

Spring 5-18-2012

Ugly Love

Kevin Kish
University of New Orleans, kkish@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kish, Kevin, "Ugly Love" (2012). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1453.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1453>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

Ugly Love

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing, Fiction

by

Kevin Kish

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2004

May, 2012

Dedication

For Eric

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to all my writing teachers over the past fifteen years: Tim Geautreaux, Jack Bedell, Joseph Boyden, Joanna Leake, and Fredrick Barton.

Also, thanks to the many friends who have indulged me with criticism and support, especially Sarah Joyce Clark and Lee Goodson.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Ghosts.....	1
Arrest.....	5
Adult Themes.....	12
Old Scratch.....	34
Drownings.....	55
Father's Day.....	79
The Name of the Disease.....	92
Ugly Love.....	106
The Fishing Trip.....	132
Vita.....	141

Introduction: Ghosts

My mother believes in ghosts. She talks to them. My younger brother, Eric, died in a car accident ten years ago at the age of twenty-two. A few months after that, I noticed the books on Mom's shelves were changing. Frayed, Wal-Mart-bought paperback copies of the latest bestsellers had been replaced with books on communicating with the dead. Matter-of-factly, Mom told me about trips she had taken, some out of state, to visit psychics. I was incredulous, but I kept my feelings to myself. She talked plainly about conversing with Eric and told me how he was doing. She told me about these conversations in words no different from the ones she used when relating conversations with my other, living brothers. I didn't believe her, but it made her happy-- or at least content. I wasn't going to take that away from her.

A few years ago, just as I started grad school in creative writing, my grandmother died. Unlike my brother's death, we saw hers coming for months. Cancer. It was almost too anticipated. Mom called me at work one morning, frantic, and told me that Maw-Maw, as I'd called her since I could talk, wouldn't survive the night. I drove the hour and a half from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, went to the hospital and said goodbye to my grandmother. She was frail, half the size of her usual, tiny self. She didn't completely recognize me, confused me with my other brothers. Sometimes she called me Eric. Mom saw more significance in this than I did. Maw-Maw survived another two weeks, long enough to make it home and die in her own bed. Mom handled it well. I suppose having months to prepare helped, but I also knew Mom wasn't finished talking to my grandmother. It turns out, at least to my mother, that Maw-Maw found another way to communicate with her, and ultimately, to my great surprise, with me.

Maw-Maw kept a handwritten, daily journal going back to 1939. Ten years before her death, she began the task of transferring the journals to her computer, an old Commodore or Atari system, using an obsolete diary program. Before she died, she emailed Mom some of these files; Mom tried to print them, but no modern word processor could make sense of the format. Some months after Maw-Maw's death, Mom called me, her voice quivering. The night before, she'd replaced the ink cartridge in her printer. It flashed, sputtered to life and printed on its own, spitting out page after page of Maw-Maw's journals. Mom was convinced Maw-Maw was printing from Heaven. I tried to rationalize it to Mom, reminding her of her attempts before Maw-Maw's death to print the files. The printer was out of ink, I said. The files likely set in RAM for months, waiting for that memory gate to reopen so they could pour out. Mom argued with me, said she had used the printer after that, said it was impossible, and yet there the journals were. I gave up trying to make sense of it to her. I don't think the truth really mattered.

I've often wondered where I came from. The person I am-- my personality, my interests, my talents and flaws—I didn't create those things out of whole cloth. The threads came from somewhere and led me somewhere else. Very little of who I am, of who anyone is, is unique. All stories have been told, and all we do, as writers, is retell them, we hope with a different, personal slant. People aren't very different.

Some of my origins are easy to discern. One can't look at a picture of my father, his father, or anyone on that side of the family without seeing my physical appearance: my height, eyes, and face. Beyond that, though, it's more difficult. Mom encouraged reading when I was younger, sent my brothers and me to the library during summer months, but they

didn't develop an interest in writing. My interest in words, stories, and language had always been a mystery to me until I looked at Maw-Maw's journals.

I knew she was a smart woman, not college educated but intelligent. I remember the walls of her office: covered in bookshelves, overflowing with books, journals, and papers. I can't look at the walls of my own office, also covered with shelves and books, and not think of my grandmother's walls.

Her journals are stories of her life and her family. She was a nun who secretly married my grandfather and was expelled when the secret was discovered. She chronicled his life also, telling of a musician's poor childhood, of making a violin out of a cigar box, of a French speaking child struggling to go to school in south Louisiana. The stories are rich, textured, and true.

I've only seen a glimpse of them; the hundreds of pages Mom printed constitute only a fraction of what is on the disks. I saw myself in them, however, and knew that as I struggled through grad school, as I continued to try to discover if I could write, that there was a precedent for what I was doing set in my family by a woman who did it for herself, her children, and her grandchildren, not caring about what teachers, editors, publishers, or workshops thought.

Ideas are like ghosts. We catch fleeting glimpses of them; they retreat, and we can spend the rest of our lives trying to describe and convey them. The stories in this collection, a small sliver of stories written over the past decade, are my attempts to capture those ideas. They come from everywhere: ransacked childhood memories, stories I read or heard that wouldn't go away, friends or relatives I didn't understand but wanted to. Many came to me

fully formed like gifts; others sat at the edge of my mind, daring me to catch and freeze them in words.

One more memory:

Twenty-five years ago at least, I was at Maw-Maw's home for a weekend visit during the summer. I had taken up stamp collecting after a representative from the post office visited my school. I was young, still impressionable, still had room in my head for others to shove ideas. Maw-Maw was delighted by this interest in stamps, having collected them herself for years. And like me, she was a pack-rat, never throwing anything away. She saved every envelope from every letter that had ever been sent to her over the past forty years. We went through those envelopes, found stamps that interested us, cut them out with scissors, and soaked them in water, letting the adhesive dissolve until the stamp floated limply to the top. We dried them upside down on plates and used stamp collecting tabs to tape them into albums. She normally kept the valuable ones for herself, but sometimes, if I protested enough, she'd give one to me.

I lost interest in stamps after that summer, got older, and seldom had reason to visit Maw-Maw outside of family functions. Before she died, she knew I was enrolling in grad school for creative writing, but I'm not sure what she made of it. I never talked to her about it. I don't think I ever had an adult conversation with her. The ghost of my childhood is the me she likely remembered at her death. I still have the stamp collection somewhere in my parents' house, locked away in boxes, probably stored with Eric's things and all the other ghosts.

--Kevin Kish
April, 2012

Arrest

Gravel popped beneath the police cruiser's wheels like tiny light bulbs. The sheriff drove the vehicle down a quarter-mile strip of dirt and rock that ran off Linder Road, just on the outskirts of Delta's Heart, Louisiana. Mailboxes, some labeled, marked the driveways for homes and trailers spaced apart in hundreds of yards. No speed limit was posted because the road had never been officially recognized, but Sheriff Tool planned to get the council on that so he could get the funds to pave the road. Plenty needed to be done, and he intended to do it all in the long run, God willing.

Tool reached the closed cattle gate that marked the end of the drive, turned the cruiser off on another dirt artery and followed along. A wall of trees on both sides blocked out the sun until they thinned out and blue sky showed again. The land was flat and open, cattle grazing on the green in spots. Including his years as a deputy, Tool had policed Delta's Heart for over a decade, but folk still lived out here whose names and faces he didn't know. He trusted their types, though, mostly good, hardworking people, all with a Bible tucked away somewhere, even if they just used it to swear on.

Tool saw an old, three-room, wooden house up ahead, specks of stained, white paint still clinging to its walls like dead skin. He spotted a rusted pickup truck parked at the rear of the house, its front end curved and rounded, the way they used to make them. Tool saw the man he came out here for standing in the bed of the truck: Dave Gibbons, a tree trunk of a man, built big like the land itself grew him. He wore a frayed, faded pair of blue jeans and no shirt; sun plastered his naked back with light. Wisps of hair that likely never saw a comb or scissors clung to his skull.

Tool parked the cruiser in the driveway, took his cuffs off his belt and laid them in the back seat. He didn't think he needed them, not today. He hoped Dave noticed. Tool felt at his holster, made sure the gun was strapped down but left it on. He only removed the belt at home, before his first drink of the evening, placing it at the top of a closet where his wife and boy couldn't reach. It needn't be that high, with the wife being so tiny and Lowell only three, but chances weren't a thing he cared to take. Tool straightened his badge and ran his hand over his head, the freshly trimmed hair brushing at his fingers. Tool stepped out of the car, took a wide path along the edge of the house so Dave could see him coming.

Dave stopped and wiped sweat-soaked strands of black hair from his unshaven face. He stared at Tool a moment then said, "Sheriff."

"What you say, Dave?" Tool asked, checking the interior of the truck's bed. Two-by-fours and roofing lay neatly stacked inside. Some had been unloaded already, set down by the side of the house.

"This and that," Dave said.

The sheriff was a tall man, but Dave stood straight in the back of the truck, his face a good four feet from Tool's eyes. Tool watched the truck sink from the big man's weight. The tires looked ready to give in.

"Got yourself a project going?" Tool leaned his head over the bed to get a better look at the wood.

"Just fixing up that old shed." Dave pointed at a rotten mess of a shack farther back in the yard.

"Well, here." Tool reached inside the back of the truck. "Let me give you a hand."

Tool could see Dave watching him like a scared stray being offered scraps. Tool gripped the end of a two-by-four bundle, scooted it aside so it squealed, wood against metal. Finally Dave bent over, helped him lift it.

“Ain’t seen you in awhile,” Dave said, leading Tool and the bundle toward the other unloaded stacks.

“Oh, you know how it is. Been a busy few weeks.”

“Yeah.” They laid the wood down, sat on it to catch their breaths. Tool stood first, started back to the truck. “How you liking the new job?” Dave asked.

“Still settling in, really.”

“I hear you. I got to make a confession at you, Sheriff. I can’t say I voted for you.”

“That’s all right, Dave. I won’t make no issue out of it.” Tool lifted his end of the next stack of lumber.

Dave did the same with his side. “Can’t say I voted at all. I don’t like them little booths they make you stand in.” He made a sound as if to laugh, then stopped, maybe thinking better of it.

“Different strokes, Dave.”

They set down the second bundle. Dave took a breath and bent over, resting his palms on his knees. There were signs of sweat on him when Tool arrived, but now Dave was drenched in the stuff.

“Look, you probably know why I’m here,” Tool said. “And it ain’t to bullshit you.”

“Yeah.”

“Now, I not gonna search your house or truck or nothing. Ain’t got a warrant, don’t have no cause for it. But I was thinking about taking me a look down by the pond, if you got no objections.”

Dave swallowed. “No, Sheriff. You go right on ahead.”

“I appreciate that. I really do.”

Dave made a move to stand.

“No,” Tool said. “You don’t got to come. I know the way. You look like you been working hard out here. Take yourself a break.”

Tool walked out from the shade offered by the house and through the back yard: an open pasture, no trees around. Near the skeletal shed was a patch of fresh, upturned dirt. Green vines curled around stakes that jutted from the soil. Dave didn’t come to town much, stayed out here mostly, but everyone knew about his garden. He made his living with it, sold vegetables to the local produce stand and grocery store. Tool took a second to admire the tomatoes, beans, lettuce, and red peppers, then walked past the patch to the pond downhill.

He thought on a boy he pulled over three years ago for speeding, a young man smelling of expensive cologne, well dressed and groomed, too polite. On intuition, Tool called in the boy’s plates and license, found out the car was stolen and the boy had a warrant up in Tennessee for murder. He sat in the town jail for three days waiting for extradition, never saying a cross word, never causing any alarm.

Tool asked the detective that came down to pick up the boy about who he’d killed. The detective showed him some sun-flared Polaroids, bleeding color on the edges like oil spots in a puddle. They showed a young girl, face down naked in a pond or lake, her head under the water, pale ass and legs shown to the sky. Tool didn’t ask what her relation to the

boy was, signed the detective's papers, watched him cuff and walk the boy out of the station. The clank of the handcuffs locking together seemed to ring through the small police station for hours after they left.

Tool knew then that the world was changing. He'd yet to see a murder in Delta's Heart. There were accidents on farms and in the mill, and once a year or so he'd scrape up some dumb kid who'd raced and lost on 4-H Club Road, but nothing like what the boy did to that girl in Tennessee. It was just a matter of time though, he thought, till that kind of thing seeped down from the big cities and into his town. A new exit off the interstate, a new plant with new jobs, that's all it would take to attract the bugs from whatever carcass they'd already picked dry.

He tried to put those thoughts away and focus on Dave. Thirty yards away, he saw what he'd come for: a patch of green, darker than the grass surrounding it, nestled alongside the bank of the pond. Tool walked closer, bent over. Marijuana plants, maybe ten of them, sprung out of the moist dirt, their leaves spread out like peacock feathers. He picked one, rubbed it between his fingers, felt it disintegrate, took a whiff of it, then let it fall from his hand. He looked along the edge of the pond, the Polaroid bleeding in his mind, but there wasn't anything else there.

Back at the truck, Dave unloaded the roofing tiles. Tool strode over to him, grabbed a stack, helped pile them.

"Garden's looking good," Tool said.

"Yeah." Dave's voice was lower, thinner.

"Can't say the same about the one you got out by the lake, though."

Dave turned his hands over, showed empty palms. “Ain’t nothing, Sheriff. You know I don’t grow it to sell. Just for my own use. Don’t hurt nobody.”

Tool kept his eyes on the bare hands, remembered a time he saw Dave use them to break a watermelon in half, the way the meat inside splattered and bled down his arms. Tool never wanted to see what those hands could do to another man. He thought of his handcuffs in the car, thought of what the boy from Tennessee might have done if the sheriff had ever let his guard down like this with him.

“I hear what you’re saying, Dave. But you know how it is.” Tool lifted another bundle of tiles. “You done been warned. We let you do it, what’s to stop someone else doing the same to sell?”

“I know, but-“

“But you thought I’d be too busy settling in downtown, that I wouldn’t notice if you grew a quick batch. Come on, Dave. What day you think I was born?”

“I ain’t never said you was dumb.”

“I got eyes just like most folks. I got ears. I hear things. And I sure know you. I probably knew about it the second you thought of it. Now what you do at home, in your privacy, I ain’t gonna say nothing about. Smoke a bowl if you want. But growing it out there, right under God’s blue sky. You know I got to do something. I got to do my job.”

“I know that, Sheriff.” Dave dropped his hands.

“I thought you would. You a working man, so you can appreciate my dilemma. So why don’t we finish up here, get this stuff unloaded. Then you get on a shirt, take a ride down to the station with me.”

“You could just ignore it,” Dave said.

“Yeah.” Tool wiped sweat from above his eyes. “You right. I could. I could ignore the rain too. I’d still get wet.”

They finished unloading in half an hour, covered the lumber and tiles with a blue tarp in case of a storm. Dave put on a clean shirt, sat down in the front passenger seat of the car. Tool turned the ignition, lurched the cruiser forward, heard the clang of metal in the backseat. The handcuffs. He’d gotten them as a deputy, knew they had to be twenty years old. He wondered if they would even hold someone like Dave, wondered if they were made differently nowadays: stronger or louder. Tool knew he’d have to find out eventually. For now, though, the boy in Tennessee sat in a locked cell hundreds of miles away. For now, Dave’s big hands sat limply in his lap. For now, the handcuffs clanked and rattled as they slid around in the backseat. For now, they could stay that way.

Adult Themes

The day my wife left me, I had an APB put out on her car. I would have gone after her myself, but she took a steak knife to the tires of my truck and slit them like chicken breasts. Some State Troopers that are friends of mine caught view of her car as it crossed the Louisiana/Mississippi border. I wanted them to keep at it, but the APB got called off. The troopers said they'd lose their jobs if they kept following her.

Sheriff Tool expressed similar sentiments when he caught word of what I'd done. I'd been a deputy under him for two years in Delta's Heart, Louisiana, and never saw him that mad. He shot his lead eyes at me and chewed me out like a fresh pinch of Skoal, not leaving enough left to spit out. He said he'd do more than fire me if I abused my authority again. He'd bring me up on charges for impersonating a police officer, since the second I even gave notion to such a "shit-brained idea" again, I'd no longer be a cop. "You here to serve me serve the public," he yelled. "Not yourself."

This wasn't the first time Karen'd walked out on me. When we met, I was twenty-one and in college. She was seventeen. She left right after her eighteenth birthday, four months pregnant with my child. We weren't married, and I wanted to be, but she wouldn't go with it, got scared and left in the middle of the night. She didn't even bother packing. When she came back six months later, I learned I had a daughter named Amanda. Karen wanted her last name to be Pennington, just like mine. That was enough for me, so I asked again to marry her. She said, "Yeah."

It took barely a year for her to leave again, when I was almost finished with college. She couldn't hack the waiting, didn't find glamour in a man who was an assistant manager at Popeye's Chicken, said school was taking too long. She disappeared with Amanda to

Mississippi and refused to talk to me. So I started divorce proceedings, sent word through her relatives that I was going to take our daughter from her. That scared her enough to give me Amanda every other week. We'd meet on Sundays in a noisy truck stop parking lot forty miles away in Hammond. Sometimes we'd sit in the front seat of her car and talk while Amanda slept. After a while we'd start to hold hands, then make out, then she'd let me feel her up. Soon she was giving me hand jobs, saying she wanted to come back and make things work.

She moved back a week after I graduated with a BA in Criminal Justice, pregnant with twins that weren't mine. I was mad, sure, fit to explode, but she got sick, complications due to the pregnancy, and when those two bastards were born and everyone was still alive, I swore I'd treat them as if they were my own. I never pressed her about the father, figured as long as she was with me and no one else, I could go the rest of my life without knowing.

That was about a year ago. This time she packed up, left a note saying she was gone for good.

It's been a week since she left. I walk into the Waffle House at six a.m., my shift over for the night. The other two deputies, Hanks and Berenger, are there drinking coffee.

"Mark," Hanks says to me. His face is crumpled, hairy. They're both twice my age. "Slow night?"

I unfold a glossy menu, pretend to look it over. "Mainly. Got a call to my brother's place. Some kids were nigger knocking out there, peeping into their window."

"They back from their honeymoon then?"

"Yep."

Hanks coughs up a laugh. "Bet those kids caught a show in them windows."

I pretend to ignore him. "Y'all ready to work?"

They laugh. "Ain't never ready for that."

Cherylann, the waitress, walks over to me and leans over. She's about thirty, pretty, but flaunts it by unbuttoning one too many buttons on her blouse and wearing a skirt a size too short. "What you want, Mark?" she says, smiling.

"Coffee."

"Hey, Cherylann," Hanks says. "Nine-hundred ninety-nine thousand, eight-hundred seventy-eight."

She rolls her eyes off to the side, holds them there, then looks back at Hanks. "Nope."

"Two-hundred ninety-two," Berenger says.

Cherylann shakes her head. They're playing this game they started, where Cherylann picks a number between one and a million. If one of them guesses it, then she'll give the winner a date for the night. They're too stupid to realize that she rigs it, that she doesn't even have a number picked but plays along since it yields good tips and happy customers. She told me as much one night when I was here bitching about Karen. She also told me to forget about Karen, that she was a floozy, that I could do better. Then she licked her lips, coated them with a shiny layer of spit, told me that a man like me could probably guess her number if he had a mind to.

"You gonna play, Mark?" she asks.

I look up. "Not tonight." I've never taken her up on the offer, tempting as it may be. Adultery is one thing I could never do to Karen, not so long as there's still hope for us. She's done it, sure, but I won't be like her. Somebody has to be the better one.

Cherylann shrugs and walks off.

"Goddamn, you a spoil sport," Berenger tells me. "You could at least help us eliminate some numbers."

I try everything to find Karen. I visit the state penitentiary where her mother is and have a talk with her. I ask who Karen knows in Mississippi, who she might stay with.

"You ain't no man," she tells me. "That girl better off without you."

She doesn't like me because I'm a cop, although I don't recall her liking me even before that. She's been in jail since just before the wedding, possession of meth, sold off Karen's engagement ring to buy it.

I call a boy I know from school that's a trooper in Mississippi, ask him to put the word out on her car. He says he'll keep an eye out but don't count on anything. If she don't want to be found, then I should just let her be. I tell him he's right, hang up and kick one of Amanda's empty plastic toy chairs.

I go to Karen's daddy's grave and stare at it. He was an alcoholic, did some time himself, ended up dead in a roadside ditch four years ago after a night of hard drinking. I yell at the stone some, blaming him for the way she is. I figure it's got to be the daddy's fault most of all. A daddy's supposed to teach little girls how to be women.

At nights, I stay up, drink beer, watch titty movies on Cinemax, think about all the mistakes I made and imagine a world where I could redo them. In that world I ignore Karen when I first meet her, when she's dating my friend Wayne. When that one night comes, and we all go out, and she tries kissing me, I push her away, tell her it's a wrong thing for me to do. She makes several other passes, but I rebuke them all, a strong man looking out for my future. I don't end up pissing Wayne off, don't end up knocking Karen up, don't have that final conversation with Wayne where he told me he what a shit I was and suggested a coat hanger for Karen's "problem." I don't sit up nights, thinking about the way things could have been, about the way I fucked them all up.

It's my off day and the phone rings. I pry my eyes open and look around. I'm still in my gray deputy's uniform. T.V.'s still on, playing some kid's cartoon. Sunlight glows behind the drapes, painting the room in a yellow, dusty mist. I reach over and pick up the cordless.

It's Karen.

"Hey," I say. All the things I've been wanting to say to her now seem dull, like the light in the room.

"How are you?" she asks.

"Good," I say. "Where are you?"

"Amanda wants to see you. I want you to see her. She needs her daddy."

"What about the twins?"

"They're with their daddy. They're fine."

I feel a thump in my chest. I've never seen their daddy, hate being reminded that he even exists. "When?"

