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## Some New Place

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Some New Place

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  
Creative Writing  
Fiction

by

Nicole Mayeux

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2008

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## Dedication

To the wanderers, the ones who are lost and the ones who aren't, and to Sammy, who earned his eight percent tattoo but left us before he could get it.

## Acknowledgments

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Amanda, you get your own paragraph. Thank you for being my mentor, friend, editor, advisor, and encourager these past five years. It has been an honor to learn from you, whether it's how to stick an ending or a single-legged monkey roll. You were the one who first nudged me towards the idea for this thesis, and you are the one who helped guide it to completion. A million times, thank you!

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Lila,

10/12/07

Greetings from the Big Sleazy! This place is definitely as wild as you said it was. Did you know people eat alligator down here?? And snakes and shit too I think. Can you imagine working in an alligator processing plant? That would be pretty badass. Missing our whiskey sewing circle and your ugly mug.

Love,

Pocket

## Tall Bike

Devonne opens his door and steps out into the hot afternoon sun, bouncing a little on the soft soles of his Nikes. A few blocks down the street, he can see Lila working on a bicycle in front of her house. Devonne sees Lila every Friday, because on Friday he walks across St. Claude Avenue to get a sno-ball from the stand at the end of Spain Street where it meets the river, on the side of St. Claude where all the white people live. He likes it when Lila is already outside and he doesn't have to knock on the door to the shotgun house where she lives with a bunch of other people. He thinks it's nicer to sit on her porch with his sno-ball and watch her build bicycles. Lila says Devonne is much better than the radio at keeping her company, and she likes to tell Devonne stories about her crazy musician friends and about growing up on the coast of California, which sounds like something out of a movie. Devonne always eats his sno-ball very slowly.

Lila looks up from her work and and wipes the back of her hand across her forehead, leaving a streak of black grease behind. "Hey!" she greets him, pointing to the bicycle. "Check it out!"

Devonne looks. The bike rests upside-down with its handlebars on the sidewalk and its wheels in the air. The wheels are higher than they should be, though. The bike is nearly as tall as Lila, and the whole thing is spray-painted a shiny gold color. Lila gives the front wheel a spin. "What do you think?"

"Why'd you make it so tall?" Devonne asks. Immediately, he wishes he would have said something nicer first, something like "The wheel works good" or "I like the color you painted

it.” He always likes it when Mr. Calvin tells him he’s done a good job washing dishes at the end of the night, and he wants to make Lila feel like that about her bike.

Lila smiles. “Don’t worry,” she says, “that’s how it’s supposed to look. It’s two bicycle frames joined together.” She points to a rough place on the frame where two metal rods meet. “See? I did the welding myself out in the backyard. Pretty sweet, huh?” Lila nods as if she’s agreeing with herself, and her big glass earrings sparkle in the sun like shiny quarters. When she bends down to scrape a bit of rust off the handlebars, Devonne can see rings of dirt around the back of her neck, underneath her blue bandana. “Heading down to the sno-ball stand?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Devonne answers. He pulls his money out of his pocket and re-counts it--\$1.30 for a large. A dollar, a quarter, and a nickel. Last week, Devonne dropped the quarter on the way to the stand without realizing it, and Mr. Ron had already given him his large spearmint sno-ball when he put the money on the counter and realized his mistake. Mr. Ron told him not to worry about it because he was such a faithful customer, but it had made Devonne feel bad, and so now he counts his sno-ball money twice. Habits like checking the front door lock seven times each morning and always tying his shoes right lace over left allow Devonne to be able to have a job and live by himself. They make him feel calm and safe. As long as he keeps doing his habits and earning money from his job and not bothering Aunt Rita, she’s promised not to send him to the hospital in Baton Rouge.

“It’s pretty,” Devonne says as he looks back at the bike. “But how’re you gonna ride it?”

“Just a little running start. Here, I’ll show you.”

Devonne watches as Lila moves her toolbox out of the way and turns the bicycle right side up. She drops the wrench she was holding into the big front pocket on her overalls. That’s one of the reasons Devonne likes Lila so much. She has habits just like him. Devonne can’t

remember the last time he saw her wearing something other than brown overalls, a gray or white tank top, and her blue bandana. Lila likes to be barefoot whenever she can, so that's a habit too. Once, when she visited Café Thai with some of her friends, he even saw her kick off her flip-flops as soon as her legs were under the table.

Lila is always barefoot when he sees her at her house on Fridays, and Devonne is worried when she walks into the middle of the street with the bike. When he was little, his mother told him never to walk into the street barefoot because there were all sorts of nails and sharp things that could cut him. He doesn't like to see Lila do it, but he also can't imagine anything ever really hurting her.

"It's easy," she says. "Watch me." She holds onto the handlebars of the bike and jogs next to it for a few steps before jumping up and swinging her leg over the seat like it's a horse. She rides halfway down the street and then turns around, jumping back off when she reaches the porch. Devonne likes how she looks up on the bike, like she's sailing safely over all the rusty nails of Spain Street. "Want to try it?"

He shakes his head. Devonne isn't brave enough to do the things Lila does. Then he remembers that he does have something nice he can tell Lila, something that will make her happy. "I had a dream last night," he says.

"Oh yeah? A good one?" She leans the bicycle against the porch and then sits down next to him on the steps.

Lila has trouble sleeping a lot because she dreams of dead children. In her dreams, she told Devonne, she wakes up in the morning to find little bodies scattered all over her house. Babies in the flower boxes. Toddlers on the coffee table. Their bellies were always swollen and the shape of their bones showed through their skin. They died because she forgot to feed them,

she said. So she doesn't trust herself to own anything that would depend on her, not even a pet dog or a house plant.

"Yeah, a real good one." Devonne tries to keep still as Lila reaches down to adjust the tongue of her boot. It makes him uncomfortable when people get that close to him. He doesn't like being touched. Lila smells like sweat and something else, something like warm metal, or the inside of a garage. "I was at the café and Mr. Calvin said I was doing such a good job washing dishes that he was going to let me wait tables. So I started waiting tables, and I was real good at it. Didn't drop any plates or glasses or nothing. And the new dishwashers weren't good—they didn't stack the dishes in rows like you're supposed to—but I was so happy getting to wait tables that I didn't even mind. I wasn't even bothered."

Lila smiles. "That sounds real nice, Dev." Then she reaches over and pats the top of his knee—one, two times.

Devonne jerks his leg away. He feels very strange, kind of like he wants to throw up but also kind of like Lila sailing high and smooth on the tall bike.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Uh-huh," he says. And he is okay, he thinks. "You know, I was thinking. I was thinking maybe if I keep telling you all my good dreams, and maybe if you think about them right before you go to sleep, it'll make the children go away. Then maybe you could get some plants for your flower box, or maybe even a dog."

She laughs, but not a mean laugh like some people do. A nice one. "It's worth a try, right?"

They sit on the porch and talk about their favorite kinds of desserts and what Lila should name the new bike until two guys walk up to them with instrument cases on their backs. One has

his head shaved with a bunch of tattoos on it, and the other is wearing a pair of shiny silver pants that look to Devonnie like ladies' pantyhose. "Heading to the river," the one with the shaved head says. "You coming?" The one with the pantyhose lights a cigarette.

"Sure," Lila tells them. "I'll catch up to you."

The men nod and walk off. Lila takes a set of keys out of her pocket and locks her front door. She walks the tall bike out into the street again. "Thanks for the dream, Dev," she says. "See you later?"

"Okay," Devonnie answers. He watches her ride all the way down the street before he walks the rest of the way to the sno-ball stand.

On his trip down Spain Street next week, Devonnie wants to see Lila even more than usual. The night before, Aunt Rita came over to bring him his prescription refills and to take his paychecks for that month. Devonnie isn't very good at math, so Aunt Rita has to keep his bank account for him and pay all his bills. Aunt Rita acts like it's a whole lot of trouble and she hates doing it, but Devonnie doesn't like it any more than she does. Seeing Aunt Rita always makes him miss his mama because she never made him feel bad for the way he is.

As he crosses St. Claude, Devonnie starts thinking that he might tell Lila about Aunt Rita. Maybe if he can help her feel better about her bad dreams, she could help him feel better about being bad at math and needing Aunt Rita to help him do things. Maybe Lila will even offer to help him with his money so he won't have to see Aunt Rita anymore. Devonnie thinks he would like that best of all.

Lila isn't outside when he passes her house, so he keeps walking and buys his spearmint sno-ball from Mr. Ron first. When she still isn't outside on his way back, he steps onto the porch and knocks on the wood frame of her screen door. The real door behind it is open, and Devonne can see Lila lying on the sofa through a big rip in the screen. Her head turns sharply when she hears the knock. "Oh hey, Dev," she says, but she sounds confused. "It's okay, you can come in."

He can barely see once he steps into the dark room out of the bright daylight. There are sheets hung over both of the side windows, and the room smells like weed cigarettes, the kind that his mama and her boyfriend used to smoke out in the backyard sometimes. Lila sits up on the sofa and turns on a small lamp on the floor by her feet. Devonne sits on one of the striped lawn chairs across from her. He knows that this is strange, that sleeping in a dark room in the middle of the day is not one of Lila's habits, but he doesn't know what exactly is wrong. Her hair looks even dirtier than usual and is all stuck to one side of her head, and she isn't wearing her overalls. In fact, Devonne isn't sure she is wearing anything underneath the big red blanket that she has wrapped around her. She looks cold.

"Don't mind me today," she says. "I'm a mess."

Devonne wants to tell her that he doesn't think she is a mess at all, that he thinks she is brave and strong and pretty, but instead he just asks, "How come you're not working on your bike?"

She adjusts herself on the sofa, dangling one leg off the side and looking up at the ceiling. "It got stolen last night," she says. "Outside of Dragon's Den, while I was at a show. Some asshole cut the lock off."

Devonne doesn't know what to say. He thinks about when he lost his Superman action figure at the park when he was little, and about when the other dishwashers at the café make him



go wrap silverware during a rush because he works too slow. So he just picks at the edge of his Styrofoam sno-ball cup and says, "I'm sorry, Lila."

She keeps her eyes on the ceiling. "I can't hold on to anything, you know? Everything just keeps slipping right through my fingers." She stretches her arm up toward the ceiling and turns her hand over, like she's looking for something on it. Suddenly she turns back towards Devonne. "I did have a nice dream last night, though. I think your idea is working."

He smiles at that. He is about to ask Lila to tell another story about California and the ocean when he hears footsteps on the porch and sees the screen door swing open. The shaved head man from last week steps inside. He looks first at Devonne and then at Lila, or maybe just at Lila's leg sticking out from under the blanket. "What's he doing here?" the man asks.

Lila sits up again, wrapping the blanket even tighter around her shoulders. "We're starting a bridge club. What do you care?"

"Whatever," he says as he flicks the light switch up on the wall. Devonne squints. "Are you ready to go?"

"I told you, I'm not going."

"Unbelievable," he says. "You're really going to sit home and pout because of something you can't do a damn thing about."

"Just drop it, okay? I don't feel like going out. I worked for weeks on that bike."

The shaved head man flings his hand in Devonne's direction. "How do you know Rainman here didn't steal it? I hear retards like shiny objects."

Lila jumps off the couch so quickly that Devonne drops his sno-ball cup on the floor, spilling green syrup all over. She lunges at the shaved head man and shoves him hard in the chest

with one hand, trying to keep the blanket around her with the other. “That’s it,” she says. “Get the fuck out of my house, Z. I’m serious.”

The man grabs Lila’s wrist and yanks the blanket out of her hands, and suddenly she is naked in front of both of them in the middle of the room. Devonne wants to scream, but his throat is closed off. He wants to jump up and hit the man, hit him hard enough to make him go away forever, but his feet won’t move. He has no habits to help him in this situation. All he can do is close his eyes to avoid seeing the parts of Lila that he knows he shouldn’t and rock himself back and forth in the chair to keep from crying.

“There’s something wrong with you,” he hears the man say. After that, the screen door slams. Devonne opens his eyes as Lila bends down to pick the blanket up off the floor. Her back is to him, and he notices the lines by her shoulders where her arms are darker from always wearing tank tops. She turns and looks at Devonne for a second then lies back down on the sofa, facing the wall.

“I’m kind of tired, Dev,” she says. Devonne can barely hear her from where he sits. “See you next Friday, okay?”

Devonne uses a crumpled piece of paper to scoop as much of the sno-ball back in the cup as he can. He gets up to go, but then he thinks of something. He looks over at the shape of Lila’s shoulder underneath the red blanket and before he knows exactly what he’s doing, reaches over and pats her on it—one, two times. Then he leaves, making sure to shut the screen door quietly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next night at the café, Devonne asks Anthony, one of the other dishwashers, who The Rain Man is. He already knows what a retard is, that it's a mean name for people like Devonne who have special needs. The kids at school called him that sometimes when he was little, and once a server in the café yelled it at him after he dropped a tray of dishes on accident and Mr. Calvin cut the server's shift and sent him home early. Anthony slams the big metal flap of the Auto-Chlor machine down into its slot to start the wash cycle. He looks at Devonne like he's trying to decide something. "It's just some dude from a movie, man," he says. "Just keep your mind on those dishes, y'heard? Rush about to start."

Devonne tries to concentrate, but he can't stop thinking about Lila. It's like when something forces him to break a habit, and all he can think about for the rest of the day is putting all the coffee mugs in a straight row or tying his shoes left over right instead of right over left. In his mind, he sees the shaved head man grabbing Lila's wrist over and over until it doesn't even feel real anymore. Devonne must be working slower than usual, because Mr. Calvin tells him to wrap silverware before it even gets busy.

At the end of the night, Anthony surprises him by slapping him on the back as he is hanging up his apron. Devonne jumps back. "Hey!" he hears himself say.

"Oh sorry, man. I forgot you ain't cool with all that. I just wanted to see if you was alright. Nobody been messing with you or anything, huh?"

"No," Devonne replies. Then he adds, "I'm just kind of tired."

"Cause you know if somebody's messing with you, they messing with me, right?"

Devonne nods his head. He knows Anthony is trying to be nice to him, that in some ways he cares about Devonne like Lila does, or like his mama did when she was alive. "Right."

Outside, the air feels sticky as Devonne starts his walk down Frenchmen Street. He touches each light post that he passes, a habit that helps him feel safe while walking home in the dark. He likes to walk from the glow of one light to the next, like playing hopscotch almost. He is so busy thinking that he almost doesn't notice that the next light post he touches has a bicycle chained to it. It's the shiny gold paint reflecting under the lamp that makes him turn his head. Devonne can't believe it. Here is Lila's bike, right here in front of him like it's just been waiting for him to finish working at the café and walk past. He runs his hand over the rough place on the frame that she welded.

Before he can think of what to do next, a short man wearing all black comes out of the bar on the corner and starts walking towards him. Devonne recognizes him from around Lila's neighborhood, but he isn't one of her artist friends that lives at her house. "Got a problem, brother?" he asks.

"This is Lila's bike," Devonne says. He thinks his voice sounds strange, like he is trying hard to keep up with where his words are going.

"Who?"

"This is my friend Lila's bike," he repeats. "And I think you need to give it back."

The man takes a step closer. "And I think you better mind your own goddamn business."

He reaches out and yanks Devonne's hand off the bike, but instead of flinching, Devonne springs forward. He closes his eyes and swings both his fists at the man, and although he isn't trying to, all of a sudden he's screaming. He feels bad pain in his stomach, and he punches harder, screams louder. His fist hits something sharp and wet, and still he keeps swinging his arms. He doesn't stop until he feels himself being lifted up and then dragged into the street. Devonne finally opens his eyes to see the man bent over a few feet away, right under the light

post. He makes a coughing sound and spits something bloody onto the sidewalk. Devonne is still screaming.

It's very confusing after that. Things get all bright and wavy, like what you see in the dark when you rub your eyes too hard. Devonne feels someone digging in his pocket for his wallet, but he can't get away. He can't do anything. A little while later he sees Aunt Rita's face and hears her voice loud and angry, but he doesn't understand the words. He knows he's inside somewhere, not on the street near the cafe anymore, and that makes him feel a hundred ways at once. He's glad to be away from the man, but even more than that he's angry that someone has dragged him away from Lila's bike. No one but him knows that it belongs to her. Does the bicycle thief still have it? How can Devonne ever find it again if he does?

A feeling worse than every test he ever failed in school sits in the bottom of his stomach. He should have saved Lila's bike. He should have saved her from the shaved head man. But he just messed everything up like a retard and now he will never be able to fix it. Devonne feels his body start rocking back and forth, back and forth, but this time he can't keep from crying.

Aunt Rita told Devonne that he could cut his hospital bracelet off when she brought him home the next day, but now it's a week later and it is still on his wrist. Devonne finds himself bending the little plastic tab back and forth whenever he's nervous, and every time he tries to pick up the scissors out of the kitchen drawer to get rid of it, his heart starts beating super fast like it did with the bike thief, and he has to put the scissors away and go check the locks on the door again. The

bracelet makes him think of Lila, which is happy and sad at the same time and sometimes makes Devonne cry, although he never lets Anthony or anyone at work see.

A few days later, Devonne sleeps through the whole night for the first time since the hospital, but he has a very bad dream. In it, he finds Lila's bicycle stuck high up in the branches of a tree. Lila is under the tree, and her arms are all scraped up and bleeding from trying to climb and sliding down the bark. Devonne starts to climb the tree, and to his surprise it's easy. He's so strong. But when he gets a few branches away from the bike, the tree grows ten more feet and the bike is even higher. Devonne keeps climbing, but when he gets close it happens again. Pretty soon Devonne is so high in the tree that it makes him dizzy and scared to look down, and he doesn't know what to do. Then he sees Lila's friends, the shaved head man and the one with the silver pants, at the bottom of the tree. They're smoking cigarettes, and after they light them they set the tree on fire. Devonne can hear them laughing as the flames climb and the smoke stings his eyes. Soon he would have to decide whether to keep climbing or jump. But no matter what he did, the bicycle would be destroyed.

Devonne doesn't know what to think of his dream as he laces up his Nikes by the front door, but he thinks he understands a little better now what it must be like for Lila. Nothing is real in nightmares, but you feel scared when you wake up just the same.

That night at work, Anthony pulls Devonne to the side of the Auto-Chlor machine as he is about to start washing dishes. "Hey man, don't you think it's time you cut that thing off?" He points to Devonne's wrist. "Or are you planning on starting some bar fights and thinking you might need it again?"

Devonne knows Anthony is trying to joke about the bracelet, but he can't make himself laugh. "It's fine," Devonne says, and starts to turn around, but Anthony keeps talking.

“Look, man,” he says, and his voice is softer this time. “Mr. Calvin said that thing's gotta go. It's all dirty and stained-looking and shit...it's a health code thing, man. We can't be having the customers see that.”

Devonne's heart is beating, beating. He twists the tab of the bracelet and tries to look Anthony in the eye even though that is very hard for him to do. He doesn't know what to say.

“...I know it's stupid, D,” Anthony continued, “but you see they got me wearing this damn hairnet on my beard, so you know it ain't just you. They just like that about stuff. But you gotta pull it together if you wanna keep your job, man...”

Devonne thinks he can hear Anthony still talking, but his voice fades away with the noise of the kitchen as Devonne turns the corner towards Spain Street, touching every light post twice as he goes.

Devonne hears someone knocking at the door, and he knows he should get up and answer it, but his legs don't move.

After a few minutes, the door opens, and Lila steps inside. She's wearing her overalls and bandana. “Dev!” she says when she sees him. “Why wouldn't you answer the door? I knocked a hundred times.”

Devonne wants very much to answer her, but nothing he wants to do seems to work now. It takes all his energy just to keep rocking, rocking, rocking.

Lila comes over and sits on the floor in front of him with her legs crossed under. “Mr. Calvin says you haven't shown up for work the past two weeks. He's worried about you.” She

stops. Then, "I heard it was you that found my bike. I know you tried to get it back for me. I wanted to thank you." She pauses. "And also to say goodbye."

Devonne hasn't seen her for a long time, although it may not be that long because he doesn't do much besides sit in his apartment now. He watches as Lila picks at a splinter in the floor boards. Her hands are greasy again. "I'm skipping out in a couple days," she continues. "Hopefully tomorrow night. Gonna head to Montgomery with my friend's band."

"Why?" Devonne asks.

She keeps picking at the splinter and doesn't look at him. "Everybody's an asshole here," she says. Devonne thinks of the shaved head man. "Except you, of course." Now she looks straight into his eyes and it's Devonne's turn to stare at the floor. He feels helpless and naked in front of Lila, like this time he is the one under the red blanket that gets ripped away. "Look, I'm really not good at this, Dev, but you need to go to work. Mr. Calvin told me about your Aunt Rita, about how she wants to ship you off to some group home in Baton Rouge. You...you can't let her do that, okay?" She stops for a second, like she doesn't know what else to say. "You've got to just...stick it out, you know? Keep trying."

They sit like that for a few moments, across from each other on the living room floor. Devonne wonders if Lila will pat his knee again, and what he would do if she did.

"I'm glad you're here," Devonne finally says. He wants to ask Lila all sorts of things—what she will do in Montgomery, if she's still having bad dreams. If the shaved head man has hurt her. He notices that her eyes are red like they were the day she was wrapped in the blanket, and there is a bruise on the inside of her arm. Instead he asks, "What were you going to name the bike?"

Lila smiles. "Goldilocks. It's stupid."



"Because it's gold," Devonne says. "I like that." Outside, he hears the crickets getting loud, so he knows it will be dark soon. Something has happened to him, Devonne knows that much. He isn't sure if it's good or bad. It feels like both. It feels like falling off a bike--painful and hard but also kind of happy because you had been scared of it for so long, and here it is out of the way at least. He thinks Lila will get up and leave then, but to Devonne's surprise she uncrosses her legs and scoots over next to him, looking where he looks at the pattern on the wall from the window blinds. They stay that way together for a long time.

10-3-04

Dear Grandma,

Sorry its taken me so long to write. Ive been moving around a little, but you can write me back at this address for a few more weeks, probably till the end of the month. After that I'm not sure where I'll be next but I'll write you when I figure it out.

I know youre probably still mad at me for leaving. I just want you to know that I'm really sorry and I never meant to hurt you or specially to hurt Ashley. I don't know if she told you this but I did tell her goodbye. The day that I left I went to see her at school during her lunch hour. I brought her Taco Bell. We sat down at one of the lunch tables and she ate her burrito and I told her that I was going away for a while. I told her that I loved her and that she should always listen to you because you love her too and you know better than Mom because Mom's sick right now. I told her that Mom loved her, but when I did it felt like lying. But Grandma, I did say goodbye and I did tell her that if anything bad starts happening again she needs to tell you.

I don't know if she's still living with you or if Mom got out and took her back. I know it's coming up on six months and she's supposed to be on parole by then but I think it's better for Ashley when she's gone even though I know that's a terrible thing to say. When we were living in the apartments on the east side with her last boyfriend, she kept telling Ashley how we were all going to go to Disneyland that summer, then she was high it was even worse, and she would lay in Ashley's bed with her and talk about all the rides we were going to go on and how she was going to meet Belle and Cinderella and all the other princesses. I think by the time she went to jail she believed it ~~just~~ as much as Ashley did. Anyway, if you hear Ashley start talking about Disneyland all of a sudden, tell Mom to cut that shit out.

I hope she's still living with you, and that maybe you could try to find a way to keep her this time. I know that's asking a lot coming from someone who dropped out and ran off, but some times I think I'm crazy the way Mom is and maybe I'm no good for Ashley either.

## The Prophetess

Mama Bess woke up with the Spirit of the Lord resting heavy on her chest. She half expected to see an angel or other holy visitant hovering above the bed when she opened her eyes, but there was only the familiar view of her ceiling with its peeling paint and water stains like a speckled trout. Still, there was no denying the presence. She sat upright in her bed, causing the mattress to sink considerably in the middle and the frame to creak in a way that Mama found insulting, if a bed frame could be said to harbor intentions. She cocked her head and squinted, listening.

She was right to describe the Lord as heavy in the room. That was unmistakable. But heavy with what? Mama Bess felt compelled to rise to her feet and walk around, exploring this new spirit. She slipped her feet into the matted terrycloth slippers beside her night stand and began pacing the space between her bed and the kitchenette with her arms outstretched, spreading her fingers to let the air pass through them like a sieve. She waited.

