaned forward and spit brown tobacco juice into the paper cup in his left hand. "Son, she's a classic, I'll give you that, but I just don't know if I can sell her. How you expect me to dump seven, or hell, even six thousand on a truck I don't even know if I can sell."

I knew I couldn't bring myself to fake legitimate grief, so I was going with peripheral attachment thereof as my selling point. I took a piece of paper from him and pretended to work on some numbers with the pencil from behind my ear. In truth, I had put maybe a grand into the truck over its purchase price of twenty-two hundred. Based on the use I'd already gotten out of it, brief but glorious as it was, I would have taken half that. I crumpled up the paper and threw it away, then slumped back in the metal folding chair. I looked out the window to where Thomas was waiting, reading a book in the air-conditioned Toyota. We had decided not to make it look like we were ganging up on the guy. "I'm sorry," I said. "You have me over a barrel here. I love this truck, I hate to give

it up, but I'm willing to do this for her. I'm afraid what you're offering just won't cover it, though."

He motioned out to Thomas. "Can't you borrow some of the money you need?"

"I'm already taking that into account."

He spit again. "What did I say I'd give you?"

"Thirty-five hundred."

"And what do you need? I mean absolutely need?"

"If I borrow and beg for bus fare and my boss gives me a two-week advance? I think maybe I can get by on four. I'll be eating ramen for a while, and they'll probably cut off my phone, but that'd about cover it." I looked again out at Thomas, glad he couldn't hear this. Aunt Ida would have told me I'd better start praying for my soul. I steeled my resolve. This was a used car salesman. Odds were pretty good he was taking me. "No, forty-two hun—no, I think I can do it with four."

He ran his tongue between his teeth and bottom lip, scooping out the dip, and spit the whole wad into the cup. He sighed. "All right."

"All right?"

"You come back here and tell my partner and he'll kill me. I'm gon' have to give you five hundred out of my own pocket, keep it from him, but I can do four. We'll do the paper work for thirty-five, and that's what the check'll read, but I'll give you the difference in cash."

I started to feel bad. "Thank you, I mean it, but if this is going to break you . . ."

“I’ll be all right, son, but you just remember me when you and your friends need ve-hicles. I’ll give you some business cards, and you tell that country club set I can give ‘em an honest deal. You coming back down after y’all are done up there, ain’t you?”

“Soon as I’m able, sir, soon as I’m able”

\* \* \*

Thomas helped me carry the sea chest onto the train platform, almost falling when he blew out a flip-flop. He sat down on the bench and I sat on the sea chest, barely a few minutes ahead of the Amtrak Crescent. The sun had set and a cool front had moved in, so I took out a long-sleeved shirt and offered another one to Thomas. The mid-sixties felt frigid for Mobile summer.

He waved it off. “You talk to your parents yet?” he asked.

“They’d try and stop me, at least make me wait around a while. Or my dad would feel guilty and try and get me to come to the store.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“Right now it would,” I said. “I got to get the hell out of here.”

“All of this because of Christy?” He laughed.

I reached over and punched him on top the leg. Anyone else would have probably gotten it in the face. “That’s funny, really it is,” I said.

“Man, you know that’s what everyone’s going to say, all those jackals you’ve been talking about.”

“Screw ‘em.” The sun had just set. I took off my dollar store sunglasses and put on my wire rims so I could see the train when it came around the bend.

“You ever ask your parents about why they didn’t join the club?”

“Nope. Don’t care,” I said, folding my sunglasses and shoving them in my pocket.

“Liar,” Thomas said.

“Yep. Look, man, they paid for four years of a liberal arts education for me, right?”

“Yeah.”

“They had to’ve scrimped and saved for years for that, right?” The fact that Thomas had worked his way through school was not lost on me.

“Goddamned right.”

“So what do I care whether or not they wanted to use what was left, if any, of their hard-earned money to buy some snooty friends?”

“Does that mean you’re going to go inside and call them before you get on the train?”

“Hell, no.” I pulled my new prepaid cell phone from my pocket. “Not till we’re at least out of the state.”

“We?”

“I got enough to cover both of us for a while. You know you want to go. A couple of Lower Alabama boys take on the Big Apple. We’ll kick serious ass in bar fights. All we’ll have to do is drawl, and they’ll piss their pants.”

“Yeah, man, I’d love to go. But you know I can’t.”