"Same place in Hammond. You can have her for the weekend if you want."

"We need to talk," I say.

"We will."

Fridays I work day shift, so I take off early, drive out to Hammond. It's two p.m. when I get there, an hour before we're supposed to meet. I ride past the college I went to, watch the kids there tug their books, lives, and relationships. I think about my years there, commuting the forty miles every day from Delta's Heart, rushing back in the evening to be at work, studying at night, sleeping three or four hours if I got lucky. I had big ambitions, wanted to work for the FBI or ATF or maybe be a detective in a real police department. But Karen didn't want to move away, and I didn't want to be away from Amanda. So I tried the local parish and state police, but no one would hire me. They thought I was a smartass college kid and told me so. Finally my parents made a call to Sheriff Tool, told him what good voters they were, how many people they knew, and wouldn't a college graduate be a nice thing to have in his office.

I drive back to the truck stop. Karen's there all dressed up. She wears a gray business suit, skirt to her knees, black panty hose on her legs. She looks so different: like a real woman, not the teenage kid I always think of when I remember her. If she didn't have Amanda draped over her shoulder, I almost wouldn't recognize her.

"You look good," I say.

Karen puts her finger to her lips, rolls her eyes towards Amanda. "She just fell asleep."

I nod. A truck grumbles next to us. "What's with the get-up?" I point at her outfit.

"Here," she says, handing me Amanda.

I take my daughter, noting that she seems heavier than the last time I held her and open the passenger side door of my truck. I lay her down. She opens her eyes, mumbles "Daddy," then closes them again. I turn around. Karen is heading for her car. "Hold up," I yell.

She turns around. "I'll come get her Sunday."

"Here?"

"I don't know. I'll call and let you know."

"When you coming back home?"

She lowers her head, takes a breath. I watch her breasts rise and fall through the blouse. She mumbles something, but a truck passes by, grinding and growling.

"Let's sit down and talk," I yell. She looks like she's trying to say no, but I head to the other side of her car and get in.

"I don't have time for this," she says. "I'm running late."

"What, you don't have time to talk to your husband?"

She closes her eyes, puts her palm to her forehead.

"We need to stop these games," I say. "This is ridiculous. Why don't you just come back home?"

"This is getting old, Mark."

"What's so old about a man, you know, wanting his wife and kid home?"

"That's all you want," she says.

"I don't know what that means."

"You don't want nothing to do with me when I'm around. I came home the last time to try and make us work, and what do you do? You go off and start working overtime and nights. Anything to get away from me."

"That's not true. I had two more kids to take care of."

"You're making excuses."

"I didn't ask for them to be around."

"You didn't ask for Amanda either, huh? You don't want to be around me. You just don't want me to not be around you."

"You got to twist everything up, don't you?"

"What you want me to do, sit around all day, waiting for you to get home so you have something to yell at?"

"I told you to go get a job."

"I'll agree to whatever divorce terms you want. Complete joint custody, you keep the trailer and everything else. I won't even bother with alimony or getting a settlement on child support. I know you'll take care of Amanda."

"Then let me take care of her the right way! Not running around from parent to parent, from here to wherever you got her, living some white trash lie. I don't want her growing up like..." I stop myself, bite the inside of my cheek.

"Like what? Go ahead and say it, Mark. Like me."

"You're putting words where they're not."

"You're so goddamn arrogant, you know that?" she yells. "You grew up the same place as everybody else. Just 'cause you got a degree don't mean shit."

"It means I got a good job to take care of my family."

"Well, I got a job too. And I'm late for it now."

"Doing what?"

"That don't concern you."

"The hell it don't. You can't just run off with Amanda, not tell me where you are.

What if there's something the matter?"

"Here." She pulls out a pen, writes on the back of a receipt and hands it to me. "You can leave a message for me here if there's an emergency."

I stare at the numbers. "Give me an address."

"No."

"That ain't fair. You know where I live, where Amanda's gonna be. I deserve the same consideration."

"I'm not the one libel to go knocking on your door drunk in the middle of the night."

I hesitate. "You could," I say.

"Don't do this. Don't do it." She looks up, points out the window. "Amanda's awake."

I look toward my truck. Amanda is standing on the seat, her palms on the window, her scream swallowed by the glass. She's got her mother's face, but the anguish on it is all mine.

What I do is drive Amanda to my mom's and leave her there. I call the sheriff's station, have them pull up an address for the number Karen gave me. It's a business called Adult Themes, on Route 7, right outside Jackson, Mississippi. I gas up the truck and gun it the hundred miles there.

The sun's just a white bulge over the horizon when I pull off the interstate. Route 7 is a white trash strip with one-story motels on both sides, bars promising GIRLS, GIRLS, GIRLS, massage parlors hiding in the corners. A blinking red neon sign advertises ADULT THEMES: MATURE BOOKS, TOYS, GAMES, LITERATURE. I pull up on the curb, stop the truck and kill the lights.

Adult Themes is a two-level cinder brick building. A hole in the wall marks the entrance, a NO LOITERING sign posted outside. There's a window and balcony on the second floor, a wooden rocking chair on the ledge, but I don't see any stairs. I get out, walk toward the entrance.

Inside the walls bleed red, bandaged with triple-X photos, magazines, racks of plastic and rubber effigies of the human anatomy. It smells like an open condom packet. A fat woman sits behind the counter, watching the T.V. She looks up when I enter, silences the T.V. with a remote and stands up quickly to face me.

"This ain't no bust, is it?" she says with a nervous laugh.

I look down at my uniform. I forgot I was still wearing it. "No," I say. "Nothing like that."

"Oh. Feel free to browse then."

"Nothing like that either." I pull out the slip of paper Karen gave me and show it to the woman. "This the number here?"

She bites her lower lip, leans forward over the glass counter, peers at the paper.

"Yeah."

"You got a Karen Pennington works here?"

"Ain't nobody works here but me and my boy."

"Who's your boy?"

She folds her arms. "What is this? He in some kind of trouble?"

"I was given this number to contact Karen Pennington."

"I got a Karen Powell that stays upstairs. Don't know no Pennington or whatever."

I crumble the paper. Powell is Karen's maiden name. "She lives here?"

"Upstairs, with my son. They got a couple of boys together."

"Is he home?"

"Yeah-huh."

"I want to talk to him."

"Look officer, like I said, if he's done something-"

I interrupt. "Ma'am, I'm no officer here. I'm from the town of Delta's Heart."

The woman's face nearly shrivels. Her lips seem to disappear.

"I'm Karen's husband." I point toward the stairs. "I'm gonna go up there right now and talk to your boy. You got any objections, I don't really care."

I lift the counter top and walk to the stairs. The woman is shouting things at me, how she's going to call the police if I don't leave, but I just ignore her and head upstairs.

I beat against the door with the bottom of my fist. My right hand is clenched tight, the piece of paper still in it, my fingernails biting into the skin on my palm. I plan to beat the living shit out of whoever answers the door then be on my way.

I slam my fist against the door again. I hear footsteps behind it, the clattering of a chain. "Hold up," a voice says behind the wood. I hit it again.

It's just a kid that opens it. He's a foot shorter than me, skinny as a stick bug, a black Megadeth T-shirt wrapped tight around his chest. He's got short hair in the front, long curls in the back crawling around his shoulders and neck. His face goes pale when he sees me. "Oh shit," he yells, stepping backwards, almost tripping over himself. "Don't hit me, man!" He covers his head with his arms.

My fingers relax. The paper falls. "You know who I am," I say to him.

The kid peers through his arms, sees I'm not going to hit him. "Yeah."

I step into the doorway, look around. The place is pretty clean: plastic on the couch, the T.V. flashing in the corner. Over on the shelf there's a picture of Karen and the boy at a dance, blue and white balloons looking like bubbles around them.

"How old are you?" I ask.

The boy stands up. "Eighteen. Almost nineteen. Look bro, she ain't here."

I study the boy's face. It's the shape of his eyes, the distance between them, that prove to me who he is. I've seen eyes like that before. Then a chorus of crying explodes down the hallway. The bastards. I walk past the boy toward the sound.

"Where you going, dude?" he says. "Wait up."

I turn into a room at the end of the hallway. It's dark save for a clown-shaped night-light in the corner. I recognize it. I bought it for them after they were born. I stand over the bastards' crib, watch their faces, listen to their cries. One of them sees me, then the other. They both shut up.

I smell shit. I turn to the boy. "Don't you know how to change a diaper?"

"Karen or Mama normally does that. I ain't touching no shit, man."

I clamp my hand around the back of the boy's neck, grab a lump of hair. "C'mere." I push him to the crib, lift the tape from one of the bastards' diapers and pull it away. "This is what it means to be a daddy." I pull the diaper off and shove it in the boy's face. He recoils back, slamming against the wall.

Loud, heavy footsteps vibrate through the floor from down the hall. I turn around, grab a bastard under each arm the way I would two watermelons and head for the door.

A double-barreled shotgun stares me down when I get there, the fat woman behind it. "You put them babies down right now," she says.

The boy stands up, peels the diaper off his face and drops it to the floor. "Mama! Look what he done."

The fat woman grabs the boy's skinny arm and tugs it toward the door. "Go clean that shit off your face and watch the shop downstairs." She keeps the gun leveled on me.

"Easy ma'am," I say, dodging to either side of her, the bastards squirming under my arms. "Put the gun down. Everything's copasetic."

"I done called 911, mister, and you about to get your ass arrested, cop or not."

"Look, I'm just a concerned parent, OK? I won't let my daughter or these bastards be raised around that filth." I nod at the floor toward the shop.

"This is a respectable business. My daddy raised four girls on this place."

"It's inappropriate. No judge alive would grant Karen custody of these kids over me."

"They don't see nothing. They use the back entrance, never once go downstairs."

"This isn't right," I say. The woman moves like a tractor that's running out of gas. I can think of three ways to disarm her with minimal contact, but I'd have to drop the bastards to do it.

"You got thirty seconds to put down them kids before I pump holes in you."

On cue they start to cry, both on the same beat, louder than dogs in a kennel. I look down at them, see their faces, the brown streaks of shit on the bare ass of the one. I set them down on the floor. "Fine."

The woman moves in closer, circles around me, the eyes of the gun still watching me. "That's right. Now stand on over there." She motions with the gun, points me to the corner by the door. I slowly obey.

She rushes to the bastards' sides, cuddles the clean one in one arm, holds the gun on me with the other. "It's OK," she sings to him. "Maw-Maw's here." She swings her head around, looks at me. "You get on out of here. Take the back door and don't ever come back."

"I thought you called 911."

"I did. But they slow as shit, I'm sure you know. I'd rather save Karen the embarrassment of having a husband in jail."

"Ex-husband."

"Damn straight." She reaches for another towelette and a fresh diaper. "Goddamn girl needs to get herself a restraining order against all you men. You nothing but losers and psychos."

I get back on Route 7, keep going. It's getting dark. Streetlights flash off the hood of the truck. I feel like I've been flung at something, inertia building inside me but with no target to release it against. I pull off the road at the Jackson exit, ride around town.

I drive by a shopping mall and see Karen's car. A normal person would miss it, but I've been trained to spot cars and faces in crowds with just a cursory description. This one I know every detail of, every curve, every tiny dent and scratch. To me it sticks out like a devil in church.

I pull into the lot, park next to her car outside a Dillard's department store and go inside. I walk down aisles through the men's department, past mannequins. I see Karen standing behind a perfume counter. She's talking with an elderly woman, spraying perfume on her hand. I stand behind a mannequin, twenty feet away, and watch.

Karen smiles, the soft florescent lights of the store glowing around her, softening her hair, her cheeks, her eyes. I want to walk right over there, grab her by the arm, and drag her home. The bastards can stay here like they were never born. We can go home with Amanda, pretend that none of this happened.

A black woman in a white dress walks over to Karen, compliments the way she handles customers, tells her she has a call on line one. Karen nods, says something unimportant and picks up the phone. I move in closer, hide behind a statue of a boy in a baseball cap riding a red wagon and listen.

"What?" Karen says into the phone. "Hold on, calm down. What happened?"

She pauses, her eyes steady. Then they go wild, jumping like fleas. "He did what? Oh God, are they all right?" She falls back, leans on a post for support. The black woman notices

and rushes to her. Karen drops the phone and slides back on the post to the ground, like fresh blood on a wall.

"Girl, what's wrong?" the black woman says.

Karen looks up, her eyes drenched, blackened from smearing makeup. "That fucking son of a bitch," she says, her voice as steady as an epileptic. "I hate him." She drops her head onto the black woman's shoulder. Her voice rises, distorts. "I HATE HIM I HATE HIM."

I back away, taking care that she doesn't see me. Once I'm out of sight, I turn around, almost running, out the door, as far away from her voice as I can get.

It's past eleven when I make it back to Delta's Heart. The drive took three hours, plenty of time for me to get mad at myself for pussying out like that. So what if I made Karen cry? Like she's never made me feel that way, never made me want to scream.

I figure that Amanda is probably asleep so I don't bother picking her up. Instead I drive home, pull up to the trailer, and kill the truck. There're no street lights around. Crickets sing in the distance, frogs backing them from the ditches. I bang my finger against the steering wheel and listen to my wedding band tap against it. I know what I have to do.

I start the truck back up, head to the Waffle House in town. The waitress there, some young girl, probably barely seventeen, tells me Cherylann has the night off. I know where she lives, a small apartment block near the edge of town, so I head there.

Cherylann answers the door. Her hair is tied up, almost toppling over her head. She's wearing a Delta's Heart Fishing Rodeo T-shirt.

"Well hey, Mark," she says.

I invite myself in. She obliges. Her apartment's a small, one bedroom number, cluttered with antiques and record albums.

"I'm sorry to come by this late," I say. "I figured you'd be up."

"Well you and me are both night folks, ain't we?" She laughs, goes to the refrigerator.

"You want something?"

"You got a beer?"

She pulls out a bottle of vodka, a two liter of Coke. "How 'bout something stronger?"

"Fine."

I sit down, stare at the TV. Glasses clatter and jingle behind me. Cherylann sits down next to me, her back to the armrest, and hands me the icy drink.

"So what's up?" she asks.

"I saw Karen today."

"Is that why you're here?"

"I don't know." I watch her breasts loll under the T-shirt and the way she crosses her legs.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"OK." She stirs my drink with her finger.

"She's living with some punk over a goddamn porno shop," I say.

"That's horrible."

I tell her the story, listen to it as I do, try to find in it the explanation of why I'm here.

She leans forward, takes a sip of her drink. "You're just lonely. We all get like that."

"I don't think she wants to see me again."

"For the best. You deserve more."

I lay a hand on Cherylann's thigh, flinch when I touch it, half expecting it to carry an electric shock. It doesn't. She takes her free hand, places it on top of mine, sandwiching it between the thigh. She leans over, kisses me on the lips. They're cold from the drink. I pull away.

"Something wrong?" she asks.

I look away at the door. "No." I lean over and kiss her. I close my eyes, don't look at her, don't even think about who she is. I think of Karen when we first met, before the fights and the baby and her leaving me. Cherylann is aggressive. She grabs the back of my head, pulls me closer, injects her tongue into my mouth. Karen was never like this; she was always softer, gentler. I pull away, open my eyes.

"I want you to know," Cherylann says, almost in a whisper. "I don't normally do this. I don't want you thinking I'm easy or something."

I kiss her again, put my hands on her T-shirt, feel her tits underneath. I hear shuffling, skin on skin, heavy, shallow breathing.

Then there's a bang from next door. I pull away, look toward the wall and listen. A man yells, "Shut up!" I hear a woman yell back but not what she's saying. There's another bang.

"Don't worry about them," Cherylann says. "They get like this every few nights."

I look at her, pull her close. The shouting next door continues.

I can't deal with it. I untangle our limbs and stand up. I walk to the wall, press my ear against it. The man is yelling about how the woman is a slut. She sounds like she's throwing things. "I should go over there and say something," I say.

"What, does it bother you?" she asks.

"They're disrupting the peace."

"Don't bother me. If it's disrupting you, go right ahead. But you're off duty. I think it's none of our business."

"How can you say that?"

"People fight; they argue. You know that better than anyone."

I look back at her. The wall shakes behind me. I can feel it. "Fuck this." I walk to the door and step outside.

Cherylann follows me. "Mark, you should just let this go."

"He's beating that woman up in there."

"That's a family matter. It's not our concern."

"The hell it isn't." I knock on the neighbor's door, hard. "Hey," I yell. "Open up in there. Sheriff's Office."

The yelling stops. A rough voice travels through the door. "There ain't no trouble here, officer."

"Open the door," I say.

"Honest, we just had rats or something."

"Sir, I'm giving you thirty seconds to open that door I before break it down."

I pause, give him a moment to consider. Then I hear locks clicking, metal on wood. I grip my holster. The door opens.

It's a woman that stands behind it, not a man, her eyes glassy and still. She's big, wears dirty, blue, almost transparent pajamas. A broken mop handle is clenched in her fist. I scan her face, searching for signs of abuse. Nothing.

"You all right, ma'am?" I try to peer behind her.

"Yes, I'm fine. Now go away." She goes to slam the door. I stick my boot in the frame, blocking it.

"Where's your husband?"

"We just had a little yell is all. Ain't nothing."

"Ma'am." I duck, get a glimpse down the hall under her arms. I see feet lying on the floor, motionless. "What the hell is that?"

"I said-"

"Ma'am, I'm gonna ask you one more time to remove yourself from the doorway."

She twitches. "Fine. I done told you what happened." She steps aside.

I walk past her down the hallway. The feet are bare, hairy. They stretch out from legs over a tiled floor into the kitchen. I point to the woman. "Sit on the couch."

"You ain't got no warrant, mister. You can't-"

"I said sit down." I widen my eyes. She concedes.

I walk into the kitchen. A man lies on the floor, blood on his head. I look around, see a mop handle propped up against the wall. "Shit." I bend over, check for breath. "Cherylann!" I yell. "Go call an ambulance."

"No," a shaky voice says from below me. The man opens his eyes, looks up at me.

"I'm OK. Just fell."

"Sir, you just stay right there. I'll get some help-"

"I said I'm OK. Don't need no help. Woman was mopping, I took me a slip is all."

His head is battered, blue in several spots. The floor is scabbed over in dirt, looks like it hasn't been mopped since Kennedy. He lays his palms to the tiles, rises to his skinny knees. I notice scars climbing across his arms and neck. "Sir," I say. "There's no need to make up-

"Son, I done said what happened. You gonna help me up or talk bullshit?"

I stand, take the man's hand and lift him to his feet. It doesn't take much effort. He pulls away from me, leaves blood on my fingers.

"Now you can just go on now," the man says.

"Does this happen a lot?" I ask him.

"I been known to take falls."

"He's real clumsy," the woman yells from the living room.

"Ma'am, shut up!" I turn back to the man, lower my voice. "Sir, listen. There's no shame to this. I can take her in, you can press charges. Nothing to be embarrassed about. She's a big-

"Goddamn, boy." The man pushes me aside. "You think I ain't a man to take care of myself? You get the hell out of here."

I step back, look at the woman. "You done heard him," she says.

I walk to the door, turn around. "If you two keep this up, then I'm gonna bring you both in for disrupting the peace, you understand?"

The man leans out the door, spits a glob of blood on the concrete. "Ain't no peace here to be disrupted," he says and closes the door.

I turn around. Cherylann is standing there, a blanket wrapped around her.

"You didn't call an ambulance," I say.

"No. I told you. This is nothing you can do something about."

"It's bullshit is what it is."

"Why don't you come back inside."

I take a breath and shrug. "No."

"You sure? Don't let this-"

"This was a mistake. I'm a married man." I show her the band on my finger.

"What went on in there shouldn't change anything."

"Who said it did?"

"I don't get you."

"I've just..." I drop my head, can't look at her without thinking of Karen. I want to say I've lost my nerve, but I don't.

"Fine. I'm here if you change your mind." She closes the door slowly, watching me.

I finally turn around, walk off and head to my truck. I sit down on the seat and crank the engine. Dash lights come to life around me, emergency lights buzzing. I lift up my hand and look at my wedding band. There's blood on it from the man. I take it off, wipe it on my shirt, and hold it up. It's dull in the night light, lets off little shine. I spit on it, rub it against my pants, and put it back on.

Old Scratch

Tommy had been digging for an hour when the rain fell. The sun kept shining. He thought of something his dad liked to say-- if the sun is shining when it starts to rain, it means the devil is beating his wife. Tommy didn't understand. They never mentioned the devil's wife in church.

Oh sure, Dad said. The devil has lots of wives. One for every woman in the world. He always looked at Mom when he said that part, and her face would scrunch up, and he would laugh.

Tommy had been looking for the devil for a long time. Weeks at least. The kids on his street laughed when Tommy said the devil lived underground, and he knew he had to prove them wrong. It was summer, so he had the time. He grabbed Dad's shovel from the shed and started to dig. Mom wasn't happy when she saw the holes. She yelled and made Tommy refill them. But she was too busy with her new microwave and other new stuff to make him stop.

Tommy slammed the shovel into the dirt and stomped the blade until it disappeared into the ground. Tommy was only eight, but he could dig a deep hole. He lifted a scoop of dirt and dumped it to the side. He slammed the shovel into the soil again. It went deep, deeper than normal. He almost lost the shovel. Tommy pulled it out and peered into the hole.

It sloped downwards into darkness. Dirt skidded down the side and disappeared. He found something-- another hole, deeper than he could imagine. Tommy leaned closer, let a wad of spit collect on his tongue, and watched it fall from his mouth into the pit.

He waited a few seconds. He didn't see the spit land. Then a voice boomed from below--

Hey, it shouted.

Tommy didn't believe it, but that didn't stop his feet from scooting back. The grass was wet, so he fell instead.

I know you're up there, the voice shouted. I can hear you.

Tommy tried to stop breathing, but that only seemed to make it louder.