Outside, Mama Bess could hear the thump-thump-buzz of a car stereo system as it cruised down Oakwood Street. With her eyes closed, the smell of old bacon grease coming from the kitchenette intensified. But these things, Mama Bess thought, these things. She squinted harder until little flares of light burst against her eyelids. These things—the car, the food, her apartment, the clothes she was wearing—they seemed to Mama Bess so trivial all of a sudden. It was like the whole world and everything in it had been drained of value in the light of this impending revelation. Even Freedom Tabernacle and her mission were dead leaves on the ground, of no consequence to anyone. Mama Bess had never felt anything like it. Nothing

matters, she thought, nothing matters except this message. She knew she must fast and pray until the Lord communicated it to her.

Mama Bess wanted to linger a bit longer in this moment, but when she glanced at the clock she saw it was five minutes until the prayer walk was supposed to start. Even though Mama lived in a little converted garage apartment directly behind the Freedom Tabernacle, she found it difficult to make it to services and meetings on time, so often was she delayed either by her intense meditation with the Lord or her long-suffering battle with constipation. The thorn in her side, she mused bitterly. Mama put on yesterday's red sweatpants and T-shirt that still lay in a pile on the seat of her recliner. She smoothed her curly hair back with gel and gathered it in an alligator clip. Her pocket-sized leather Bible and Covert Ops X-treme Super Soaker water gun sat propped on the window sill next to the door, and she grabbed them both on her way out.

The Freedom Tabernacle used to be a three-bedroom house. Mama Bess bought it as a foreclosure almost eight years ago. At the time, her congregation and renovation crew consisted mostly of recent graduates of her drug rehabilitation program, Sanctified. When they weren't shooting dope or pounding forties, many of those men had worked jobs in manual labor or construction, so Mama was able to convince most of them to offer up their skills in service and thankfulness to the God who had delivered them from the snares of the Enemy. Only a few of those original congregants still remained (narrow is the way!), and of them Alonzo was the most on fire for the Lord. Mama trusted Alonzo with a key to the Tabernacle, so she wasn't surprised to find the back door already open and a fresh pot of coffee being brewed in the fellowship room.

Alonzo poked his head around the supply closet door. "Morning, Mama Bess!"

Alonzo had rotten teeth from years of drinking soda and inhaling smoke of every chemical variety. He had trained himself to never let them show, resulting in a smile that was rigid and never totally convincing of its sincerity.

“Morning,” Mama Bess replied, setting the bible and the super soaker on the table. “Have you prayed at the altar?”

“Of course, Mama,” Alonzo said. He looked a little hurt. “I never begin the Lord's work unless I've met with Him in the sanctuary.”

Mama Bess studied Alonzo's face for signs of lying, just as she did every week with the addicts in her Sanctified meetings. Alonzo didn't normally arouse this kind of suspicion in Mama. He was, among a throng of backsliders who seesawed between serving the Lord and using their tithe to buy crack, an island of consistency. Alonzo took a bottle of anointing oil from the storage closet and began pouring it into the reservoir of the super soaker.

It's not about Alonzo, Mama concluded, it's something else. Little flecks of knowledge were floating down to her like ashes from a burnt offering. She needed to be vigilant. There was something—no, she corrected herself, someone—she was to look for.

Alonzo pointed to a box of doughnuts near the coffee pot. “A little breakfast before we go?”

Mama Bess was indeed hungry, but her excitement over seeing her favorite kind of doughnut waiting for her (bear claw) was quickly tamped out by the reminder that she had committed to fasting until the Lord revealed His message. And yet, she thought, there had been many times where the Lord had seen fit to release Mama Bess from her fasts early with the assurance that her prayers had been heard and her heart restored to that precious place so near to His own. And He had, after all, revealed another piece of the puzzle already.



Alonzo picked a chocolate glazed out of the box and dipped it into his coffee. Yes, Mama decided, it is well with my soul. But let us be on our way. She seized the bear claw and began eating it as she slung the super soaker back over her shoulder. Alonzo picked up the bible and the two of them set out to proclaim the Good News to East Nashville.

Oakwood Street was Mama Bess's Sodom. She was no stranger to the comings and goings of the ghetto; before the Lord saw fit to save her soul she had fit right into this neighborhood. She had seen someone shot. Knives (plural) had been held to her throat. She had worked corners, peddling meth and handjobs alike. Mama felt that it was because of her past that the Lord had called her to remain in this neighborhood and be a light to all those still wandering in darkness. She started the weekly prayer walks after a drive-by shooting left a teenage girl bloody and twitching two houses down from the steps of the church.

Mama Bess licked the sugary glaze of the bear claw off her fingers while Alonzo walked alongside her singing "I Surrender All."

"Thank you Jesus!" she cried out. "Thank you for this day that you have made and these people who are your beloved creation."

Alonzo lifted his hand skyward as he sang, and although his eyes appeared closed, Mama Bess knew he had to keep them slightly open in order to see where he was going. The two of them made their way past the slum apartments and dilapidated houses in this way, with Mama praying as the Lord directed her while Alonzo ran through his short but eclectic repertoire of hymns and spirituals. Be vigilant, Mama felt the Lord say as the heavy presence returned.

They passed an elderly woman sitting on her porch. Mama Bess didn't know her name, but she was always in the same spot whenever Mama saw her. The woman smiled mechanically as she fanned herself.

“Grace and peace to you this morning, sister,” Mama Bess offered.

“Praise the Lord!” the old woman echoed.

The double next to the old woman's house held an ever-rotating number of children who spent the majority of their time, as far as Mama could tell, dashing in and out of the street and trying to steal Hot Fries from the convenience store on the corner. They reminded Mama of the tribe of lost boys in Peter Pan. Lost in more ways than one, she reflected.

Alonzo hit a key change in “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” as a little girl with a head full of plastic barrettes stepped into their path on the sidewalk.

“Hello there, Amara,” Mama Bess greeted. “How are you this morning?”

“There gonna be food at the church today?” Amara asked. Taking notice of the super soaker, she reached out a small hand caked with something purple towards it.

Mama Bess lifted the water gun out of reach. “Not today, baby,” Mama told her. “That's once a month, remember?”

“Can I play with that?”

Mama shook her head. Then, using an amount of effort that little Amara was certain never to appreciate, she squatted down onto her hams and motioned for the girl to come closer. She said very softly, “I know this looks like a toy, sweet pea, but it's not. Do you know what it is?”

“Aunt Pearl says you're a crazy lady.”



Undaunted, Mama continued: “This is an instrument of the Lord Jesus. Called and sanctified for His divine purpose. It's very ordinary on its own, isn't it? Just a toy water gun. But the Good Lord came to Mama Bess in a dream one night and told her that she should use it to bless those who would rather be cursed, and show them the way to His grace.”

Mama Bess set the super soaker on her lap for Amara to inspect. The little girl ran her fingers over the bright orange plastic of the reservoir and looked up at Mama in much the same way Mama had looked at Alonzo earlier—testing her for falsehoods.

Suddenly, a voice called out above the screeches and laughs of the other kids playing in front of the house. “Amara!” it scolded. “Get your ass over here and quit talking to that lady!” An older boy started across the lawn towards them. He couldn't have been more than thirteen, but he was dressed like a miniature gang banger—baggy white t-shirt, even baggier jeans, and his hair pulled tight into cornrows like black ropes stretched across his skull. He was scowling in a way unnatural for his age. Mama felt like she had seen him around the neighborhood, but she couldn't place where.

As Mama struggled back to her feet, Amara stuck her tongue out at the boy. “You ain't my daddy, Travis!” she yelled back. The plastic barrettes in her hair made a faint clicking sound as she whipped her head around. “He's only eleven,” she told Mama.

The boy grabbed Amara's hand and pulled her toward him. “I ain't your daddy,” he said, clearly for Mama's benefit as well as the girl's, “but I'm the one's gonna answer for you. Now get in the house and go do your homework before I tell Gran.”

Amara wrenched her wrist out of the boy's grasp. “I ain't even got homework!” she shot back. “And if you tell Gran on me I'mma tell her what Jerome got you doing!” With a final flick of her barrettes, she trotted back up the driveway to the house.

The boy watched her go then turned back around to face Mama. “You leave my cousin alone,” he said, squaring his shoulders and puffing out his chest slightly. That familiar pose. What did the kids call it? Swagger? “She don't want nothing to do with you.”

Mama was confused. On the one hand, she was used to this kind of reception from people in the neighborhood. The Gospel is foolishness, Scripture says, to those who are perishing. It would take the dedication of a true servant to bring the Light to East Nashville, and Mama Bess wasn't used to much of anything in life coming easy. She was, however, surprised to see quite so much venom coming from someone so young. Mama felt a deep sorrow for this boy whose heart had obviously been ensnared by the devil at the earliest opportunity. “Young man, we are on a prayer walk,” she replied, pointing to Alonzo, who by this point had wandered half a block down in his own private ecstasy and was currently praying in tongues over the crack house on the corner. “I was only talking to your cousin about the Lord and His grace.”

The boy was unfazed. “I know what you do. You best leave me and my cousin alone, and the rest of the neighborhood too.” His eyes cut to the super soaker then right back to Mama like a snapped rubber band. “Crazy witch lady. You better get rid of that thing. Those guys are pissed about what you did.”

Now she was sure of it. This boy, Travis, had been with the group of thugs that Mama had encountered behind the barber shop on last week's prayer walk. When Mama and Alonzo walked past, she had noticed the group of teenagers behind the dumpster and started witnessing to them about the dangers of the streets and how to receive Jesus. At first they just laughed while Mama quoted Scripture after Scripture over Alonzo's soulful baritone. But when they realized that she wasn't leaving (or, Mama liked to think, when the truth of the Gospel began to threaten their sinful nature), they began to taunt her, telling Alonzo to “get hold of his woman” and calling

Mama Bess a “white witch.” This only served to flood Mama Bess with a righteous zeal, however, and before any of the boys knew what was happening, she turned the super soaker on them, using all of the Covert Ops X-treme's twenty-foot range to anoint the whole gang whether they liked it or not.

“That nasty oil shit ruined their shirts,” Travis added.

“I hope it did,” Mama Bess replied. “I hope it serves as a reminder of their sinful deeds and their need for salvation.” Mama had thought Travis was the same age as the other boys because of his height, but now she could see how young he really was. There was a spark of something in his eyes that, troubled though they were, Oakwood Street had not managed to fully extinguish yet. It was something the boy himself was trying to hide just as he was trying so desperately to intimidate Mama Bess. But to Mama, who had the spiritual gift of discernment, it was as obvious as a signal flare. She felt an electric buzz in the tips of her fingers, and her heart began to race. “You shouldn't be running around with those boys,” she managed to say.

Travis scowled. “You just stay the hell away from me with that thing,” he said. He backed away from her slowly, lifting his t-shirt and hooking his thumb into the waistband of his jeans as he must have seen the older boys do, although the effect was more or less lost on Mama when no pistol handle appeared. “And leave my cousin alone,” he repeated, trying to find the right note to end on. Only then did he turn around and rejoin the other kids on the lawn, looking up every few seconds to keep an eye on the super soaker.

Mama felt weightless, a sensation she was only able to associate with two things: methamphetamine and the Spirit of God. There was something extremely special about this boy. Moses special, she realized. King David special. She suddenly wished Alonzo was closer by so that she could see if he had the same feeling, but from the looks of it he had only just now

realized that Mama was no longer at his side and was ambling towards her from the end of the block, flashing his tight-lipped smile. Some days Alonzo reminded Mama of a blue tick hound that she had when she was a little girl.

“I got the Spirit today, Mama,” he declared when he got closer. “I sure do love those old songs.”

That nearly sent Mama through the roof. Just as that morning she had felt everything around her pale in the light of the Lord's revelation, now Alonzo's chatter angered her with its insignificance. He clearly wasn't capable of perceiving what powerful movement of the Lord had just taken place. Mama felt once again the loneliness of the prophet wandering in the wilderness.

“Sometimes,” she told Alonzo, “I think it's the sound of your own voice that you really love.” Not waiting for a response, she turned back towards the Tabernacle, knowing without looking that Alonzo would plod along after her with his head hung low and his tail between his legs.

The Lord didn't let Mama sleep after that. She woke in fits, thinking only of Travis.

She knew now that this boy was the person she was supposed to be looking for, and that he was someone the Lord wanted to use in mighty ways. She imagined many people would scoff at such an idea, but Mama Bess had learned to take the Lord at His word, no matter how foolish it seemed to the world. Had she not felt His own call to be a minister and prophetess while she was coughing up blood in an alley after a john had stolen all her dope and broken her ribs? Had Moses not felt the call while he was a fugitive murderer tending sheep for a pagan family?

Having given up on her bed, Mama Bess decided to keep a prayer vigil instead and positioned her recliner towards her bedroom window. She looked out as far as the flickering streetlight would let her see. Everything looked sulfurous and yellow. She had made a habit of walking past Travis's house every day now, without the super soaker, in an effort to run into the boy again. She hadn't, but she had on several occasions seen a large dreadlocked man smoking weed on the porch while Amara and a few others played on the sidewalk. He had a teardrop tattooed under his eye. She wondered if the man was Travis's father.

Lord Jesus, she prayed, protect Travis from the evils of this world and reveal to him his divine calling. After a few minutes, Mama saw a figure step under the street light and stop. It was a gaunt-looking white man with a backpack. The way he was stooped over made it hard to tell whether he was old or merely bent under the pack's weight. Either way, Mama knew from the way he wrenched his hands together and darted his head back and forth that he was tweaking. He was waiting for his dealer.

She sighed and glanced briefly at the super soaker near the door. Mama Bess made a habit of breaking up drug deals whenever she happened upon them, preaching and hollering and generally making a racket until both parties felt it wise to take their business elsewhere. She knew it was the righteous thing to do, but in some perverted way she always felt the sharp prick of betrayal in a secret part of her heart. Looking out at the man under the street light, Mama saw a wild-eyed reflection of her former self, and it made her whole body ache like an old wound when the air pressure changes. She wanted to close the curtains and try to go to sleep, but something (the Lord?) kept her watching.

Soon someone walked up to the man. It took Mama a few moments to recognize him, but when he bent his head down to pull something out of his pocket, she saw clearly the straight

black cornrows that helped make Travis look so much older than he was. So, she thought, this is what his little cousin threatened to tell on him about. Eleven years old and dealing rocks. Mama realized that she would be breaking up a drug deal tonight after all. After putting on her terrycloth slippers, Mama unlocked her door, but instead of picking up the super soaker, she reached under her mattress and pocketed the switchblade she kept hidden there.

By the time Mama crossed the street, the man with the backpack had left and Travis stood alone on the sidewalk. When he saw her, his eyes widened, and Mama could tell he was considering whether to run or not. Instead, though, he planted his feet and chucked up his chin as she approached.

“I told you to stay away from me,” he said.

Mama reached out and grabbed Travis by the ear.

“Ow!” he screeched, once again a child. “Let go of me!” He kicked at Mama and beat on her arm but didn't manage to get away until she had dragged him out from under the streetlight and into a dark patch of sidewalk near an overgrown lot.

“And I told you,” Mama said, “that the Good Lord loves you and has a plan for you and that you shouldn't be running around with those older boys.”

“They're not older than me,” Travis shot back. “I'm fourteen.”

“You're eleven, and don't have enough sense to sell your drugs in the dark instead of under that flashing spotlight over there. If I saw you from my window, how many other people do you think have seen you?”

This hadn't occurred to Travis, Mama could see. He glanced around the empty street. “So what?” he asked. “Let 'em see. I ain't scared. Jerome'll kill anybody that messes with me.” He

looked over his shoulder then back at Mama. “Look, you really got to go. Other people are gonna come.”

Mama ignored him. “Who's Jerome? Is that that man who sits on your grandma's porch all the time?”

“Yeah, and he'll kill you if he finds you talking to me.”

“Where's your mom?”

Travis shrugged his shoulders. “Who gives a fuck?”

Mama felt that heavy presence again, but this time she couldn't tell if it was the Lord or the damp night air. Either way, she had to try. “That man,” she pointed down the street towards Travis's house, “isn't looking out for you. That man is using you. Are you willing to be used by a drug lord and not by Jesus?”

Something in that statement rattled the boy, but not the part Mama had hoped. “He ain't using me,” he shot back. “I'm using him!”

Just then a blue Cadillac turned the corner. As it passed Mama and Travis it slowed down to a crawl, but nothing was visible behind the tinted windows. Mama was still watching it when Travis shoved her in the chest. She stumbled back a step and almost took a dive off the curb before she could right herself. “Please!” Travis pleaded. His voice had no toughness left to it. “You gotta go, now. They're gonna tell Jerome I was talking to you. Please just leave me alone. I don't care about your plan.”

Looking into Travis's face which was suddenly twisted in fear, Mama found herself in doubt. She wondered, as she sometimes did when prophesying over someone in service, whether she was really a vessel for His words or just a clanging cymbal. She had been bold with this message because it had been stronger than anything she had ever felt, but it wasn't her own life

she was gambling with. For the first time in a long time, she felt unsure of what to say. “Is someone going to hurt you, Travis?” she asked. “Why don't you come with me back to the church and we can figure out who to call. You'll be safe there.” She reached out to touch the boy's shoulder, but he jerked it away. He looked at her a moment longer (was he considering?) and then took off running before Mama could say another word.

Mama Bess didn't see Travis at all the next day. She walked by his house several times, but she only saw Amara and a few of the other kids playing soccer on the front lawn. When she called Amara over and tried to ask about Travis, a woman appeared in the doorway and called all of the children inside.

That night was the weekly Sanctified meeting, and an hour before it was supposed to start Mama had no Bible study prepared and couldn't keep her focus as Alonzo tried to give her the latest news on a program member who had been missing for several weeks.

“He finally called up Joey the other day,” Alonzo explained as he took a large bite out of a glazed doughnut. Not even the bear claws sitting in the box next to him tempted Mama. She felt sick to her stomach. “Said he'd gone on a bender and ended up at his sister's place out in Murfreesboro. Nearly put himself out for good what with that bad liver he's got. The doctor said he ain't got another weekend like that left in him, so he better straighten up.” Alonzo dunked his doughnut into his coffee and took another bite. A drop of coffee ran down his chin and into his three-day beard, but he didn't seem to notice. “Want me to start setting up the folding chairs?”

“Alonzo,” Mama asked suddenly. “What is it that made you give your life to the Lord?”



Alonzo got that confused, hangdog look, like he wasn't sure what answer to give but wanted it to be the right one. "It was you, Mama," he said. "It was you and me going through Romans in the parking lot of Burger King what made me let Jesus into my heart six years ago come June."

Mama looked past Alonzo to the open screen door at the front of the fellowship room. "I'm not talking about who led you to the Lord," she corrected. "I'm talking about what. What happened inside."

Alonzo leaned back in his chair, doughnut reduced to crumbs on the edge of the table. He waited a long while before answering. When he did, all of his usual enthusiasm was gone, making him sound, for the first time Mama could remember, incredibly honest. "Well," he said, "Lord forgive me if this ain't exactly respectful, but the truth is I guess I just got desperate."

Soon after that people began arriving for the meeting, and Alonzo began to set up the chairs and get extra Bibles from the storage closet while Mama stepped into the kitchen to refill her glass of water from the faucet. As she did, she heard someone open the back door. Still holding onto the glass, she craned her neck around the refrigerator to see who it was.

Travis let the screen door slam behind him, both hands now occupied with trying to steady the gun he had trained on Mama Bess. Mama dropped the glass into the sink and stepped backwards until she felt the countertop digging into her flesh. Travis walked towards her, gun shaking but not enough to miss. He had a fresh purple bruise on his cheekbone, and his lip was swollen and bloodied. He had been crying, and in fact still was.

"I told you to leave me alone," he said in a voice like a broken violin.

Mama put her hands in the air and pressed them downward, like she was trying to quiet a noisy child in Sunday school. "Travis, please," she said softly. "Put the gun down."

Travis shook his head. “You wanted to help me, so you're gonna help me. The bus ticket's a hundred and sixty dollars. I've got eighty. You're gonna give me the rest.”

There was the sound of metal chairs scraping the ground as the meeting members took their seats in the fellowship room. Soon Alonzo would come to see what was taking Mama so long. “Someone's going to find us soon,” she told Travis. “Are you going to shoot them?”

Travis furrowed his brow, fighting back more tears. His arms were quivering from how stiff he was holding them. “I just need the rest,” he said. “Just give me eighty and I'll leave.”

“Mama!” Alonzo called from the hallway. “You coming?”

“I'll be right there,” Mama replied, her voice sounding strained to her own ears. “Why don't you get everyone started with the passage for tonight?” Then to Travis she whispered: “The money is in my house out back there. If I promise on my honor to give it to you, will you put the gun away? Can we make that deal? That way if anyone comes in they won't think anything's strange.”

Mama prayed as she watched the boy think it over, although the prayer contained no words. Then, suddenly, he dropped his hands to his sides. “Okay,” he said. “Let's go.”

Mama thought her knees would give out on her from relief as the gun pointed at the floor, but she knew Travis wouldn't trust her for long. “This way,” she told him, leading him out the back door and across the yard to her apartment. She unlocked the door, and when she turned around to let him in, he was wiping his eyes on the sleeve of his shirt.

Mama felt certain she could take the gun from him then if she snatched out her hand. Every survival instinct, fine-tuned from years of death being as close as a lover, cried out for her to do exactly that. But the Lord was with Mama Bess in that moment, and she no longer doubted. “I have to get it from the desk drawer,” she explained. “Do you want to come inside?”

Travis didn't say anything but followed her into the apartment. Mama took a hundred dollar bill from the envelope where she stored offering money until she could deposit it at the bank. She returned to where Travis stood in the middle of the room and placed the folded bill in his hand. "This is enough for the ticket and food for a few days," she told him. "Where are you going?"

Travis took his backpack off and put the money and the gun in a small inside pocket. Next to it were a few wrinkled T-shirts, a couple CD cases, and a small sketchbook. "Denver," he said, not looking up. "My mom's there." He zipped the bag up and slung it back over his shoulder.

Looking down at the boy standing in front of her with all of his belongings on his back, Mama realized that Alonzo had said something very true, something that she was only just now beginning to understand. "You won't make it on the bus with that gun," she told Travis as she reached underneath her mattress. "Take this instead. Tuck it in your shoe, and pray to the Lord that you never have to use it." She handed him the switchblade, which he inspected for a moment before slipping it into the instep of his sneakers and giving Mama the gun in return. She left it on the nightstand as she walked Travis back out into the yard.

"I'm sorry I caused this," she said.

Travis shrugged then reached up to touch his cheek. "I was going to go anyway."

"The Lord does have a plan for you, Travis. I really do believe that." She saw in the boy's eyes a longing that she ached to fill.

"Thanks," he said. And with that, he hopped over the chain link fence and disappeared around the corner.

Mama noticed the sun starting to dip below the houses on the horizon, and she hoped Travis would be able to make it to the bus station before dark. The street lights were already on, and the one across from Mama Bess's house flickered, erratic and stubborn, against the advancing night.



## Hold Fast

Pocket gripped the leg by the ankle and turned it side to side a few times, trying to figure out the best way to begin. It had only barely thawed after sitting in the freezer, and it was still cold enough to sting her hands. She scanned the wall of the workshop, taking stock of the tools and instruments that she had organized just a week ago—scrapers, planers, picks, and handsaws hung in categories according to size. Settling on a wicked-looking detail knife that she had seen Ebby sharpen a few days earlier, she positioned the leg little toe-side down and made the first cut across the back of the calf.

After about forty-five minutes standing on the side of I-10, Pocket squinted in the afternoon glare to see a green Ford pick-up rounding the clover leaf leading to the on-ramp. The truck rumbled past Pocket and her cardboard sign at full speed only to come to a sudden, jerky stop on the shoulder about a hundred feet away. An iffy driver, Pocket thought. The kind Lila told her would make sure to say they've never picked up a hitchhiker before. More often than not, she had warned, also the kind that would ask for a blowjob within the first fifteen minutes. Pocket hooked her thumb around her belt loop as she approached, fingers grazing the hunting knife sheathed at her hip. She pulled at the Ford's passenger door handle, and it swung open with a rusty grunt.

“Where you trying to get?” a voice asked from the cab.