“We’ll both disappoint our parents. It’ll be a communal activity. They can console each other.” I tried the half-smile that had worked on the car salesman. The train appeared in the distance and everyone on the platform started shifting around.

“It’s not the same, Jake. I got a girlfriend to think of.” He paused.

I nodded that it was okay.

“I got Carla to think of, and you know how much this all means to Willie and Ida.”

“They’d track me down and force feed me lemonade and raw chicken if I took you with me, wouldn’t they?” I said.

He chuckled. “I was really looking forward to running around with you this summer, Jake. We’re not going to lose touch this time, right?” He stood.

I stood and gave him a hug. Both of us were raised on Ida’s hugs and weren’t afraid to grip too tight. “No way in hell.”

Eldon was supposed to come find Jake if there wasn’t a group to walk home with. That was the rule. He was supposed to sit in the stands and watch. Jake always made sure to try and make Eldon feel like it wasn’t a bother. Everyone knew Eldon’s name and they tried to include him, letting him chase down balls and whatnot.

Eldon knew he wasn’t supposed to try and cross Springhill by himself. Jake’s parents had to work, but Eldon would stay at the Burroughs’ house and hang out with Margaret until someone came home. After the babysitter quit for full-time work, Margaret had insisted. All of Christy’s running around with high school friends had left her lonely.

Eldon had been the one to refuse, for whatever reason, to let Margaret pick him up from school. He said it made him feel like a baby. Jake always suspected it was because of the time his teacher had mistaken Margaret for his mother, but he had always kept that to himself.

For some reason that day, Eldon didn't wander over to baseball practice. He must've wanted to sit and wait and be sure there was no one to walk him across the street. School had been over for a full half hour when the high-schooler in the Explorer ran over him.

At first every day, and then with less and less frequency, I had to remind myself that he had no way of knowing Eldon was still sitting out there. Now, eight years later, I hoped Margaret had been able to do the same. It would have been perfectly ordinary for Eldon to come over to practice; Margaret had no reason to go looking for him.

I looked down at my clenched fists on the desk in front of me and realized that I had crumpled the photo. I tried to smooth it out the best I could. I took my bottled water and walked over to the window of the corporate apartment and opened it, letting in the oppressive Indian Summer heat. I had another ten days until the designer came back from Milan. This place would go to his personal assistant and I'd need to find my own apartment.

The city smelled foul, but I had already grown accustomed to that. I looked out the window and down at Bleecker Street. A mother, heavy set, Hispanic, pulled a small child by the hand through the crowd, against the flow of people. She was loaded down with shopping bags, and the kid kept looking every which way, but she held tight.

I closed my eyes and inhaled. I tried to remember the smell of the Gulf, but I only made myself cough. I opened my eyes and searched out the woman and child again. Both her arm and his were stretched out, and they both kept running into people, but they pushed forward. I watched them until they turned the corner and disappeared, defeating

the thrust of the masses that tried to hold them back. I took a sip of my water, then, shaking a haunting image from my mind, picked up the phone to return Christy's call.



## Vita

Brad Philipson was born in New Orleans, Louisiana on Bastille Day, 1975, the same day that President Gerald Ford was celebrating his 62<sup>nd</sup> birthday. After rigorous preparation at the Newcomb Nursery, he spent thirteen years at Isidore Newman School, graduating with little distinction and some degree of resentment. Due largely to the gracious recommendation of his 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, Philipson managed to gain entry into Washington & Lee University, where he distinguished himself far more in service to the community than in his class work. Thanks to the wonders of standardized testing and a few more nice letters, he earned admittance to, among other places, The College of William & Mary School of Law. After begging a year's deferment, Philipson drifted down to the Florida Keys, where he worked in car rental for six months before moving to Baton Rouge to wait tables and live in a friend's spare bedroom rent-free. Against his better judgment, he matriculated at William & Mary in the fall of 1998. Three restless semesters later, Philipson packed his things in a trailer and drove an '87 Chevy K5 Blazer as fast as he could to Texas, barely keeping ahead of the malaise that chased him. He found work as a financial advisor and managed to fake that pretty well for nearly two years before bailing to teach and pursue graduate studies. He taught at a rural public school in Florida for a year before attending an intensive one-year M.A. program in Creative Writing at Hollins University. He graduated in May 2003. The following fall, he returned home to New Orleans as the Board of Regents Fellow in the University of New Orleans Creative Writing program. He is a teacher at Metairie Park Country Day School, and hopes to complete his M.F.A. in May 2005.