It's very rude to spit on someone, the voice said.

Are you? Tommy swallowed. Are you the devil?

Why do you ask? the voice said.

Because the devil is the only one I know that lives underneath us, Tommy answered.

He is?

Everyone knows that, Tommy told him.

I guess I must be then, the voice said. Why did you spit on me?

I was looking for the devil, Tommy said.

Why would you do that?

Tommy stopped and thought. He didn't have a good answer. I just wanted to see if you were really there, he finally said.

Well, yes, I am, the voice said.

My name is Thomas. But everyone calls me Tommy.

Hello, Thomas. Step closer to the hole. I can barely hear you.

Tommy stood up and leaned forward but kept his feet locked into place. You're not gonna try and take away my soul, are you? he asked.

That's absurd, the devil said. What would I do with that?

How long have you been down there? Tommy asked.

I don't know.

It must have been for a very long time, Tommy said. He loomed over the hole, trying to peer all the way down. Can you see me? he asked.

No, the devil answered.

You must be very far down. Do you have a name?

You are full of questions, the devil said.

My dad says the devil's real name is Nick Scratch. Can I call you Nick?

If you must.

Tommy heard a door creak open and looked toward his house. His mom yelled for him to come back in.

I've got to go now, Tommy said. Can I talk to you later?

I'm not going anywhere, the devil said.

You're funny, Tommy said. Oh well, bye.

The next morning at church Tommy asked his Sunday school teacher what the devil looked like.

He's beautiful, she said. But he's not like you see on TV and the movies.

The other kids tried to argue, but Tommy just listened.

He has to be beautiful so he can tempt you, she said. He comes to you as something you want. Imagine the thing you want most in the world and the devil can be that.

I don't see how that makes him bad, Tommy said.

He'll make you do things, Tommy. He'll get into you and be a voice that you hear that tells you to do the wrong thing. Haven't any of you ever been tempted to steal? When you go to the store and see a toy you really want? The devil is the voice that tells you it's OK to take it.

Tommy couldn't make it make to the hole until nearly dark that night. Nick waited for him.

My Sunday school teacher says you're bad, Tommy told him.

Why?

She says you'll tempt me to do bad things.

Like what?

You know. Like stealing and stuff.

Do you ever want to steal?

I don't know, Tommy said. Sometimes I don't think it's really stealing.

What times?

Like when somebody has more than you do and they don't even want it. So I think it's OK to take something if the person who has it doesn't care about it.

Do you ever do it? Nick asked.

Well. Sometimes I take stuff from Mom's jewelry box. She has so much and never notices if I take just one.

What do you do with it? Nick asked.

I don't know. Just hide it places. Dad's been buying her a lot lately. They fight, and he buys her something. She never notices when the old stuff is missing. Do you think it's wrong for me to do that?

I guess not if your mom doesn't notice, Nick said. What's that clanging noise?

That's the oil rig. Tommy looked over the fence. They're drilling next door.

Drilling?

For oil. They put in a big rig awhile ago. Every day and every night they crank it up, and you can hear them looking for oil.

Doesn't it bother you? Nick asked.

Not really, Tommy said. I think it's kind of neat. It looks cool when it's all lit up at night. And I like the sounds it makes. Sometimes I come out and try to draw it with my sketch pad, but I get lost when I get near the top.

No one complains?

Not really. A lot of people are getting paid by the oil people to let them look over there. Dad says it's called mineral rights. Everybody around here is buying new cars and putting in swimming pools and stuff. Dad bought Mom a microwave and a new TV and this tape player that plays movies.

Did he buy you anything?

No, Tommy said. He bought an Atari video game and said me and Cory could share it, but then we got into a fight and Dad threw it in the closet.

Who's Cory? Nick asked.

My little brother. He's a brat. He gets whatever he wants.

That's not fair.

None of it's fair, Tommy said. It's like, I live here just like everyone else and if there's oil under my bedroom I deserve some of the money too.

Do your friends get stuff?

I don't have any friends, Tommy said.

Why not?

Because all the kids on the street are stupid. I had a friend at school, but he moved away last year. To Nebraska. That's really far from here in case you didn't know. Look, it's getting late. I better go before Dad starts yelling at me.

Tommy talked to Nick every day. He liked Nick because he understood things that no one else did. Nick didn't treat him like a stupid kid and didn't make Tommy feel bad about the things he told him. He was the best kind of friend, the kind you could tell anything to who wouldn't go behind your back and tell someone else.

One night Tommy walked to the hole after dark. It was cold, and he was crying.

I brought you something, he told Nick, sniffing.

What?

Here. Tommy held his fist over the hole and opened it. A silver necklace fell out into the hole. Did you get it? Tommy asked.

Yes, Nick said. It's so shiny.

It's a necklace I got from Mom. She never wears it anyway.

It's beautiful, Nick said.

Tommy tried to hold back, but he couldn't help himself, and he started sobbing.

Thomas, Nick said. What's wrong?

You gotta help me, Tommy answered, his voice high and scratchy.

What's the matter?

Mom and Dad. I hate them. I wish they'd die.

What happened? Nick asked.

It was stupid, Tommy said. I was in my room drawing, and Cory walked in. I told him to get out, and I started yelling at him. Mom came in, and Cory cried, and Mom said he can stay in my room because that's what big brothers are for. So he started touching my stuff, and he grabbed my sketch pad and started scribbling on it, so I hit him. Mom came in and yelled at me, and I yelled back at her. Then Dad came in with his stupid belt and started hitting me with it.

Doesn't that happen all the time? Nick asked.

Yeah, but this time it was worse. This time I picked up a thing of oil paint, and I splashed it all over Cory's face. Mom freaked out and ran Cory to the bathroom to wash it out. Dad started yelling because I ruined the carpet, and he kept hitting me with the belt until Mom made him stop.

Why did you do that?

I just lost my temper, Tommy said.

What's a temper?

It's what happens to me when I get all mad. Mom says I got it from Dad. Don't you ever have one?

I don't think so, Nick said.

They don't care about me, Tommy said. All they care about is Cory and the stupid carpet and the car and everything else. They wouldn't even care if I died.

I would care, Nick said.

That's because you're my only friend. You have to promise me you'll do this. You have to make them stop.

How?

I don't know. You're the devil! Take away the house or Cory or something. Take away all that stuff so they'll start listening to me.

Thomas, I don't think I can do that.

Tommy stood up and yelled through sobs. Yes you can! he said. You can do anything! I'll get you anything you want. You can have all of Mom's jewelry. She's got better stuff.

I'm stuck down here, Nick said. I can't do anything like that.

You have to, Tommy yelled. This is all your fault anyway.

My fault?

Mom says the devil gets into me when I do things. That you made me do it.

I didn't make you do anything, Nick said.

Tommy heard the house door creak. He looked and saw his dad.

Get your ass in here, Tommy, Dad yelled.

Tommy turned to the hole. Do something, Nick, he said. Please.

Thomas...

Dad stomped across the yard toward Tommy. Tommy stood up and went toward the house. Some devil you are, he whispered at the hole.

The next day they were supposed to go grocery shopping, but Mom was screaming. She couldn't find her coupon book, and she was throwing things around saying how she couldn't have anything around there that was just hers. She kept going into the kitchen and telling Tommy and Cory to look for the coupons, but they just stood there because they knew if they tried to help she'd get mad and yell at them for being in the way.

On the kitchen counter, Mom left her black purse and keys. Next to them was a five dollar bill. Tommy could hear Mom rumbling through the closet down the hall. She couldn't see him. Cory stood in the living room, watching the fish in the aquarium. He couldn't see Tommy either.

He stepped closer to the counter and laid his hand on it like he was leaning. Five dollars would buy a lot of comic books. Tommy wondered if he should take it when his hand snatched the five and crumbled it up. Tommy wanted it to stop, but he could only watch as his hand slid the crumpled bill into his sock.

Mom said something down the hall. Tommy couldn't hear her at first, but then her voice swelled louder as she got closer—

...Lester is just going to have to pay the extra money. I can't find the damn coupons.

She walked into the kitchen and picked up the purse and keys. She turned like she was going to walk into the living room, but then her eyes swiveled back and her head followed them toward the counter.

Where'd that five dollars go? she asked.

Tommy shook his head and threw his arms up in the air.

Mom lifted the phone book and slid the mail over. I left it right here, she said. It was just here. She looked at Tommy. Did you take it?

Why do you always blame me? Tommy asked. He felt the bill scraping against his ankle. He wanted to itch it, but he couldn't.

It was right here, Tommy. Where did it go?

I don't know. Maybe Cory took it.

Nuh-uh, Cory said. Tommy took it. He pointed.

Mom turned back to Tommy, and her eyes went wild like they wanted to reach out and choke him themselves. Tommy, did you take it?

I said I didn't, Tommy yelled.

She grabbed him and shook him like she hoped the money would fall out of his clothes. Tommy, don't lie to me. Did you take it?

God, Tommy said. Why can't you just believe me? You never believe me. You act like I'm a big liar all the time.

We're not going anywhere, she said, until I have that money back in my hand.

I didn't take it, Tommy said. I swear.

She turned to the kitchen table and lifted things like she was searching. Well then start looking, she said.

Tommy watched her. He knew what she was doing. He went to the counter and opened drawers and pretended to dig through them. Her back was turned to him, but he could see her eyes glancing in his direction. She was waiting for him to put the money back and pretend he found it. But Tommy was too smart for that.

It's not going to be in the drawers, Mom said. Look on the counter. Maybe I just missed it.

Tommy slid mail and plates over on the counter, but his eyes stayed on Mom.

OK, she said. Maybe I left it in my room. Let me go look. Cory, you check the living room.

It's not in there, Cory whined. Tommy has it.

Just do it, she said, pulling him into the living room by the shirt.

Tommy waited for her to go into her room, and he opened the back door and ran into the yard. He couldn't have her blaming him for this. She always blamed him. It doesn't matter if it did it or not, she had no reason to blame him.

He ran to the hole. Nick didn't say anything, and Tommy didn't have time to explain. He reached into his sock and pulled out the wadded bill and dropped it into the hole.

Watch this for me, Tommy whispered. I'll be back for it tonight.

Tommy ran back to the house. Mom opened the door before he reached it.

What were you doing out there? she said.

Nothing, Tommy answered. He tried to think of an excuse, but she had her hands wrapped around his wrists. Her fingernails bit into his skin, and it hurt.

What did you do with the money? she screamed.

Tommy couldn't think of anything. He looked at the oil rig and wondered if the men there could see him.

Where is it? she said, slapping Tommy on the leg. Where the hell is it?

Let go of me, Tommy said.

She didn't listen. She kept hitting him on the legs and then the arms and then all over, her voice a quaky mess. Tommy could feel his eyes getting wet like they were drowning. He pulled away from her and ran toward the hole. He could hear her yelling behind him. He didn't know why, but he kept running: past Nick and the hole, out of the yard and into the woods. He kept running until he couldn't hear Mom screaming anymore.

Tommy kept walking the trail in the woods until his feet started to hurt. He sat down and wiped his face, and soon it wasn't wet anymore. It was getting dark, and he felt scared because he didn't recognize where he was. Then he saw the lights of the oil rig flashing over the top of the trees.

Maybe he'd just stay there. He didn't need to go back home. He knew he took the money even though he couldn't help himself, but it wasn't fair of Mom to act like that. It wasn't just that. It was everything. Anytime something broke or went missing they always started pointing at Tommy. A lot of times he didn't even do anything.

He stretched his arms behind him and leaned on the ground. His hand touched something sharp and rocky, and he jumped forward. Behind him, he saw horns poking out from the ground, and for a second he thought it was Nick. He wouldn't help Tommy before, and now he'd come to get him. Even Nick was after him. Then he looked closer and saw it was just the old skull of a bull. He'd seen it before in the woods, and he knew where he was. He decided that he'd taught Mom her lesson, and he could go home and take whatever she wanted to dish out at him.

Tommy could see the kitchen lights on when he emerged from the woods. Shapes moved through the window, and he recognized one of them as Dad. Tommy waited until he was gone, then walked toward the hole.

Nick, he whispered. It was dark, and all he could see was the outline of the hole. He sat on the ground beside it. Then he saw the shovel lying next to him. Tommy got on his knees and felt the ground and felt fresh dirt. The hole had been filled in.

Nick, can you hear me? Tommy whispered. He clawed at the dirt with his hands but wasn't getting anywhere, so he grabbed the shovel. He imagined Nick's muffled screams beneath him, drowning in the dirt.

Looking for this? Dad's voice said behind him.

Tommy turned around. Dad was holding the dirty five dollar bill.

And maybe you can explain this? Dad reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of dirty jewelry.

That's not yours, Tommy said.

Dad shoved the jewelry back in his pocket and pulled the shovel away from Tommy. What is with you? he yelled. Hiding things in the dirt like a damn dog?

You gotta let me dig the hole back up, Tommy said.

Come on, Dad said. He grabbed his arm and dragged him back into the house.

Tommy could smell onions and spices and meat cooking when he walked into the kitchen. Mom stood at the stove, steam from a pot floating over her head. Tommy couldn't tell if she was mad or not.

Go to your room, Dad said to Tommy.

Mom turned her head, and her face was red and puffy like she'd been crying. Lester, she said. Let him have some supper first.

Dad yanked at Tommy's shirt. He'll just go hungry tonight, Dad said, dragging him down the hall.

Lester, Mom called. He's got to eat.

You're gonna spoil him, you know? Dad yelled at Mom. He wants to act like a dog, we'll treat him like one.

Tommy spent the rest of the night awake in bed. He tried drawing Nick, but he didn't know what he looked like. He scribbled something on the pad, but he was really listening to Mom and Dad yelling at each other. Dad said it was Mom's fault Tommy was this way, and Mom said Dad put all these ideas in his head. Then Tommy heard stomping down the hallway, and a door slammed. He could hear Dad in the living room, watching T.V. He heard the T.V. all night.

It was still dark outside when Mom woke Tommy. Dad's truck wouldn't start, so she had to bring him to work, and Tommy and Cory couldn't stay home alone. Tommy wanted to stay in bed, but he was too tired to argue. He slept in the car, waking up several times to hear his parents arguing about money.

Tommy spent the day in his room, trying to draw, staying out of Mom's sight. He wanted to sneak outside to dig up Nick, but he knew it would be better to wait until dark. At six, Mom loaded Tommy and Cory up in the car to pick up Dad from work. Tommy watched

the clouds roll in the sky as they drove, like waves over a red sea. He could hear thunder far away. Soon it started to rain.

It was pouring by the time they made it to Dad's construction site. He sat down on the passenger seat and threw his wet hardhat and tool belt on the back seat between Tommy and Cory.

Mom drove home. The rain got heavier and coated the car with a blurriness. Mom's words got faster when Dad said he might get laid off, and they started arguing again.

What about your truck? Mom said. How are we going to pay for that? The dentist says Tommy's going to need braces. How-

It's just a rumor, Dad interrupted.

Still, we have to be prepared just in case.

We have plenty of money, Dad said.

What about the bills? And the kids' college funds? We have to put that money back in there.

We've still got the money from the oil company coming in, Dad said.

That's not going to last forever.

The road got bumpier the closer they got to home. Soon they were out of the city and on the outskirts of town where they lived. No other cars were on the road, and sheets of water slid down the windshield. Tree branches stretched out from the side of the road through flashes of lightning. Dad started telling Mom how to drive, and Cory was crying, and everything seemed to be getting louder.

Tommy heard Nick in his head. Not echoes or memories, but the real thing.

I've done it, Thomas, Nick said. Just like you wanted.

Tommy spun his head from side to side, looking for Nick. They were in front of the house. Lightning sparked in the sky, and Tommy could see a sketch of the oil rig in it, like in one of his drawings.

I can't see the driveway, Mom said.

It's right there, Dad said, grabbing the wheel.

I've got it, she said. They both tried to steer. Mom won.

Then there was another flash of light, brighter than a hundred lightning bolts put together. Tommy covered his eyes, and there was a loud boom that seemed to last forever.

Mommy, Cory cried.

What the hell? Dad said. That sounded like it hit right here. Where was it?

I don't know, Mom said. Jesus, you want me to start counting Mississippi's for you?

Just park the car, Dad said.

Mom pulled the car into the driveway and stopped. They waited a second. Dad opened his door first, leaned over, and got out of the car. Mom followed and opened the door for Cory. Tommy got out by himself.

The rain was cold and heavy and hit Tommy's head like pebbles. Mom tried to open her umbrella while Cory wrapped his arms around her leg and cried.

Just run to the house, she told him.

Oh Christ, Dad said. Tommy looked up to him and saw his eyes on the rig next door. Get back in the car, Dad yelled.

We're not going back out in this, Mom shouted.

Just get back in, Dad said, putting his big hand on Tommy's back and pushing him back into the car. Get Cory, he yelled at Mom.

Cory got in on his side, and Mom and Dad slammed both doors. Tommy saw their mouths moving, and Dad pointed next door.

One of the oil tanks was on fire. The blaze looked small from that distance, but it was hot and bright enough to cut through the rain, and it seemed to be getting bigger. Mom and Dad crossed each other in front of the car, then Dad got in the driver's seat, and Mom sat in the passenger side.

Oh God, Lester, she said, crying.

Dad, what happened? Tommy asked.

Dad pulled on the gear shift and looked at Tommy. Lightning struck one of the oil tanks, he said. It's on fire.

Is it gonna blow up? Tommy asked.

Buckle up, Dad said. He jerked the car backwards, throwing Tommy into the seat in front of him.

Lester, we have to go, Mom said.

We're going, Dad yelled.

The car pulled onto the road, and Dad pushed the gear stick. The rain was loud but not as loud as the engine or Cory and Mom's crying.

Tommy heard Nick's voice again. I did it, Nick said.

Dad drove to the church at the end of the road. Tommy could see a white steeple poking through the rain. Gravel crunched beneath the car as it pulled into the parking lot and stopped. People stood under the canopy of the church's foyer, dressed up for evening worship, waiting for the rain to let down. Dad pounded his palm against the steering wheel a few times, blaring the car's horn. The people looked at them.

Come on, Dad said, getting out of the car. Mom covered her face and sobbed through her fingers. She didn't move. Dad opened the back door and pulled Cory out. Jesus, Sharon, he yelled. Come on.

Tommy opened his door and stepped out. The rain was still cold, but he was already wet, so he barely noticed. Dad came around to his side and opened Mom's door. He said something to her in a low voice then hugged her. He got out and he patted her on the back.

Lester, a church man said. What's going on?

Call the fire department, Dad told the man. Mom was at his side and tried to walk, but the wet gravel slipped underneath her feet, and Dad had to catch her.

Dad shouted at the man and told him what happened. The man ran back to the church and inside a door, a group of fat deacons behind him.

Dad took Mom and sat her down against the wall on the dry foyer. She muttered things about our sins and about how God gives and takes, and Cory wrapped his arms around her, crying. Church women gathered around Mom and patted her on the back and told her everything would be OK. Tommy looked at Dad and saw him staring at a brick wall, his fingers over his face like a web. He didn't look like a man who hated Tommy or wanted to hurt him. He looked tired.

Tommy heard Nick's voice again. He told him things, and Tommy saw them in his mind.

He saw the house. He saw the oil tank burning. The flames snatched at the sky and grew higher and bigger around the tank. Everything happened in slow motion: the flames danced and swallowed the bulk of the tank. It grew black and started to fade, a skeletal frame replacing it. Then there was a white light, and that's all Tommy saw before his house was

torn apart. The windows shattered, and the wood cracked and splintered while the bricks crumbled. Then it all blew away like dandelions in the wind. The ground glowed with orange embers, and Nick was standing in the middle of it, smiling. Tommy finally saw what he looked like.

He looked just like Tommy.

Tommy, Dad said. Come here.

Tommy was still standing in the rain. People were staring at him.

It's all my fault, Tommy yelled.

Thomas.

It's all my fault.

Tommy ran away from the church and onto the road. Dad yelled, but Tommy didn't stop. He didn't care what Dad did to him. Dad didn't know that it was all Tommy's fault, and he had to stop it. Tommy had asked Nick to do it, but he didn't mean it. He was just mad.

The pavement was oily and lumpy beneath his feet. A rock got caught in his shoe and cut into his foot with every step, but he didn't stop. The rain kept falling, and the trees chattered beside the road. Tommy could hear Dad and the other men yelling behind him. He didn't stop. Their voices faded the faster he ran, and soon all he could hear was his blood thumping, and his breath, and Nick inside his head. He told Tommy to stop. He said he did it for him. He said Tommy wanted this.

Tommy saw flashing lights ahead. His house. Still standing, not burning. But for how long? He ran faster even though his breath felt like it was sucking fire into his lungs. He stopped in front of the house and saw fire trucks pulling up to the tank, their sirens wailing. Tommy ran to the back yard.

Stop it, he yelled when he saw the filled in hole. Stop it!

Nick didn't say anything. Tommy grabbed the shovel and slammed it into the dirt.

Why are you doing this? Tommy yelled. I didn't mean it. I don't want it anymore.

He slammed the bottom of the blade onto the ground, trying to pack the dirt in harder.

Tommy, Dad yelled from behind him.

Tommy ignored him and kept smashing the shovel onto the ground. He kept yelling, even after Dad grabbed the shovel from him and carried him out of the yard.

*
**

Tommy sits in his room, holding his sketch pad. He hasn't looked at it in over a year, not since the fire next door. He can hear the beeping of the Nintendo Maw-Maw game in the living room. Cory is trying to beat Tommy's Super Mario Bros. score. Above that, he can hear Mom and Dad talking. Dad is mad because the town promised they would pay for the paint job on his truck, and they never did. Last year when the fire trucks pulled into their driveway to get at the fire next door, they dragged their hoses across the yard and scratched up the back of Dad's truck. He says it's ridiculous that he's had to wait this long for them to pay since it's their fault. Mom tells him he should just forget about it. Dad says that's her problem—she forgets about everything.