“West,” she answered. Pocket shaded her eyes, trying to see through the glare. “As far as you're willing.”

The driver put the Ford into park. He was wearing a dirty trucker hat that threw most of his face into shadow, but Pocket could see by the leathery hands gripping the wheel that he was middle-aged, blue-collar. Those things Pocket liked. It was the smell of sweat and the hidden eyes that made her fingers twitch.

“Well, I'm headed home to New Orleans,” the man said. “Coming back from a delivery to Mobile. You're welcome to ride, if that's west enough for you.”

Pocket wavered, unsure. Make a decision, Lila's voice coached from inside her head. Commit or be chickenshit stuck in the middle of bumfuck ninety-eight degree south Mississippi. “West enough for me,” she said. Stuffing her pack into the passenger side footwell, she climbed in after it and slammed the door, making a mental note that the locks were manual.

The man took off his hat and raked his fingers across his balding scalp. He looked at Pocket, and the two of them assessed each other. Pocket was aware of her violent sunburn and the inkblot of sweat between her breasts at the same time she took in what the sun had obscured—light blue eyes that were sunken and lined with crow's feet. He leaned towards her, and she jumped, cursing herself when she realized that he was only trying to reposition the A/C vent towards her. “Hot today,” he said, smiling. She couldn't tell if he had noticed or not. “My name's Ebby.”

“Pocket,” she replied.

“What's that now?”

“Pocket. That's my name.”

The driver squinted, his eyes shrinking even further into his brow. “Like hell it is. What's your real name?”

That familiar feeling caught in her throat like a bike chain locking up. Lila's voice again: You don't take shit off no one. “Oh, and you can talk?” she shot back. “‘Ebby’ sounds like a cartoon elephant or something.”

“It's short for Eberhardt, which is the name on my birth certificate, thank you very much. What's yours short for?”

“Pocketknife.”

Ebby laughed, more than she'd expected, as he guided the Ford onto the road. “Well alright then,” he said, still chuckling.

That tightness in her throat eased up a bit. She didn't consider herself out of the woods yet, but she thought a kind laugh was pretty telling of a person. At least she hoped it was. “You mind?” she asked, pointing to the radio.

“Anything but that rap stuff,” Ebby said. “I don't go for that.”

Pocket turned the dial until she found some bluegrass on a college station. She laced her fingers behind her head and tried her best to radiate adulthood and badassery in front of the strange man sharing his truck with her. She let the air conditioning cool her sunburned skin until goosebumps appeared.

The detail knife didn't disappoint her. It sank into the stiffened flesh of the calf as if it had been oiled, releasing a trickle of watery blood that seemed impossible to Pocket considering how



much had already drained out and gathered in thick, dark clots in the corners of the bag. She thought about when she first started working with Lila at the game processing plant and how they had stuck her with only the shittiest of tasks that no one else wanted to do, the worst of which was hosing down the concrete floor where the deer were gutted. She would sweep the place from wall to wall with the high-pressure hose, always amazed at how quickly the stuff turned sticky and brown. Nothing at all like it had been just a few hours earlier, rushing through the heart of a stag running for its life. Pocket pressed down on the leg until the blood stopped flowing.

All the way through Mississippi, Pocket prodded Ebby with questions about his life, at first because the silence freaked her out, but as time went on she found she genuinely liked listening to the guy. It reminded her of nights with Lila huddled in the corner of her van after another ten-hour day at the plant, smelling of blood and whiskey and deer musk. Lila would tell her stories from when she traveled with the circus until the batteries went out in the camping lantern or the whiskey put them to sleep. Ebby talked about his tour in Vietnam and coming home to open a custom furniture business with his new wife, his high school sweetheart: “She never wrote me, but she never dated anyone else, either.” The business crumbled with the marriage, he explained, which left him living a much more meager existence taking odd jobs around town and the occasional furniture order from one of his old clients. He said meager suited him just fine. “The most expensive thing I buy nowadays are my diabetes meds,” he joked. “The lavish lifestyle of the middle-aged.”

“So why furniture?” Pocket asked, bare foot sticking out of the passenger window.

“I wanted to have as little to do with people as possible,” he explained. “Do you know how long it takes to inlay an opal starburst mosaic in a curio cabinet door?”

Pocket shook her head.

“Long enough to not be bothered.”

She laughed. “Okay. So tell me how to do it.”

“Do what?” Ebby cocked his head. Like one of those small spitting dinosaurs from Jurassic Park, Pocket thought. Equal parts cute and menacing. “The inlay?”

“Sure, why not?” she asked. “I’m interested. Who knows when I’ll run into another old-fashioned wood craftsman. My next ride could be a deaf-mute data processor for all I know.”

Ebby looked at Pocket like he was trying to figure out her angle. “Well,” he finally said, “I hope you know what you’ve gotten yourself into.”

“I don’t, but I’m alright with that.”

Ebby was twenty minutes into his tutorial of how to hand carve a basic table leg when they reached New Orleans East. Pocket had noticed clouds forming in the west a while back, and once they crossed over an epic bridge that Ebby called the High Rise, rain started dotting the windshield.

“My exit’s coming up,” Ebby said, squinting up at the sky.

“Oh,” Pocket said. “I guess you can just drop me off wherever, then.” Another half-mile and the water started falling in sheets, but Pocket stayed stone-faced. She hadn’t counted on a thunderstorm. She needed time to get her bearings and figure out a plan wherever she ended up, and all the pelts and buckskin in her backpack would be ruined if she got it soaked. Think stray cat, she told herself. Think survival.

“In this?” Ebby pointed upwards.

“Yeah,” she assured him. “Little known fact, but I’m actually water resistant up to five feet. Well, four feet ten inches technically, if I’m breathing through my nose.” She smiled, but Ebby didn’t seem to appreciate the joke. They rode for a few minutes that way, weirdly quiet and not looking at each other. It freaked Pocket out a little bit, actually, and she began to wonder if she had read this guy wrong after all. Why wasn’t he pulling over? When the sign for Orleans Avenue came up, Ebby hit the turn signal and guided the Ford down the off-ramp. He pulled into the parking lot of a gas station at the first red light they came to.

“Look,” he said, slamming the truck into park. “I’m an old fart, and that means I’m not evolved enough to drop a teenage girl off on the side of the highway in the pouring rain and go on about my business. So you’ve got two choices—you can either hop out here and promise me you’ll wait out the rain at this gas station, or you can come stay at my place for the night. Wait out the rain, get you a shower, and be fresh and ready to take on the Wild West in the morning. It’s up to you.”

Pocket looked at the middle-aged man in front of her. She didn’t know him from fucking Adam. Lila warned her she’d have to make these calls traveling alone. She said that she would need to be a tightrope walker. On one side of the balancing pole was the trust you needed in order to get where you’re going. On the other side was the doubt you needed so you didn’t get your throat slit. And you’re tiny, Lila had added, so you’re going to need an extra dose of doubt.

Pocket fiddled with the fraying edge of her pack strap. “A shower would be nice I guess,” she heard herself say.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pocket grabbed a paper towel off of the workbench and dabbed at the blood as she dragged the knife across, trying to make the line as clean as possible. Her hand was getting clammy where she gripped the ankle, and the sensation of sweat and leg hair and dead flesh made her stomach churn. As the leg thawed in the stuffy workshop, a thick, rancid odor reached Pocket, way worse than a deer carcass. She wondered if there was some aspect of natural selection that makes the bodies of your own species smell like the worst thing on earth. A smell that would make you want to survive. Pocket pulled her handkerchief up over her nose before bearing down on the second cut.

Ebby's house was little more than a glorified squat. Half of the walls were plywood, with the kitchen and living room stripped down to the subfloor and one of those camping toilets with the removable bucket underneath in the bathroom. "But the shower works," Ebby said when he gave Pocket the grand tour. "I didn't kid you about that."

Ebby explained that he had struck a work-for-board sort of deal with the owner of the house, where he would contribute so many hours in home repairs per month instead of rent. The owner, a long-time client of Ebby's, had also let him convert the toolshed in the backyard into a workshop. "You should have seen it when I first moved in," he told her, making a sweeping motion with his calloused palm. "Totally gutted."

Pocket tip-toed around stacks of lumber and power tools to get to a small bedroom where Ebby suggested she put her pack. The only furniture it contained was a yellowed twin mattress on the floor and an intricately carved mahogany nightstand looking wildly out of place.

“Your work?” Pocket asked as she bent down to check out the anchor emblem in the middle of the trim.

“Every once in a while you gotta make something for yourself.”

“It looks like an old sailor tattoo,” she commented. “Cool.”

“Well, I am an old sailor, and it's taken from my tattoo, so I guess that's about right.”

Ebby propped his right foot on the mattress beside her and rolled his pant leg up. There, stretched across the jutting muscle of his calf, was the same design—an anchor with a rope draped across it. The colors had taken a beating under Ebby's aging and work-tanned skin, but the linework was some of the best Pocket had ever seen—not a mark of hesitation or a blowout in the whole design. Without thinking, she reached out to trace the rope with her fingers. The lines felt raised underneath the curly leg hair.

“I got it for my ex-wife,” Ebby explained, “before I left for my second tour. I told her it would keep me anchored, to home and to her. And it did, for a long time.”

Pocket tried to imagine Ebby as a young sailor, on his way to or from a jungle full of napalm and foreign screams, looking down at his leg and thinking of the girl he loved.

Ebby straightened himself up and brushed at the dirt stains on his jeans. “Well,” he said. “I'll leave you to it, then.” It seemed like he was struggling to figure out the right protocol for hosting a vagrant teenager in your condemned rental home. “Gonna fix supper soon. You're welcome to eat if you want, but I won't bug you about it either. That lamp works, and I may have

some extra blankets stashed somewhere..." He trailed off, jerking his head around like he expected the blankets to suddenly materialize in the rafters.

"I'll be fine," Pocket said, trying to let him off the hook. "Thanks."

"Alright, then." Still looking confused, Ebby smiled back at her and left the room.

Pocket lay back on the mattress, propping her backpack behind her head. She felt exhausted even though she hadn't done jack shit to be tired. The house smelled like sawdust and stale weed, which Pocket found comforting. She could hear Ebby knocking around in the kitchen and the sizzle of something fatty in a skillet. She thought about the offer to eat with him, but Lila's voice held her back. This isn't a sleepover, she said. You're not going to braid each other's hair. You're going to keep your goddamn distance and live to tell me about this incredibly stupid decision you made one time in New Orleans.

Instead of eating, Pocket took her flask and the buckskin skirt she was working on out of her backpack. Sitting cross-legged on the mattress with her back against the corner, she sipped Evan Williams until it didn't hurt anymore when the needle popped through the thick hide and pricked her fingers. She thought about Lila and her track scars, the way they looked like new wounds when they were splattered with deer blood at the end of a work day. The night before she left, Lila had asked where she was going, and Pocket had said she was meeting up with some friends at a punk house in Phoenix because she knew it would make Lila feel better. Pocket hated herself for how easy it was to lie. The truth was that she had no idea where she was going, only the vague notion that moving felt better than staying still. She had hopes about ranch work, or maybe picking fruit, but that was as far as she'd gotten.

In the kitchen, she heard Ebby washing dishes. It had to be past three a.m. Does this guy never sleep? Pocket wondered. She started creeping herself out when the idea popped in her head

that maybe Ebby was waiting for her to fall asleep. When she finally started unrolling her sleeping bag on top of the mattress, she first picked up Ebby's nightstand and placed it against the door, taking care not to scratch the corners.

Sleep came to her in the tiny room, clammy and reluctant, and Pocket woke up after what felt like only minutes. There was a streak of sunlight in her face, though, so she knew it was morning. She opened her eyes to see that the door that had sure as hell been shut last night was cracked open at least three inches. There was a small dust trail on the subfloor where the nightstand had been pushed across. Pocket bolted upright, Lila's voice dripping with sarcasm: Sure, Mr. Gein, I'd love to see that new juggling act you've been working on. Join your book club, Mr. Manson? I'd be delighted.

Just another pervert asshole, and she'd practically thrown herself at him. Whether he had wanted to make her into a lampshade or just fuck her, Pocket wasn't sure. As she stuffed her sleeping bag into her pack without bothering to roll it, she was only sure of one thing: she should have chanced it at the gas station.

Throwing her backpack over her shoulder, Pocket kicked the nightstand away from the door, leaving an ashy boot print on the rich finish. She stormed into the hall with her knife in her hand and had already opened the front door before she realized that something was stuck to her shoe. She looked down to see a crumpled mess of saran wrap clinging to her boot heel and a trail of what looked like potato salad leading back to a paper plate on the floor in front of her room. Through the kitchen window, she could see Ebby bent over a sawhorse in front of his workshop, varnishing a large piece of wood.

A complicated, mostly-shitty feeling came over Pocket as she picked the saran wrap off of her boot and walked back to the plate. Along with the potato salad, there was a smeared,

generous portion of fried fish and baked beans. A yellow post-it note on the edge of the plate read: Dinner (if you want) – Ebby.

“Well damn,” Pocket said out loud. Now she felt bad about the nightstand.

Still, she figured it didn’t change much, except maybe that she owed Ebby a thank-you before skipping out entirely. Pocket cleaned up the mess as best she could with a couple Taco Bell napkins she found on the kitchen counter and went out through the side door towards the workshop.

When her shadow crossed the spot where Ebby was painting, he looked up. His eyes traveled over her with an intent that she couldn’t pin down. It pissed her off, like when something would be buzzing around her head at night in Lila’s van and she couldn’t tell if it was a fly or a wasp. She just wanted to know what she was dealing with. “Morning,” he greeted her. “How’d you sleep?”

“Pretty good,” she answered. “Thanks. For the bed and, you know, everything else.”

Ebby pointed to the pack still on her shoulder. “Heading out?”

Now that she was close, Pocket could see that what Ebby was working on was a headboard for a bed. There was a huge floral design along the length of it, inlaid in a much lighter wood. Lilies and lotuses criss-crossed each other in dizzying patterns. The nightstand was child’s play compared to it, and Pocket realized for the first time just how much Ebby had undersold himself. “I guess so,” she told him. “The early bird, right?” She wished he would grab her ass. Ask her to shoot up with him. She just wanted to know.

“Well that’s a shame, because I was going to ask you to help me cut some bedposts to go with this set. See if you were really listening in the truck.”



She wished she had been right about the crack in the door. She wished she had told Lila the truth. Her backpack felt heavy on her shoulder.

She had to know.

Once Pocket cut an even square around the tattoo, the job got messier. She swapped out the detail knife for a larger blade with a serrated edge and began sawing through the sinew of Ebby's calf muscle like she was fileting a salmon. The muscle was firmer than salmon, though. Stiff with rigor mortis and still a little frozen near the bone, it resisted the knife and made a faint, awful squish when she pressed harder. Only then did Pocket think she might puke. She reached out her foot and slid the garbage can next to her just in case.

Ebby didn't say anything when Pocket stayed for dinner after it got too dark to work, this time joining him at the table, and neither one of them mentioned it when she said goodnight and shut the door to the bedroom. It was like they were both scared of spooking each other. Or maybe, Pocket wondered, they were both unsure of their own reasons for wanting each other around.

After that first night, the days bled into one another. Ebby slept in an aluminum frame army cot in the living room, and Pocket unpacked her scant belongings in the bedroom. During the day, she sat perched on a barstool in the corner of Ebby's workshop, watching him grind down opal and turquoise for his inlays, the fine dust billowing around him. She put hand soap

and toilet paper in the bathroom, and she swept the subfloors every day even though it was pointless. After a week or so, she bought a postcard of a Mardi Gras Indian from a corner store and sent it to Lila using the processing plant's address, saying that she missed her and that people eat alligators here and that working in an alligator processing plant must be pretty badass. She didn't say that she was still in New Orleans, and she didn't mention Phoenix. To Lila, who would read Pocket's postcard between pinched fingertips stained with blood, she existed in limbo.

At first, she made an effort to walk the seven or so blocks from Ebby's desolate street to the Bywater, where there were cheap coffee shops run by anarchists and lots of crusty kids riding bikes with their pit bulls trailing alongside. She got to know a group that would sit around this grassy vacant lot on Franklin and drink 40's while they sewed patches on their clothes. One day, she even met a guy who had lived with Lila in Asheville a couple years ago. When the sun started to set, though, she still found herself leaving to meet Ebby back at the house for dinner.

"Hey, wait up," the Asheville guy called out as she was rounding the corner. Pocket turned, waiting for him to catch up. "A couple of us are going to this guy Stevie's house later. Him and his girl have a hookah and a couple six packs they're willing to share. Should be fun. You in?"

By all accounts, she should have been in. Up until then, it had been against her code of ethics to turn down free beer and pot, and Asheville actually had a nice smile hiding behind the facial tattoos and bike grease. Wasn't this, after all, what she came for?

"I can't," she said. "I've got plans."

"Oh, I see," he replied, smile widening. "A hot date. I seen that old man you walk down to the hardware store with. Little mama's into some aged whiskey. A little upper crust sugar daddy."

“Whatever, asshat,” she shot back. “I’m apprenticing. You know, skills and shit? Doing something with my life?”

Asheville took a step back, eyeing Pocket like he was looking for weak spots. He shook his head. “Little, little, little girl. You may have that old man fooled. You may even have yourself fooled. But I know the itch when I see it, and you,” he said, pointing at her crotch with the neck of his beer, “haven’t scratched yours yet.”

Pocket’s arm shot forward and knocked the bottle out of his hand. Bits of glass pelted her leg when it shattered on the concrete. “Fuck off,” she growled. “What do you know?”

She stormed off towards Ebby’s house, pretending not to hear Asheville laugh as she went.

A few nights later, Pocket set the tray of roundish oatmeal lumps down in front of Ebby. They looked, if you squinted, vaguely like the peanut butter cookies they were supposed to be.

“For a man resigned to his vow of bachelorhood, you’re spoiling me pretty rotten,” he said.

“Don’t say that till you try them,” Pocket replied. “They’re ‘no bake’ cookies, which is weird enough, but then I had to use Splenda so you won’t die on me, so who knows how they’re going to taste.”

Ebby bit into one. “Delicious,” he concluded, rubbing his pot belly with varnish-streaked hands. “I’m going to need some milk for these.” As he walked to the refrigerator, Pocket realized that he was favoring his left leg.

“Are you limping?”

Ebby looked down at his leg as though he’d never seen it before. “What? Oh, that. I took a chunk of it out on the corner of that scaffolding out back. It’s just a little tender, that’s all.”

“Maybe you should go have it checked out or something,” she suggested.

Ebby shook his head. “The VA here is absolute horseshit since Katrina. I wouldn't send my dog there. Besides, it's nothing.” He handed her a glass and sat back down with the milk carton. “So...I've been thinking about a little project.”

“Yeah?”

“I've seen all those little leather crafts you work on sometimes. I guess you know how to tan, right?”

Pocket nodded. “My friend taught me.”

“Well, there ain't a leather store anywhere near here, so when you run out of what you've got, I figure your best bet would be to tan your own. I got a buddy with a hunting camp out in Tickfaw that I'm sure would give me some hides once the season starts...” Ebby trailed off, shifting his eyes beyond Pocket to the kitchen window. “I figure I could set you up a little tanning station out in the yard next to the workshop...you know, if you end up sticking around.”

Pocket felt the bike chain lock up in her throat again. She didn't know what to say, so she smiled at him and put another cookie on his plate. They sat like that for a long time, chewing their artificial sweetener quietly.

Once Pocket freed the square of skin from the rest of the leg, she decided to get rid of the limb before it started to smell any worse. She dropped it in the trash bag she had set aside, along with the scraps of fat and muscle that sat in chunks on the workbench like raw chicken. She hadn't thrown up, but she felt light-headed and dizzy, like when she would chain smoke at a bar and

then stand up too fast. She knotted the trash bag and stepped outside into the yard, only then realizing that she had no idea what she was going to do with the leg. The army survival manual that she traveled with had instructions on how to make tourniquets and cauterize wounds, but it didn't have much to say about where to get rid of human limbs. The best thing would be to burn it, but starting a fire in Ebby's backyard would be way too noticeable, and it definitely wouldn't smell like barbecue. She could bury it in one of the empty lots down the street, but what if a stray dog dug it up and went strutting down Frenchmen with a decomposing leg in its mouth? These were not the sort of problems Lila had prepared her to solve.

Over the next week, Ebby's leg got worse. Pocket watched him as he limped around the workshop with nearly all his weight on his left leg. She knew he was trying to hide it, and the fact that he couldn't worried her more than anything else. When he accidentally bumped his toe against the lip of the subfloor where it met the hallway, he doubled over in pain.

Pocket couldn't take it any more. "You stubborn-ass old man!" she said, running to spot him as he slid down the doorjamb to the floor. "Enough. What's wrong with your leg?"

"It's just...healing slow," he managed to say. His breath was ragged. "Diabetics...don't heal as quick."

For the first time since she'd met him, Pocket saw fear in Ebby's face. She reached out to his right leg and looked at him for a reaction. He didn't try to stop her, so she rolled up the pant leg. Above the inside of his ankle, a few inches away from his tattoo, there was an angry red wound the size of a silver dollar. The skin all around it was pink and swollen, and when Pocket

pressed lightly on the outer area to try to get a better look, a trickle of black liquid seeped from under the thin scab.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “We're going to the hospital.” Pocket fished Ebby's cell phone out of his jeans pocket. “You just stay there.”

His shirt was dark with sweat and heaving with his sharp breaths. “Now don't get all in a frenzy,” he told her. “Nobody's dying here.”

She ignored him and walked out the side door into the yard while the phone rang. After she got a cab dispatched, Pocket hung up the phone and paced along the side of the house, trying to pull her shit together. She had been in way more dicey situations than this and not been so rattled. She had sat with numerous friends back at the skate parks in Denver as a kid while they howled over broken arms, waiting for an ambulance. She had even held a cracked-out fifteen-year-old girl in her lap and stroked her hair as she delivered her baby in an abandoned warehouse. This is nothing, she coached herself. This is a blip on your radar.

When she went back inside, she found Ebby exactly where she left him on the floor, head tilted against the doorjamb and eyes closed. She knelt beside him and put her hand on his knee. “I called a cab to take us to the emergency room.”

Ebby opened his eyes. The way he looked at Pocket made her want to crawl out of her skin and cry at the same time. “Yeah, I guess that's probably a good idea.”

When the cab honked from outside, Pocket helped Ebby struggle to his feet and slung his arm around her shoulder. She was short enough to be the perfect lean-on, and Ebby was in too much pain not to make full use of her. “Thanks for staying,” he said weakly, looking at her with those sad, knowing eyes, like he saw in Pocket a decision that she hadn't made yet. As the cab driver opened the door, she concentrated on not buckling under the dead weight of him.

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The best that Pocket could come up with was the river. She hopped on Ebby's bike with the trash bag in her pack and rode to a spot where the Mississippi met the Industrial Canal. Aside from a few locals who walked their dogs along the levy and the punk kids who smoked under the draw bridge, there were never many people around. She and Ebby had sat out there one night after a long day in the workshop, listening to the water and swapping stories. Pocket shimmied down the steep bank to the river's edge and unwrapped the leg. The smell hit her all over again, and she gagged. She looked around for a heavy rock and dropped it into the bag, retying the knot. Swinging the bag as far as she could into the river, she waited until the ripples stopped before riding home.

Ebby had been right about the VA. The place was as bad as the worst free clinic Pocket had ever been to in Denver. It stank of mold where it should have burned with antiseptic and fluorescent lights. Pocket waited for hours with Ebby before anyone would see them, trying her best to distract him by doing funny voice-overs for the muted Lifetime movie that was playing in the waiting room. When a nurse finally called his name with a clipboard in her hand, Pocket didn't know whether to go with Ebby or stay. "Should I?" she offered.

Ebby shook his head. "You've gone above and beyond your call of duty today. I don't want you to see an old man cry when they start poking and prodding that thing." He winked at her and took the nurse's offered hand to maneuver himself into the wheelchair.

"Will you let me know when a doctor sees him?" Pocket asked the nurse.

Pocket watched her eyes travel over her dreadlocks, tattoos, ripped tights. “Family?” she asked.

“She's my daughter,” Ebby answered.