Tommy looks at the last thing he drew in the sketch pad the night before the fire. It's a picture of his house burning. The flames are just a mess of sloppy triangles, and the house looks flat. Circles and squares that are supposed to be Mom, Dad, and Cory are running out

of the house, but Tommy is sitting in his room with Nick, smiling. The flames don't hurt them. He doesn't remember drawing it.

Tommy doesn't hear Nick's voice anymore. He forgot what it sounds like.

He picks up his pencil and turns to a fresh page in the sketch pad and tries to draw something new.

Drownings

Cory leaned over the river's bank, his feet just inches from the bubbling waters that rushed past and threatened to swallow him. The day before, three boys from town disappeared into these waters. He wondered if this was the spot where it happened. The river bottlenecked at this spot, the other side only fifty feet away. He studied the current and imagined it devouring the boys as they tried to swim across.

Thunder groaned from the ugly, gray sky. Rain poured out again. The river kept rising and would climb over the bank soon, probably the next day. Cory felt the slippery mud shift under his weight. Any sudden movement, and he would go in too.

"Hey, kid," a voice boomed from behind him. "Get away from there."

Cory turned around. Four men in shiny, yellow, rain slicks jogged toward him.

"What are you, crazy?" another shouted. He grabbed Cory's shoulder and pulled him away from the bank. "Last thing we need is another kid to look for."

"I just wanted to see," Cory said. "I wanted to help the search." He thought a ten year-old kid like him might be able to go places, see things that an adult would miss. It seemed exciting, and he wanted to be a part of it.

"Hey, Perry," the man yelled. "Get this boy out of here."

The largest of the men lumbered toward Cory and grabbed his wrist. "Come on," he said, leading him away.

"You're Sheriff Mark's nephew, huh?" Perry asked.

"Yeah," Cory said. He recognized the man's voice from visits to his uncle's station.

"He ain't gonna be too happy to hear about this, son."

Cory didn't believe him. His uncle always told him how smart he was. Still, the man's size kept him quiet.

They reached the swath that Radcliffe Road cut through the woods. More rain fell, cutting through the little shelter offered by the trees.

"Have you found them yet?" Cory asked.

The man looked down. Hidden by a yellow vinyl hood, his face seemed twisted and meshed, like an unfinished sculpture. "No," he said. "Not yet."

"What's taking so long?"

"It's this damn weather. Can't get out there in the water. Might get pulled under ourselves."

"I thought I might find them."

"That'd be a stroke of luck," Perry said. "Come on."

The rain paused. Perry motioned for Cory to follow him across the road. They got into a truck, a brand new Dodge Ram, just as the storm kicked back in.

"Jesus Christ." Perry slammed his fist on the steering wheel and looked toward the sky. The clouds seemed to tremble. "Ain't you gonna let up none?" he shouted at them.

"We prayed for all the lost boys in church today," Cory said. "And the people looking for them." It was when he thought of helping. Prayer was good and everything, but his dad always said praying won't put food on the table. Sometimes you have to do.

Perry said nothing.

"How long is it supposed to rain?" Cory asked.

Perry grunted and put the truck into first gear, easing it onto the drenched road.

“Do you know them?” Cory’s dad asked at dinner.

“I only know Billy Tavers. He sits in front of me in homeroom. The other kids were in high school.” His father didn’t ask why he came home soaked or where he had been. He never seemed to notice much anymore, especially when it came to Cory.

His older brother, Thomas, sat on a bar stool at the counter. No one called him Thomas but Mom, so Cory did too. Thomas wore a black Megadeth t-shirt and black hair to match. “They were idiots,” he said. “They got what they deserved.”

“They did not,” Cory said. Thomas thought he knew everything. He always had. Cory had seen his report cards, though. He knew better.

“Y’all.” Dad dropped his fork. “Talk about this after dinner.”

“Where’s Mom?” Thomas asked, strands of spaghetti oozing from his fork. “I’m tired of eating this crap.”

“She’s at the library,” Dad said. “Studying. Cook your own food if you don’t like mine.”

“I would if you’d let me.” Thomas hunched over, peering over his plate.

“I think it’s good, Dad,” Cory said. He wished his brother would shut up. He wished it almost every night. He knew what was coming.

Thomas slammed his fork on the counter. “Oh, shut up, you little sycophant.”

“I think you better be the one that shuts up, Tommy,” Dad said. His voice was thin, like a T.V. turned almost all the way down.

Thomas stood up. “Well, can’t you cook anything besides spaghetti? I mean, God, we could at least have McDonald’s or something.”

“I’m doing what I can. We all have to sacrifice while your mom’s in school.”

“I liked things just fine before,” Thomas yelled.

Cory looked down at his plate, pretending not to hear. He knew he was no longer in the room. He might as well be part of the wall. He tried to think of Billy instead and ways he could help.

“We’re just trying to give you a better life,” Dad said.

“Better than what? It sucks worse now.”

Dad stood up and shoved a finger at Thomas. “Don’t you talk to me like that.”

“I don’t have to listen to you,” Thomas shouted back.

“When you’re under my roof—“

“Oh, blah, blah, blah,” Thomas interrupted. “You talk like you’re on fucking T.V.”

“Don’t you—“ Dad lifted a hand, ready to strike, but held it in the air. Cory almost flinched, even though it wasn’t aimed at him. “Show me some respect.”

“Show me some respect, you old fool.”

Dad slapped Thomas across the face.

“You don’t hit me,” Thomas yelled. He tackled Dad. The two flailed around the kitchen like two cartoon characters. All they needed was a cloud of dust.

“I’m going to my room,” Cory said, but he knew they didn’t hear. This happened all the time, especially since Thomas had gotten as tall as Dad. They traded blows, broke a few dishes, then kept away from each other until Mom came home to mend things. Or at least that’s what she used to do.

Cory was in bed by the time his mother made it home. He didn't have a clock in his room, but he knew it had to be at least midnight. Before she went back to college, she had him in bed by ten every night. But Dad didn't bother.

Cory sat up in his bed and listened. He knew what was going to happen. The front door would creak open like it was a bell marking the start of a boxing match. Dad would start with the accusations: "Where you been?"; "What you been doing?"; "Who you been with?" Mom would fend him off, answering each with, "None of your damn business." The yelling would start, and Dad would curse, and Mom would call him stupid. It was like they were actors rehearsing the same script every night, adding small changes each time, trying to make it perfect.

Heavy metal music blasted through the wall from Thomas' room. Cory still heard his parents, but he couldn't make out the words. He closed his eyes and pulled the pillow over his head. Eventually, he fell asleep.

The next morning, Mom threw the door open and flooded Cory's bedroom with light. "Time for school," she said and rushed back down the hallway.

Cory rose slowly and dressed, trying to shake the sleep from his head. By the time he reached the kitchen, his mother was gone.

He picked the glass with the least food on it from the sink and rinsed it out then poured in some orange juice. The house felt empty. Thomas was still asleep. Dad was already at work.

The morning newspaper sat on the kitchen table. Cory looked at the front page. A picture of Billy Tavers sat above an article on the search. Billy smiled in the picture, his hair spiked, his eyes shifted slightly to the side. The picture came from last year's yearbook. Billy wouldn't look like that anymore. The spiked look went out months before.

Cory didn't want to go to school. He imagined himself in homeroom, listening to Miss Torchia ramble about Louisiana history, staring at the empty desk in front of him. Cory had only been to one funeral-- his cousin's, the year before. He died in a burning car, so the casket was closed. Cory sat in the third pew, his eyes locked on the coffin, trying to imagine what was inside. Photos sat above the casket: prom pictures, yearbook pictures, and holiday pictures, but all Cory could see was the charred corpse inside that kept materializing in his mind. He couldn't stop thinking about that coffin for days. He wanted to see what was inside. He imagined staring at Billy's desk the way he stared at that coffin. He wouldn't be able to concentrate.

A clock rang through the house. The bus would be by in a few minutes. Cory waited until it passed then walked outside. Sunlight tried to poke through the sky. The rain held back. Cory picked his bicycle off the ground. His uncle was the sheriff of the town of Delta's Heart, and the station was only two miles away. That's where Cory wanted to be. No one listened to him at home. No one even noticed he was alive. But his uncle said Cory was smart. He would listen, and he could let Cory help. They could find the lost boys, and people would know that Cory played a role. He wouldn't be part of the wall anymore.

Cory chained his bicycle to a railing in front of the sheriff's station. He saw his uncle's police cruiser parked out front. No other cars were around. Inside, the station's lobby was dim and empty. Closed blinds covered the windows, a few streaks of dusty sunlight breaking through holes. Inside the lobby were a couple of green, vinyl, padded chairs, an empty bubble gum machine, and a bare wooden desk. The station had been part of the post office, but then that moved to a new building, and the sheriff was left alone here.

"Uncle Mark?" Cory walked toward the sheriff's office. The lights were on inside, and the door was slightly ajar, but no one answered. Cory called again. Still no answer. He pushed the door open.

The office wasn't much bigger than Cory's bedroom. Folders overflowed from file cabinets, flooding the floor with paper. Burger King wrappers hung out of the garbage can. The green light of a computer screen glowed over a desk buried in files, a phone, and a full ash tray. Cory's uncle slumped over the desk, his head resting on his folded arms, a baseball cap covering his face. An empty brown bottle leaned against his uncle's arm, the kind he always drank at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

"Uncle Mark?"

His uncle didn't move.

A thousand scenarios scripted themselves in Cory's mind. What if his uncle was dead? What if robbers had broken in and shot him cold in the chest? Every cop movie Corey ever saw seemed to converge on the desk, one possibility begetting ten more.

Then something beeped. Cory froze like a criminal. It beeped again. Cory traced the sound to a coffee table in the far corner. The beep grew into a shrill and exploded in static, turning into a gentle whir. Paper rustled. A fax machine on the table spat out a sheet.

A clue! Whoever had done this to his uncle was now leaving a clue. Cory waited until the fax machine went silent and crept to it, his weight on his toes.

He pulled the top sheet from the fax machine. The paper felt warm. It showed a photocopy of a photograph. Cory held the paper to the light of the computer screen. It was a picture of a person, maybe more than one. Cory could make out limbs, but they seemed twisted and out of proportion. The legs looked flipped over, and the arms seemed twisted together, like a stack of old sock dolls. A line snaked through the people, connecting them at the waist. It reminded him of a video he caught Thomas watching one time that had blurry pictures of dead bodies from wars. They never seemed real.

“Who’s there?” a voice grumbled behind him. Cory turned around but didn’t answer. Uncle Mark lifted his head, the baseball cap falling off, loose brown hair spilling over his eyes. He squinted. “Who’re you?”

“It’s me,” Cory said.

“Who?” Mark rubbed his eyes with the palm of his hand, pushing hard, like he was trying to keep something from spilling out.

“Cory.”

Mark shook his head and opened his thin eyes completely. Light stubble dotted his face. Cory knew his uncle was close to Dad’s age, but Mark always seemed to look so much older.

“Cory?” Mark stood and stretched, then looked around. Finally, he seemed to recognize Cory. “What are you doing here?”

“Look,” Cory said, holding up the fax.

Mark plucked the paper from Cory’s hand and studied the image. “Oh, Jesus.”

Cory felt a tinge of excitement. “What is it?”

Mark fumbled through the mess on the coffee table and leafed through the other faxes. He turned on an overhead lamp. He held one sheet high to the light like an offering and studied it carefully. Cory could make out the black hues of ink as the light shined through the paper. It seemed to be a head, or something shaped like one.

Mark breathed a loud, hoarse sigh and sat down. He dropped the papers on the desk and slumped his face into his hands, his elbows on his thighs. “Why are you here, Cory?” he asked, his voice muffled through his fingers. “Perry said you was down at the river yesterday.”

“I wanted to help find Billy.”

Mark jabbed a thumb at the faxes. “Too late.” He flipped over the pages. “Got a call this morning from Springfield. Some bodies washed up there, they said. Had to be our boys.” Cory moved closer and examined the blotchy photos. The shapes seemed right, but the faces were black and featureless, like a mannequin’s. “Can you believe this shit?” Mark said. “Two days we’re thinking they got swept out to the Mississippi, and come to find out they’re right under our noses all along. It looks like they tied themselves together with a rope. Must’ve thought if one of them got caught in the current, then the others could drag him back. Instead, it’s probably what killed them. You know, other than the drowning.” Mark picked up the faxes and ran his eyes over them again. “Stupid kids. I swear.”

“Oh.” Cory felt disappointed, like someone had told him the ending of a movie he wanted to see. “What now?”

“What now?” Mark folded the faxes and shoved them in his back pocket. “Why ain’t you in school?”

“I wanted to help you. I didn’t want to be there.”

“Well let’s get you back. I’ll square things with the principal.”

“No,” Cory shouted, louder than he meant.

“Yes. You lucky I don’t call your daddy.” Mark picked up the phone. He dialed a number and asked for Principal Barker. Cory listened as his uncle explained about Billy, then, almost like a footnote, mentioned Cory. He said goodbye and hung up. “Everything’s copasetic. Barker said I could bring you back and you won’t get in trouble.”

“Can’t I just stay with you today?”

“Jesus, kid. I got things to do.”

“I can come with you.”

“No.”

“Why not?” Cory asked. He knew people at school would be talking about Billy and what happened, but Cory didn’t want to talk. He wanted to be a part of it like his uncle was. Then the kids could talk about that.

“Listen,” Mark said. “I got to take care of this shit.”

Cory felt goose bumps on his skin. “You have to go get the bodies?”

“No,” Mark answered. “Coroner from Baton Rouge’s gonna do that. But I gotta...”

He shook his head. “Look, I gotta go tell the kids’ parents we found their boys.”

“Let me come,” Cory said. “I know where Billy lives.”

“I don’t think so. Come on.”

“What do you say we grab a bite first?” Mark said as they drove through town. “I ain’t had a decent meal in three days. Then I’ll take you to school.”

“Shouldn’t you be going to Billy’s house to tell his parents right away?” Cory asked. He sometimes fantasized about being kidnapped and murdered. He imagined his uncle coming to his house and telling his parents. Cory wanted to see how it was handled. He wanted to see parents grieving, what it looked like when they cared.

Mark turned the police cruiser down the main highway. “It’s not like they don’t already know. I first heard about it right after daybreak. The parents probably got a lot of calls about it already. Me going, it’s just a formality.”

Mark slowed down as they reached the Burger King on the edge of town. A line of cars snaked out from the drive-thru. Mark pulled in. “How things at home?” he asked.

“The same,” Cory said.

“Tommy ain’t still running away, is he?”

Cory shook his head.

“Thank God that phase is over.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Mark slammed his fist against the steering wheel. “I do not feel like dealing with all these folks right now,” he said and pulled the cruiser out of the line. “Ever ate at the Stagecoach, kid?”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s right outside the city limits. They got good burgers.”

Cory recognized the Stagecoach when his uncle pulled into its parking lot, one of many bars nestled on a highway strip right outside Delta’s Heart. Mark parked the car and got out. Cory waited inside and ran his eyes over the tiny, white sign by the bar’s door with hand painted letters that said, “NO ONE UNDER 21 ADMITTED.”

“Come on,” Mark said.

“I don’t think I’m old enough.” He always wondered what was in these places, but Dad never went to one.

“Ah.” Mark shrugged. “You’re with me. They ain’t gonna say nothing.” He led Cory to the entrance. A bar stool propped the front door open. Country music played softly inside.

Cory followed his uncle to the bar. Mark sat down on a stool and motioned for Cory to sit next to him. Cory climbed the stool like a ladder and sat down on the round, green, cushioned seat.

“Hey, Sheila,” Mark yelled.

A large, child-faced woman walked to them from the other side of the bar. She flicked short strands of blonde hair from her face and smiled at Mark. “Hey now,” she said.

“You ain’t got no jurisdiction here, Sheriff.”

“That so?” Mark said. “Then how about a drink?” They both laughed.

Cory stared at them like they were stupid.

“Mark,” Sheila said. “You know ain’t no kids allowed in here.”

“Aw.” Mark swatted at the air. “That’s my nephew.”

“Nephew?” she said. “This Sharon’s boy?”

“The youngest,” Mark answered.

She hitched her weight forward and cupped Cory’s chin in her hand. “Well let me get a look at you.” She turned his face from side to side like she was inspecting a tomato. “You got your mamma’s cheeks.”

“And his daddy’s waywardness.” Mark took out a pack of cigarettes and shoved one in his mouth.

“You hush now.” Sheila slid an ashtray down the bar to Mark, her eyes still on Cory. “How old are you now?”

“Ten.”

“You know your mamma used to babysit me when I was a little younger than you?” Sheila asked.

“No,” Cory said. He tried to picture Mom with another kid. A girl even.

Shelia sighed like a tire with a leak. “Ain’t you got school today?”

“It’s a holiday,” Cory answered.

“Ain’t no goddamn holiday,” a loud voice boomed from the far end of the bar. A skinny, hairy man sat there, a beer bottle in his hand. “You a hooky player.”

“Now, now,” Sheila said, walking to the hairy man. “You just suck on this, OK?” She reached into a cooler and pulled out a brown Budweiser bottle, popped the cap and slid it to the man.

“Just like a baby,” she said when she got back to Cory and Mark. “All he needs is something wet in his mouth.” She slid out a yellow notepad from the front pocket on her blouse. “So what can I get y’all?”

“Give us a couple specials,” Mark said.

“Couple specials,” Sheila repeated, writing on the pad. “And to drink?”

“Do you have Coke?” Cory asked.

“Uh-huh.” She turned to Mark. “You?”

“What the hell,” Mark said. “Give me a Bud.”

“Ain’t you on duty?”

“I’m always on duty.” Mark looked over his shoulder at the exit. “But like you said, ain’t my jurisdiction.”

“Whatever you say, Sheriff.”

The food arrived a half hour later. A spindly kid not much older than Thomas brought it out, lumps of bread, meat, and vegetables piled high on scratchy, white, ceramic plates. Cory didn’t know where to start.

“Now that’s a burger,” Mark said, shoving it into his mouth. “Hey, Sheila,” he yelled, chewed bits of meat falling from his lips. “How about another beer?”

Five minutes later, Cory managed to finish a few bites of his burger. It was bloody inside, not like the burgers Dad brought home from McDonald’s. Mark swallowed the last of his and held up his empty beer bottle, waving it like a tiny bell.

Sheila pulled another from the cooler. “You sure you want another?” she asked.

“Just need to wash this down,” Mark said.

Another five minutes.

“Last one. Then I’d best be going.”

Six minutes, thirty-seven seconds. Cory watched a Budweiser clock tick.

“One for the road.”

Cory rested his chin on the bar, his eyes creeping over the burger he had given up on. He wanted to remind Mark about Billy, but he’d seen his uncle drink enough at Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners to know he wouldn’t listen. Minutes turned to hours. He started to get mad. What if someone told Billy’s parents before they did?

By three o’clock, Uncle Mark was as drunk as Cory had ever seen him.

“Let me tell you about these sons of bitches,” Mark yelled. “These motherfuckers, sitting up on their pedestals, taking the time out from beating their wives to tell me how to do my job. They can take a dive right into that river themselves. See how long it takes me to find THEM.”

“Mark,” Sheila said. She rolled her eyes toward Cory.

“What?” Mark patted Cory on the back. “Ain’t like you never heard this shit before, right?”

Cory said nothing. He thought of Thomas and his dad.

“He’s heard worse, ain’t you, Cor? Hell, he LIVES this shit every day. His brother’s a trip to juvenile hall just waiting to happen. His momma, she’s crazier than a shit house rat. And I know a thing or two about crazy women.”

“Mark,” Sheila shouted.

“And his daddy,” Mark continued. “If that ain’t one beaten dog, then let me give you the stick.”

Shelia snatched the beer from Mark’s hand.

“What the fuck?” Mark said.

“That’s his daddy you’re talking about. That’s your brother.”

“Show me the proof,” Mark answered.

Sheila pulled a garbage can up to the bar. “I think you’ve had your last one,” she told Mark, sweeping all the empty bottles into the can with one stroke of her arm.

“Fuck, me and the kid got work to do anyway. Come on, Cor.” Mark tried to stand up. His legs looked like they were made of rubber. “Shit,” he said, stumbling to his knees.

“Uncle Mark,” Cory shouted, jumping from his stool. He grabbed his uncle’s shoulder, helping him keep his balance.

“Oh God,” Sheila said, watching them. “Earl,” she yelled.

A fat, oily man lumbered over to them from the back. “Not again,” he said. “Sheila, ain’t I warned you about this?”

“He seemed under control,” Sheila said.

Earl helped Mark to his feet. “What the hell’s a kid doing here?” Earl asked.

“Mark brought him.”

“Well get him out of here.” Earl dragged Mark off to a side table.

Cory could hear his uncle mumbling. The only word he could make out was, “Sorry.” He’d heard his uncle say it before.

Sheila let Cory use the phone behind the bar to call home, but no one answered. It was four o’clock, and Cory knew his dad was home from work. He pictured the darkened

house, his father sitting alone in front of the TV, ignoring the phone. He never answered, said it was always bill collectors. After Cory made several attempts, Sheila picked up her purse and offered to take Cory home.

She drove a blue, battered Malibu Classic, the back window covered in duct tape and cardboard. The engine started after three or four cranks, and Sheila pulled the car onto the highway. She lit a cigarette.

“You know that’s bad for you,” Cory said.

“Living’s bad for you,” Sheila answered. She looked at him. “I didn’t mean that.”

“I have to get my bike,” Cory said.

“Well where is it?”

“At the sheriff’s station.” Cory punctuated the sentence with a cough.

“Oh, sorry.” Sheila rolled down her window. “Well, it should be safe there, huh?”

“I have to bring it home. If I don’t, my dad will beat me.”

“You’re joking.”

“No,” Cory lied. Dad never hit him, not with anything harder than a belt, and he couldn’t remember the last time that happened. “He’ll tell me how much the bike cost, then how many hours he had to work to pay for it. He wants me to know how much of his life he spent on me.” That part was true.

“OK. We’ll get the bike.”

Sheila pulled the car up to the station.

“I’ll just ride it home,” Cory said. “It’s not far.”

“You ain’t gonna get in trouble for this?” Sheila asked, putting the car in park.

“No.” Cory looked at his bike, still chained where he left it.

“Your momma and me go way back, you know. Just have her call me if she don’t believe you. She knows what Mark’s like.”

“You don’t need to. She doesn’t care anymore.”

“Don’t you be talking like that. Of course she cares.” Her mouth formed a smile, the kind adults made that Cory knew was fake.

“Whatever.” He opened the door and swung his legs out of the car. Rain sprinkled over his skin.

“You all right?” Sheila asked.

“Yeah.”

“You’re the most precious thing in the world to her, you know?”

Cory got out of the car.

“Listen to me,” Sheila said. “I’d give anything to have a boy of my own like you. Your momma knows how lucky she is.”

Cory wanted to say, “Then why is she never there?” But he kept silent.

“I was gonna have a baby once, but I lost it. Ain’t nothing worse than that.”

“OK,” Cory said. He thought of Billy Tavers’ empty desk. He slammed the car door and ran toward his bike, never looking back at Sheila.

Cory had no intention of going home. He unchained his bike and got on it. He thought of the fax his uncle had shown him, the black-smearing faces staring back at him. He knew that somewhere underneath all that ink was the face of Billy Tavers. Cory pictured him lying under a white sheet in some morgue, toe-tagged, his body bloated and wrinkled like he’d taken a bath for too long. Cory felt sorry for him. Not because he was dead but because he was alone. Alone in that morgue, his family missing him. Cory imagined himself in that

morgue, imagined what his family would do when they heard, how sorry they would be for everything. He wanted to see it for himself.

He rode his bike onto the wet road. The day was almost over. This couldn't wait until tomorrow.

The Tavers lived down the back roads behind the school, roughly three miles away. Cory navigated the afternoon traffic, darting between cars and empty lots. The sky blackened as he reached the gravel road where the Tavers lived. Cory threw down his bike, preferring to run the rest of the way. It would be faster than biking.

The Tavers had a single-wide trailer situated on a dirt patch at the end of the gravel road. Mr. Tavers repaired dump trucks at the sand pit. Rusted, crusted engine parts that he intended to sell but never did rotted in the yard. Cory had been friends with a neighbor of the Tavers a long time ago. He recognized the smell of the oil-stained grass as he trampled toward the trailer.

He slowed to a walk to catch his breath. Oily mud streaked with rainbows splashed below him. Lights flashed in the trailer, and the screams of a television set pounded through the walls. Cory reached the trailer just as the screen door opened. Mr. Tavers, a big, sweaty man with short, curly, black hair and tiny, mean eyes, stepped out.

“Who the hell you?” Mr. Tavers asked.

“I'm...” Cory hesitated. “I'm a friend of Billy's”

“Billy ain't here.” Mr. Tavers turned around, letting the screen door slam behind him.

“No,” Cory shouted, grabbing the door handle.

“Goddamn it boy, I just said—“

Cory interrupted him. "I know. I mean, I know he's not here. I'm supposed to tell you something."

"What's your name?" Mr. Tavers asked.

"Cory Pennington."

"As in Sheriff Pennington?" Mr. Tavers moved his eyes to the side as if churning out a thought.

"Yeah."

"Come on in, then." Mr. Tavers opened the door.

The trailer smelled like the school bathroom. Mrs. Tavers, a skinny, wrinkled woman, sat on a worn couch, bent over, her hands clutching at her face tightly. She whimpered like a dog.

The door slammed shut, and Mr. Tavers walked in. He walked to the big, blue upholstered recliner in the center of the room and dropped onto it. He picked up the remote and turned the T.V. up.

"So what you have to say?" he said, his eyes on the TV screen.

"I..." He tried to imagine what his uncle would have said. "They found Billy."

A muzzled gasp shot out of Mrs. Tavers.

"Pipe down," Mr. Tavers said, swatting at the empty air between him and his wife.

"That's yesterday's news." He pointed at the T.V. "Been all over the box since I got home. Principal Barker even called me at work to give me his condolences." He raised his upper lip, showing the remains of his teeth. "Sheriff got kids making his calls now?"

Cory opened his mouth to reply but swallowed the words instead.

"That all?" Mr. Tavers said.

“No. Uncle Mark, I mean Sheriff Pennington. He needed you to go to the morgue. To identify Billy.” That sounded right.

“I ain’t driving way the hell out there to see something I don’t wanna see. They know it’s him.”

Mrs. Tavers looked up. “We should go,” she said. “We have to go.”

“That what you want to see?” Mr. Tavers stood up and pointed his finger at her. “You wanna see that face of his after two days in the water? You know what them fish do to a piece of meat that size?”

“Wilson,” she cried. “Billy.” The name seemed to drown in the bottom of her throat.

Cory saw movement down the hall. He turned and saw two kids: a boy and a girl, no older than three or four, wearing tattered, brown pajamas. They looked at him and dashed back down the hall like field mice.

A big hand wrapped around Cory’s shoulder and squeezed tightly. “Come on, boy.” Mr. Tavers pushed him toward the door and led him outside. “I don’t appreciate this one bit,” he yelled. “I don’t know what the hell Sheriff’s deal is, sending a runt like you to stir up shit here.”

“I just wanted to help,” Cory said, barely.

“You tell your uncle,” Mr. Tavers said, wagging his finger at Cory. “You tell him what he needs to worry about ain’t identifying no dead boys. What he needs to identify is a good lawyer.”

“Why?”

“I done spoke to the other kids’ parents, and we talking to one of them big time lawyers from the T.V. He say we gonna sue them all. You go and tell your uncle that.”

“It was an accident,” Cory said.

“Ain’t no accidents in this world. We gonna sue God if we have to. You go and tell all them folks that.”

As Cory pedaled home, the rain came down, light at first, barely pellets, held back some by the column of trees that rose and hung over both sides of the road like the roof of a church. The downfall picked up as he wheeled onto River Road, long sharp spears of water dropping from the sky, their trajectory arched from the wind. Beyond the woods, the river hissed, water climbing over its bank and, at the lowest points, spilling out onto the road. The streets would be flooded and blocked off by morning. If it was bad enough, there might not be any school.

Cory wanted to be home more than anything. If Billy’s house was what other kid’s houses were like, then he didn’t have it that bad. Things could get better at his home. He wanted to see his father and tell him that everything was OK. He wanted to hug his mother and beg her to come back home and make everything all right.

Finally, he saw his house. The porch light blasted through the rain. No cars were in the driveway. Where were they?

Cory pulled into the driveway and threw down his bike. He ran to the porch. A scream pierced the windows. He thought it was his parents, but then he heard another and realized it was just Thomas’s stereo. Bass rumbled through the walls, trying to keep time with the thunder outside.

Then a headlight flooded the porch. Cory turned around and saw his father's truck pull into the driveway. His mother's car followed. The engines cut, and the headlights faded. Doors slammed, and Cory saw his parents dashing through the rain to the house.

"Cory," Mom yelled. The wooden porch shuddered under his feet as she ran across it. Dad slowly followed behind.

Mom dropped to her knees and wrapped her wet arms around Cory. "We thought you'd run away," she said, choking on the words. "We thought you'd gone down to the river."

Cory hugged her back, the first time he'd done so in forever. He looked up at his dad. The man's eyes were red and wet. He looked like a different person. He laid a hand on his wife's shoulder but didn't say anything.

"Come inside," Mom said. "You're soaked." She stood up and opened the door. They all went into the house.

A loud boom shook the hallway. It almost sounded like thunder, but it came from Thomas' room. The doorknob trembled with every thud, the music rattling framed photos on the walls.

"What is that goddamn racket?" Cory's father yelled, stomping down the hall.

"Lester," his mother said. "Remember."

His father looked back at her and slowed down his walk. He knocked on Thomas' door and opened it. Thomas yelled and cursed. Their father yelled and cursed back.

Cory wished they could hear it the way he did. The clattering, the screaming, the knocking: it was the soundtrack of their lives. You could try to turn it down, but it wasn't

going away. It welled up and surrounded them, spilling from the rooms. You could drown in it if you weren't careful.

Cory walked to his room and took off his wet clothes, listening to his parents and Thomas yell at one another. Then the lights flickered off. The house fell silent. Outside, the storm raged. He'd have to wait it out.

Father's Day

The clock radio on the night stand tells me it's seven a.m. The caller ID on the phone flashes green and tells me my son's calling from jail again. The phone makes no sound. My wife, Sharon, turned the ringer off last night. I sit on the edge of the bed and watch the receiver light up. I wait for it to stop, lean over, and erase the number from the memory.

I stand up and stretch. Four twelve hour shifts at the construction site crawl down my back, and I feel every one of them. I must've stumbled into bed around four a.m. after watching TV all night, but I can't say for sure if I got any sleep. Sharon has her back to me in the bed, hugging the side, just that close to falling off. She mumbles my name, Lester. Asks if Cory's calling again. I tell her no and lie back down to see if I can get some sleep. Instead, once I close my eyes, all these thoughts go banging around in my head of how we got here.

It was Sharon's idea to turn the ringer off at night, to ignore Cory's calls from the town jail. Otherwise, she said, we'd have had him in our ears for the past two weeks since he got arrested, begging us to come get him out. It was Sharon's idea to leave him there too.

I guess I saw it coming long before she did. I knew Cory'd been messing with drugs since he was in high school. Weed, pills, coke, whatever the hell the kids do these days. I'd caught the smell of pot on him a few times and mentioned it, but he denied it. Denying's what he does best. That and lie.

Somehow he still graduated high school. Then came the DUI's, two of them in as many months. The first, Cory totaled his car, the used one that I'd bought him. He was meant to pay me back for it by working down at the job site where I was the foreman. I didn't have any delusions, though. I know my own son. Couple of weeks in and he started to play sick,

pretended he couldn't hack the work. I had to drag him out of bed, sometimes physically. He fought me on that. We had some real knock downs over it.

That's how the window in his bedroom got busted. He must've been on something that morning, seemed stronger than normal. I had to match him. He's about my height, a little over six feet, but he's got a skinny kid's body. When push came to shove, I ended up shoving him right through the glass. I wasn't trying to hurt him. Things just got out of hand. Sharon made a fuss over it, and that was the end of Cory coming to work with me. That's usually how Sharon works things. She stays out of them until they got too bad, then swoops in like the voice of reason, making me look like a fool.

Cory's second DUI came a few weeks after the first. His license was revoked, but that didn't stop him from taking the wheel of his punk friend's car after they downed a case of beer at the pool hall. My brother Mark is the town sheriff, and Cory's lucky for that, cause Mark kept treating him with kid gloves. We picked Cory up from jail and decided we'd crack down on the boy this time. We cut off all his funds and wouldn't give him rides anywhere. So Cory one-upped us and set up his own business, selling pills and weed out of the house during the day while me and Sharon was at work.

I picked up on it pretty quick. I noticed weird numbers on the Caller ID when I got home. I started taking longer lunches, drove by the house, saw the activity: kids I'd never seen before, niggers who had no business being in our neighborhood.

I didn't tell anyone though, especially not Sharon. She'd have said I was being paranoid. After the second DUI, Cory was made to see a counselor. After a couple of sessions with the boy, the counselor decided he needed to see all three of us. I refused, didn't want to be analyzed, didn't need to hear someone who didn't know me from Adam talk about

my temper and "rage issues." Sharon still went, and the counselor worked his mumbo-jumbo on her, put all kinds of ideas in her head. She even started thinking I had some kind of hatred in me for Cory, given the way I fought with the boy all the time. She just didn't understand. It's not something you can explain to a mother. Sometimes a father's love for his son doesn't take on sweet forms. Sometimes it's ugly.

I have my own way of doing things. I went to Radio Shack, bought a tape recorder that could tap into phones, hooked it up in the attic, and turned it on in the mornings. Soon I had hours of proof of what the boy'd been up to. I could have taken it straight to Mark, but he could have let it slide too, especially if Sharon got involved. Mark's never been good at dealing with crying women. Besides, I don't like bringing my problems to others. I was sure I could handle it myself. I'd confront the boy and show him what I knew, then get him back to work with me and off the drugs, or else. Tape recorders don't lie.

Then Cory went and did it. Got piss drunk one night with his punk friends, ended up in a fight with some other punks. They all got arrested, and surprise surprise, half a dozen of them got busted for possession.

To my real surprise, Sharon said we was gonna get tough with him. She said we'd leave him there, let him sit it out until his court date in two months. It isn't what I had in mind. I wanted to get him home where I could keep an eye on him. I had the boy's number this time. I knew if I threatened him with the tapes, threatened to take it over Mark's head, he'd know he was screwed. I could straighten him up this time. Me and Sharon fought about it. Finally I said to hell with it; let her try it her way.

It's noon when I wake up. Sharon's long gone, off to see her dad for the day. I get dressed, get out my toolbox, and head to Cory's room. It's pitch black in there, even at midday. After the boy broke the window, I just patched it up with a piece of plywood. Today I mean to fix it.

I take measurements on the window and get in my truck and head out. First stop is the Home Depot out of town, where I spend half an hour haggling with a sales boy who claims he has a window that won't break and wants to charge me an extra two hundred for. I finally get him to give up and sell me the cheapest one he's got.

Next stop, I head to the Delta's Heart sheriff's station where Cory's locked up. Now I know what Sharon said, that we can't see or talk to him. She says she wants him to see where he's headed, that he'll be alone if he goes there. That's just her way of copping out, because she knows she can't trust herself. She knows the second she sees him behind bars, her eyes'll start stinging and she'll be posting bail in a minute.

I intend to talk to the boy, to talk it over like men. See if we can't work something out. There's no cause for all this lying. He can't fool me, has never been able to. I can see what's in his head right on his eyes just like they were my own. They pretty much are.

It's two p.m. when I get to the jail. Visiting hours are probably over, but with Mark being sheriff, I don't see a problem. First thing I hear when I walk inside is my name. "Uncle Lester!" A teenage girl runs up to me, blonde and beautiful. Mark's girl, Amanda, who I haven't seen in awhile. She's got a textbook in her hand, but she still wraps her arms around me.

"Uh, hey," I say, patting her on the back. I don't remember the last time I hugged anyone. Not my boys or my wife. I peel myself away.

"Guess you here to see Cory, huh?" she asks.

"Yeah. You down to see your dad for the weekend?"

"Lester." Mark walks in, my kid brother, all dressed up in sheriff's garb. I'll never get used to it.

"Daddy." Amanda runs up to him, kisses his cheek.

He's got this smug smile on his face, and he makes sure to let me see it.

Sure, I want to say. Easy to get that kind of affection from a daughter. Try to get it from a son.

"I want to talk to Cory," I say.

"Sharon know you're here?" Mark asks.

I don't say anything.

"It's OK, Lester. Come on."

I follow him down a hall. "How's he doing?" I ask.

"He goes up and down. Last of his buddies posted bail the other day, so he's a little bummed being alone. Put me at ease, though. No way this jail was meant to hold that many kids. Ain't supposed to have more than two drunks at a time. But Amanda's been in there today, talking to him, keeping him company while I work."

"We ain't trying to neglect-"

"I know," he interrupts. "Sharon's told me all about what you're doing. I'm fine with it."

"When was that?" I ask. She's never mentioned that she'd talked to Mark.

"She calls everyday to check up on him. Called just this morning, actually. I understand what y'all are trying to do."

"Well," I say. "I may be getting him out soon."

"She didn't say nothing about that."

"She ain't the end all of it all," I say.

"OK." He makes the letters long. "Anyway." We stop at a barred door. Mark unlocks it. "He's over here."

There are only two cells, and Cory's in the left one, alone. He's sits at the edge of the bed, stares at me through the bars. I expected him to be wearing a jail outfit, a bright jumpsuit or something that tagged him an inmate, but he's got on his normal clothes, baggy jeans and a big shirt, the whole ghetto look that costs a fortune.

"Sharon's been sending fresh clothes for him every few days," Mark says. He unlocks the cell. "I'll leave it open. Holler when you're done."

No contact, huh, Sharon? She said we had to do this together then pulls this, making me look like the bad guy.

I drag a chair into the cell, pause before I sit down. The first sight of him behind bars took me apart a little, but now, seeing him inside with his clean, expensive clothes, understanding uncle, and pampering mom, I'm put back together pretty quick.

"Looks real rough in here," I say. "I was hoping this might make a man of you, but that don't seem to be the case."

"Don't give me that be-a-man crap," Cory says. "You don't know what it's like in here."

"I don't, huh?" I wanted to take this slower, but just hearing him talk makes me clench my fist. "I guess not. I ever tell you I spent a couple of weeks in jail, I was your age? For a little joyride me and a friend took in a car wasn't ours? Only I got thrown in a New Orleans jail. Try being in there with a bunch of niggers who want to beat your ass, just cause."

He doesn't say anything. Probably trying to figure out if it's true or not. He'd be smart not to believe me, since I made it up. Something kind of close happened to Mark and his buddy Wayne years ago, so I just took that, made it my own, made it part of a story I'd been rehearsing all week. I meant to tell it to Cory to try and reach him.

"When y'all gonna get me out of here?" he finally asks.

"Don't know why you'd want to," I say. "Bet even supper's better here than what I'd provide for you, huh?"

"Dude." He points at the empty cell next to us. "Robbie's dad came and got him out a week ago. And he's the one started the fight."

"We're trying to teach you something."

"God, don't you think I learned my lesson? I'm sorry. Really. I'm done with all that. What more you want from me?"

I want to believe him. His voice is shaking and weak. But I've heard all of this before.

"You want out?" I ask.

"Yeah. Come on, Dad. Give your son a chance."

"You want out?" They're lies, I tell myself. Don't listen to him.

"Dad!" His eyes grow bigger. He looks close to tears.

"You have to stop hanging out with those kids," I say. "They the ones got you into this."

"All right."

"And come to work with me. Every day. If I'm there, you there. You pay off every last cent all your shit has cost us."

"Fine. I'm there."

I hesitate. "I'll talk to your mom."

Then he does it. He smiles. Just like he's won something. My sight goes red.

"Stop lying to me," I yell, standing up and kicking my chair back.

"I ain't lying."

I snatch his wrist and squeeze it. I can feel his pulse. "I can't believe a goddamn word you say." My words ring inside the cell. I hear footsteps, heavy and fast, down the hall.

"All right," Mark says, coming into the cell. "Visiting's over."

I let go of Cory, feel a dizzy spell come over me, and close my eyes to see it out. When it's done and everything fades back into view, I see my son again, standing on the cell's bed, back flat to the wall. I want to tell him I'm sorry; I messed up. Let's try again. Instead, I follow Mark back to the lobby. He tells me to go home.

The house is empty when I get back. I go to work on the window. Even with the way Cory acted today, I want to talk to Sharon about getting him home. I'd rather him here under my eyes as compared to anyone else's. I figure fixing the window will get me on her good side.

All that working gets me thinking more about how unfair all this is. About how a man does the things he's supposed to do: stays faithful to his wife, stays married through good and bad, doesn't drink, doesn't hit his kids unless they ask for it. How a man can do all that and still end up like me. I look at Mark, who divorced Amanda's mom after a year of marriage and drank himself to sleep every night for years after. And he gets a good job for it. A daughter who cares for him, that doesn't embarrass him for all the world to see.

And I get a son who treats me like shit, has no respect for anyone, puts his mother through hell, and all the while doesn't seem to give a damn.

Who the hell do you blame for that?

An hour past dark, I hear Sharon's car pull up. I'm in the living room, staring at the TV, the sound turned down, a habit I started while staying up nights, waiting for Cory to come home, listening for the slightest noise.

I hear Sharon come inside and set something down on the kitchen counter. She walks into the living room.

"Saw the new window?" I ask.

"Don't get mad," she says.

"For what?" Then I hear it. More footsteps in the kitchen. "What the hell is this?" I jump to my feet and rush to the kitchen. Cory's there.

Sharon gets between us. "Mark told me what happened today," she says.

"Oh," I say. "So you called him. Again."

"Mark told me you went by the jail," Sharon says. "And I got mad. Figured if you could break our promise-

"It was your promise."

"-then I could just go see him."

"Mom, this is stupid," Cory says. "He ain't gonna listen."

"Shut up," I yell at him. "You just stay right there." I turn back to Sharon. "You need to make up your mind. It was your idea to keep him there."

"I know," she says. "I just couldn't...he was in there, and he looked so...Mark said you wanted to get him out. Cory promises he's going to change. We've got to trust him this time; it's the only way he'll-

I interrupt. "He told me the same thing. Lied right to my face."

"I mean it this time," Cory says. "Mom knows."

I feel the red boiling inside of me again. I don't know why. I wanted him home more than she did. But it was her idea to keep him there. No one sticks by what they say.

"You go to your room, Cory," I say. "And you stay there."

"No problem," he says.

"And tomorrow, you go to work with me."

"Nuh-uh. Mom says I don't have to do that shit."

"See," I yell at Sharon. "He's doing it already."

"Lester, he's not cut out for that. Let him find a job of his own."

"You're too good for what I do?" I ask him. I slam my fist against the counter. "He goes with me tomorrow or he goes back."

"He's not something you bought that broke, Lester. You can't 'send him back.' He's your son. He's MY son. I can decide-

"You can't decide nothing no more. You don't know what else he's been doing." I go to the closet in the hall and reach for a shoebox on the top shelf. I drop it on the kitchen counter. "I'll show you what he does when we're not around."