The nurse wheeled Ebby past a pair of swinging metal doors that reminded Pocket of a grade school cafeteria. She watched the wheelchair jump farther and farther down the hallway with each swing of the doors, until they slowed to a stop and all she could see was a wavy reflection of herself. Feeling antsy, Pocket walked outside to fish for snipes in the ashtray near the entrance. She lit one of the Camel stubs that she found and tucked another behind her ear, watching the rush-hour traffic on Tulane Avenue as she smoked and trying not to think about what she was going to do when she finished.

Holding the filter tip like a joint, she sucked down her last greedy drag before heading back inside to thumb nervously through decades-old copies of Reader's Digest. After what seemed like an eternity in an eggshell white purgatory, the nurse finally motioned to Pocket to follow her. “You can see him now if you'd like.”

“Try to keep it short,” she instructed when they reached the room. “He's got to rest up for tomorrow.”

Pocket wanted to ask the nurse what she meant, but she was halfway back down the hall before she could get the words out. Ebby's room was one of those duplex deals with the blue curtain down the middle. She passed a man sleeping with an oxygen mask in the first bed and found Ebby sitting up in a hospital gown in the far one, leaning halfway out of it and running his hands over the small end table against the wall.

“Particle board,” he said, shaking his head. “I guess they squandered their budget on friendly staff and state of the art equipment.”



Pocket laughed in spite of herself. “Clearly.”

Ebby sat back. “So did they tell you?”

“No.” She felt like she should sit down, but there were no other chairs, so she perched on the edge of the bed.

“It's gotta go. At the knee. They said it's staph and it would have done a number on an Olympic athlete, much less a fifty-year-old diabetic.”

Ebby's legs looked thin underneath the blue cotton sheet. She wanted to say something comforting, but all she came up with was “Shit.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “That it is. But hey, it's not the end of the world. I can still do my work, and they've got those metal prosthetic things nowadays.” He smiled, and Pocket knew it was for her benefit. “The thing I'm most upset about is the tattoo. I know it's stupid. I mean, I'm not even still married to her, but I guess I'm a little sentimental about it. It's like losing a part of my memories or something.”

“Isn't there something they can do?” she asked. “Antibiotics or skin grafts or something?”

“Nope. They're chopping it, first thing in the morning. It's military efficiency here at the VA.” Ebby saluted as he lowered himself back against a stack of thin pillows.

Pocket bit her lip, coaching herself: Stop it stop it stop it.

“Hey,” Ebby said, suddenly chipper. “Why don't you get out of here for the evening, huh? This isn't your sad story.” And then, softer: “I bet you got lots of things to do.”

In her mind, Pocket saw the bedroom at Ebby's and her empty pack in the corner. Unzipped, waiting. “Are you sure you don't want me to hang around? We can find another cheesy TV movie.” In her mind, the sun glinting in her eyes as she waits for a ride. The sweat of

a boy pressing against her. A young boy. A boy that will find a way to kill himself before he ever gets close to fifty. “I learned some good jokes while I was waiting.”

Ebby's eyes narrowed, and he placed his hand on top of hers. “I'd only feel guilty if you stayed.”

Pocket nodded, understanding and not understanding at the same time. She left the room without saying anything else, the monitor beeps sounding like sirens.

There was a faded red stripe in the middle of the hallway that led back to the waiting room, and Pocket moved along it like a conveyor belt. She wasn't in charge of the steps she was taking or the plan already forming in her mind. By the time she watched her arms push open the metal swinging door and felt her legs turn towards the reception desk, Pocket realized that it wasn't even her plan. It couldn't be. All of her plans went to shit, and this was going to work perfectly.

Back at the workshop, Pocket salted the skin, pressing it flesh-side down into the bowl and making sure that it was thickly coated. She left the skin on top of the tree stump to dry in the sun until dark, when she brought it inside so that no raccoons or rats could eat it. She placed it tattoo-side up on top of a piece of cardboard on the sparrow nightstand while she packed her things. Before putting away her survival manual, she tore a page out of the back of it and wrote detailed instructions for Ebby on how long to dry the salted skin and how to tan it on the rack he'd made for her. It didn't feel morbid. It felt like the only love letter she had ever written.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, Pocket walked to the corner store and bought a gallon of bleach, a scrub brush, and two canisters of salt. After opening all the doors and sweeping out as much dust and dirt as possible, she diluted the bleach in a coffee can and started in on the kitchen, taking care to scrub the sides of the stove and the ceiling of the microwave, places she knew Ebby would never notice. After the kitchen, she did the bathroom, or what there was of one, and shook out all the sheets and blankets. She put Ebby's back on his mattress and folded her own, stacking them in a neat pile on the edge of her bed.

The last thing she did before going to the hospital was the workshop. She ripped open a couple of garbage bags and laid them flat on the bench, securing them underneath with electrical tape, and poured both canisters of salt into a mixing bowl. She kept one garbage bag intact and set it aside.

On the walk to the VA, Pocket passed a group of kids busking on the corner of Royal and St. Ann. They were on the opposite side of the street, but the boy from Asheville was unmistakable in the same tattered Misfits shirt she had last seen him in, stamping his foot and pretending to play the ukelele.

Commit, she told herself, although she didn't need to anymore. She crossed the street and got inches from Asheville's face before she saw the recognition flash in his eyes. She grabbed the neck of the ukelele, muffling it. "Hey asshat," she said, "I owe you a beer."

Asheville squinted at her, unsure. "Yes, you do."

"I'm hopping out. Tonight. If you meet me at the Orleans on-ramp, I'll buy you one at the next stop."

He smiled, and Pocket didn't wait for any further answer.

When she got to the hospital, she was relieved to see the same receptionist at the front desk, a broad-shouldered black woman who seemed too disgruntled to give a shit. She was typing furiously at an ancient-looking desktop as Pocket approached.

“Hi,” Pocket offered, waiting for the woman to make eye contact. “I’m Eberhardt Landry’s daughter. We spoke yesterday?”

“Right,” the woman said, pursing her lips. “You was the one asking about the remains. Did you arrange a pick-up with a crematorium?”

Damnit, Pocket thought. The woman hadn’t mentioned anything about a crematorium yesterday. She should have known they wouldn’t just hand it to her. “No ma’am,” she answered. “I was hoping to deliver it myself.”

“Listen baby, that’s not how this works. We’re supposed to deal directly with a licensed cremation facility if an appendage is going to leave the hospital.”

She needed to come up with some serious bullshit, fast. “I know it’s unusual, and I’m really sorry, but we had less than twenty-four hours’ notice of this surgery. The place I called can’t get someone over here that quickly, and I’d really like to have this all taken care of before he goes home. I don’t want him to have to deal with it. You understand that, right?”

The lips stay pursed, un-fucking-fazed. “It ain’t about what I understand, baby. It’s about what’s legal. That limb is a biohazard.”

After a lifetime of forcing herself to stop crying, for once Pocket wished she could turn on some waterworks. She had nothing, but she was going have to bluff like she held a royal flush. “Ma’am, please,” she begged. “I’ve got a cab waiting outside to go straight to the crematorium. I’ve already given him the address. You can go ask him if you don’t believe me.”

She had thought to end there, but found herself still talking: “I’ve been a really shitty daughter. This is the one thing I can do for him. Please.”

The woman's eyes shifted to the phone on her desk. After a second that felt much longer, she picked it up and pressed a button. “Corey?” she said. “Bring that biohazard bag from surgery room D up front. We got a pick-up.” She hung up the phone and met Pocket's eyes across the plexiglass divider. “Now, I'm going to do my part to make sure this never happened. Are you going to do yours?”

“Yes ma'am,” Pocket assured her, head spinning a little. “Thank you so much.”

When she had everything in order, Pocket left the spare key that Ebby had given her on the kitchen table and locked the front door behind her. The wind had picked up a little and Pocket thought it might rain, but she couldn't tell. She hadn't been back to the Orleans on-ramp since she arrived in town with Ebby, so she made her best guess and started walking in a direction that she thought, but was not sure, was west.



Freedom Tabernacle  
Of Nashville

April 23, 2003

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Howard,

Thank you for your past faithfulness in supporting Freedom Tabernacle and our Sanctified Rehabilitation Program. This has been our third year of operation, and I'm pleased to report that the Lord has blessed us with five new saved souls who are even now being disciple and trained to leave behind their lives of addiction and enslavement to the Enemy and take up their cross to be a soldier in the Lord's army. The altar call at our Easter potluck was responsible for three of these conversions and continues to be our most effective outreach event. We are stepping out in faith to name and claim that next year the Lord will grant us a double portion of His spirit and we will see even more numbers added to the kingdom. But we need your help!

The Lord provides for Freedom Tabernacle through the faithfulness of the body of Christ all over the country. With your one-time gift of \$25 in January, you have enlisted as a foot soldier in the Lord's army here in East Nashville, but now the Lord is appointing his officers to squash Satan for good in our neighborhood. Will you heed his calling and consider a monthly donation at one of these levels?:

**\$20/ month – Lieutenant Level**

**\$50/month – Captain Level**

**\$100/month – General Level**

(A commitment at the General Level will come with a free Bible cover decorated by one of our Sanctified graduates)

Please fill out the enclosed form with your donation amount. With each dollar sent, the Lord's work increases through our humble mission and blessings rain down on the faithful. We thank you in advance for your continued support and are praying for you during this joyous Easter season.

In Christ,

"Mama" Bess Wilhorst

## First of May

When Marlana died, her spine was twisted like the roots of a cypress tree. But there is a picture of her from twenty years ago, a Polaroid labeled 'Sioux Falls' in smudged purple marker, where she is erect and proud, leaning on the shoulder of a knife thrower with her hip cocked and jaw chucked up at the camera, smoking a cigarette. She is nineteen there, a year younger than Lila was when they met. She keeps the Polaroid in a cigar box along with her sewing kit and a few sticks of incense so that every time something rips apart, she has to look at Marlana in order to fix it.

Lila joined the show in Montgomery after a long stint of boxcars and rides with strangers and house parties oozing body odor and coke. She had been shacking up with a boy she met at a punk show who worked the night shift at Fed Ex and used the un-snipped ends of his guitar strings to pick his teeth. After a couple weeks, he was dreamy-eyed and Lila was restless, so when she saw the “crew wanted” sign for the circus at a drugstore, it was all the excuse she needed. It's the goddamn circus, she reasoned. Who could pass that up?

They put her to work washing dishes in the cook house, which was really a cook tent that ran on a generator and wasn't capable of producing anything more sophisticated than an endless flow of frozen chicken tenders and canned vegetables. That suited Lila fine and gave her an chance to find her bearings in this rag-tag community of eccentrics. There was the ring crew, who ate like garbage disposals and sat on overturned buckets swapping prison stories. The flyers and aerialists, who only ever came to refill their giant thermoses with coffee. The show

coordinator, who always asked for an extra dinner roll and called Lila Huckleberry Finn because her cut-offs were covered in band patches. Lila ate all the mozzarella sticks her heart desired, and the scenery changed enough to keep her from thinking about the Montgomery boy who probably still hoped she'd walk through the door with the pack of cigarettes she went out for six weeks ago.

One afternoon as she was loading up a tray of plates at the end of her shift, one of the dog trainers took Lila's wrist in his meaty hand. "I've got a bottle of Old Crow in my trailer," he leaned in to say. "Care to join?" He smelled like rawhide. She couldn't decide if she liked it or not, but she figured she could head in that direction and make up her mind on the way.

The midway was rust-stained, just like everyone and everything since they set up in Canton. They had red clay there, miles and miles of it, and all the sawdust in the world couldn't stop it from seeping between the flyers' toes and crusting over the horses' hooves. Halfway between the candy carts and the caller's stand Lila stopped to scrape a clod off of her boot heel with a stick. When she looked back up, she noticed the tarot booth directly across the path, all draped in damask and paisley like Stevie Nicks had exploded. Marlena sat in a velvet wingback chair across from a gigantic, corn-fed Indiana woman. She was holding the woman's palm in her hands, tracing her lifeline with one slender finger, ever so slowly, while looking the woman straight in the eye. The woman shifted a little in her fat rolls, obviously uncomfortable with Marlena's stare, but returning it nonetheless. And twenty-year-old Lila, punk rock poet, theorized about the fat woman's loneliness—how that might be the first time someone has traced any part of her with their fingertips in her entire life.

She must have been staring too long, because Marlena cut her eyes in Lila's direction as she shuffled the tarot deck. She couldn't tell what she meant by it, but Lila suddenly felt stupid



leaning against that light post with her boot still propped up against her leg and the stick in her hand like a lawn flamingo. She weaved her way through the passing crowds to the other side of the midway and pretended to watch a clown make balloon animals next to Marlana's booth.

The fat woman was crying now, and it was hard for Lila not to think of the word 'blubber' even though she was actually pretty graceful about it. Lila watched Marlana gather the tip of her crushed velvet shawl in her hand and gently brush the fat woman's tears away with her slender fingers. Something about that simple gesture struck her, and she was fascinated by this woman who could act tenderly towards someone so repulsive without it reeking of pity. In fact, she marveled, it was downright sexy. Soon, the woman got up from the chair, with considerable effort, and ambled past Lila on her way towards the big top. "Get yourself a reading," she advised, eyes still glossy. "It'll change your life."

The next time Lila saw Marlana was a few days later on her way back from the dog trainer's trailer the morning after a thunderstorm. (She did decide to go, twice. He wasn't a great lay, but he was generous with his weed and whiskey, and he had a great record collection.) It was early morning and the only people on the midway were the ring crew, throwing down sawdust by the bucketful to try to dry the area before the first show. The rain had sloshed red mud all over the tents and booths, as if the Georgia soil was trying to swallow the circus whole.

Inside her booth, Marlana struggled over the wingback chair, trying to pick it up by the sides and having no such luck. Even then Lila didn't notice her back—not at first, anyway. It was only when she got closer and Marlana stepped back to reassess her strategy that she saw the

small hump jutting out from the fortune teller's shoulder and the serpentine curve of her torso, like a question mark. Marlana leaned on the cane and with her other hand grabbed a loose dreadlock from under her headscarf. She chewed the tip, contemplating.

Lila walked up to her. "Having a little trouble?" she asked, wondering too late if the woman would think she was making fun of her.

"It's this damned clay," she replied. "Water pooled all around my table last night and now's it's practically cement."

She was older than Lila had thought. From a distance, the dreadlocks and jewelry and heavy eyeliner threw her off. But now she could see crow's feet grasping at her temples and the veins on the back of her hand like the ones Lila's mother always used to complain about. She found herself wondering a million things about the woman all at once. "I can give it a try for you," she offered.

Marlena gestured to the other side of the chair with the cane. "Just hop over on that side. I'm sure between the two of us we can manage."

They countered each other, each grabbing the chair by its arm, and pulled. With her added strength, Lila expected the chair to slide out easily, but Marlana's body, like so many things about her, was entirely deceiving. She was strong as an ox; the damn thing was just really stuck. After the third attempt, they wrenched it free. The reddish stains on the legs showed that it had sunk in a good six inches. Then they tackled the card table, and once that came up, they slid a flattened cardboard box under both of them. Marlana sat back down in her chair and motioned for Lila to take the one across from her.

"Thanks for the help," she said. "I didn't get your name."

“Shouldn't you already know? You're a fortune teller.” Lila picked up one of the crystals off the table, turning it over in her hand. That was asinine, she chided herself. Why did she say that? Still, part of her did wonder what Marlana might say if she asked for a reading. A very different part of her wondered how it would feel to have her fingers trace her palm.

Marlena smiled again, and this time it felt parental, like that of the world-wise and weary to the fresh-faced kid who had so much to learn. Later on, Lila would grow to hate that smile when it showed up after some of her most sincere confessions and, at the end, when she begged Marlana not to give up. But right then it felt strangely intimate, like she had told Lila a secret she didn't fully understand. “That's not really how it works,” Marlana said. “Nor is 'fortune teller' a particularly PC term, but I'll let that slide. I'm Marlana, in any case.”

“Lila,” she told her, setting the crystal back down.

“You must be a first-of-May,” she said. “I don't remember seeing you last year.”

“I came on in Montgomery. Working at the cook house.”

Marlena twisted the large garnet ring on her middle finger. “Why'd you decide to run away with the circus?”

“I'm not running, really,” Lila said. “I was just, you know, on the road. Thought this would be fun for a while.”

“Oh trust me, you're running.” She leaned back in her chair and spread her arms in a theatrical gesture. “We all are. 'Everyone's a little bit mad here.' Did you ever read Alice in Wonderland?”

“I saw the Disney movie.”

“That,” she said, levying her jeweled finger at Lila, “is not an acceptable answer. Come with me to my trailer and I’ll lend it to you. This should have been a vital part of your upbringing.”

They left the booth and trekked through the clay swamp towards the performers' trailers on the other side of the big top. Marlana had to hold up her big broomstick skirts with one hand and use the cane with the other. Seeing her try to navigate the sticky places with her crooked walk made Lila uncomfortable. She was scared Marlana was going to fall and wanted to offer her arm, but she was still paranoid about acknowledging the disability. Marlana seemed like a woman who was used to managing on her own.

Brightly colored curtains hung in the windows of her trailer, all different patterns. When they got closer, Lila could see that they were hand sewn. She started to wonder if it was all a part of her act—the curtains, the skirts, the talismans and silver chains—or if it was really who Marlana was. She thought of the trust fund traveler kids she knew who sewed canvas patches on their brand new jeans just to look the part. Was Marlana like them?

Lila only stayed long enough for Marlana to give her the book, which she located on the top shelf of a massive bookcase that took up an extravagant amount of space in the cramped living area. Lila tried not to stare at her hump when she reached up to grab it. “I’ve got to get to the cook house for my shift,” she said. “I’ll get this back to you soon.”

“Let me know when you’re done with it and I’ll make some tea or something. There aren’t too many people around here that I get to talk books with.” For the first time, Marlana didn’t look at Lila when she spoke. She busied herself straightening the books on the shelf.

Lila ended up borrowing several of Marlana's books before she had her over for tea. They were in Roanoke then, all mountains and college kids. It would go like this: Lila would read a book, drop it off to Marlana at her trailer, and Marlana would shove another volume in her arms while she stood in the doorway. She never invited Lila in, and Lila began to wonder if she really had offended or embarrassed her somehow. Meanwhile, she made it her business to borrow every damn literary classic Marlana owned just to have a reason to see her.

This was uncharted territory for Lila, and for the longest time she convinced herself that she wasn't interested in Marlana as anything more than a charming circus veteran. After all, she had slept with girls before, but they had been sinewy riot grrls who played bass and didn't shave their armpits, not a handicapped fortune teller old enough to be her mother. And yet, here she was, buying Adderall off of a horse groom so that she could barrel through her dyslexia long enough to read a two-hundred page book for just such a person. When she asked around about Marlana, she found out she was “old school,” meaning that she had been born into the circus, and that she had been a flyer before her spine started to warp.

When Lila returned Huckleberry Finn (25 milligrams of Adderall), she found her nerve to learn more. “What about that tea?” she asked. “We've got a hell of a lot to talk about by now.”

Marlena looked a little startled, but then she smiled in her all-knowing way. “Sure,” she answered. “Let me get some water on the stove.”

Lila sat at the place where the formica dining table that came with the trailer used to be. Marlana had unbolted it along with the chairs and put a round coffee table and a bunch of oversized pillows and cushions in its place. The fabric smelled like incense and reminded Lila of

going to Mass as a little girl. She watched Marlena simmer black tea and Indian spices in a sauce pan on the little electric range to make homemade chai.

“So,” she ventured, “that day I met you, after the big rainstorm. What did you tell that fat woman that made her cry?”

Marlena tasted the tea with a wooden spoon, then continued stirring. “Oh, her,” she said. “I told her that her mother would soon betray her and leave her heartbroken.”

“And...so...” Lila wasn't sure how to phrase the question. “Is that true? Do you really believe it? I mean, did you see it in the cards or whatever?”

Marlena turned off the burner and poured the chai into two floral teacups. “That's kind of a complicated question. The woman's mother lives with her and leeches off her. She sits around smoking Virginia Slims and watching TV all day while her daughter works at the Dollar Tree to support them. She told me all about it. Not phrased like that, of course, but that's the gist of it.” She walked over to where Lila sat and offered her one of the teacups on a mismatched saucer. Lila saw Marlena's hand shake a little on the cane when she had to lean so far down, but no tea spilled from the delicate china. She returned with her own cup and deftly lowered herself onto the cushion across from Lila.

“So you just tell them stuff that sounds reasonable based on what you know about them?” she asked, a little wounded. “But what if you're wrong? What if they go home and quit their job or kill themselves over it?”

“If someone did that, it's only because they would have done it eventually anyway. It's not my fault.”

“Of course it's your fault!” Lila shot back, and in her head she thought: Fake patches after all. “People trust you. They think you've got answers, that you can fix whatever's wrong with them. Don't you realize that?”

Marlena furrowed her brow, crow's feet deepening. “People are more or less like trains,” she said after a moment. “They're barreling down a fixed course. All I do is look to the horizon, confirm to people the things they already know deep down, and send them on their way feeling like they've experienced a little bit of magic in their lives.” She took a sip from her teacup. “Sorry if that isn't ethical to you, but the world isn't exactly brimming over with employment opportunities for someone like me.”

Lila looked down at her teacup, embarrassed. “Is it painful?” she asked after a long silence. She wasn't sure if she meant Marlena's back or her loneliness.

“Sometimes,” she said.

They drank the rest of their tea without talking, both of them staring into the leaves to try to see what would come next. Marlena picked up the teacups and rinsed them out in the sink. Lila stood up too, and as she watched Marlena's curved shape leaning against the countertop she realized that she wouldn't be walking out of the trailer that night with a book under her arm. She reached out, intending to test the waters by touching Marlena's shoulder, but just then she shut off the water and turned around, so Lila took her face in her hands and kissed her instead.

Marlena stiffened, and Lila swore she could feel her turning over the tarot deck in her mind, deciding what course to take. She pulled back, touching her lips like Lila was something venomous that bit her. “Lila,” she said, “I'm really flattered, but I must have given you the wrong impression.”

“No,” she apologized, “I'm just a pushy bastard. I'm sorry.”

“You're young is what you are. And it's just...it's just not right.”

Lila had expected a lot of responses—I'm not interested, I'm not gay, I'm not single—but not that one, and it pissed her off. “It's not right?” she repeated. “Well neither is deceiving fat Midwesterners at ten bucks a pop, but you don't have any problem doing that.” She grabbed her jacket off of the table.

“That's not what I mean—”

“That's an excuse.” From the look on Marlana's face Lila knew she had hit a nerve. “I just thought you were someone who didn't make excuses for herself.” It was manipulative, and Lila knew it. In the dark days after she was gone, Lila would wonder if anything would have ever happened between them if she hadn't said it, and if maybe that would have made it easier. But you can't put back a card once its been flipped, and maybe what happened was as fixed and unchangeable as Marlana thought. All Lila knew was that when Marlana took the jacket from Lila's hands and put her arms around her waist, she didn't regret it.

Being with Marlana made Lila feel safe, enveloped. They spent that first night making out on that mass of cushions for hours, like teenagers in their parents' basement. In fact, that's what Marlana said as she slid her hand under Lila's T-shirt, her silver rings chilly against Lila's skin: “I feel like a teenager.” She remembered because it made her self-conscious.

They reached Phoenix about a month later, and by then Lila had vacated her bunk in the three-person sleeper with the other cook house workers and unpacked her scant belongings in Marlana's bedroom. “I hope you know what you're getting into,” she warned as Lila crammed



her ripped band T-shirts into the dresser drawer that Marlana had cleared out. “There's still time to come to your senses.”

“I've lived with worse,” Lila joked. “Definitely in worse.” But the truth was that she didn't know what she was getting herself into, and the thrill was like catching out on a train with no crew change to tell you where it was going.

They caused a little stir and a flurry of whispers after Lila moved in, but nothing serious. It was, after all, the circus. At their weekly dominoes game, Angelo the equestrian pulled Marlana aside and asked her if she was sure about all this, and did she need someone to talk to? Someone started a rumor that Marlana had a family fortune and Lila was a muff-diving gold digger, but that idea was so funny that they laughed about it over their dinner of frozen vegetable stir-fry, the generic brand.

The only person whose skin it really got under was the dog trainer. He started making little comments to Lila when she passed him in the cookhouse, and when he was done eating he would shove his tray at her and walk away hunched and sulking.

The Phoenix run was long, and after a few weeks Lila was bored with its depressing flatness, the horizon line running unchecked by anything except a few scrubby bushes. One afternoon she resorted to her usual course of action when she felt anxious and there were no good drugs around—clean the shit out of something. That day's target was the pantry. “At this diner I worked at once,” she told Marlana, “I found an entire rat skeleton behind a back stock of canned tomatoes. Not a rat. A rat skeleton. It grossed me out big time, but I made a cool necklace out of the skull.”

Marlana reached over and tucked Lila's hair behind her ear as she wiped down and re-stacked the soup cans. Lila could feel Marlana's eyes running all over her, delicate but hungry.

“It's funny,” Marlena said. “You're so much younger than me, but you've experienced worlds more. You know I've only ever slept in trailers my entire life? Never went to a high school dance. Never cooked on a gas stove. I've never even been bowling. Here, let me do that. There's a science to getting it all to fit.” Lila stepped out of the way and watched Marlena reach on her tip-toes to shuffle the Hamburger Helper boxes at the back of the cabinet. With her torso stretched and the hump on her back pressing into the back of her neck, she looked in pain. So many of the things Marlena did looked painful, but she never complained.

“Yeah, but none of that's as exciting as your life is,” Lila offered. “Most of the shit I've done is stupid and liable to kill me by the time I'm thirty.” She hopped up onto the counter and leaned her head against the cabinet while Marlena worked—pulling things out, putting things back in. Lila realized that she wanted to be the center of Marlena's world. She wanted Marlena to rearrange every part of herself to make Lila fit.

“Don't say that.” Marlena frowned.

“Hey, maybe I'll join the twenty-seven club like Jim Morrison, huh? That'd be a pretty good way to go out.” Lila reached out to touch her, but Marlena batted her hand away.

“I'm serious,” she said. “That's not funny. Don't talk about your life like it's not worth anything.”

“What's gotten into you?”

“Nothing.” She stared into the cabinet. “Hand me those cans.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They went to work during the days, Marlana to her booth and Lila to the cook house, and at night they drank blackberry wine and read the books from Marlana's shelf. Every day Lila discovered something new about her, scraps of information that she hid away inside herself. Marlana's family was real circus, five generations strong. She was once the only flyer in the show who could land a double-twisting double. That was years ago, she reminisced. Before her body began to betray her just like the fat woman's mother. One morning when Lila was trying to grab my left boot from under the bed, she found a shoebox with her old grips inside. They still smelled like chalk, with faint rust-colored streaks along the edges. Canton? she wondered.

The next stop was Corpus Christi, which welcomed them with triple digit heat and 100 percent humidity. The cook house became a torture chamber, and on days when Lila worked the deep fryer, she would soak through three bandanas per shift. One morning as she was setting out the giant breakfast platters of scrambled eggs and Jimmy Dean sausage, Lila saw the dog trainer stumbled to the back of the line, looking drunker and sadder than usual.

"Poor guy," the girl next to Lila said as she refilled the maple syrup. "Did you hear? His pomeranian died yesterday. The one that rides on top of the great dane."

"How?" Lila asked. The pomeranian was his favorite, she remembered. It was the only one he would let sleep inside his trailer and eat the gristle from the cheap steaks he loved to grill.

"It cooked," the girl said. "Got out of the training pen somehow and dehydrated before he could find it. Apparently those dogs aren't fit for a Texas summer. All that hair I guess."

"Oh God," Lila said. "That's awful." She really did feel bad for the guy. With a kind of benevolence that only comes from being happily in love when your ex is miserable, she scooped

a giant spoonful of eggs onto his plate when he reached her. “Hey, I’m really sorry about your dog.”

“I’ll bet you are,” he sneered. “Big-hearted woman like you. I bet you’re just torn up about it.”

“You don’t have to be an asshole.” The benevolence was fading fast. “I was just trying to be nice.”

“You know she’s dying, right? That fortune-telling dyke you shackled up with. She’s been dying for a decade from that hunchback of hers. Doesn’t have much longer now. Everybody knows it.”

Lila bluffed, a knee-jerk reaction. “I know.”

He looked surprised, but she couldn’t tell if he really bought it. “Oh, do you?” he asked. “Then you’re an even bigger bitch than I thought.” He shoved the plate of eggs back at her and walked away.

He’s lying, Lila told herself. She repeated it in her head for the rest of her shift. He’s lying, he’s got to be lying. When it was finally over and she got back to the trailer, Marlena was watering the herbs she kept potted under the kitchenette window. She didn’t hear the door shut, and her back was turned to Lila. Her body was twisted awkwardly—Lila knew now that it ached the most in the mornings and when the weather changed—but she didn’t look weak. For a second Lila thought about saying nothing at all, just sneaking up behind her, burying her face in Marlena’s neck, and wasting the rest of the evening away proving to herself just how not weak she was. But then she heard the words tumble out: “Are you dying?”

Marlena didn’t turn around. She took a breath and let it out slowly, picking withered leaves off the basil plant. “That’s a complicated question.”

A typical Marlana dodge, and it never pissed Lila off more than it did right then. She grabbed the watering can out of Marlana's hand and waited for her to look Lila in the eyes. "Somebody told me you're dying from this, from whatever's wrong with your spine. They said you don't have very long. Is it true?"

She took Lila's face in her hands and kissed her, and that was her answer.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lila heard her own words as if she were on the other side of a long tunnel. She sounded like a hurt child.

"Why should I tell you something like that?" she asked. "What good would it do?"

And before Lila could stop it, before she could throw herself onto the tracks of her own selfishness and derail this awful sentence, out it came: "Because I wouldn't have started this."

"Oh," Marlana breathed.

"No," Lila tried, "that came out wrong. I just meant that I wouldn't have wanted to make this more complicated for you."

"More complicated," she repeated, "for me." She placed the kitchen scissors back on the shelf and didn't say anything for the rest of the night.

The cloud of that conversation hovered over Marlana's trailer, and the two of them fumbled around in its fog. Their words were hollow and strained, and at night Marlana slept curled away from Lila on the edge of the bed, like a parenthesis that had been flipped. Lila kept watching her for signs of deterioration, trying to find the evidence of a truth that she hadn't accepted yet. She

looked the same, and the only thing Lila ever found was a stash of prescriptions for drugs she had never heard of under the bathroom sink.

The following Thursday night, after Marlena left for her weekly dominoes game with Angelo and the other equestrians, Lila busied herself cleaning out the inside of the microwave. Alone in the trailer, she felt like she did trying to sleep at night in a too-hot boxcar when her stash ran out. Everything in her was frantic, and she wanted to rip up the fine, soft roots that she had begun to put down. She was used to flinging herself at death, even got a masochistic kind of rush from it, but she couldn't face it in Marlena. She couldn't watch her shrivel.

The nights in Corpus Christi were no cooler than the days, and nothing but the cloying humidity came through the open kitchen window. Lila scrubbed with the steel wool at months', maybe even years' worth of tomato sauce splatters and crusted droplets of soup, but it wasn't working. It has to be tonight, she thought. It has to be before she gets back.

When the glass microwave plate finally sparkled like fine crystal, Lila went to the bedroom and started stuffing clothes into her backpack. She told herself it was the kind thing to do, that Marlena would be able to live the final part of her life in peace, not in some complicated relationship with an immature girl who required her to give at all the times when she should be taking. In Marlena's dresser, she dug through their melded wardrobe to find the only pair of black jeans among the mass of cottons skirts. She told herself she didn't love her and this had all been just some weird infatuation. When all of her clothes were packed, she grabbed the few things she had in the bathroom and closed the kitchen window before leaving. She told herself she would write to her later and explain.

Outside of Marlena's trailer, Lila could make out the lights from the highway as they flickered between the big top and the smaller tents. She walked down the empty midway in the

dark, hearing nothing but the crunch of gravel under her feet and her own guilty thoughts. She didn't even notice that she was in front of Marlana's booth until she heard her voice. "I don't hold it against you," it said. Lila whipped her head around, not sure at first where it was coming from, thinking for a wild second it was only in her mind. Then she saw her, sitting in the wingback chair and shuffling the tarot deck.

"Were you waiting for me?" Lila asked.

"No," she said. "Just avoiding going home. Had a feeling I might not like what I found waiting for me. Or rather, not waiting." Something about the tilt of her head as she spoke and the cruel wisecrack made Lila realize she was drunk. She sat down across from Marlana and noticed a half-empty bottle of something clear, vodka or gin. She had peeled off the label in little curled strips that collected on the table in front of it.

"You should," Lila told her. "It's a shitty, cowardly thing to do and you don't deserve it."

Marlena cut the cards and shuffled, making a bridge. She looked more like a gambler than a fortune teller. "Nah," she said. "We had a good time, right? You taught me how to play dice. I broadened your grasp of English literature. I don't hold it against you."

"Marlena..."

"I just want you to know," she went on, either not hearing Lila or not caring, "that I didn't want you because I'm dying. Because I'm scared to die alone, I mean. I'm not scared." She set the cards aside and picked up one of the shredded strips of label paper, tearing it into even smaller bits.

"I don't think that," Lila said.

"Well good, because I'm not. I've made my peace, you know? I was fine by myself. And then you came around, and..."

“I’m sorry,” Lila pleaded. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“I know,” she replied, dismissing Lila with a drunken wave of her hand. “It’s a hard thing. It’s just a hard thing all around. I don’t blame you.”

In the ample Texas moonlight, Lila could see Marlana’s humped shoulder as it pressed into the smooth, soft neck that she loved to touch. It will get worse, she thought. It will wrench and distort her until nothing is left, and you will have to watch.

“You should go.” Marlana stood up and tried to take a step but tripped over the end of her shawl. Lila shot out her arm to try to catch her, but all she did was knock the bottle off the table. Lila reached around Marlana and pulled her up by her waist, letting her arms linger there even after she found her balance.

“Come on,” Lila told her, “Let’s get you to bed, okay?”

Marlana didn’t say anything, but she allowed Lila to walk her down the midway and past the tents to the trailer. Even now, Lila still wondered if Marlana expected her to leave again after she helped her to bed. She didn’t know what Marlana’s reaction was when she saw Lila next to her in the morning because it was Marlana’s searching touch that woke her. All Lila knew is that they didn’t get out of bed until noon, and after breakfast Marlana helped helped put her clothes back in the drawer.

For a long time, Marlana’s condition didn’t visibly change, but they certainly did. The night on the midway seemed to peel the final layer of veneer off of their life together. Suddenly, no subject was taboo anymore and they exchanged their quiet nights of reading or playing dominoes



for hours and hours of conversation. They talked about everything, talked until their throats were sore and Marlana had to brew them both peppermint tea with honey before they could continue. They were greedy for each other's words, and for time itself that seemed to race past them like a broken carnival ride. Dallas, Reno, Little Rock, Charleston. Prairie and desert and coastlines.

Marlena started to teach Lila things. How to change the ribbon on her old metal typewriter, how to read the tarot deck, how to properly care for the herbs that she loved and fussed over. Lila guessed it was her way of creating a legacy, and Lila became the vessel. One day while she was trying to get the hang of a complicated stitch Marlana had shown her for reinforcing hems, she asked Lila what she planned on doing when she was gone.

"I don't know," Lila answered. "Join a convent, I guess."

Marlena laughed. "That would be a sight." She had been working on her dreads, tightening the loose roots by rubbing them between her palms, but now she stopped. "But really. You're young. You have a life to live. What do you want to do? Where do you want to go?"

Lila studied Marlana's face with its high cheekbones and wide-set eyes lined with kohl, trying to understand. "I used to want to go a million places," she said. "But now I just want to be near you." She was only trying to be poetic and sweet, but once she said the words she realized they were true. In the stillness of Marlana's trailer, watching her gather her hair back at the nape of her neck, Lila was no longer restless.

But Marlana, least sentimental woman in the world, soured at her answer. "Your life can't end when I do," she scolded. "You have to move on."

But Lila had finally figured out what it was to stay, and to desire to stay. She didn't want to think about moving anymore.

It took six months before the noticeable changes started happening, but once they did the progression was swift and unforgiving. Marlena's hump got progressively worse as her body slowly crumpled in on itself. When Lila met her, Marlena didn't need help to accomplish any task in her daily life. By the time they reached the Catskills, Lila had to rub an herbal salve on her hips every morning just so she could get out of bed.

“Finally,” she joked, “the age difference gets creepy.”

The worse she got, the more desperate Lila became. She researched Marlena's condition, combing the Internet for stories of survivors. She told Marlena about a hospital in Philadelphia that specialized in diseases of spine and nervous system. She behaved in ways no one should with a person who is terminally ill; she cried in her arms and dangled threads of hope in front of her, demanding that she grasp them. “I can get a job to support us,” Lila told her. “And we can take out loans for the treatment.”

“If I were going to do that,” she said, “I would have done it a long time ago. Stop torturing yourself.”

During a two week run in Lancaster, the day came when she couldn't make it to her booth anymore. Her torso was so twisted that it began to crush her lungs, and anything more than sitting up in bed made her fight for air. Lila didn't want to leave her to go to work, and the only way Marlena could convince her otherwise was to promise that she would have Angelo come over to play dominoes with her while Lila was gone. That satisfied her for a while, but when Marlena had a coughing fit that turned her face blue and Lila came home to find the EMT van in front of the trailer, she sent Angelo home and didn't go to the cookhouse the next day, or ever again.

It was starting to snow when they set up in Albany, the northernmost stop on the circuit. After that it would be a slow trek back down to the deep South to escape the dropping temperatures. Lila had three space heaters running in the trailer, liable to short circuit and burn the whole place down, but Marlana was still cold.

“Do you want me to brew some tea?” Lila asked. She was at the place where only doing things kept her sane. Dusting the window sills. Refilling the pill boxes. Checking the calibration on the oxygen tank Marlana now had to use at night in order to sleep.

“No thanks,” Marlana said, smiling. “I’d rather have you keep me warm. Come over here and bring that quilt on the sofa.”

Lila eased herself into the bed and wrapped them both in the quilt. Marlana's body was rail thin now, and looking at her ribs made Lila ache. Marlana took Lila's arm and placed it around her shoulders under the blanket. “That's better,” she said. After a while, they both fell asleep.

In the morning Lila knew Marlana was gone as soon as she opened her eyes. It couldn't have been for long because she was still warm, but there was an emptiness in the room that felt like standing in the middle of the big top after everything else has been packed away. Only the support beams remain. The canvas flies loose from the rigging when the ring crew unties it, and this thing that felt so permanent suddenly folds down into nothing and gets rebuilt in some new place, carrying the intangible weight of everything that came before.

4-14-08

Dear Ashley,

Grandma said she would start giving you my letters as long as they don't make you cry and you don't tell Mom about them. So I'm going to keep sending them to Grandma's house and you can read them whenever you stay over there and you can even write me back if you want and Grandma will mail the letter to me. I'm even sending some cool paper for you to use if you want. It's from this hippy store (do you know what hippys are?) in downtown Minneapolis and all the little specks in it mean it's made out of recycled paper so it doesn't use up any new trees. I thought you would like that because you like animals so much. Are you still in to pandas? Every time I see a shirt or something with a panda on it I think about you and all the panda facts I know because of you talking about them all the time. An adult panda spends approximately 12 hours a day eating bamboo. See? You a pretty great teacher.

So Mom is back with Gabe huh? (Grandma told me) I hope Mom is doing good, but you remember what we talked about right? If Mom or Gabe or anyone Mom has ever makes you feel not safe or if they start doing drugs in the house, you call Grandma to come pick you up. I know it's hard for you since I left, but I promise it won't be forever. In 2 years I'll be 18 and you'll be 12 and you know what that means? That means I can be a legal guardian, you'll be old enough to choose who you want to live with. And by that time I'm going to save up as much money as I can so I can come back and get an apartment for you to live with me.

I've been working a lot with some friends playin music downtown.  
One of them is teaching me how to play the banjo and we play  
all this country blue grass music like Grandpa used to listen to.

Do you remember much of Grandpa? You were pretty  
young when he died but that's okay because he was  
mostly an asshole, especially to Mom. But he had a  
good record collection and now I'm glad I know all  
those old timey songs because people love it here and  
we get a lot of money in our hat when we play.  
And I know you think it's funny the clothes I wear  
but I swear we get tipped more because we look like  
the hobos we sing about. That's what you call being authentic.

Sorry Grandpa  
but you know  
it's true.

Do you know that word? Of course you do, you're so damn  
smart and you're almost 11 years old! Did you think I would  
forget? I'll bet Mom has something special planned for your  
birthday. If she takes you to Baskin Robins be sure to get an extra  
scoop of chocolate cheesecake and eat it for me ok? I wish  
I could be there to eat it with you but I'll be thinking about  
you all day and I'm going to tell everyone that stops to hear  
us play that it's my baby sister Ashley's birthday. Although I  
guess you not such a baby anymore, are you?

Love, your favorite stinkface brother.

Rusty

## Runaway

When the bus reached the station in Denver, Travis knew he had to keep his cool. Pull his hat low, mean mug, and let 'em know they don't want to mess. The doors at the front and back of the bus hissed open and everybody started piling out like roaches when you knock something over in a basement. Travis hiked up his backpack and started walking down the busiest looking street with a little bit of a shotgun limp in his step like he had seen Jerome do. You don't know what I'm packing, he made his face say. You don't want to find out.

Fancy-dressed white people surrounded Travis as he walked. A blonde lady wearing tight rhinestone-studded jeans nearly knocked him down with the rolling suitcase she pulled behind her, and as she passed he could smell her perfume. It smelled like the inside of a department store. He wanted to stop somewhere and make some kind of plan while he ate the bag of Cheez-Its he swiped from the last gas station, but all the buildings looked big and official, like courthouses, and the crowd just kept pulling him along with it. Travis knew he could stay pretty invisible if he just kept copying everyone else and looking like he had somewhere real important to go. And that part was true—he was going somewhere important. He just didn't know how to get there yet.

As he walked, Travis wondered what would happen if the police stopped him. Would they put him in a foster home in Denver, or would they ship him back to Gran's house in Nashville? What if he refused to tell them his name? Would they put him in jail? The only things Travis knew about jail were from stories that Jerome and his crew told. All Jerome's friends tried

to make it sound like no big thing, like they're so hard that it's just a joke to them. But when they were alone at Gran's, Jerome would level with Travis and tell him it was a fucked-up place where they treat people like animals. Once, when Travis measured out the product wrong and ended up selling too much for too little, Jerome slammed him against the wall and said, "I got one strike left, and don't think I won't use it to make you sorry you ever cheated me." That's when Travis knew he had to get out, because if Jerome could beat his ass raw on the regular and not get sent to jail, Travis didn't want to know what he planned to do that would.

After a few more blocks, Travis finally saw a McDonald's on the corner and decided to check it out. He still had about twenty dollars left from what that crazy church lady had given him, so he ordered a Big Mac and a Coke. He felt like he could eat a hundred Big Macs, but he knew he needed to save his money to make sure he had enough bus or cab fare to find Mom's house. The lady at the counter gave him a funny look when she handed him his tray, so Travis snatched it from her and started to walk off real quick.

"Hey, little man," she called out.

Shit. Travis looked at the glass doors at the entrance and wanted to make a run for it, but Jerome's voice in his head stopped him. "Just be cool," he had told Travis as he prepped him for his first night on the corner. "Just be cool and act like you own it."

"Little man, hey!" the lady said again, louder. Travis turned around. "You're leaving your change." She held up two dollar bills and a receipt and waved them at him.

Travis tossed the money on his tray and bee-lined it to the farthest corner of the eating area, near the other exit door just in case. He sat at a big red booth behind the play place. The lady glanced over a couple of times as he started to eat his burger, but it was lunch time and the lines were getting long and pretty soon it looked like she forgot about him.

The Big Mac was the first real thing he had eaten since sneaking out his window after dinner two nights ago, and it tasted amazing. Then Travis had a great idea and took out his bag of Cheez-Its, placing a layer of the powdery crackers in between the bun and meat patty, and that made it even better. When he finished eating, Travis pulled out his sketchbook and took out the scrap of folded paper that marked his page. On the paper was an address written in his mom's handwriting. He had torn the address from an envelope addressed to Gran that he'd found in the kitchen trash can two years ago, and ever since he kept it in a shoe box under his bed along with the money he made selling rocks for Jerome. Travis still didn't know what had been in the envelope, because when he brought it up to Gran she told him to mind his own business and get used to Mom being long gone.

Travis licked his finger and tried to wipe away a dab of ketchup from the corner of the page where he held it. Gran was always telling him that his mom was never coming back, but Travis knew that was only half right. She wasn't coming back because she was saving up to bring him to Denver, only now she could use that money for something else because Travis was going to come to her.

He was trying to figure out how to get directions and was thinking about asking the lady at the counter when two older dudes--teenagers--came and sat down at the table across the aisle from him. Their clothes were all dirty and weird looking, with tons of patches on their jeans and thick bracelets with spikes and studs all over them. Travis didn't think white people could lock up their hair, but one of them had thick, gnarly dreads that were even longer than Jerome's friend Kendrick who was a rasta. Neither of them ordered anything. They just sat down and started playing a dice game while taking turns drinking a bottled Sprite that they brought in with them. They both had beat-up looking skateboards leaned up against their chairs.



“So what are we playing for?” the one with the rasta locks asked. “Cigarettes?”

“Sure,” the other one said. He was skinny and was wearing a black T-shirt for some kind of band Travis had never heard of. “Loser buys the next tin of Bugler.”

They took turns rolling the dice and laughing or cursing based on the numbers, but Travis didn’t understand the game. The only people he had ever seen play dice were the Honduran guys who sat outside the corner store and always glared at Travis because they knew he was Jerome's cousin. Travis figured the white boys had to be either skipping school or were dropouts, so they wouldn’t care that he was too. He thought about showing them the address, but before he could make up his mind one of the dice flew off the table and landed under his booth.

“Smooth move, Ace,” the skinny one said, getting up from the table. “Hey man, mind if I grab that from under you?”

“I got it,” Travis said. He reached under the booth and felt around for the die. When he came back up, the skinny kid was looking at his open sketchbook. Travis slammed it shut.

“Whoa,” the boy said. “Sorry. I was only checking out your stuff. It's really good. I mean, how old are you, ten, eleven?”

“None of your business,” Travis shot back. He put the die in the boy's hand. Travis didn't show his drawings to anyone, ever. Travis thought the skinny boy must be making fun of him, and he wanted to wipe that stupid smile off his pasty face.

“Okay, okay,” the boy said, “suit yourself, dude.”

From the other table, the rasta kid called out, “Rusty, yo! Are we gonna play or what?”

Just then, Travis saw a guy in a McDonald's button-down shirt and visor walking towards them. “Excuse me,” he said, “you kids are going to have to leave if you don't buy anything. These tables are for paying customers.”

“He bought something,” the rasta kid said, pointing to Travis' tray with its Big Mac wrapper and drink cup.

The manager squinted, looking all three of them over like he was trying to figure out how they fit together. “Are these two with you?” he asked Travis.

Before he could think of what to say, the rasta kid chimed in: “Sure we are. We're his babysitters.”

“Shut up, dickwad,” the skinny one said, shoving him in the arm. He grabbed Travis's sketchbook and backpack and handed them to him. To the manager, who was looking more and more pissed off by the second, he said, “Sorry, we're leaving.”

Not knowing what else to do, Travis followed the two boys out the door and around the corner until they were out of sight. The skinny one started rolling a cigarette from a little blue plastic pouch of tobacco that he took out of his back pocket. Travis liked how quickly his hands moved, sealing the cigarette with his tongue without spilling none of the tobacco. It looked really badass and tough. “What's your name, Sketch?” he asked once he lit it.

“Jerome,” Travis answered. “You?”

“I'm Rusty, and the loudmouth over here is Dirty Dan.” He pointed the lit cigarette at Travis. “You're alright. Do you skate?”

Travis shook his head.

“Oh well,” Rusty said, “maybe we'll see you around.”

Dirty Dan threw his skateboard onto the sidewalk and jumped on. Rusty did the same, and the two of them pushed off down the street until they got up enough speed to glide. And just like that, Travis was back where he started—in the middle of Denver with nothing but an address

that he didn't know how to get to, and now it was starting to get dark. At least he wasn't hungry anymore.