I pull a tape player out of the box. Audio cassettes spill out. I meant to label them but never got around to it. Still, I know what's on them. I know every last word.

"See, Mom," Cory says. "I told you he's crazy."

I tell Cory to shut the hell up, and I fumble with a tape and insert it into the player. I press play. "You think he's just been using with his friends?" I ask Sharon. "Just listen." Silence, punctuated with bursts of static. "Dammnit, this is the wrong tape. I'm not crazy. I know what I heard."

"Lester," Sharon says. "You need to calm down. It's like that counselor said-

"Oh, shut up," I yell. "I don't want to hear about that."

"Fuck all this," Cory says. "I'm getting out of here." He makes for the door. I get in his way. "Move, Dad."

"You're staying here."

"I'm leaving. You don't trust me. There's no point to this."

He tries pushing past me. I wrap my arms around him, the way Amanda did to me earlier, but I squeeze harder, push him against the wall. He pushes back.

"You're staying here." I push him down the hall into his bedroom and slam the door closed. His wrist gets caught, and he yells. I open the door. His other arm comes flying out, his fist right in my face. He's stronger than he used to be. Sharon screams behind us, names,

something. I don't know. I can barely hear her through the pounding in my head, over the beating in my chest.

Cory takes the advantage to grab me, swing me around, and push me towards the window, the new one. I see it, then Cory, and for a second he's got that rage in his eyes too. I crash through the window. I try to break the fall with my hand. New glass slices through my fingers.

Grass is underneath me. Dirt. I'm outside. I look up, see Cory through the jagged shards of the window, wiping sweat from his brow, breathing too loud. He walks back inside. I don't have the breath to stop him.

I finally stand, see the lights of neighbors' houses on around me, robed people standing in their doorways watching. I walk to the front of my house, go inside, and head to the kitchen sink. Sharon tries touching me when she sees the blood, but I shrug her off. I don't hear whatever she says. There's no sight of Cory. He must've left. I turn the faucet on, wash the blood from my hands, spend ten minutes picking out glass splinters. It's not as bad as it looks.

By the time I'm done, the house is quiet. I assume Sharon's left, gone after Cory. I pick up my toolbox. For some reason, I think of when Cory was a boy, and we'd gotten him a plastic, toy toolbox, and he stayed with me in the backyard while I put together a new swing set. He took his tiny, plastic drill, pressed it tight against every screw that he found, just like he thought he was really doing something. Back then he looked up to me, thought growing up to be like me was something worthwhile. But it didn't last long. Nothing ever lasts.

I grab the measurements I made of the window earlier and calculate in my head what this is going to cost me. I figure in the cost of the expensive window, the shatterproof one the

boy at Home Depot tried to sell me, but stop myself, figuring it's a waste of money. I don't think they can make things like that. Nothing's so perfect that it can't break.

The Name of the Disease

The day I paid my third week's rent, I slept with my landlord's wife. He was a veterinarian in the small rural town of Delta's Heart, Louisiana, with a scrawny room for rent attached to his animal clinic right above the dog kennel. I'd just broken up with my girlfriend, Anne. We were traveling to New Orleans from Texas for a new start, had a fight-- the big kind that only happens when you think a new start will fix things. She demanded I leave her at a bus station. I did, kept driving, stopped at the next town. I was young and had just dropped out of school. No one expected me anywhere.

Dr. Madson rented the room so cheap because of the kennel. He said the dogs only made noise during business hours, and I was planning to find a day job anyway. It sounded like a good deal, but it didn't work out that way. I got hired for the night shift at a grocery distribution warehouse just outside of town filling orders for grocery stores and loading pallets into trucks. Each morning, I arrived home just as the clinic opened, and the dogs would start barking like a broken alarm clock. It was a small kennel, couldn't hold more than five or six dogs, but you'd be surprised by how much noise a few dogs in stainless steel cages nestled inside cinder block walls can make. I learned to get by on a few hours of sleep in the afternoon.

Dr. Madson lived next door to the clinic with his wife. I'd see her in a nightgown on their porch some mornings smoking cigarettes. She was the poster image of a woman who'd let herself go: short and overweight with creampuff cheeks and no visible neck. She did have a nice head of long red hair and ample breasts, but I wouldn't call her the type of older woman a younger man like me might fantasize about.

We never spoke, barely exchanged friendly hellos as I walked upstairs to my room every morning. Then that day I gave my rent to the receptionist at the clinic, Mrs. Madson called me with a whistle. I walked over. She introduced herself as Elly, asked me if I could help her move a piece of furniture so she could vacuum. On reflection, it sounded like the setup to a bad porn movie, but at the time, I thought nothing of it. Once we were inside, she offered me a seat on the couch and a glass of orange juice, then she had her hand on my crotch. We had sex on the living room floor. I remember that she smelled like pancakes, that I cramped my leg, and that she never took off her nightgown. Once done, I put my pants back on, looked back at her like I was looking back at Sodom, and left without a word.

I tried to sleep, but there was a dog downstairs screaming, not barking. It sounded like a child being drowned in a plastic sack. I swear it was speaking, saying clearly discernible words in a language I couldn't understand. I don't know how I fell asleep, but a few hours later a knock at the door woke me up. The morning hung in my head like a dream, and at first I thought that it must have been one, until I stood up and the cramp from Mrs. Madson's weight stabbed at my thigh. I limped to the door, opened it. Dr. Madson stood outside wearing green scrubs stained with dark splotches that I could only imagine were fresh blood.

"Hey, son," he said. "Hope I didn't wake you." He had to be in his forties, wore a scruffy gray beard, and had a big frame that looked like it used to hold a fit body.

"No sir," I mumbled, looking behind me as if to make sure he couldn't see something, although what, I couldn't say. In the near month I'd been there he had never visited me, and I paid the rent in cash.

"You a polite one," he said. "You don't have to call me sir." He sounded educated but spoke with a slight drawl, like that education happened a long time ago, somewhere far away.

“Sorry, Dr. Madson,” I said.

“Call me Steve.” He held up a twelve pack of Miller High Lifes. “Thought you might want to join me for a beer. We ain’t talked much since you got here.”

A small walkway jutted out in front of my door, just enough room for a couple of folding chairs. We sat, opened a beer each. We made small talk at first about my job and Delta’s Heart. I watched sweat trickle down my bottle, imagined it on my forehead. I wondered if he could see me glancing out the corner of my eye at his house, making sure Mrs. Madson wasn’t watching.

“Hope them dogs aren’t causing you to lose too much sleep,” he said.

“I can barely hear them,” I lied.

“We had a loud one in today. Weimeraner pup.”

I nodded, said nothing.

“It was a fucked up thing, that case,” he said. “Beautiful dog. I tell you, beautiful as the morning sun.”

“What’s it got?”

“What’s it got?” He laughed, but not a funny laugh. “Damned thing got hit by a car. Sometime last week. Owner brought it in today, asked what was wrong with it; shouldn’t it be able to walk by now?” He sighed, dropped his head. A breeze stuttered by, shaking some trees. I watched one of their shadows trample over his face.

“What’d you do?” I asked.

“I had to put the thing down. Wasn’t nothing wrong with it but the leg, but the owner waited too long. I would of had to amputate it. He said it wasn’t worth all that cost to end up with a three-legged pup.”

“It was a puppy?”

“Maybe a year old. They got it to be a hunting dog, threw it in the backyard, didn’t bother to train it. Didn’t have room to run the way it needed, so it dug a hole out the fence, ran right into the highway. I tell you, the people out here, they get these dogs, think they like goldfish, that all they got to do is sprinkle some food out for it, and it’ll all be good.” He took a long sip of his beer. “You got to be at work soon or something?”

“No,” I said. “Shift doesn’t start until ten. Why?” I looked at his house again. “You got to go?”

“Not until the wife pokes her fat head out the house. You ain’t seen her, have you?”

“No sir.” I wondered if he knew something, but he couldn’t. He was at the clinic all day.

“Saw you walked out here with a limp. You OK?”

I looked at my feet. The beer was soaked from condensation, felt like it was going to slip from my hand. “Yeah.”

I didn’t hear from either one of them again for several days. The warehouse closed on Sunday, so we worked late Saturday night, right past dawn. I parked my car in the clinic lot and saw Mrs. Madson’s SUV a few blocks down the street, heading my way. I lingered outside my car, kicking the tires, wiping mist off the windows, pretending I wasn’t waiting for her to pull in next door. I can’t say why. I guess I just wanted to know if she would talk to

me again. The clinic looked closed, and Dr. Madson's truck was gone. His wife stepped out of her car and waved me over.

"Want to help me with these groceries?" she said.

I grabbed a couple of bags, followed her inside. Warehouse dust coated me, and I smelled like cardboard. I didn't care.

We had sex on the kitchen floor, her on top, the cold ceramic floor tiles pressing into my back. She used a pair of oven mitts to cushion her knees. We didn't kiss or fondle; her dress never came off. A T.V. blared in the other room, a televangelist show, and the sex didn't last a commercial break. I nearly tripped putting my pants on afterwards.

"You ain't got to rush so quickly," she said. "Stevie's on a house call way out on the edge of town. He won't be home for awhile. He's never home for awhile."

I slowed down my dressing, just for show.

"In fact," she said. "You could say I'm pretty damn used to waiting for him. 'Wait till I'm done with vet school. Wait till I can buy the practice.' Hell, if I had known I'd be waiting so I could watch Oprah and soaps all day..." Her voice trailed off, maybe into thought. Maybe she was trying to get me to talk to her. But I left instead.

Dr. Madson came to my door that afternoon. With the clinic closed and quiet, I had fallen into a deep sleep, the first I had gotten in a week. He had another case of beer. I followed him outside, and my eyes rolled towards the direction of his home. We sat down, talked about his house call, a horse with mange he was treating. He told me about going to

vet school, about his dream of owning a practice in the city only to come back here to be near his wife's family.

I felt buzzed by my fifth beer. He looked at the empty bottles at my feet as if counting them and said, "So how the hell does a boy like you end up way out here in Delta's Heart? This ain't the place for a young man."

"Just where I ended up," I said. I related the fight with Anne to him, told him about dropping her off at the bus station. "This was the next town I came to."

"So you came to lick some wounds, huh?"

"Something like that."

"What happened with you two? You fuck around on her? I would of, at that age."

"No, no," I said. "That's not me."

"What about her?"

I didn't answer, took a swallow of my beer, and looked out over the parking lot.

"I knew it," he said. "Always got to be one way or the other. How long were you with this girl?"

"Three years."

"Ain't long unless you a mutt. You mind if I asked what happened?"

I hesitated, pretended I didn't want to talk about it, but the truth is I told the story to anyone that would listen. "It was a stupid thing," I said. "We had a bad fight one night; I left to cool down; she hooked up with some friends and drank too much. I came home next morning, and some dude was naked in bed with her."

"Shit."

“I would have left her, you know. But she begged me to stay. Pleaded with me. She was crying. I’d never seen her do that before; normally, she had me by the balls and begging her not to leave. She promised it wouldn’t happen again. And it didn’t, far as I know.”

“So what was the matter?”

“I couldn’t let it go. That image of those two kept popping in my head at the worst times, like a movie that’s always on TV. I’d bring it up every time we fought, no matter what it was over. Guess she had enough of it after awhile. I mean, it’s been a year. I thought maybe we could move to New Orleans, go back to school, get things together again, but, you know.

“What’s fucked up about it, when I walked in on them, I started yelling, and the guy woke up first. I told him who I was; he freaked out, jumped up and started getting dressed. She was still so drunk, she didn’t know I was there. And I asked him if he had fun fucking my girlfriend. He said he didn’t think they got that far. And he was standing there, ass naked, right there in my girlfriend’s room. And him saying that made me feel so much better, at least for a little while. Like it didn’t really happen.”

“I’ve met your husband,” I told Mrs. Madson the next day after we had sex in her hallway. “A bunch of times.”

“Yeah,” she said.

“He seems like a decent guy.” I followed her back into the living room.

She slipped her hand between the couch cushions, pulled out a remote control. I noticed for the first time that she had no underwear to put back on. She still smelled like pancakes.

I zipped up my pants, buttoned them, and turned toward her. “I just wonder why you do this,” I said.

“You ain’t the first; you won’t be the last,” she said. “And don’t go feeling sorry for him. He ain’t dumb. He knows what kind of bed he lays in.” She pointed the remote, pressed buttons. The TV didn’t come on.

“I don’t think we should do this anymore,” I said.

“What, you worried about him finding out? I don’t talk. You safe, boy.”

“He’s twice my size,” I said. “And he’s skilled with surgical instruments.”

“Suit yourself.” She turned the remote over, slapped her hand on the battery cover. “You a good looking boy. And there’s lots of young, good looking, easy girls in a town like this. If you’ve got a mind to go out and find them, that is.”

I put my feet into my shoes, popped them into place.

“But I guess my pussy’s just as wet as theirs, huh?”

If she had laughed after she said that, I would have felt better about it, but she didn’t. My skin felt like it was going to fall off.

Anne used to say that I lived life on autopilot and, as a result, I didn’t respect consequence. She said I’d take one step towards something and let inertia do the rest, going

on and on until I ran into a brick wall and everything came crashing down around me. She said I did that with school and the three times I attempted it; with all the jobs I worked, doing just enough to get paid but never pushing myself further; and most of all, with my relationships. She said things were always good enough for me, and I never wanted more. I guess that's why she cheated, ultimately. That was her way of putting the brick wall in front of me.

I think she's wrong about me not respecting consequence, though. Sometimes I think it's the only thing that interests me. I thought about this a lot while in Delta's Heart. A desire to see how things turn out is the only reason I take that first step to begin with. I like to see where things come from—what action causes what reaction.

I kept sleeping with Mrs. Madson. It became a daily thing: me pretending to have a reason to be outside, usually related to my car, her coming up with new reasons for me to come over, usually to have me move something. It was like we were reading a script, a bad one at that, and I just wanted to know how it ended. It wasn't about the sex; I got more pleasure from masturbating. And every time, right before I left, I said it was the last time, and she brushed me off like a piece of lint. Sometimes I'd imagine Anne walking in on us, wondered what she'd say, but when it came to that, I had no imagination.

And I started to like Dr. Madson. Every evening he'd come over covered in shit and blood, and we'd have a beer, and he'd tell me about about unhappiness, and missed opportunities, and fucked up people, and it was like a big green, reflective sign on the highway for an exit I didn't want to take.

But I couldn't ignore the fact that he had started coming over when his wife and I started our affair. I tried to tell myself it was just a coincidence, that this was just going to be

a nightly thing between him and me, but there was only one way to know for sure. I acted sick at work the next night, left early before dawn, and closed all the windows in my apartment. I didn't look outside, didn't want to her to see me accidentally, or me her. It was an especially loud day in the kennel. I maybe slept two hours.

I heard a knock at the door at six. Dr. Madson. I sighed, told myself he didn't know anything since nothing had happened that day. Then I noticed he didn't have any beer.

"You busy for the next few hours?" he asked. I shook my head. "You want to make some extra money?" He told me he had a freezer full of dead animals and needed help hauling them to a dump site on the edge of town where he burned them.

"People just leave their dead pets here?" I asked as we loaded his pickup. The animals were wrapped in thick, black, plastic bags so I couldn't see them, but their shapes were clear. Most were frozen as if they were sleeping.

"Some are dumped off," he said. "Some ask me to get rid of them. Most places have their own incinerator, but I can't afford that. So I got an arrangement with a boy owns some property way outside town; he lets me burn them in a hole out there. It's got to be far outside town on account of the burning ban laws."

While he drove, I asked him how many dead pets he dealt with in the average week.

"On a slow one," he said. "A dozen maybe. On a busy week, double that. Thirty sometimes."

"Shit," I said. "You ever save any?" His face hardened. I forced a laugh to show I was joking.

“Let me tell you about this one client I have,” he said. “And just to let you know how this story ends up front, his dog’s back there. Shepherd mix. Big, sweet girl. Used to be, anyway.

“He was one of the first clients I ever saw when I first got down here. Before I even owned the practice. And he brought in a little shepherd puppy. Named her Killer. Said she was going to be a watch dog. I gave her some shots and dewormed her, sent them on their way, told him to be back in three weeks for boosters.

“I next saw that boy four or five years later. Killer wasn’t eating, he said. She was just curling up under the house, not doing any guarding, not doing nothing. So I told him to bring her in, and that girl was just fur and bones. You could count every rib from the outside. So I ran down all the things that could be wrong, from parasites to diseases to organ failures. And it wasn’t a lost cause, but it would have taken a lot of love and money for that girl to be brought back to life, and I don’t think he had either. So I put her down.

“Couple days later, same boy comes back in, this time with a brand new puppy. Another shepherd. Another girl. Says her name is Fluffy, that his little daughter named her. So I give her her shots, run down for him the vaccine schedule, and he says, ‘Sure thing doc, see you in a few weeks,’ then goes on his way.

“It’s three or four years before I hear from him again. He calls, says, ‘Doc, I think Fluffy’s got the same thing Killer did!’ So he brings her in; it’s the same story. I can see abrasions on her neck from where they kept her chained up. So I put her down.

“Few days later, guess what? In comes the same boy with another little puppy. The dog you just threw in the back of the truck. And we go through the whole charade again. And the other day, he calls me, says ‘Doc, I don’t know what they teach you up at that vet school

of yours, but there must be some disease around here you don't know nothing about.' And he brings the dog in already dead, says he found her under the house like that. He says it ain't just his dogs, that he got friends whose dogs died the same way. He says I need to restudy my stuff before he brings another pup to me."

Dr. Madson pulled the truck off the highway through a cattle gate and down a gravel road. "The thing is," he said, "people get these pets like they toys, play with them a few weeks, then throw them in the back yard like it's a toy chest. They might toss them some food and water, but they don't give them any love. And then when they bring them to me, they ain't interested in knowing what went wrong. They just want to know what killed it, the name of the disease. That's all. Long after it's too late to do anything."

I didn't know what to say. Was he talking about Anne and me, or himself? He had been morbid before but never cryptic. I thought of Mrs. Madson sitting at home in her nightgown, waiting, alone, the T.V. always on.

The truck pulled off the gravel road, drove across a pasture. It was black out. All I could see were cones of green grass framed by the truck's headlights. I saw a hole up ahead. The truck stopped. The crevice was ten feet in diameter, filled with ash and bone. I could clearly make out the white flash of skulls, leg bones, ribs—reduced to this, they could have been human remains. The smell of old smoke hung in the air.

"Come on," Dr. Madson said. We unloaded the animals, tossed them in the hole. A cloud of ash lifted from the ground after we dropped the first dog, after that, just a wet thump. He told me to find some wood pieces and throw them on top. He retrieved a gas can from his truck, the big, five gallon, metal kind, and poured it over the animals. He said we had to keep the temperature up since the animals were all still frozen. He lit a match. A tiny flame leaped

from the tip like a single ghost. It left a trail in the air as it fell into the hole; finding the fuel, it exploded, opening the gate to all hell.

“What you do to the boy you found with your girl?” he asked, orange light bouncing off his face.

“Nothing,” I said. “I let him leave.”

“But you wanted to do something.”

“Yeah.” And I did. I fantasized about it for months, saw myself beating him bloody. Sometimes I still do. “But I didn’t even know the guy. He didn’t have nothing to do with us. He didn’t owe me shit.”

“You a smart boy,” he said. “That’s a lot of wisdom coming from someone so young. Maybe that didn’t have nothing to do with what you done. Maybe you was just scared. But still. What you did, that was the wise man’s choice.”

I said nothing. The heat forced sweat to ooze from my skin.

“I try to make the wise choice too,” he said. “But even at my age, it’s hard. I’m not stupid though, son. I hope you don’t think I am.”

I looked at him. I could see the flames in his eyes. Logic told me it was a reflection, but I knew it was something else.

He put his hand on my back. I stood a foot away from the edge of the pit. Ash began to fall from the air and cling to my damp skin. His fingers pressed into my shirt; I thought of a high school lecture in physics class about kinetic energy and potential energy.

“I can pay you cash for helping when we get back,” he said. “Or I can take it out of next week’s rent. If you was planning on staying, that is.”

“I’ll take the cash,” I said. He nodded, took his hand off my back, went into his truck, pulled out a cooler. He offered me a beer. We sat in the back of the truck and drank, not talking. The flames teased one another to rise higher, threatening to blot out the sky until finally, an hour later, spent, they fell back down to Earth, suffocating in the ashes, the survivors peeking out from behind the hot glow of embers. We drowned them with the melted ice in the cooler and left.

Ugly Love

My daughter decided to be born just as I finished my shift at The Movie Barn. Suzy's aunt, the only one in her family that would still talk to me, called to say that Suzy went into labor that afternoon, and I better get my ass down there quick. She said it might be a good way to try and make peace. But the last time Suzy and me talked, right after she told me about being pregnant, she said she hoped I ran my truck off a bridge and killed myself just like my daddy had so that the baby'd never know me. I figured she wanted to see me about as much as I wanted to see her, so I took an extra shift and stayed at the video store until closing.

I made it to the hospital around midnight. I hoped Suzy was asleep or drugged out enough for me to sneak in and see the baby, do the proud poppa thing, and sneak out. I walked up to the receptionist and told her I wanted to see the Babert baby. She looked me over for a second, then asked if I was Mr. Babert.

“No. But the kid's mine.”

“What's your name?” she asked, tapping some stuff on her keyboard.

“Scoey LaMeyer.”

She finished typing, squinted at her computer screen, and said I needed to go to the third floor delivery lobby, that a doctor would be waiting to talk to me.

When the elevator door opened, I saw Suzy's momma, her aunt Sally, and some other women I'd never seen before. There were no men. They didn't stick around long in that family. Suzy's momma sat on a couch, her fingers tugging at her face like she had on a mask that wouldn't come off. I stepped out of the elevator and slipped down the hall so they couldn't see me.