Travis kept walking, and after a while he came to a big street that had a bunch of stores and restaurants instead of business buildings. A sign said “16th Street Mall,” but Travis had never seen a mall that wasn't indoors before. The street looked like it went on forever, and two big buses ran up and down the middle where cars would normally go. It looked crazy, like something out of the Star Trek re-runs that came on TV sometimes, or his Green Lantern comics.

Travis walked to the corner and waited for the next one to come, wondering if Mom ever rode this bus--maybe to work or something? When she lived with Travis and Gran she worked the night shift at Dunkin' Donuts, and every morning when Travis woke up there would be a box in the kitchen of all the ones they were going to throw away just because the glaze was starting to crack. When Mom started going around with Gerard, though, the donuts stopped. First it was because lots of mornings she just didn't come home, and then it was because she didn't work at Dunkin' Donuts anymore and spent all of her time at Gerard's or lying on Gran's sofa, not talking. Travis had been a baby then, no older than his little girl cousins, and at first all he was mad about was missing those donuts in the morning and having to eat the nasty eggs and grits that Gran made. It wasn't until he started running with Jerome that he understood what had happened to Mom and why she had to leave Nashville, Gerard, and Travis too.

Travis pulled out his wallet when the trolley stopped at the corner, but when he stepped on he saw that people just walked straight to a seat—there wasn't a change machine or nothing. It was free? Denver was starting to seem alright. He took a seat towards the back and watched the bus fill up. He saw a lot less business-type people like he saw near the bus station, and there were even a few other kids that looked like Rusty and Dirty Dan, with skateboards and big wallet

chains swinging from their hips. They reminded Travis of the lost boys in Peter Pan, like a modern day version. He wondered what Jerome would think of them.

A lady in green hospital clothes sat down next to him. She lifted her big brown purse onto her lap and let out a big breath, tilting her head back and closing her eyes like she was real tired. Travis waited for her to open her eyes again and tapped her lightly on the shoulder. She looked over.

“Do you know how to get to Bruce Randolph Avenue?” he asked.

She cocked her head a little. “Oh, honey,” she said, “you're a little ways from Bruce Randolph. Are you by yourself?”

Looking at the woman, Travis realized she must be about the same age as Mom, and that Mom might look totally different when he saw her. Would he recognize her? Would she recognize him, grown almost a foot and with the crazy braids that he let Jerome's girlfriend plait on his head? “My mom's waiting for me,” he told her.

“At the bus stop, I hope,” she told him. “That area's not safe after dark.” She looked all around the inside of the trolley like she was waiting for Travis's mom to jump out from underneath a bench or something. “You're all by yourself?” she asked. “How old are you?”

“Fourteen,” Travis lied, but the woman just frowned.

“I think you better see if you can get someone to pick you up,” she said, pulling her cell phone out of her bag. “Does your mom have a car? Is there someone with a car who can come get you?”

Shit, Travis thought. He picked the wrong person to ask. “My mom doesn't have a car,” he tried, “and she's at work. But my cousin's going to pick me up.”

“But I thought you said your mom would be waiting for you,” the woman said. She shook her head at Travis, and then, even though no one asked her a question, she said: “No. Absolutely not.” She started dialing a number into the cellphone. “No boy your age should be taking the bus by themselves to that neighborhood at night.”

“Who are you calling?”

The woman lifted the phone to her ear. “The police,” she said. “They’ll make sure you get home safely, and then if they’re worth a damn they’ll charge your mother with child neglect.”

“What?” Travis panicked. The police would send him back. They would find out who he was and send him back and he would never make it to Mom. “Lady, please!” he begged, tugging on the woman’s sleeve. “You can’t call the cops.”

“Don’t worry, baby,” she said sweetly, “You’re not the one in trouble here.” Then, into the phone: “Hello?”

Travis sprung out of his seat and knocked the phone out of the woman’s hand before she could get another word out. It flew down the aisle of the trolley in its hot pink case until it smashed into pieces against one of the center poles.

“Hey!” someone called out. “What the hell?”

The trolley pulled to a stop at a corner and the doors opened. Travis could hear the woman shouting, but he ducked into the exiting crowd and took off down the street without looking back. He kept running down 16th Street until he saw another group of skateboard kids, and because he didn’t know what else to do, he followed them as they skated down a side street, making sure to stay far enough behind that they wouldn’t notice.

A few blocks down, the kids stopped in front of a huge building with big columns and two levels of steps leading up to the front doors. Between the sets of stairs was a wide walkway

with some big metal sculptures and fountains and things. There were at least ten other kids hanging out there, doing tricks on their skateboards or just chilling. Travis saw Rusty and Dirty Dan sitting on the edge of the center fountain, playing dice again. This time, Travis didn't have time to be scared or act like a pussy. He needed to find Mom, now.

He pulled the piece of paper out of his backpack and walked up to them. "Do you know where this is?"

"Well hey again, Sketch!" Rusty said. "Look who hangs out with skaters after all."

Dirty Dan took the paper from him and studied it. "That's off Downing," he said. "Way the hell across town."

Rusty looked over at the paper. "You're not from here, huh?" he asked, but the way he was looking at Travis felt like he was asking some other, secret question. "Who lives at that place?"

"My mom." Travis looked around. There were still tall buildings in every direction. Not a single house in sight. "It's far, huh?"

Dirty Dan stuck out his hand to Rusty, who handed him a cigarette from behind his ear. "You gotta head down the mall to the forty-four bus line," Dan mumbled as he lit it. "That'll get you in the right neighborhood, but you gotta figure it out from there." He took a long drag and exhaled the smoke in Travis's direction. "Shit, dude, your mom better watch herself living off Downing. There's nothing but crack houses and gang bangers over there."

He was lying, him and the woman on the bus. They were lying because they were both stupid white folks who think every black neighborhood's dangerous, and Travis was sick of it. "It's not the projects," he fired back. "She told me. It's a big house with my own bedroom. You don't know anything about it."

Rusty put his hand against Dan's chest to stop him from saying anything else. "Dan thinks everywhere outside of downtown is a shithole," he said, leaning in to Travis as if Dan couldn't hear the whole thing. "I know the bus route. I'll ride out there with you. We'll find it."

"Whatever, Rusty," Dan said. He picked up his backpack and flipped over his skateboard. "You wanna hike it across town, go for it. I'll catch you at the spot." He snatched a pack of cigarettes out of Rusty's pocket before pushing off on the skateboard down the street.

"There better be some left when I get back!" Rusty called out after him. Travis noticed when he turned his head that Rusty had a jagged little scar down his jaw, like a lightning bolt. From a knife? Back home, if you were tough you had to show it on the outside—walk slick, look mean, and act like you're always ready to blow a dude away. Either that or you had to get in good with somebody like Jerome so people knew you were in his crew. Rusty didn't act like that, but as Travis walked next to him towards the bus, he felt like he did in his own neighborhood when Jerome was with him. Like they were the guys who made the rules.

They passed a Walgreens, and out in front some much older kids even dirtier than Dan sat on the curb near the door, playing guitar. Rusty waved to them, and the guy playing guitar nodded back.

"You know them?" Travis asked.

"They're travelers, crusty kids," he said. "They've come by the drop-in center a couple times this week, but they'll be gone as soon as they make a little money busking."

Travis thought Rusty had started speaking another language. Whiteboynese or something. "Drop-in center?" he repeated.

“It's a pretty cool place,” he said. They had reached the bus stop, and Rusty motioned for Travis to sit next to him on the bench. “They serve lunch every day,” he went on, “and there's computers with internet and pool tables and stuff for kids like us.”

“What do you mean, 'kids like us'?” Travis asked. He couldn't imagine him and Rusty being any more different.

“You know,” he said, his voice suddenly a little softer. “Street kids, dropouts, runaways. That's what you are, right? You ran away to get out here?”

Travis felt his face burn hot. “I guess,” he admitted. “But only until I can find my Mom. She'll work it all out after that, and then I'll just live here from now on.”

Rusty looked like he was going to say something, but then he pressed his lips together hard and smiled instead. The bus pulled up, and Travis paid for both of their fares with the cash from his last twenty. They took a seat towards the back, and again Travis felt way too close to Rusty. He could smell the dirty-laundry odor of his T-shirt, and it reminded him of when Gran would send him down the street to the laundromat with a giant basket full of Jerome's clothes after they had piled up in his room for weeks.

They stayed on the bus for what felt like forever, first passing through the rest of downtown, and then heading farther and farther away. After they were past all the big buildings, the streets got wider and looked more like the ones back home. Travis started seeing a lot more black people, and there were lots of Mexicans too. There were even a bunch of stores that had names and signs all written in Spanish, which Travis had never seen before.

“Do you have a back-up plan?” Rusty asked. His skateboard was propped up on its end between his legs, and he was spinning it under his finger like people do with a basketball.

Travis looked back out of the window. “For what?”



“In case, you know, this doesn't work out.”

“What do you mean?” Travis asked. “If what doesn't work out?”

“Are you sure your mom's going to be there?” Rusty asked. The skateboard spun under his fingers. “What if she moved? Or what if she doesn't want to see you? I mean, not to be harsh, dude, but she left you, right?”

The bell to signal a stop rang, and Travis saw Downing Street light up on the sign at the front of the bus. Travis jumped up and pushed past Rusty, knocking the skateboard over. Fuck him, Travis thought. I don't need him anymore. “You don't believe me,” he said, “but I don't care. I'm not like you, so just leave me alone.”

He walked off the bus without looking to see if Rusty followed him, but as he started walking, he heard the wheels of the skateboard coming up behind him. “You still don't know how to get there,” Rusty said. “I'll help you find it and then I'll peace out, okay?”

Travis glared at him. “You just want to prove me wrong, but it won't work. You're the one who's gonna feel stupid.”

For the first time since he met him, Travis saw Rusty lose his cool. “Look, kid, if you don't want my help, then fine.” He stopped walking and pointed down the street. “Bruce Randolph is about three blocks down. Pay attention for it when you pass the supermarket, and take a left. Have a nice life.” He turned and started skating in the other direction.

Travis suddenly felt guilty, like when he would yell at his little cousin Amara and make her cry after Jerome had wailed on him. It felt good for a split second, and then it was the worst feeling in the world. But he shoved all the feelings down and kept walking, fast. He was almost there.

By the time Travis passed the supermarket, he felt like his legs were going to fall off. He turned left on Bruce Randolph like Rusty said and started reading the addresses. There was a run-down apartment complex on the corner, and Travis was relieved to see the number was much lower than the one on the paper. A cracked-out looking woman sat in a lawn chair in the parking lot with rollers in her hair, and she gave Travis the hard stare as he went by. Just keep moving, he told himself. Act like you own it.

He went another block but found himself hoping he was on the wrong street after all. All the houses were run down and ghetto, like the ones off East Trinity back in Nashville. Junk spilled into the tiny yards and paint peeled off of shutters and doors that were all crooked. There were empty lots with overgrown grass as high as Travis's head. This couldn't be where Mom's house was. It was nice, she had told him the last time she called. It was nice and big and had a bedroom she was getting ready just for him. She even asked him what color he wanted it painted. Travis had told her green.

Travis stopped in front of the house that matched the number on the paper, but he couldn't believe it was right. The house wasn't really even a house anymore. Vines grew all over the roof, and there was a big sign that said 'No Trespassing' hung on a two-by-four that was nailed across the door. Part of the chain link fence along the sidewalk was knocked to the ground, and Travis stepped over it. He walked slowly up to the door, half expecting Mom to open it anyway, to bust through the two-by-four and tell him it was all a big joke. He cupped his hands and looked into the window, hoping to see anything that would prove she had been there. There was nothing but some broken furniture and dead leaves that had blown in. Travis slid down the door until he was sitting on the stoop. He had no back-up plan. He didn't know where else to look, no number to

call. Grandma had been right, and now he had fucked everything up. He started shaking, and he couldn't tell if it was because he was cold or because he was scared.

It was dark now, so when Travis saw someone else hop over the chain link, his stomach flipped. He jumped to his feet and reached for the pocket knife in his sock, but then he heard the skateboard wheels on the driveway. "Hey," Rusty said.

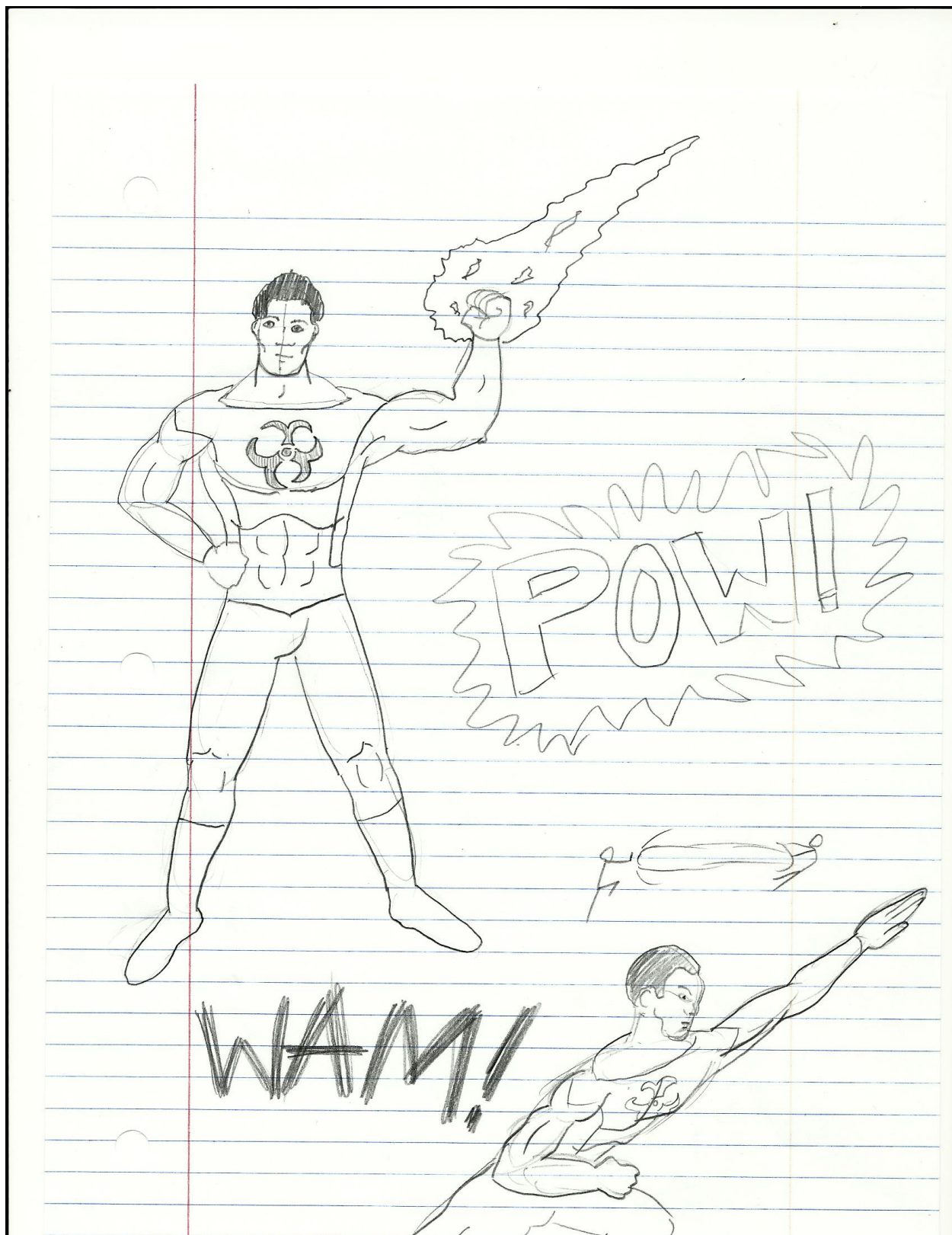
Travis didn't answer.

"You can't stay here all night." He squatted down in front of Travis. "Why don't you head back with me? I know someplace we can stay, and then in the morning we'll look for your mom."

Travis started to cry. He was too exhausted to hate himself for it. "There's nowhere else to look," he managed to say.

"Well, first things first." He stood up and offered his hand to Travis, pulling him to his feet. "Let's get out of here, huh?"

"Okay," Travis said. He didn't know what else to say after that, so he just walked alongside Rusty and focused on swallowing the hiccups that jumped into his throat. When he pulled out the plastic pouch of tobacco, Travis asked Rusty to teach him how to roll a cigarette.



## Big Rock Candy Mountain

Rusty thought Chris was full of shit when he talked about New Orleans, going on about how “it's post-apocalyptic down there, man. A whole city full of gutted houses and police that don't give a flying fuck. It's the land of milk and honey, I'm telling you.”

Rusty didn't pay him any mind at first. Chris was a big talker, and the only reason Rusty took up with him and Pocket was because he said they were headed to New Orleans to do some delivery crew job for a guy Pocket knew and there would be work enough for him, too. Rusty needs to scrounge up some money pronto so he can make it back to Denver next week for his little sis Ashley's eighth grade graduation. He hasn't seen her since he took off four years ago, and the first piece of mail she sends him after about a zillion unanswered letters is a goddamn graduation invitation. By the time he passed back through Kansas City and got it, it was twelve days away.

Now that they've made it into town, Rusty decides that this may be the one single experience in Chris's life that he didn't upsell. He really wasn't kidding about this town.

“We should have done been down here,” Rusty tells him.

“You ain't kidding.” Chris is picking through a trashcan on the corner of Bourbon Street and Toulouse. It overflows with styrofoam cups of booze, and all around people are spilling out of one bar and tumbling into the next, like musical chairs. Chris grabs a few cups and gives them a shake. He takes off the tops and pours what's left of them into one big green plastic thing that looks like a vase with a pineapple on the bottom. On the side it says “The Hand Grenade.”

“Here,” he says, giving the whole thing a swirl and handing it to Rusty. “Do the Bourbon Shuffle.”

Rusty knocks it back, but not without bracing himself. Unlike Chris, he isn't a pretentious motherfucker that's out to prove how punk he is. He doesn't do gross shit just to do it. But by this point in the evening, he's not refusing much. A few straight days in a freight car with nothing but flat land and time whizzing by has left him antsy. Too much thinking and not enough drinking. The stuff tastes like licorice and rotten fruit, but he gets it down.

Pocket reaches for the little flask she keeps in her boot and takes a swig. She's too dignified for shit like this, but she doesn't hesitate to let Chris stick his tongue down her throat after he's coated it with a dozen strangers' alcoholic backwash. That's how it is with girls like her, Rusty thinks. However ugly or crazy or strung out they are, they always hook up with a guy ten times worse. Not that Pocket is any of those things, really.

Rusty's throat and belly fire up a bit, and as long as he doesn't think too hard about what just went down his gullet, he can keep it down. He tosses the empty container on the street, but Chris picks it up and cracks him over the head with it.

“Listen here, you piece of shit...” Chris steps to Rusty and gets all in his face like he's about to go off. Rusty knows he's joking but balls his fist anyway. Up close, Chris's pupils are so big they make his whole eye look black. “God hates litter!” he yells, cracking up. He stumbles away from Rusty, laughing. “Haven't you seen the commercial with the Indian crying?”

The joke doesn't make sense, and that's how Rusty knows Chris is good and drunk. He laughs, but he makes sure to clock Chris in the shoulder, hard, just to let him know it's not cool to get in his face. Chris is the type of guy you have to re-establish that shit with once in a while, and Rusty sees something flash across his eyes that lets him know Chris gets the message. He pulls

Pocket to his side and grabs her ass. She shoves him in the chest and calls him a cocksucker, but not in the kind of way that means anything.

Rusty knew Pocket way back when they hung out at the same drop-in center for teens in downtown Denver. Street kids could get a free lunch there, shoot some pool, dick around on the Internet, whatever. Pocket was a few years younger than Rusty and about three feet shorter than everyone on the planet. Like most tiny girls, she's scrappy and a total bitch ninety percent of the time. But the other ten percent was pretty cool, and Rusty had made out with her a couple times at the skate park when he was fifteen. When he met up with Chris last month in Kansas City and she was on his arm, he recognized her scrawny midget ass immediately.

"This is my lady, Pocket," he introduced, but Rusty knew her as Ellie back in Denver. He was about to say as much, but he caught something in her sharp little glance that made him keep his mouth shut. She recognized Rusty too, but he guessed maybe she didn't want to go into all that.

"I'm Rusty," he offered instead, and that was how they left it.

On Bourbon, Rusty struggles to keep up with her as they snake single file behind Chris in the middle of a thick crowd on the next block. They hold up their drinks and slip sideways past all the churning bodies, and in Rusty's approaching-buzzed brain it feels almost like a machine, like they're a bicycle chain turning the gears of the shrieking bachelorettes and sequined drag queens and drunk business men, cranking themselves forward into the night. It's a thing that happens to him sometimes, in crowds. Rusty's head gets light, and for a second he can't tell if he's moving or standing still. People's faces roll past on either side, one cog turning another, and another. The next thing he knows, Pocket's little-ass hand takes hold of his and guides him out of

the crowd to a side alley, his hand grasping hers and the rest of him just trailing along behind like a herd of retarded sheep.

“You alright?” Chris asks. He's walking towards them from the back of the alley where it leads into a courtyard bar. Pocket lets go of Rusty's hand.

“Fine,” he says. “I'm just too sober for Bourbon. Hand that thing over.” Rusty reaches for one of the two new styrofoam cups in Chris's hands that he must have copped from an empty table in the courtyard.

“Fuck Bourbon,” Pocket says. “We got our starter booze. Let's go find someplace cool to hang out.”

Chris and Pocket argue for a while about where to go, but eventually they duck into a dive joint on Decatur that Pocket swears has the best jukebox in town. She feeds it a few quarters and gets some old Hank going while Chris and Rusty grab a couple stools at the end of the bar. “You got any money?” he asks. “I want a shot.”

Rusty does have money, three twenties folded up in his sock to be exact, but he came down here to add to it, not subtract from it by being Chris's good time guy. He's starting to get a little worried about just how blitzed Chris seems to want to get tonight. “Aren't we supposed to be at that guy's house tomorrow morning to start the job?” He reminds him. “You should pace yourself a little.”

Chris waves his hand around like he's literally swatting Rusty's words away from his face. “Man, you need to chill out. It's our first night here! 'Sides, the guy's some old uncle or something of Pocket's, so he ain't gonna freak out if we're not there at the crack of dawn.”

“Yeah, but I don't want to lose half a day's pay because you're haggard from too much Bourbon Shuffle.”



Chris squints his eyes and gives Rusty that charming drunk smile that manages, some-fucking-how, to get him into the cutoff Carhartts of girls like Pocket. “Don't be such a killjoy, Rusty. You'll get your work. Your sister's barmitzvah's like three weeks away, right?”

“It's her graduation, and it's next Friday.”

“You'll be fine,” he assures. Then he leans over and crams his hand into Rusty's left boot. “Now let's have a good time, huh? I know you got some dough stashed in this rank-smelling shoe of yours.”

“Get off me, man!” Rusty kicks his leg, trying to shake Chris's grimy hand from his boot before he finds what he's looking for. The kick lands square on Chris's shin, which Rusty didn't exactly aim for but satisfies the hell out of him just the same.

“Jesus!” Chris howls. “What's your problem?” He shoves Rusty, and he topples off the bar stool, landing ass-up on the floor that's sticky with years' worth of spilled beer. Rusty knows the smart thing to do is just laugh it off, tell Chris he's a mooching asswipe, and buy him the shot to keep the peace, but when he steals a glance over at Pocket, she's looking at him in the orange light of the jukebox like he's a puppy that's just been beaten. And that's when he says “fuck it” to the smart thing and kicks the leg of Chris's bar stool with everything he's got.

Chris hits the deck, hard. Rusty caught him off-guard alright, but in less than a second he's on top of him, and they're rolling on that nasty floor like two metal coils sprung loose, like they've been building up to this bar fight all night. Maybe they have, Rusty thinks. All he knows is that it feels good to land one in Chris's gut even after he slams Rusty's shoulder into the floor so hard the pain shoots down to his legs. People are yelling and he knows they're going to get separated soon. Chris isn't a big guy, but he's got that wiry kind of muscle that takes you by surprise. If they would have been going at it on their feet Rusty would have had a chance, but

down on all fours Chris pins him before he can right himself, and then he knows he's screwed. Chris starts to wail on him and gets two punches in before somebody pulls him off. When the second one lands Rusty hears his nose crunch.

His head weighs a hundred pounds after that, wanting to roll right off his neck and underneath the pool table, or at least that's what it feels like. A couple pairs of hands drag him to his feet. His eyes are watering so much he can't see anything, but he can make out the voices: the bartender saying "Get 'em the hell out of here!" and Pocket yelling Chris's name. She sounds small and scared, and it reminds Rusty of Ashley crying for Mom every time she'd get locked up or taken to rehab. These girls, Rusty ponders drunkenly. They're always calling out the wrong damn names.

"I'm cool, man, I'm cool," he says to the two guys grabbing his arms, but they don't let go until they shove him onto the sidewalk. He plunges head-on into a group of college girls all wearing pink feather boas, and they bunny hop away from him, shrieking. "He's bleeding!" one of them says. Rusty grabs hold of a bike rack and tries to steady himself. It's only then that he realizes his nose is dripping blood all over the pavement.

"Fuckin' gutter punks," the one guy says as he walks back inside.

Rusty lets his body slump down to the curb—not like he had much say in it at that point anyway. The booze keeps him from feeling the proper amount of pain in his face; instead it's just a numb throbbing and a heaviness that makes him want to hang his head between his knees even though he knows he needs to tilt it back to stop the bleeding. He pulls his bandana off and stuffs it in his nostrils. It smells so foul that it actually rallies Rusty out of the fog for a second, long enough to see Pocket dragging Chris out of the bar as he flips off someone inside. "Come on," she tells him, "Let's just go."

He jerks his arm away. "Get off!" he growls. "Everybody quit laying their fucking hands on me. And you!" He adds, pointing at Rusty. "You stay out of my way. I knew we should have left your ass in Kansas City. Fucking buzzkill."

"Shit, Rusty," Pocket says. "Is your nose broken?" She takes a step towards him, but Chris grabs hold of the strap of her pack and yanks, hard. And in his throbbing head, Rusty thinks: I knew it. I knew he was that kind of asshole.

"Are you kidding me?" he yells, pull Pocket towards him. Rusty tries to push himself up off the curb, but everything starts to swirl and he feels his ass hit the pavement again.

Pocket wriggles out of her pack and shoves it at Chris's chest. "Let me go! He's really hurt."

Chris looks down at the pack in his hands and then up at Pocket like she's some kind of snake that just shed her skin. "You're as loyal as a golden retriever, Pocket..."

"Chris, stop--"

"...I really love how you back me up when I need it, you know? It's really touching."

"Leave her out of it," Rusty manages to say through the balled up bandana. He wants another shot at him. If he can just get to his feet...

"You know what?" Chris throws Pocket's pack at the ground near her feet. "Fuck you guys. I'm out of here." He turns and starts walking back towards Bourbon.

For a second Rusty thinks she's going to run after Chris, but then she moves her pack over to the curb and squats down on her haunches in front of him. "Let me see," she says, peeling the bandana away from his face. As Rusty looks at her, he thinks back to the drop-in center in Denver and how he walked in one day to see her rolling around the floor with this stupid juggalo bitch three times her size. He walked in right as the center worker busted out of

his upstairs office to see what the hell was going on, but by the time he got across the room to break up the fight, little-ass Pocket had the girl pinned on her back like a dead cockroach, each one of her limbs held in place by Pocket's strained arms and legs.

“Why do you act like you don't remember me?” Rusty asks.

She takes his blood-soaked bandana and exchanges it for her own. The bleeding has let up a little, but Rusty's head still feels like a hammer, and he can feel his face starting to swell. At least his nose has more or less gone numb. “I don't know,” she says. “Because Chris is a jealous asshole, and I thought this would be easier.” Her bandana is softer than Rusty's, but it doesn't smell much better. He doesn't mind, though. “Besides, it's not like there's really anything to remember. I mean, we only hung out a few times before you split.”

Something about the way she says it makes Rusty feel guilty. All the time he's been gone, he's been so busy feeling shitty for leaving Ashley that it never crossed his mind to feel shitty about leaving anybody else. “What are you keeping Chris around for?” he asks. “The Ellie I used to know wouldn't have stood for any of his shit.”

“Well, in case you haven't noticed, I'm not Ellie anymore, and we don't really know each other.” She picks up a snipe from a crack in the sidewalk and lights it, taking a long drag. “Listen, I gotta go find him before he gets himself arrested. He'll be over the whole thing once he sleeps it off. Just meet us back at the squat, okay?” She stands up and hikes her pack over her shoulder, then offers Rusty the snipe. “Want the rest?”

“Sure,” he says, and when he reaches up to take it, he has to shove down the impulse to grab her hand instead. As Pocket walks away, he wonders if Ashley is kissing boys yet back in Denver. Then his head starts its pounding again and he feels like puking, but when he puts his head between his knees, he blacks out instead.

When Rusty comes to it feels like he's been out for days, but he's hit the deck enough times to know it was probably less than a minute. Pocket's bandana is on the ground between his feet where he must have dropped it. He feels like he's sweating alcohol but chalks it up to the crazy Louisiana humidity. He folds the bandana, tucking it into the side of his boot, and grips a signpost to hoist himself up. The world starts spinning again, so he laces his fingers behind his head like they tell you to do in gym class and that helps a little.

The squat they had picked out that morning was a gutted house on some street called Alvar, but Rusty doesn't know what direction it's in from there. People trot past him on both sides of the sidewalk like he's Moses parting the Red Sea with his bloody broken nose, and he gets that gear-turning, paralyzed feeling again. He uses the prepaid cell phone he got at the Walmart in Kansas City to try Chris's number, but it's dead. Pocket doesn't have one as far as he knows, so that leaves him with the equally shitty options of either walking back towards Bourbon to try to catch up with Pocket or attempting to find the squat on his own. He decides on the squat and starts walking towards Esplanade, a big street with a grassy median where they had hung out that afternoon with some kids who were busking. There's a different group hanging out there now, but Rusty recognizes a few of them from a punk house he stayed at back in Minneapolis last summer.

“Yo, Rusty!” one of them says. He's a Mexican-looking dude with dreads—Jonesy or Jamesy, Rusty can't remember. “What're you doing down here?” When he gets a few steps closer and he sees Rusty's face, he adds: “And who roughed you up? Do I need to call somebody's mother?”

“Very funny,” Rusty says. “I just got into it with this asshole I’m traveling with. Hey, you guys haven’t seen a short little crusty chick pass by here recently, have you? Camo skirt, black boots, star tattoo by her eye?”

“That’s, like, every girl in New Orleans, dude,” Jamesy-Jonesy answers.

A girl sitting nearby with a giant pit bull in her lap smiles, giving Rusty the eye. “Forget them and come with us,” she coaxes. “We’re about to go to this rad moonshine party.”

The throbbing in Rusty’s head has settled into a steady ache, and he knows he should keep looking for the squat so he can grab at least a half a night’s sleep. “Sounds cool, but I got this job in the morning I gotta do. I’m trying to get back home and I gotta scrounge up bus fare pronto.”

“What kind of gig is it?” another guy asks. “I’m trying to get an apartment with some people, I could sure use some extra dough.”

“I don’t know, man,” Rusty says. “It’s this older guy my friend knows. He does, like, this crazy custom woodworking stuff out of his backyard.”

“You mean Ebby?” Jamesy-Jonesy asks. “Guy with one leg?”

“Yeah, I think that’s his name. I don’t know about the leg.”

“Hate to rain on your parade, dude, but Ebby’s dead. About four months ago, from pulmonary something or other. I don’t know, something you get from smoking. He used to hire dirty kids a lot to help deliver the big furniture pieces he did. I did a couple jobs with him. He was a nice guy.”

“You’re kidding me,” Rusty pleads. “Come on man, you’re joking.” His chest tightens up like a vice as the information sinks in.

“No way, dude. He’s dead as a doornail. R-I-P.”

He had everything riding on this job. He had missed his last opportunity to try to ride the rails back up to Denver from Kansas City because Pocket and goddamn shitbag Chris told him this was a sure thing. That they would be able to clear three hundred a piece easy and he'd be able to get a shower and buy some decent clothes and show up back home on a Greyhound instead of covered in dirt and grime from a freight car. He is totally, irreversibly fucked.

James-Jonesy must see the devastation on Rusty's mangled face, because he claps him on the back and says, "Hey, we're gonna fly signs on Elysian Fields tomorrow. Why don't you meet us out there? If that nose looks half as busted as it does right now you may strike it rich."

The girl with the pit bull stands up and saunters over as the rest of the group starts walking towards the river. She's got linebacker shoulders and a dumpy build, but also these big cow eyes that make Rusty feel sorry for her. When she gets closer he can see the meth scars on her face where she's tried to fill them in with make-up that's too light for her skin. She offers Rusty an open Altoids tin with a couple chalky pink pills inside. "Come on," she teases, shaking the tin in his face. "There's nowhere to go but up, right?" As Rusty stands there, thinking of Pocket and Ashley and all the ways he hates himself, that actually sounds pretty smart. Two pink pills later, when he repeats it to Cow Eyes as they take turns sliding down the levy on flattened cardboard box, it sounds like ancient wisdom.

They eventually find the party, which is at this huge squat in a neighborhood way out past the French Quarter where everything looks like a zombie movie—all boarded up windows and crumbling houses, no streetlights and tons of trash and shit everywhere. The squat's actually this

old warehouse for a carpet company, and the kids living there have made a kind of yellow brick road out of mildewed carpet and rug scraps that winds out from the busted loading dock door all the way to the street. Rusty and Cow Eyes follow the trail, and he links arms with her like the Wizard of Oz. “And he's Toto,” Rusty says, pointing to the pitbull, and Cow Eyes nearly falls over giggling. “She's a girl,” she explains, taking a swig out of a bottle of cough syrup that has materialized in her hand. Cow Eyes is a walking pharmacy, Rusty realizes, and then suddenly he's tasting the nasty-sweet cherry liquid as it slides down his throat.

The cough syrup mixes with the X which is chasing the whiskey from earlier and Rusty finally gets that chilled-out feeling he's been looking for all evening. Fuck the system. Fuck family. Why'd it take her that long to write, anyway? It's not his fault he took his first opportunity to get out of that shit hole.

It's so dark and crowded inside that Rusty would probably bust his ass if he wasn't hanging on ole Cow Eyes for support. The place is crawling with crust punks and dirty kids. The smell of pot and b.o. and mold slaps Rusty in the face, and gangsta rap blares through a busted speaker somewhere. The only light he can make out is coming from a few kerosene lamps somebody's strung up from the rafters. He keeps his eyes on them, trying to distract himself from the crowded room and that funny feeling creeping up on him despite the cocktail of drugs in his system. Just a gear being turned, and then he sees them in the air all around, mindless and constant and corroded.

“I'm gonna find out who's got the moonshine,” Cow Eyes says, and vanishes into the crowd with the pitbull on her heels. Rusty opts to lean against a stack of wood pallets and let the cough syrup finish its job. The flickering orange light bounces from face to face in the crowd, lighting them for a second before pitching them back into darkness. Under one of the swaying



kerosene lamps, he thinks he sees Pocket standing in front of the kegs, although at this point he can't really be sure. He's already seen Ashley several times on the walk over. The potentially-unreal Pocket cranes her neck and looks around the room. For me, Rusty wonders, or for Chris?

He floats across the warehouse to her, or is it that he wills her to float to him? Either way, there she is, and he reaches out to her face to see if she'll disappear.

“What the hell, Rusty?” she says, pushing his hand away.

“Sorry,” he says. “It's really dark.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“I didn't. Where's Chris?”

“Making out with some shot girl on Bourbon. Or at least he was when I found him.” She takes a drink of moonshine out of a Mason jar. “Good riddance, right? I was worried about bringing him around Ebby anyway. He's kind of like a dad to me, and I'm pretty sure he would have hated Chris even more than you do.”

Oh God, Rusty thought. He'd been so wrapped up in how a dead Ebby screws up his own plans that he didn't even consider what a dead Ebby might mean to Pocket, or that he would have to tell her about it. “Like a dad?” he repeated.

Pocket's face multiplies to five faces, all of them spinning like a kaleidoscope and getting self-conscious as she spoke: “Well, I mean, yeah—kind of. He took me in for a while, a few years back when I was really green and stupid. He taught me a lot, and he would've kept teaching me if I hadn't left. It's going to be really awesome to see him again.”

“Well hey,” Rusty starts out, “about that...”

“What?” Her five heads lean in closer and merge back into one. “I can barely hear you!”

Rusty cups his hand around her ear. She smells like pipe tobacco and dirty hair. “I ran into my buddy earlier and he used to work for Ebby...” and he stops because he knows he has a choice right now—a choice between doing a really kind thing and an incredibly fucked up one. The problem is he doesn't know which is which. He never seems to, really. “He told me Ebby moved.”

Pocket turns to look at him, skeptical. “That doesn't sound right. He loved it here.”

“Yeah,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. “He moved to the West Coast. Something about a brother or a nephew he's got out there. I don't know.”

Pocket frowns, and the light plays frantic shadows all across her face. Floating above her head Rusty sees a big scale like they have in courthouses, and it's tipping back and forth, guilt or not guilty. “Damn,” she says, “that really sucks.” Just then the scale comes crashing to the ground behind her, and when she screams he realizes it's not a scale but one of the kerosene lamps that's fallen from the rafters.

Rusty pulls her to him, and for a second he thinks, It's fine, we're fine. But then he sees a trail of smoke start to rise out of a pile of carpet samples a few feet away. He tries to get to it, but the crowd is pressing in on them and blocking the way. They don't seem to notice until there's a sudden burst of light and the whole thing ignites. Then, chaos.

“Rusty!” Pocket yells as bodies shove between them. He reaches out to her but a cloud of smoke hits his eyes and blinds him. He feels the force of the crowd and knows he's moving even though he's trying his damndest to stand in one place. When he's able to open his eyes again, she's gone. Somewhere from behind, there's an explosion that knocks him to his knees and then a searing heat. The moonshine, he remembers, and his mind rockets past the fear of injury to the wordless terror of death.

Something animal in Rusty takes over and he claws at the forms around him, pulling himself up by someone's jacket sleeve before they rip his hand away. He goes spinning off into the crowd, groping the smoky darkness and looking for Pocket, for Ashley, for anything he can save. He thinks, Maybe it's not all fucked. Maybe there's still time. The gears are turning, but maybe he can jam the machine, put it in reverse.

A burning rafter falls and in its blaze he gets a glimpse. He hurls himself at an arm that is scrawnier than all the rest, and pulls it towards him. Pocket's face is blurry and swirling, even though she's inches away. He intends to say it only once, but the words come pouring out of his mouth and he can't stop: I found you, I found you, I found you.

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All desert areas have snakes. They inhabit ruins, native villages, garbage dumps, caves, and natural rock outcroppings that offer shade. Never go barefoot or walk through these areas without carefully inspecting them for snakes. Pay attention to where you place your feet and hands. Most snakebites result from stepping on or handling snakes. Avoid them. Once you see a snake, give it a wide berth.

### TO FINISH TANNING:

1. Rinse off salt and soak the skin in clean water for 3 days (in the SHADE)
2. Soak in a mixture of 2 quarts vinegar and 10 gallons water for 24 hours, then in a solution of 2 lbs salt/1 lb alum/5 gal water for about a week, stirring twice a day. (For real, Eddy. Twice a day. DON'T FORGET)
3. Rinse the skin thoroughly and nail it to a piece of plywood, flesh side outward. Let it dry in the shade most of the way & then rub it with reat's foot oil, blotting the excess.
4. Remove the skin from the board and work it gently back and forth over a sawhorse until it's supple, adding oil as you go.

13-12

## Coming Down

Lila watched from the kitchen window as her ten-year-old daughter taped a paper shooting target to the siding of the old storage shed in the field behind their rented farmhouse. The target, with its thick black lines in the vague shape of a human head and torso, came with the hot pink air rifle currently draped across Marley's back—a gift from her father.

Lila hated the rifle, although, as she found out during the argument with Jared last night, she couldn't articulate a single reason why. It wasn't that she thought the toy was too dangerous. She was a Virginian hillbilly's daughter and firm believer in teaching children how to handle dangerous things with respect rather than avoid them. She was certain that Marley, who operated the gas stove and sewing machine regularly, could be trusted to practice basic gun safety. From her voyeur's perch, Lila could see Marley was running through some kind of checklist that Jared must have taught her over the weekend, inspecting various parts of the rifle before finally planting her feet and raising it to her shoulder with confidence.

“Is it the money?” Jared had asked when he dropped Marley off. “Because I'll buy all the refill BB's. Just let me know when she's getting low.” It pissed Lila off when Jared bought Marley extravagant presents because, more often than not, they were the strips of duct tape holding together the seams of his shoddy fatherhood. But it was better than when Marley was a baby and Jared was too loaded to even be trusted with a child, and as a result she often found herself compromising with him in all kinds of ways that she never would have if he were actually a competent parent. It gnawed at her conscience to let Jared pump Marley full of junk

food and bribe her with toys, but the thought of him giving up on her altogether or relapsing was worse. As it was, Lila had begun to suspect as much when she noticed his jeans nearly falling off his hips the last few weeks.

“It's not the money,” she had told him. It wasn't anything as tangible as that. Something about the rifle itself, its very nature, disturbed Lila on gut level. She hadn't even let Marley keep the thing in the house; she made her leave it on the back porch. Now, hearing the gun's sharp crack as it bucked against her daughter's shoulder, Lila wished she had insisted that Jared keep the gift at his place altogether. She couldn't see if Marley hit the target or not, but the familiar frown of determination on her face told Lila she wouldn't be coming in for dinner until she did.

The oven timer went off, and Lila used the cuffs of her sweatshirt to pull the tray of chicken breasts off of the rack and onto the stovetop. On her days off from the nursing home, Lila liked to cook elaborate dinners with Marley, utilizing their herb garden to create Thai curries or Italian meatballs from scratch. But coming off of her marathon twelve-hour weekend shifts meant baked chicken, frozen veggies, and a frequent willingness on Lila's part to lift the no-reality-TV ban in order to watch *Survivor Man*, Marley's favorite, with a giant bowl of popcorn between them. Lila fixed both of their plates and set them down on the coffee table before calling Marley inside.

Marley's entrances were always miniature stampedes these days, as she was insistent on wearing her hiking boots at all times. She bounded around the corner waving the paper target above her head. “Look Mom!” she said triumphantly. “Look how good I did!”

Lila took the target in her hands and ran her fingers over the pea-sized holes. Most were scattered around the outer perimeter, but two were dead center where the heart and lungs would

be. Kill shots. “Straight shooting, Annie Oakley,” she said, handing the target back to Marley. “Now put that in your room and come eat.”

“I’m gonna hang it on the fridge,” Marley informed her.

Lila didn’t like that idea, but she let it go. She reminded herself that phases can change with the wind at this age, and that by this time next week Marley could just as likely want to hang Japanese origami or homemade comic books on the fridge as shooting targets. She took her usual seat on the living room floor by the coffee table and started cutting her chicken. Marley sat across from her on the sofa, sucking on a blue Freez-E-Pop. “Whoa,” Lila said, “what gives? No dessert before dinner. You know that.”

“Dad lets me do it at his house,” she stated, shrugging her shoulders. “It’s not a big deal, Mom.”

Lila reeled for a second at this fresh display of preteen sass as Marley avoided her gaze, waiting to see if she would get away with it. When Marley was younger, after Lila realized that Jared got a special thrill from disregarding her parenting wishes, she’d had numerous discussions with Marley about the different rules at Daddy’s House and Mommy’s House. It hadn’t been an issue for a long time, so what gives? Lila wondered. Immediately the image of the pink air rifle flashed across her brain, and the instinctive distrust and anger that she felt when she first saw it ballooned inside her. “I think,” she replied calmly and—she hoped—ominously, “that you want to re-think that answer.”

Marley met her eyes, brows furrowed. The stand-off.

“Particularly,” Lila continued, “if you want to keep playing with that new toy of yours.”

That was it, the key of compliance. Marley relented, peeling herself off the sofa in her defeat. “Okay, okay, I’ll put it back.” She disappeared into the kitchen and came back exorcised,

a sweet little Mommy's girl once again. "I'm getting really good at target practice, aren't I?" she asked.

"You certainly are," Lila agreed.

"I bet I could hit a squirrel or a rabbit, don't you think?" Marley pushed her vegetables around on her plate. "Dad said I can hunt with that rifle."

Dad said, Dad said. Was there anything more infuriating than that phrase? "You have to use pellets to hunt," Lila corrected. "The BB's you have would only hurt the animals, and that's not right to do."

"Well, can I get some pellets then?"

Lila thought about her first experience hunting small game with her grandfather as a child. She recalled the shock of an animal's death face, the metallic stench of the guts. Marley had never seen anything that visceral before, and Lila didn't think she was ready. "Maybe in a year or two," she said. "Let's stick with target practice for now."

"A year?" Marley exclaimed. "That's forever! And Dad said he's going to take me camping next month on Uncle Josh's land!"

"Oh really?" That was news to Lila. "You're lucky to even be allowed to play with that gun in the first place. Do you realize that very few kids your age are allowed to shoot real guns, especially unsupervised?"

Lila could tell that Marley knew she had lost whatever footing she imagined she had in the argument, that it was on a downward spiral into Lecture Land. "Yeah," she admitted.

"And do you realize that the amount of adult privileges you're going to get is directly related to the amount of maturity you can show me you have?"

Marley lowered her chin. "Yes."



“Okay then,” Lila concluded, wrestling with that strange parental mix of triumph and guilt that comes with winning the argument but crushing your kid's spirit. She tried to change gears. “So what did you and Dad do this weekend?”

“I don't know,” she answered, defeated. “Played video games, ordered pizza, visited Katie at work.” Katie was Jamie's twenty-three-old girlfriend who worked part-time at a gelato shop to supplement her burlesque dancing income. She had synthetic dreadlocks and called Marley “Mi-Mi.” Lila found her too pathetic to hate. “Oh yeah,” Marley added, “and on Saturday we had a party with some of Dad's friends. They played music in the den and let me play drums, and then we all stayed up late and watched movies.”

Lila's ears perked up at that. “Dad was hanging out with his musician friends?” she verified.

“Yeah,” Marley said, mouth full of baked chicken. “He said they used to be in a band together. I didn't know Dad was in a band. Why didn't he ever tell me?”

Lila could think of about a hundred grotesque and heroin-addled reasons why Jared never told Marley about his punk rock days, but all she said was, “That was a really hard time in Dad's life, kiddo.” With people, Lila thought, he had promised to stay away from. And more importantly, never to bring around Marley.

“Well I think it's cool,” Marley insisted. “I'm gonna have him put some of his songs on my iPod. I'm done, can I go back outside to practice now?”

Lila stared at Marley's clean plate, wishing she had a reason to say no. “Just another half hour,” she said. “It'll be getting dark soon.”

Marley leapt from the sofa and took a fresh paper target out of the box that the rifle came in, which still sat overflowing with cardboard packaging by the back door. After she disappeared

into the field, Lila loaded the dishwasher and started a kettle of tea boiling before walking back over to observe the box. She pulled out the stack of paper targets. There were at least twenty, all the same anonymous human figure with black outlines radiating from the chest like shock waves. Before she could change her mind, Lila crumpled the targets into a big paper wad in her hands and dropped it back into the box. Then she dragged the whole thing out to the recycling bin on the curb. When Marley asked about the targets the next day, Lila told her she hadn't noticed them.

There were times when Lila wanted to use again, too. She had been floating around in a functional cloud of recreational drug use for years when she met Jared at a music festival in Austin. She was living out of her van at the time, traveling from labor gig to labor gig and making really bad mixed media art that she tried to sell at craft fairs. Lila always hooked up with guys whose habits were worse than hers, but Jamie outshone them all with his three-day benders and violent, terrifying come-downs if the supply ever ran dry. Watching him claw his own face in a convulsive fit was the first time Lila ever seriously thought about kicking smack entirely. When she saw those two pink lines in a public restroom stall, the final mechanism clicked into place, and she flushed her stash down the very same toilet. Still, there were moments when she closed her eyes and remembered a warmth that flooded her until it seemed to seep from her fingertips, demanding nothing except that she surrender to it.