A woman doctor came up to me, touched me on the back, and told me Suzy was dead. Killed in childbirth. I don't remember her exact words, and I don't want to sound cold about it, but I wasn't thinking about Suzy being dead, cause that didn't quite seem real yet. I was thinking about all those women down the hall who hated me for no good reason and what they were going to do to me now that they had one.

"You got a back door to this place?" I asked.

"Don't you want to see the baby?" the doctor asked. "Suzy gave birth to a baby girl."

I nodded, figured it would buy me time to sneak out of there. She led me down a hallway to some windows where a crowd of people I didn't know stood smiling, laughing, and pointing through the glass.

I saw row after row of babies, lined up like they were for sale. "Which one's mine?" I asked. "Is it that one?" I'd never had a baby before and sure didn't see myself as a daddy, but I couldn't help but be curious about what it'd look like. I pointed at a cute little thing sleeping under a pink blanket. "Those look like my ears she's got."

"No. You need to be made aware of--"

"Are you sure? She sure looks nice."

The doctor stepped to my side, motioned at a nurse behind the glass. The nurse reached into another crib, picked up a pile of pink cloth and walked up to the glass.

"Pull that blanket down so I can see her," I said.

The doctor nodded at the nurse. "You must understand, she has some slight--"

The nurse pulled down the blanket. The doctor kept talking, but I don't know what she said, not after I caught sight of the baby. She didn't have much of a nose, just two holes where the nostrils should have been, and her lower jaw poked out like one of those caricature

drawings you see people do at the fair, the gums hiding her upper lip. The rest looked normal, until you got to the feet. She had to be the ugliest thing I'd ever seen.

"She ain't got no toes," I shouted.

"She's got some slight deformations in her skull, but that could be fixed when she gets older."

"What'd you do with her toes?"

The doctor turned to me, adjusted her glasses. "She was born without them. It's a very rare condition. What you've been given here is a very special little girl."

"Is she gonna be able to walk on them feet? They look like little hammers."

"We'll have a specialist come and talk to you about your girl's special needs."

"Look." I pointed at the other babies. "You sure you got the right baby here?" They had so many of them in there, I could see them getting mixed up.

"If you don't want her," the doctor said, almost growling, "there are other options available to you. Do you want to talk to a social worker?"

"I...shit. I don't know." I looked at the baby. Her eyes opened. I couldn't be sure, but I'd swear they were looking at me, almost the same way Suzy used to when I said something that pissed her off. "Suzy have time to give her name?"

"No. That's up to you."

I named her Jenna after the porn star Jenna Jameson, mainly because I couldn't think of any other girl names that gave me positive thoughts. Suzy's family didn't want her. They

saw me keeping her as some kind of punishment I deserved, and that suited me just fine as long as they left me alone. I didn't think it mattered since I planned to put the girl up for adoption once they released her from the hospital, and that took nearly a month. But my momma talked me out of it, went on a rant about getting knocked up with me at fifteen, and how she had the same thoughts, and what a blessing from God I turned out to be. I knew she was bullshitting. My grandma mostly raised me. Mama hadn't been to church in years, but she could be a real Christian when it came to making other people feel guilty.

So Mama's pledge to help out with Jenna is mainly why I kept her. I lived in a rusted old RV that I inherited from my grandpa right on the outskirts of the town of Delta's Heart. Neither one was really the right kind of place for a baby. Mama said she'd babysit at her apartment anytime I needed. She seemed excited at first, said she never had the chance to be a mother with me cause of her youth, and this would give her a chance to enjoy it.

Mama came to the hospital with me, sat in and listened to the special doctor tell me about Jenna. Mama even took notes, hunched over a five-subject notebook she'd picked up at the drug store that looked heavy enough to topple her boney self right over. The doctor said Jenna looked like she did because of Suzy's womb, something about the shape of it, and how the baby didn't have room to develop. The doctor said it might have been caught early if Suzy'd been getting regular checkups like she ought of. And knowing Suzy like I did, she probably never eased up on the smokes and drink either. I wondered if I had been around if it would have made a difference, but with the way me and her got on, it probably would have just made it worse.

The doctor said that despite how bad she looked medically she didn't need much more than a normal baby. I'd have to keep the air around her clean since she didn't have a

normal nose to filter it, and I had to keep her mouth free of spit and food so she wouldn't suffocate. He said that when Jenna got older they could do surgery on her skull to fix it, that she'd need it by then, but it didn't come cheap. Her feet we couldn't help, but they had "remarkable developments in prosthetic" this or that. I zoned out by that point, stared at the x-rays of Jenna's skull hanging on the wall, imagined it growing like that inside Suzy.

Mama's pledge to help lasted all of three months. I came home from work and saw Jenna's crib sitting on the steps to my RV. A horn yelled. I looked down the dirt road, saw Mama's car parked by some mailboxes. She lit the headlights and drove off.

"I should of known better," I told my friend Robbie the next day.

He fed a blank tape into my VCR. We made dubs of new pornos as they came into the video store, sold them and copies of new releases on the side, usually getting ten bucks a tape. We used to shoplift CD's and stuff from Wal-Mart back in high school. Robbie worked his way up to bigger shit: TV's, stereos, even weed and prescription pills on occasion. I got out of it when I got the job at the video store. Everybody's got to grow up.

"What was her deal?" Robbie asked.

"She said I wasn't making no real attempt at changing things, that I had to quit the video store and find a real job that don't just pay minimum wage, that she wasn't gonna stick around and watch me fuck up being a daddy."

"You can't quit the store." He wrote a title on a blank tape with a black marker.

"I know."

“She got a new boyfriend, didn’t she?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

He grunted, turned to look at the TV. We sat in silence, watched the tape dub at double speed, listened to the drone in the other room of Jenna’s air purifier machine Mama helped me buy. Robbie stood up, adjusted his red baseball cap.

“Where you going?” I asked.

“Gotta take a piss.”

“You just took one.”

“Gotta take another.”

“You better not be going in there to look at Jenna again.”

Robbie grinned. “Oh, come on. I just want to take a peek.”

“She’s asleep. You gonna wake her.”

“She ain’t gonna wake up. That girl sleeps like a snake. You got it easy, compared to most babies I seen. Most won’t shut up.” He walked off.

“Well,” I yelled at him, “see if she needs to be changed.”

“I ain’t touching her.”

I turned back and looked at the screen. The VCR played a movie called *Mighty Midgets 13*.

“I ain’t never seen something so ugly,” Robbie said from behind me.

“Why don’t you stop this shit? It ain’t funny no more.”

He sat down next to me. “I was talking about the video.”

I tried to glare at him, but I’ve never been good at looking pissed. Suzy said I had a baby face, that they should put it on diaper bags.

Robbie patted me on the back. “You know, you probably named her good. She grows up, she may be able to find work in this biz.” He pointed at the screen. “People like fucked up shit.”

I stood up. “You’re an asshole.”

“Why you getting all pissy?” Robbie asked. “You know I’m just playing.”

“You supposed to be my friend,” I yelled. “You supposed to be helping me out here.”

“What you want me to do? Get my plastic surgeon’s license? You the one stuck your dick in Suzy. You the one that kept doing it, no matter how mean that bitch was to you. Hell, you kept doing it no matter how mean you was to her. You don’t think some of that meanness might’ve gotten up there in her womb?”

My ass fell on the couch. “You don’t think that’s why Jenna’s like this, do you?”

“I ain’t no pediatrician, bro.”

“I mean, we said some shit to each other. God. I called her a whore at her own granddaddy’s funeral.”

“I know, I know.” He looked me in the eye, must have seen me getting bothered by the notion. “Why you want to listen to me? You know I don’t know shit.”

“Cause sometimes you the smartest person I know, no matter how dumb you are.”

“Look, if having parents that hated each other made you ugly, all of Delta’s Heart would be the biggest freak show on the planet. Right?”

I closed my eyes, thought of the x-rays I saw in the doctor’s office.

“You know I’m right,” Robbie said. “Shit, you gave my parents two guns and one bullet, they’d still both find a way to kill each other.”

“I should of given her up.”

“Then do it. Nobody’s gonna hold it against you.”

I picked up a pile of mail on the counter. “I still got to pay these doctor’s bills. Suzy’s momma won’t pay nothing. She’s even talking about suing me for ‘wrongful death’ or some shit.”

“That won’t hold up.”

“Still.”

“I don’t know what you want me to tell you. All I’m good at is stealing shit and selling it. Unless you want me to help you sell her, this ain’t my field.”

“Like it was that easy.”

“You know.” Robbie looked away, took his baseball cap off. He only did that when he had to think. Said his brain needed to breathe. “Uncle Wayne once told me about this boy he knew did that. Just sold his baby. They got people out there can’t have kids, can’t adopt them cause of criminal records or whatever. So they just buy them. Serious dollar too.”

“That’s just a myth,” I said. “Like people selling kidneys.”

“Uncle Wayne don’t lie about that stuff. He heard about a boy got two-fifty for his kid.”

“Yeah. They gonna pay that for a girl that’s, you know, special.”

“You said yourself you could have surgery to fix up that snout of hers when she gets older.”

“And I said I ain’t got that kind of money.”

“You ain’t listening to me. People willing to pay that kind of money for a baby, I bet they’d pay for that surgery. You could get enough to pay off your debts and give her a future all at once.”

I looked away. Robbie had a way of talking people into doing stupid things. He got it from his uncle. “They can’t fix her toes,” I said. “She’s never gonna walk right.”

“Even if you got half of that two-fifty, you’d be set.”

“No.” I stood up, opened the door, and motioned for Robbie to leave. “I ain’t even talking this kind of talk with you.”

“Just let me ask around. See what I hear.”

“Go away, Robbie.”

I had to bring Jenna with me to work the next morning since Mama stopped watching her. I knew my boss, Mr. Stanson, would never go for it, but he hardly ever came to the store anyway, spent most of his time at a pool hall he’d just bought. Later that day, though, he came waltzing in, said he’d been getting some complaints about me ignoring customers and saw Jenna behind the counter. He yelled, said he wasn’t running no day care center, and told me to clock out and go home. For good. He didn’t say nothing about the way she looked, but I bet if she looked normal, he wouldn’t of made a deal out of it.

I figured I’d let a few days pass, give Mr. Stanson some time to cool off and reconsider things. So I waited three days and called the store. Some girl’s voice I’d never heard answered, got Stanson for me. He told me he wasn’t mad no more, but he’d hired someone else, that he couldn’t pay me enough money to take care of a baby anyway, much less a special one, that this was a blessing in disguise. “Get a real job,” he said and hung up.

The bill pile had grown taller since Jenna'd been born, and I hadn't paid most of them. I grabbed some want ads, looked through them, saw nothing I wanted to do.

After a week with no job, I got fed up, packed up Jenna and her things and drove over to Miss Sally's, Suzy's aunt. The lights were out. It didn't look like anyone was up. I picked up Jenna's carriage, walked her across the lawn, and set her and her stuff down on the front steps, just like Mama had done earlier at my place.

The screen door creaked open. "What you doing?" a voice said. Miss Sally walked out wearing a blue bathrobe. I can't lie, she was a nice looking woman for her age—nice blonde hair, nice legs, big round tits. All the women in Suzy's family looked real good, even when they got old. Sally looked down at Jenna. "You crazy or something, Scoey?"

"You got to take her," I said. "I done lost my job cause of her. I can't pay my bills or nothing. I can't deal with it."

She picked up the diaper bag, threw it at me. "You take that girl, and you leave right now."

"No way. I've had it." I folded my arms to show that I meant it.

Miss Sally glared down the road. "Goddamn it boy. Somebody drives by, sees you here, they gonna tell Suzy's mom. She'll kill you, you know that? That woman's crazy. Then she might just kill me too."

I kept my arms folded but looked out the corner of my eyes, made sure no cars were coming.

"Pick up that girl," Miss Sally said. "Come inside."

We sat down in the kitchen, and I told her everything: about Mama, the store, my bills.

“I can’t take her, Scoey. The whole family looks at her like she’s the knife you killed Suzy with.”

“She’s just a baby,” I said. “She ain’t no knife. None of this is her fault.”

“You gonna have to get a real job.”

“Nobody’ll hire me. All I ever done is work at a video store.”

She sighed, closed her eyes. “Suzy’s mom’ll never forgive me if she knew I did this. I used to see a man that done duct work. He could hire you.”

“I don’t want to do no duct work.” Mama’d told me my daddy did duct work when I was born. No way was I gonna do anything he did.

“You don’t have a choice. What else you gonna do? At least give it a try.”

I imagined the bill pile toppling over, drowning Jenna with late notices. “You’ll watch Jenna for me during the day if I do it?”

“No. But the job pays good. You could afford day care. You want me to call him or not?”

“Fine.” I gathered up Jenna, peeked out the window for any traffic coming. “I loved Suzy, Miss Sally,” I said. “You know that, right?”

“You trying to convince me?”

“I really did.”

“No you didn’t. You and that girl were poison to each other. But it’s real sweet of you to try and say different.”

A week later, Robbie walked into my RV a little after midnight. I sat on the floor, flipping through old papers, bills, anything I never threw away.

“What the fuck,” he said, looking over the RV. I had overturned boxes and opened drawers, scattering whatever they held over the floor. Jenna sat in her carriage, quietly watching me.

“I’m looking for something,” I said.

Robbie picked up a pile of magazines on the floor, most of them old adult video trades from the store. “You don’t throw shit away, do you? You even keep her old diapers?”

I finished emptying the cardboard box I’d been digging through.

“Bro, stop it.” Robbie pulled the box away from me.

“There used to be a picture of Suzy around here. I took it with a disposable camera one morning after she stayed the night.”

“Was she naked?”

“You couldn’t see nothing. She was under the covers. I wanted to show it to Jenna.”

“What for?”

“It’s the only picture I got of her. Jenna’s never gonna see how pretty her momma was.”

“How long you been at this?”

“I don’t know. A few hours. Jenna and me were talking, and-“

“You. And her. Were talking?” He looked at Jenna. She coughed up some spit.

“Come on. We got to get you out here.”

“I ain’t going nowhere.”

“I came to see if you wanted to take a ride with me. Come on. You need it.”

I stood up, wiped the sweat from my face, and picked up Jenna's carriage.

"You ain't bringing her," Robbie said.

"She's a baby, you dumbass," I said. "I can't leave her by herself."

We walked out to his car. I opened the back door, swept the trash off the backseat with my arm, and set Jenna's carriage down on the seat. She tried to laugh, coughed up more spit. I wiped it off with the back of my hand.

"You going to Wal-Mart?" I asked.

"Yeah. I got a shipment to get."

I told him about the last week, about me going to Miss Sally's and the new job.

"You doing duct work now?"

"Was doing duct work. I quit after three days."

He laughed. "You a hard working man."

"They had me working at the hospital, same one Jenna was born at, crawling around vents, sliding around in grease and dirt. I can't do all that."

"You got delicate hands. What you doing now?"

"Just sitting around. I get up, bring Jenna to day care, come back home and sleep."

"Why you got her in day care if you ain't working?"

I didn't answer. Robbie pulled his car into the Wal-Mart parking lot and steered it to the docking area in the back. A black guy in a blue Wal-Mart vest holding a stack of boxes sat by a docked trailer. Robbie had long since graduated from shoplifting and now made deals with the employees to steal straight off the trucks. Robbie stepped out of the car, walked over to the guy.

I turned around, looked at Jenna. She looked tired, but her eyes were wide open, watching Robbie run across the concrete lot. Some drool had collected around the corners of her bottom lips. I found a napkin in a McDonald's bag on the floor and wiped her mouth. She made her version of a laugh, kind of like gargling mouthwash. I laughed back.

Robbie got back in the car. "Let's go," he said.

"What you get?" I opened one of the boxes, pulled out some CD's.

"Mostly nigger rap stuff, but it'll sell."

I dropped the CD's. "Don't say shit like that around her," I said.

"What?"

"That word. That n-word. I don't want her knowing things like that."

"She don't know what the fuck it means," he said.

"I'm her daddy, and I can say what I want my daughter hearing," I yelled.

"All right, all right." He pulled out of the parking lot and kept silent for a few blocks.

"You losing it, you know that?" he finally said.

I watched Jenna in the rearview mirror. Street lights flickered over her eyes. I wished she would fall asleep.

"How you paying for daycare if you ain't got a job?" Robbie asked.

"I still got a little money left over from those videos we sold."

"That ain't enough to cover you this long."

"It is if I don't pay my bills."

"None of them? They gonna shut you off. You want to go in with me more on this?"

He picked up one of the stolen CD's.

"Jenna ain't gonna have a daddy in jail for stealing shit from Wal-Mart," I said.

“You too good for it now? Well fuck you.”

We rode in silence. I kept watching Jenna in the mirror. She'd close her eyes for awhile then open them when we'd hit a bump.

“What about that thing you talked about last time?” I said.

“What thing?”

“That thing you heard from your Uncle Wayne.”

“What about it? You told me not to ask about it.”

“Don't bullshit me, Robbie. I know you when you get an idea in your head. You can't help but see if you could do it.”

“Well, what if I did? You want to do it now?”

“You think you could?”

“Bro, I could sell a stolen box of condoms to a monk. You know that.”

“I been thinking about it. And I can't give Jenna the life she needs. She's gonna grow up looking like that, and she's gonna resent me for it, and I'm gonna resent her for messing up my life. I don't want nobody hating nobody.”

“I don't know. I mean, I can't guarantee-“

“It sounds good,” I interrupted. “Everyone can win, right? I get the money to pay off the bills. Jenna gets a home that can take care of her right. You get your cut. I just want you to ask around. See what you can find out. I ain't saying I'll do it. I just want to see, you know?”

A few days later, I showed up at the day care center a little late to pick up Jenna. The girl who watched the infants, Missy, was still waiting for another baby to be picked up. I waited with her. Missy was an average looking girl: kind of plump, kind of pretty in the face, real sweet. She wasn't no prom queen, but she was the kind of girl boys married when they wanted someone that wouldn't fuck around on them.

"What you do if nobody shows up?" I asked her.

"They'll show up," she said. "Miss Donny just gets out of work late sometimes."

"You don't mind staying and waiting?"

"Not usually. Her little Mikey's a sweet potato. She's no Jenna, though."

"So you ain't never had somebody not show up?"

"It happens sometimes. You get an emergency, or someone gets drunk and forgets to come."

"That happens?"

"In this town? I'm surprised it don't happen more. But it's not a big deal. I just take them home and wait to hear something. It always works out. Why you asking?"

"Just wondering." I knew I'd better shut up, realized what it might sound like.

"Now don't you go thinking about leaving Jenna here. I might not want to give her back."

"I ain't saying nothing like that." It hadn't really occurred to me until that moment, but I couldn't dump her off, not like my daddy had done to me.

"I'm just playing with you. I know it must be hard for you, raising a little girl by yourself. Especially one that's got, you know, her needs. She's lucky to have a hard working daddy, but little girls need mamma's too." Her hand moved closer to mine.

I stood up. “I think she’d have had it harder if she had to deal with me and her momma together.”

“I’m sure you loved each other, Scoey.”

“You talk to anyone that knew us, they’d say it didn’t look that way.”

“Love is love. Don’t matter what it looks like. There’s just some people that can’t get along, no matter how hard they try.” She pointed at the day care. “I got something for you. You hold on a second.” I waited with Jenna while she ran inside and back out. She handed me a Polaroid photo. “We took this of Jenna. Her first day here. To put on the wall. We had an extra, and I know daddies ain’t so good with pictures, so…”

I looked at the photo. “Thanks.” It was Jenna all right, but for some reason, she didn’t look so ugly in it.

Two weeks later, Robbie called me.

“I think I found someone,” he said.

I stood over the sink, washing baby shit from my hands, the phone stuck between my ear and neck. Jenna sat in the other sink, naked, watching me silently.

Robbie told me he found a couple in Arkansas that won a lottery a few years back and wanted to adopt a kid. Only they couldn’t, because the husband’d been to jail for mail fraud or something.

“How’d you find these people?” I asked.

“You know. I talked to somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody. I don’t reveal all my sources.”

“This ain’t CIA shit,” I said. “I need to know how you found them.”

“Ray Ray at the gas station. You know him. I put it in his ear, and he said they came through town, and he got to talking to them, heard their problem. He said he knew somebody could get them around adoption agencies.”

“He said they was all right? I don’t want her staying with someone won’t treat her right.”

“I doubt someone willing to pay twenty-five grand for something’s not gonna treat it right.”

“Twenty-five? You talked about six figures before.”

“Hey, I did what I could. This ain’t my field. They gonna make up the difference in surgery bills.”

“I don’t know.” I needed the money. The little I had left, I spent on day care and baby food, which I’d taken to eating with Jenna. She watched me from the sink, her skin pulled tight around her mouth, pink gums showing. I think she was trying to smile, but the jaw wouldn’t let her. “They said they’d do the surgery?”

“They thought it was a pretty good deal.”

“Well, if I want to. And I’m not saying yeah just yet. But what would we do next?”

“They want to see her. Meet us somewhere safe, like a motel.”

“That sounds good. I want to see what kind of people they are anyway.”

“I’ll set it up, then. Later, bro.” He hung up.

I looked at Jenna. "I'm glad you can't talk yet," I said. I had this feeling in my chest like I'd just sold my soul, but I felt some relief too, like I'd been waiting to do it for a long time.

They wanted to meet a few days later. The Smiths, as Robbie said we should call them, would drive down from Arkansas, so we decided to meet them in Marksville, Louisiana, which seemed like a good middle ground. Mr. Smith liked the idea, said he could do some gambling at the local Indian casino beforehand.

We arrived in Marksville around ten at night and checked into a ragged looking motel. By eleven, my nerves were a live wire. I couldn't stop pacing.

"Why you so antsy?" Robbie asked.

"I don't know about this."

"How many times you gonna go over it? It's your best option."

I bent over Jenna's carriage and picked her up. She tugged at my finger. She had a strong grip. "You think she's gonna hate me for this?"

"I don't know," he said. "You hate your daddy for leaving you?"

"No. But that's cause once I got to know Mama well enough, I knew I would have left us too."

"Well there you go."

"It ain't the same thing. I ain't walking out on her. I'm selling her like she's something I don't want no more."

“Well, why don’t you talk it over with her, then.” He stood up. “I’m getting sick of hearing about it. I’m going for a smoke.” He stepped outside, slammed the door.

I watched Jenna, wondered about her in twenty years if I did this, what she might look like. I pictured Suzy, the pretty side of her without the yelling and meanness: her long shiny blonde hair, her smile, too good for a shit hole like Delta’s Heart. I saw Jenna in twenty years, and she looked just liked that. I wondered if I’d recognize her, if I’d even want to.

Robbie barged through the door. “They’re here.”

I set Jenna down in her carriage. “You get a look at them?” I asked.

“You ought to see the truck they’re in. They got some money.” He walked over to Jenna, took her blanket and covered her toes with it.

“What you doing?” I asked.

“She looks cold.”

“She ain’t cold.” I pulled the blanket away.

He pulled it over her feet again. She gargled a laugh.

“You didn’t tell them,” I said.

“I told them.”

“Everything? The feet too?”

“Well. Maybe I didn’t mention that one.”

“You dumbass. You were just gonna try to pass it off like it wasn’t there?”

“Who wants to buy a kid that can’t walk? I said what I had to to make the sell.”

“She ain’t a goddamn car. How long you think you can hide that?”

“I ain’t trying to hide it for good. Just trying to control the first impression.” A knock rumbled through the door. “I better get that.”

“Don’t you-“ I stopped myself when the door opened.

A middle-aged couple walked through. The man wore a cowboy hat and a red western shirt over a body that looked like it enjoyed a buffet often. The woman was thin, decked out in a tacky, sequin thing that even Elvis wouldn’t of been caught dead in.

“Mr. Smith,” Robbie said. He pointed at me. “This here’s the girl’s daddy.”

Mr. Smith walked over to me. “Well let me get a look at you, son,” he said. He turned to his wife. “What you think, honey?”

“I think he’s handsome,” she said, smiling at me. I wondered if Robbie had thrown me into the deal too.

“Y’all make off good at the casino?” Robbie asked.

“Ah.” Mr. Smith swatted at the air. “It’s just money.”

“This the little angel?” Mrs. Smith asked, eyeing Jenna. “Can I see her?”

“Go ahead,” Robbie said.

She approached Jenna. Robbie darted in front of her. “Now don’t let first impressions get the better of you,” he said. “This is one nice little girl.”

The woman stood over the carriage. “Oh, she’s the cutest little-“ She stopped. Her face seem to collapse. “Oh my.”

Mr. Smith put his hand on her shoulders. “Now I done told you she needed a little work,” he told his wife.

“I know. But-“

“Now you just think how pretty this little girl’s gonna look when we get her fixed up. Look at all that pretty hair she’s got.”

“Just like her momma,” Robbie said. “Ain’t you got that picture of her, Scoey?”

I shrugged. I wanted to hit him.

“Stan,” the woman said to her husband. “I don’t know.”

“We discussed this,” he said. He whispered something in her ear.

“I guess she’s not so bad,” Mrs. Smith finally said. She leaned over, made a motion to pick up Jenna.

Robbie scooted in front of her. “Um, that’s not a good idea,” he said. “She just took a shit. Yeah. We wouldn’t want you to get any on your nice dress.”

Mr. Smith grunted. “You know they got diapers that don’t leak, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but.” Robbie nodded toward me. “He don’t know how to use them.”

“Oh.” Mr. Smith held out the word like it was ten feet long. “I see.”

“Well,” Mrs. Smith said. “She is kind of cute.”

“She sure is,” Robbie said. “And not a bother either. Ain’t that right?” he asked me.

“Right.” I picked up the carriage. “I better change that diaper.”

“You sure you don’t want no help?” Mr. Smith asked.

“I think I got it.” I took the carriage into the bathroom and shut the door. A window loomed over the sink. I measured it with my eyes, tried to figure out if we could fit through.

I picked Jenna up and sat on the toilet, rocking her in my arms. I listened to Robbie hustling the Smiths. “There’s got to be a better way,” I said to Jenna.

I had lied to Robbie. I did hate my dad for leaving me, hated him from the moment I knew what hate really was and kept hating him even after he died. Not because he abandoned me but because he left me with my mother, that damn woman who couldn’t take care of anyone, least of all me, who never could hold a job, who treated men she barely knew like she cared more about them than she cared about her own son. I never said it. Half the kids in

town had a daddy that walked out on them. I wasn't anything special. If I left Jenna with these people, I'd be doing the same damn thing my daddy'd done.

I heard Robbie say we should pick this up tomorrow. Mr. Smith agreed, said he wanted to hit the casino again. They said goodbyes, and I stood up, glad it was finally over.

Then Mr. Smith's voice grew louder and closer to the bathroom. "Let me say bye to them," he said.

I turned to place Jenna back in her carriage just as the door opened. Her blanket fell, her stubby feet hanging down from her legs.

Mr. Smith's smile twisted and exploded. "Where the hell are her toes?" he yelled.

Robbie stumbled into the bathroom. "Oh, they're here." He grabbed her feet, covering them inside his fist. "They're just baby toes. Really small, you know?"

"What you trying to pull on me?"

Mrs. Smith poked her head through the door. "What's—oh my god."

"I told you there were defects," Robbie said.

"You didn't say she was no freak," Mr. Smith yelled.

"Hey," I said. "She's not a freak, you redneck piece of shit."

"What they hell you know, boy? Can't even change a diaper right."

I stormed out of the bathroom, Jenna in tow.

"Where you going?" Robbie asked.

"The deal's off," I said. I didn't care if there wasn't a better way. I wasn't leaving her with those damned people.

The next morning, I woke up, took a piss, but the toilet wouldn't flush. The water'd been turned off. Then I noticed the RV seemed more quiet than normal, that I didn't hear Jenna's purifier humming. The power had been cut too. Took them three months, but they finally made good on their promises.

I drove down to a gas station, filled up some buckets with water. Back home, I heated the water on the propane stove, bathed Jenna outside in the sunlight using an old plastic storage crate as a bathtub. She splashed and giggled like the night before didn't happen. I wished I could forget things so easy. Watching her like that, so full of life or whatever you want to call it, I knew that she deserved better. I knew what I had to do. A better way had been in front of me all along.

I brought her to the day care. Missy waited outside. "Hey Scoey," she said when I walked up. She stuck her head close to Jenna. "And hey you, cutie," she said to Jenna. She looked at the air purifier machine in my other hand. "What you got that for?"

"I got to get some work done on the RV. Thought you could use it here."

"You know we got one of them already. But go ahead." She grinned at me, pinched me on the shoulder. Another man, one not as dumb as me, would have asked her out months ago. But I hadn't dated since Suzy, didn't want to replace one problem with another.

I said goodbye, got back in my truck and drove down the street to the used car lot. An old man sat in a rocking chair by the office. I haggled with him, sold my truck for four hundred in cash. I knew it was worth three times that easy, but if I waited I'd lose my nerve.

I walked back to the day care center. On the way, I pulled an envelope out of my back pocket, shoved the four hundreds inside. That morning, I'd collected every bit of cash I had.

With the money from the truck, I had about a grand in the envelope. I knew it wasn't enough, not nearly. But I needed to stop using what I didn't have as an excuse to not do things. I wrote Missy's name on the envelope. A note inside it said, "Do what you think is right. I'm not capable of it."

At the day care center, I told Missy I'd left something in Jenna's carriage. She led me inside, showed me where it was, then went back to the kids. When I couldn't see her anymore, I slipped the envelope under the cushions in the carriage. I didn't look at any of the babies. I didn't want to see Jenna.

I walked back home, disconnected the RV from the power, water, and gas. I hadn't started it in months, so it argued with me when I turned the ignition, spitting black smoke out the exhaust. But it eventually gave in, lumbered to life, and I eased it out the trailer park.

I sometimes wonder what my daddy felt like when he left me, if he felt as chicken shit and small as I did when I walked out of that day care. But I'm not dumb. I know he probably didn't feel anything, least not towards me. I probably never was a factor for him. The couple of times I met him, he looked at me like a stranger.

I passed by the cemetery just as I was leaving town. I pulled the RV in, parked it by the gates, and got out. I'd never seen Suzy's grave, always worried that I might run into her family if I went looking for it. I ambled past the rows of stones, paying close attention to fresh plots. Then I found it.

It had a stone already, which surprised me. Suzy told me when her granddaddy died, the family fought over how to do the stone for over a year, that her granddaddy laid down there without so much as a marker the whole time. A locket for a photo was embedded in the marble, right under Suzy's name. I opened it, saw her face for the first time in almost a year.

She was smiling, but looking off to the side, like she was waiting for someone else to come along. I didn't recognize the picture. A part of me thought about prying the locket open, taking the photo, and sending it to Jenna along with whatever money I could make. That's what I had planned, to move somewhere, get a decent job, and send Jenna every dime I could, cause I think that's the only good I could ever do for her.

I reached into my back pocket, set against the stone the Polaroid of Jenna Missy gave me. In it, she's got baby food flowing out of her mouth and down her chin. She's pointing at a kitten someone brought in that morning. She's trying to smile, and I'm sure she's laughing that weird laugh of hers.

I left Jenna's picture next to her momma and walked back to the RV. My daddy's grave was somewhere in the cemetery too, but I didn't bother trying to find it.

The Fishing Trip

It's funny how sound figures into memory more than the other senses. When I remember my dad, the image of him is tainted by the old photographs Mom keeps lying around: a younger, happier man, long before he became "Sheriff Tool" to everyone else, that I never knew. He wore a cheap cologne that I've never caught scent of since his death, something they probably don't make anymore. I don't remember touching him. I imagine his skin felt something like leather or the skin of an elephant, but it was so long ago. It's always sounds that remind me the most of him—the sound of static, just like the old CB he tuned in his truck; the clanging of metal on metal, just like the old handcuffs he kept hanging from his rearview mirror, handcuffs he claimed he never had to use in all his years as a cop. And finally, one more sound, one I heard on that fishing trip he took with me when I was ten, a sound I know I'll never hear again.

It was a hot weekend in September. He had promised the trip for nearly a year, said we would live off the land the way men should, but on the day we finally arrived, he said he was too tired, that the fish would be better in the morning. So we set up our camp: a tiny, vinyl, green tent we bought from TG&Y on the way out of town that was only big enough for me. Dad went to his truck, opened a bottle of Jack Daniels and drank. He served as the sheriff in Delta's Heart, a small town on the ass side of Louisiana, and had a police scanner in his truck that he kept turned on. I fell asleep listening to it buzz the sound of distant troubles.

I woke early the next morning, excited to head to the lake, but Dad sat in his truck, slumped over the wheel, passed out. I knew better than to wake him when he had been drinking. Mom always said if I smelled whiskey, let him snore. So I went walking instead.

I pretended to be in a war movie, deep behind enemy lines on a secret mission like the stories Dad told about Vietnam. In my favorite, he was taken prisoner. Charlie saw that he had skill with engines, so rather than lock Dad in a POW camp, they put him to work as a mechanic. He said he did it for months, biding time until he was rescued, sabotaging the enemy's vehicles right under their noses.

Mom would listen and call him a liar, say that he had gotten the story from a movie. But I believed him for years. I had to. I knew when to avoid him and when to listen. He almost always wore his gun belt, even at home. But when he started drinking, he would take it off, put it in the top shelf of his closet. When it was just me and him, he was a quiet drunk. He'd sit in the recliner, his backside melting into the upholstery, and he'd only speak to tell stories. And I always believed them.

He only hit me when my mother was around. She had a tendency to exacerbate the situation, to turn him from somber to violent. She'd call him an old drunk, say he was just like his own father. Sometimes she'd lock herself in the bathroom, rattle bottles of pills, threaten to kill herself. I'd cry and pray for her. Dad would break down the door, drag her out, and beat the both of us. She knew the buttons to push, and she had to know how he would react, that he would lash out at everything: the house, her, me. But she did it anyway.

I found a dog while I explored the woods. I heard its groans first, an almost human sound, muffled and gravelly. I thought someone might be out there with me, and I felt afraid but also curious, so I followed the noise, hiding behind pine trees. The dog lay at the base of a tree, nestled in a bed of pine needles. At first I thought it was some wild animal, a wolf maybe, but then I stepped closer. It was a mutt, maybe a shepherd and lab mix, its coat a collage of brindle mazes, big and well-fed-- probably someone's pet, lost in the woods. The

dog's fur shuddered with every breath it took, rippling across its coat like waves in the water. It had its head buried under its paws, but then it must have heard me and looked up.

The dog's back legs were a tangled mess, the hair matted in blood, a white flash of bone peeking out. Its eyes were pools of green and with them it watched me. The dog scratched at the dirt with its front paws, trying to drag itself away from me, but the hind legs were anchored and lifeless. It panted like it had run a marathon. Maybe I should have been afraid, but I wasn't. I didn't watch it with sympathy but with fascination. I guess I had never seen something so wounded before, not out in the open like that, its pain on display for anyone to see. I stood there, watching and listening for several minutes until I heard Dad calling me, then I ran back to the camp.

Dad stood at his truck. He asked if I was hungry, and I said yeah, thinking that we were finally going to go fishing. We hadn't packed any food.

“Pretty sure I saw a McDonald's on the way here,” he said.

“I thought we were gonna live off the land.”

“They got land there.”

I didn't tell him about the dog. Instead we drove in silence forty miles back to the nearest town and pulled into the drive-thru. He ordered himself a Big Mac, me a Happy Meal, even though I was too old for them. Mom always let me have a Big Mac. On the way back, I held up the toy, a Hot Wheel, and wondered if it would float in the lake.

Later at the camp, as it got dark, I asked Dad if we could start a fire. He said no, that the wood out here was no good. He pulled the truck to face the camp with the headlights on.

He opened his bottle of whiskey and sat on the ground, his back to one of the truck's tires. He told me to sit down, talked about the great fishing at the lake, that I would see for myself tomorrow before we left. Then, as the bottle emptied, he asked me about Mom.

"What's she been saying about me, son?"

I shook my head. "I don't know."

"C'mon, she's got to be telling you something."

"She's not, Dad. I swear." I wasn't lying, at least I didn't think I was. My mother called him names to me all the time: a bastard, a son of a bitch, but I didn't think that's what he wanted to hear. Besides, I worried that if he heard her words, even through me, that he would react as if she was there saying them.

"She's gonna leave me, son." He took another sip. "She's gonna leave us."

"No she's not."

"She is. I already can tell. I know that goddamn woman." He looked up at the sky. Stars poked through. "You know she almost did it once before? I know she did. She don't know I know, but I do."

"It was before you was born. Or maybe you was born. I don't know. Wait, yeah, you had just come around." Another sip. "We had gotten into some big fight, and she done hurt herself. Pretty bad." I knew what he meant. He never said he did it.

Dad continued: "She was mad 'cause I had no job. And we didn't have much food. And all she could do was yell at me about it and pray. Goddamn she would pray. All the time, everywhere. It drove me nuts. I didn't think either of them was doing no good, yelling

at me or praying. Wasn't gonna get no food on the table. She could of made more constructive use of that time, you know?

"It was her sister that talked her into it. I know she did. She was the one came to get y'all when I was out looking for work. Neither one of them knew what I was up to that morning. If they did, they wouldn't of left like that.

"I had gone out and pawned my wedding ring. Didn't really like wearing it anyway, don't like no jewelry. I took the money and bought a shitload of groceries with it. Meat, and baby food, and bread, and everything else. More food than you ever seen. When I got back, your momma and you was gone. I walked in with all them groceries, set them in the kitchen. Then I just left.

"For some reason, your momma came back that night. Maybe she wanted to get some clothes, or maybe she had second thoughts. I don't know. But when I got in that night, she was sitting in the kitchen, all that food around her. She looked at me, crying and all, and told me that it was a miracle. That God had answered her prayers. Like He just made all that shit appear out of nowhere. I didn't say nothing. There was so much food that most of it eventually went bad." He finished his bottle, tossed it into the dark. "You know she didn't even notice the ring was gone for a few months?"

I said nothing. I knew not to talk during one of his stories.

"If she leaves me," he said. "I'll kill her. I swear to God I will. I don't want you without no momma, son. She ain't going nowhere."

The ground felt wet when I woke up. Sunlight swelled over the trees. It couldn't have been earlier than seven. Dad had passed out in his truck again, the scanner crackling around him. I picked up my Happy Meal box and headed into the woods.

The dog lay where I had left him. He made no sound, and his fur was still. I thought he might be dead, so I picked up a stick and poked him with it. He made a groan, looked up at me. Most of the blood on his snout was dried, mottled with dirt and pine needles. I tore off a piece of my hamburger and offered it to him. The dog tried sniffing it, but blood clogged his nostrils. I dropped the food. He just watched it.

Then I heard Dad calling my name. He came up the trail, stumbling, and looked at me. "There you are, son. I thought you wanted to do some fishing." He saw the dog. "What the hell is this?"

He came charging toward me, and I jumped out of the way, more out of instinct. Dad sat down next to the dog and gently ran his hand over its back. "What's wrong with this poor fellow?" he asked, his voice soaked in whiskey. The dog lifted its head. "Aw, hell," Dad said. "Looks like he got hit by a car or something." Dad held up its thighs, inspected its back legs. "Looks like he tore himself up real good."

Dad stood, picked the dog up and cradled it like a baby. The dog didn't seem frightened. It eyed him with something that looked like relief, if a dog can even feel that. Dad motioned for me to follow. We headed back to the camp. Once there, Dad set the dog down, got in his truck, and dug in the glove compartment.

"You getting some bandages for him?" I asked.

Dad came out with his pistol. "Ain't nothing we can do for that poor mutt, son."

"Dad, no!" I didn't want him to kill it. I wanted him to make it better. I wanted to see that he could.

Dad opened the chamber and found the gun empty. "Goddamn it," he said. He rummaged through the glove compartment.

I sighed in relief. I remembered the night before Dad and me left, when Mom went through his truck and took all his ammo. Just in case, she said.

Dad took out his pocket knife, flicked the blade open. He looked at it, then the dog. "No," he barely said. "This'd just be cruel."

"We ain't got to kill it, Dad."

"It's our job as men to put hurting animals out of their misery, son. It's the way things was meant."

I closed my eyes, mouthed a silent prayer for the dog.

"Don't start that," Dad said, grabbing my shoulder. "God don't give a shit for the animals." He grabbed his sleeping bag from the back of his truck, got on his knees and unfolded it. "Hell, sometimes I think He don't give a shit for us people either." He picked up the dog. "Help me out here."

We shoved the dog in the sleeping bag, leaving its head sticking out the end and laid it in the bed of the truck.

Dad drove us through a wide trail in the woods. We came to a clearing, and I saw the lake. The sun rose still below the tree line on the other side of the water. But the woods were thin there and the light stabbed through, a million sunbeams cast out like a glowing orange net over the still lake surface.

Dad stopped the truck. We got out, went to the back and lifted the sleeping bag. The dog looked at me.

"Don't think about it," Dad said. "This is what needs to be done." He shoved the dog's head into the bag, zipped it up. He grabbed one end; I took the other, and we carried it to the lake. "On three," Dad said. We swung the bag, one, two, then tossed it into the water. There was a splash, and the water swallowed the bag.

"Well that's that," Dad said. He turned around. I kept my eyes on the water.

"Dad..."

"Son, I don't think we're gonna get any fishing done."

"Dad, look." I pointed at the water. The bag had risen. It bobbed in the water, drifting towards the middle of the lake. I could see the dog trying to claw its way out.

"Oh hell," Dad said. He looked at the ground, picked up a rock. "C'mon son, we got to sink it." He threw it at the sleeping bag, missed by a few yards. Water rippled from the splash. Dad picked up another rock, threw it, but I just stood still. "What you waiting for? We can't let that poor fellow float out there like that. It ain't right."

The dog floated twenty feet away from us. I took the Hot Wheel out of my pocket, hesitated, then tossed it. It hit the bag dead center, rolled off, and sank. I remember a whimper, but it may have been my imagination.

"Good one, son!" Dad slapped me on the back. "Get the biggest rock you can find, try to land it straight on top." He threw another, missed. I picked up one and nailed it. "You got one hell of a throw!" Dad said.

I smiled. I couldn't help it.

I felt bad for the dog, but as it drifted farther away, I couldn't see movement. I stopped thinking about it. The dog was just a target, and Dad and I threw rocks at the bag until it was out of sight, missing like crazy, but laughing like it was a game. Dad laughed. It's the only time I can remember hearing him do that.

I don't know what happened to the dog. It probably drowned, but sometimes I imagine it floating to the other side of the lake where someone found it and took it to a vet, where it was healed and given a home. It could have had a happy ending, maybe, somewhere else. With someone else.

Mom did leave him a month after the fishing trip. She took me with her. Dad didn't do anything about it. He didn't argue with her or chase her. He didn't try to kill her either. Instead, one cold December morning shortly after, he took the gun to himself, and he was gone. I could hate him for his abuse and the pain he caused us. Sometimes I do. But other times I thank him. I think of what he told me on that trip, what he was capable of, what he could have done. I think he saved us, whether he intended to or not, when he died.

But when those days come and hatred for him swells in me, I try to remember his laughter that day by the lake, deep and full of bass, one of the strangest, most wondrous sounds I've ever heard.

Vita

Kevin Kish was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and presently resides in New Orleans with his two dogs, Odin and Kali, and his feline creature, Ryu the Ninja Kitty.