As Lila busied herself folding clothes and avoiding the clock, she felt the strongest urge she'd had in months. It was Sunday night, and Jared was twenty minutes late dropping Marley

off. Neither one of them answered their cell phones, and Lila was trying not to freak out for no reason. She still had no evidence that Jamie had relapsed other than his weight loss and her own nagging suspicion, and she had to acknowledge the possibility that she was projecting onto him her uneasiness about the air rifle, which was now housed in the umbrella basket by the back door after Marley convinced Lila to let her keep it inside. She glanced over at it and felt the same inexplicable sense of dread creeping up her spine. She would give them five more minutes.

Just as Lila finished folding the last of her work scrubs, she heard Marley's key turn the deadbolt. "Jesus," she breathed out loud, both a prayer and a curse. She tried to play it cool, though, and waited until she heard footsteps crossing the foyer before looking up from her work. There was Marley, safe and sound and looking like a deflated balloon with not Jared but Katie trailing behind her. "Hey, Annie Oakley," Lila said, which had quickly become Marley's favorite nickname.

Marley muttered "Hey" then plopped onto the sofa.

Katie handed Marley's overnight bag to Lila. "I washed all her clothes before she packed them," she announced cheerfully, as if her bringing Marley home was a normal occurrence. Before that night, Lila had only ever met her twice, when she came with Jared to Marley's birthday party and at a soccer tournament.

"Thanks," Lila said, taking the bag. "But why didn't Jared bring her?"

"Well, I think Mi-Mi wore him right out," she said a little too quickly. "He was just so tired after dinner, and his back's been hurting him a little recently, so he asked if I wouldn't mind running Marley home. And of course, I didn't mind."

She may as well have said that Jared was busy double-checking Marley's homework and writing extra child support checks for as much as Lila believed her. She used to make the same

excuses for him herself. The silence was too much for Katie, whose rehearsed lines were obviously used up, so she just started rambling. “We just had so much fun, didn’t we Mi-Mi? And Jared’s so excited about their little camping trip. He’s just been burning a hole in his wallet buying all kinds of gadgets and supplies for it. Did you know they even have this special camping toilet paper that dissolves or something when you’re done with it? Mi-Mi says that’s cheating, though.”

Marley stood up on the sofa and leaned over the back, revived by the talk of camping. “The Survivor Man doesn’t need that,” she said. “I don’t even want to use the flashlight.”

“We’re going to have to wait and see about that camping trip,” Lila said, but she had already made up her mind.

Marley knew it too, and she snapped back into the tween defiance that Lila feared had become a permanent color in her mood ring. “If Dad says we’re going, I can go,” she asserted. “It’s his weekend with me and we can do whatever we want.”

“Marlena!” Lila barked. “If you have any brains left in your head you will not say one more word.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Katie cooed, “Just let Mom and Dad have a talk about it—“

“No!” Marley interrupted. “She’s just trying to keep him away from me, and it’s not fair!” Before Lila could even speak to order her daughter to her room, Marley jumped off the sofa and ran to it, slamming the door behind her.

Lila took a deep breath while Katie stood petrified in front of her. “I’m so sorry,” she stammered. “I didn’t mean to cause a fight.”

“Don’t worry,” Lila assured her. “I’m not putting you in the middle of this.”

Katie let out a sigh. “Oh good,” she said, “because I’ve tried so hard to make a good impression with Marley, and I just think you are, like, the coolest mom ever, and I just want everyone to be able to get along and for us to, you know, be a family together.” She followed Lila’s lead to the front door and took her keys from her pocket.

“You’re a sweet girl,” Lila said as she opened the door. “And I don’t mind you being in my daughter’s life. But, Katie,” she waited until the girl made eye contact to continue, “if you try to cover for him again, we’re going to have a problem.”

Lila saw the guilt flash across her face. “What are you talking about?”

“No more visits until he’s sober,” Lila said. “Tell him that.”

Katie started to protest but changed her mind and gave a small nod instead. Lila closed the door.

Lila decided to give Marley some time to cool off before trying to talk to her. Two glasses of red wine’s worth of time, to be exact, during which Lila speculated about the best possible way to explain to her daughter that her father is a drug addict. Up until then, when Marley questioned her about Jared’s absence from her early childhood, Lila had only said that Dad had been sick for a long time, the truest lie she could think of. But that answer wouldn’t fly anymore, and Lila wondered how much Marley had already pieced together on her own. A white-hot anger burned in her when she thought about what she may have witnessed that weekend.

Lila grabbed one of the oatmeal bars she had baked for Marley’s lunches that week before knocking on her door. “I come bearing gifts,” she said. “Can we talk?” There was no answer, so

she opened the door and stepped inside. Marley sat on her bed absorbed in a tangle of bright orange nylon cord. Lila set the oatmeal bar on the nightstand and sat cross-legged on the carpet in front of her. “Whatcha doing?” she tried.

“Making paracord bracelets,” she answered flatly. “Dad and I can wear them on the camping trip and we can untie them if we need to rig an emergency shelter.”

What it was about that particular moment, Lila wasn't sure, but as she watched Marley loop the thick cord around and through her small fingers with the utmost ten-year-old concentration, she gave up hope of being able to forgive Jared for what he had done, of them ever being any kind of functional family. She was through compromising, and having Marley hate her for it would be the last collateral damage she would allow him to cause. “Baby,” she said, “you can't go camping with Dad next weekend. I'm really sorry.”

“It's our time together and we're going,” she insisted, not looking up from her work. “He said he's picking me up after I get home from school and we're driving out to Uncle Josh's land. He's going to teach me to fish and hunt squirrels with my rifle.”

“I know he said those things, but some things are different now and we aren't going to be seeing Dad for a while.” Lila put her hands over Marley's so she would look up at her. “Do you understand?”

Marley jerked her hands away, still tangled in the cord's complex knot. “You think he's on drugs, but he's not,” she said. “You don't even know what you're talking about! You just hate him and you don't want me to see him, but it won't work because he's picking me up Friday and you can't stop us.”

Lila was out of ideas. If she couldn't convince Marley that Jared wasn't taking her camping, that come Friday he might be too loaded to even get out of bed, then she would have to

wait and let her see for herself. “Tell you what,” she said, “let's just wait and see if Dad comes and then we'll talk about it. But try not to build your hopes up, okay?”

Marley didn't answer, only turned a few more degrees away from Lila and continued weaving the paracord.

Marley didn't build her hopes up; she jet-propelled them into the stratosphere. Every day after school she would drop her backpack on the floor and grab the air rifle to practice shooting empty Coke cans that she wedged between the fence posts at the far end of the field. She wore her paracord bracelet night and day and slept in her sleeping bag that she rolled out on her bedroom floor. Lila watched, powerless.

When Friday finally came, she felt like she was serving breakfast to a death row inmate, heaping her plate with four strips of bacon and extra frosting on her cinnamon roll. “So I was thinking,” she said as Marley sipped her orange juice, “that maybe we could go see a movie later tonight if the camping trip doesn't work out.” She tried to sound as casual as possible.

“He's coming,” was all Marley said.

When they got home after school, instead of her usual beeline to the backyard, Marley gathered her camping gear into a neat pile near the front door and waited on the sofa, reading a plant identification book that she checked out from the school library. Minutes went by. Hours. Lila started cooking dinner—lasagna, Marley's favorite. At five, Marley finally tried calling Jared on her cell phone. Lila craned her neck around the kitchen counter to try to hear the conversation, but he must not have picked up because after a few minutes Marley took the phone

away from her ear and threw it against the back of the sofa. Lila thought that might be her cue. She picked up the sleeping bag from the foyer and brought it to Marley. “Sweetie, I don't think Dad's coming today,” she said. “Why don't we save this gear for spring break and we'll go camping in the national forest, just you and me.”

“I don't want to go anywhere with you!” Marley shouted. “Just leave me alone!” She shoved the sleeping bag back at Lila and took the rifle from the umbrella stand before disappearing out the back door. Just let her go, Lila told herself. Let her get it all out and then maybe they could make an attempt to salvage the weekend. She put the lasagna in the oven and started on the last of her household chores for the day, hearing every so often the distant pop of a Coke can being shot.

Lila was outside watering the herb garden when she heard Marley's ragged breathing and jerked her head up just in time to see her daughter bounding up the porch steps, her face distorted in pain and fear. “I shot him!” she cried, “I shot him but he's not dead!”

No drug had ever taken effect as quickly as the adrenaline that pumped through Lila's body as she tried to make sense of Marley's words. “Who?” she demanded, grabbing the frantic girl by her shoulders. “Who did you shoot?”

“The squirrel!” she sobbed. “Mom, you have to help him!” Marley clutched at Lila's sleeve and took off towards the pecan tree at the far end of the field, dragging Lila behind her until Lila's dazed stumbling turned into a run. Then, for a few seconds, they were simply running together in a kind of dream, and Lila was aware of the bristle of the tall grass against their legs and the freckles on Marley's forearms that weren't there last summer and the truth, the terrible truth about why she hated the air rifle. She ran with her daughter towards the end of her innocence, towards the first irrevocable decision she had ever made.



The squirrel was a few feet from the tree, screeching its primal shrieks as its useless body flopped from side to side. She must have hit it in the spine, Lila thought, or maybe the stomach.

“Mom, please,” Marley pleaded as she dropped to her knees in front of the creature. “We have to do something. We have to help him.”

Lila squatted beside Marley and put her hands on her shoulders. “Baby, there's nothing we can do now.”

Marley collapsed into her arms and shook her head, sobbing. “I didn't know,” she kept repeating. “I didn't know it would be like that...”

The squirrel continued to screech, and Lila knew she had to end it. Gently, she helped Marley to her feet and walked her about twenty paces back in the direction of the house. Marley's chest heaved with her sobs, and she struggled to catch her breath. Lila leaned down and tilted her chin up so that their eyes met. “I need you to listen,” she said, “and do exactly as I say. Stand here and don't move. Close your eyes and cover your ears, and do not uncover them until I tap you, okay?”

“Okay,” she said.

Lila waited until she obeyed before walking back. The squirrel had stopped flopping around but was still twitching and wide-eyed with pain. She began looking around for a large enough rock, but then she noticed the air rifle in the grass a few feet away where Marley must have dropped it. She picked up the gun and ran her fingers over the hot pink finish for a moment before raising it to her shoulder and centering the squirrel's head in the cross-hairs. She fired, and the screeching ceased.

Lila returned to where Marley still stood with her fingers shoved in her ears and tapped her on the shoulder. “You can look now.”

Marley opened her eyes hesitantly. "Did you kill him?" she asked.

"Yes," Lila answered. "I stopped him from suffering, because that's what you try to do if you're going to hunt."

Marley's eyes were bleary and red. "I didn't mean to."

Lila wanted more than anything to scoop Marley up right then and carry her back to the house to gorge her on Freez-E-Pops and television until every memory of that day was blotted out. Instead, though, she smoothed a strand of hair behind Marley's ear and told her, "Go and pick it up."

The look of horror returned to Marley's face. "Mom, no! I can't look at him again. Please don't make me do it!"

"You killed that animal, Marley, and now you need to pick it up so I can show you how to skin it and we can eat it for dinner."

"I can't," she insisted, tearing up all over again. "I can't, I can't look at him."

"Yes you can," Lila said. "Pick it up by the tail and don't forget your rifle."

Marley looked over at the spot where the squirrel lay. "I can't," she said, even as she started walking. "I can't, I can't."

Lila watched Marley pick up the rifle first, handling it with a new kind of understanding as she slung it across her back. She hesitated for a few seconds, then reached down and picked up the squirrel's mangled carcass by pinching the tail between her thumb and forefinger, as if it might resurrect at any second and bite her. She walked past Lila and on towards the house without stopping.

Although Lila followed just a few steps behind, she felt the distance between them like a chasm widening, and she knew in that moment that Marley was no longer hers. Starting today,

she would begin building a room inside herself where Lila could never go, made from the bricks of every impossible decision, every problem in life for which no easy solution exists. From now on, Lila realized as Marley adjusted the rifle across her back, she would deal in consequence.

Dear Devonne,

I know I told you when I left New Orleans that I would write, and I'm really sorry that it's taken me this long to do it. The truth is that life has been pretty crazy for me since then, and once a few weeks went by I felt so guilty that I just kept putting it off more and more, and that made more time go by and made me feel even guiltier, and around I went in a giant circle. Isn't it funny how people do that? Why do we do that, Devonne? I wish I had you around to talk to. You never mind when I get all pensive and philosophical.

How have you been? Have you been riding that cruiser that I left for you? I dropped it off to Mr. Calvin at the cafe on my way out of town. I hope you did end up getting it and that you like it. The brakes are a little worn but I greased the chain right before I left so it should be pretty reliable for a while. I figured you could use it when you work nights so you can get home faster and then you won't have to walk alone in the dark. Sometimes I miss that little house where I was staying. There was such a great art scene in New Orleans and it was cool to learn how to use the welder and make bikes. It made me feel strong, like Rosie the Riveter from those WW II posters. Of course, Z was great at grinding that feeling into the pavement. What an asshole. I should have known when you didn't like him that he was no good, Dev. You were like my canary in the mineshaft of toxic men.

You know, now that I'm getting around to it I guess I was also putting off writing to you because there's something I needed to tell you, but I couldn't figure out how. I'm still not sure if it's going to come out right but I think I'm ready to try. You know how we used to talk about my dreams and how I didn't trust myself to take care of anything? Well I feel like maybe you were supposed to be my chance to learn how to do that. When you got hurt, I could have helped you like you helped me. I could have come stayed with you and made sure you were still going to work, or at the very least cooked some meals to put in the freezer and checked on you every day. And the thing is, I knew I should do that. Every day I thought about you and there was this voice in my head that told me I should be helping you, but I was too scared and too wrapped up in my own stupid drama (that whole cycle of self-destruction thing again). And for that, Devonne, I'm really sorry. Both for you and for me.

You see, recently I've been taking care of someone I love who's very sick, and most days I feel like I do a pretty shitty job of it. I get so terrified of what's happening to her and all the pain she's in that sometimes I can't even be in the same room with her without crying. So then she ends up being the one who has to turn around and comfort me and that's

just awful. I could use some Rosie the Riveter right about now. And I think that maybe God or the universe or whatever's out there put you in my life to try to prepare me for this, so that I could learn to give even when it's hard and it freaks me out. And I just made a mess of it all, and I left you to fend for yourself and now I have to spend ten minutes every morning psyching myself up to get out of bed and start making her cocktail of medications instead of bolting right out the door.

One night I almost did leave. I got so close, but I didn't. And I think it's because I just couldn't stand to let someone else down the way that I did to you. It's crazy, you know, because no one in my life even knows who you are, but you swayed probably the most important decision I ever made. So thank you for that, and I hope you understand what I meant by all this. I think about you a lot more than you would guess, and always fondly

your friend,

*Lila*

## Let 'Em Know Who We Are

Sketch leaves the chapel during the last verse of “Amazing Grace” when all the women start boo-hooing and the pallbearers get into position. He stops for a minute on the steps of the funeral home to roll a cigarette and then starts walking towards the Home Depot on Santa Fe. When he gets there, Ket and Lucky are already scoping out the paint aisle.

“Yo, Sketch,” Lucky says, “check out this blue, man. This is sick. What do they call this shit?” He turns the can over in his hand. “Cerulean.”

Ket nods. “I’mma use that for the fill-in on my next round of throw-ups. Going for a personal best at the freight yard—fifteen cars in five minutes.” He takes a step back and looks Sketch up and down. “What’s with your clothes, playboy? You got a board meeting or something?”

Sketch pulls at the sleeves of the button-down shirt he bought from Goodwill that morning. It was at least a size too big and wrinkled, but it was the only all-black one he could find.

“Hey, Captain Asshole.” Lucky punches Ket in the arm. “He just came from a funeral.”

“Oh shit, man, I forgot,” Ket says. “That dude you used to run with when you first got here, right?”

“Yeah,” Sketch answers. He starts picking out paint cans and dropping them in the cart.

“How’d he die?”

“A fire.”

“Damn, dude.”

Sketch holds up a can. “What do you think about orange? You like orange for a drop shadow?”

Lucky nods. “Yeah man, that's tight.”

Sketch pulls three more from the shelf and two of the flat blacks that he likes to use for outlining. “Okay, I think that does it.” He divides the cans between the three of them and counts up the total. “That's about seven bucks apiece. Everybody got a dollar can?”

Lucky and Ket hold up the cheap generic can that they'll use to rack the rest once they get to the self check-out. On days when they only need a few cans they usually send Ket in by himself because he's white and he doesn't get bothered as much. Sometimes he can even sneak out through the garden center with three or four cans in his hoodie, no purchase necessary. But with a haul like this they were going to have to divide and conquer.

“Let's do it,” Ket says. “I wanna go bomb some shit.”

The three of them split up as they walk towards the front and station themselves in three different check-out lines. Sketch likes racking paint. It was like covert ops or some shit, and it gave him a rush that was better than weed, almost better than sex. When it's his turn at the machine, he runs the dollar can over the scanner, but instead of bagging it he drops in one of the orange cans of Rust-O. Once the machine recognizes it as bagged, he does the same thing with the other four cans, bringing the total to \$6.37 instead of the almost thirty bucks it should be. The trick was to try to time it so that you're doing your thing while the employee stationed at the door is busy helping some old man try to figure out how to swipe his debit card. Sketch feeds a ten dollar bill into the machine, grabs the change, and heads for the door, cans rattling in the bag against his leg. He doesn't stop once he gets outside. He keeps walking until he reaches the

corner of the block where they had all agreed to meet. Lucky's only a little ways behind him, and a few minutes later Ket walks up.

“We good?” Sketch asks.

Ket starts loading paint cans into his backpack. “You know it, baby.”

“Where you wanna hit up tonight?” Lucky asks. “The freight yard?”

“Nah man.” Sketch shakes his head. “I got someplace new in mind.”

They have a couple hours to kill before it gets dark enough to write, so they head over to the drop-in center to shoot some pool and pick at the leftovers from the free lunch that's served every day. Sketch notices a couple other kids who were at the funeral too, including one girl he doesn't recognize from around town using one of the computer stations. She's real short but looks older, like college-age. During the service she had gotten up and talked a little after the pastor.

Sketch pulls up a chair next to her. “So you were with Rusty, right?” he asks. “When he died?”

The girl looks at him for a second, then back at the screen. “Yeah.”

“That's fucked up.” Sketch waits to see if she'll say something else. She doesn't. “I knew him before he started traveling, when I had just hit the streets when I was eleven. I guess you knew him after?”

“A little of both,” she answers. Then she quits typing and faces Sketch. “Listen, it's been a long day for me, okay? I'm not really up for talking.” When she turns, Sketch sees a bright red burn scar on her neck.

“Yeah, I get that,” he presses. “I won't keep bothering you. I just wanted to ask...see, he used to talk about how he wanted to go to New York one day and check out Times Square and



Central Park and all that. I just wanted to see if maybe you knew if he ever made it up to New York.”

The girl frowns, but her eyes soften a little. “I don't know,” she tells him. “He never said.”

“It's cool,” Sketch says. “Sorry to bother you.”

He looks around the room for Lucky and Ket and spots them on the couch playing Xbox with some kids from the skate park. He walks over and nudges Lucky. “C'mon, man, let's hit the pavement.”

“I just want to beat this level,” Lucky says, eyes still on the game. “Why you in such a rush, anyway?”

“I got a heaven spot scoped out,” Sketch says. “But I'mma need you and Ket's help.” He snatches the controller out of Lucky's hand and tosses it to the kid on the next sofa.

“Hey!” Lucky starts, but when he sees Sketch's face he gets with the program. “Alright, man, you got it. Yo, Ket, we're peacing out!”

They walk from the drop-in center to Broadway and catch the bus. After a couple stops, Ket starts to get antsy. “Man, why don't we walk? We could be tagging all kind of shit on the way. How far is this spot anyway?”

“Chill out, tweaker,” Lucky shoots back. “Sketch got something sick in mind. Don't you bro?”

“The sickest,” Sketch agrees. They're getting close, so he pulls his hoodie out from his backpack and puts it on over the Goodwill shirt. Ket doesn't argue, but he pouts by taking out his pocketknife and carving his tag into the plastic seat.

Sketch pulls the cord to get off at West Mississippi. When the bus drives away, they survey the area. “Okay,” Ket says, “where's the great spot?”

“Right here,” Sketch answers, pointing to the abandoned factory building that takes up most of the block. The only light comes from the highway, and it gives the place a creepy yellow look.

“What, the old rubber factory?” Lucky asks, surprised. “That ain't exactly fresh, dude. Writers have been all over this shit. All the good spots are taken, unless you talking about going over somebody, but I'm not really about starting beef right now.”

“I'm always about going over people,” Ket says. “Right on, Sketch, let's bomb it. Throw-ups all over their shit. Let 'em know who we are.” He ducks through a broken spot in the chain link and starts shaking up a can of black. He writes his tag over somebody's big marshmallow letters on a garage door. It's got a bunch of loops and arrows without a whole lot of style, just like Ket.

Sketch and Lucky follow through the fence. “I'm not talking about the building,” Sketch says. He points straight up to the big metal water tower standing several hundred feet above the roof of the factory where it's mounted. “I'm talking about that.”

“That?” Lucky repeats. “That's your heaven spot? I don't even know how to get up there. I mean, we don't have flashlights or nothing.”

“We can get to it from the outside,” Sketch says. He turns the corner of the building and starts walking down a side alley. “There's a fire escape this way.”

Ket runs to catch up, clapping Sketch on the back when he reaches him. “Shit yes, my man!” he says. “We are getting up tonight!”

Sketch turns on him. “Not we,” he corrects. “Me. You can do your thing when I’m done if you want, but I go up first, alright? And I go up alone.”

Ket looks hurt. “Sure, whatever. You don’t have to be a dick about it.”

When they find the fire escape, Sketch shakes the railings to try to see how stable they are. They creak and give a little, but the thing seems mostly solid. He starts climbing, with Ket following behind and Lucky bringing up the rear. This part of the building is five stories high, and about halfway up the wind starts blowing down the alley something fierce. Sketch pulls his hood over his head and tries to ignore the creaking. “Dude,” Lucky calls from below, “I don’t know about this. This whole building’s about to crumble.”

“Come on, you pussy,” Ket taunts. “It ain’t that bad.”

“Shut up, Ket,” Sketch says as he reaches the last flight. The stairs end on a little platform about ten feet below the roof. A metal ladder runs up the wall the rest of the way, so they toss their backpacks up first and then climb it one at a time so there won’t be too much weight on it.

The rush when Sketch stands on the edge of the roof and looks over is better than racking a whole cart full of paint. The wind whips around him, flapping his hoodie back and forth when he spreads out his arms. He turns his face to it and lets the cold sting his cheeks. It feels good.

“There it is,” Ket calls out over the sound of the wind. They all turn to see the water tower, which is shaped like a cartoon rocket, with a cone at the top of the long cylinder drum that’s mounted to the edge of the roof by four metal legs. Farther to the middle sits a pool-table-sized hole, the rotting rafter beams showing underneath.

“Oh fuck that,” Lucky declares when they get close. “Look, half the bolts are rusted off.”

Sketch tightens the straps on his backpack. “I’m going up.”

Lucky puts his hand on Sketch's shoulder. "Dude, I know you're way messed up about your friend and all, but this is straight up stupid. There ain't even any other graffiti up there, probably cause the last person that tried it fell to their death or something."

"Man, when'd you get to be so paranoid?" Ket asks. "This is epic! Sketch, man, you got this."

"Just watch out for cops, ok?" Sketch rubs his palms on his jeans before taking hold of the U-shaped rungs that jutt out from the tower leg, since that seems to be the only way up. The metal is freezing, but he grips it as hard as he can and climbs.

The wind is brutal now, and after a few rungs Sketch's hands are almost numb. He tries to keep his body as close to the tower as possible, and when he does he can feel vibrations from the highway buzzing through the steel. The thrill from standing on the edge of the roof is gone now, leaving nothing but molten fear churning in his chest when he looks down over his shoulder at Ket and Lucky so far below and the sidewalk even farther. So he stops looking and focuses his eyes straight ahead at the rung in front of him, and then the one after that.

"You got it, man!" Ket calls.

Finally Sketch reaches the top of the leg and is able to pull himself up onto the narrow ledge that wraps around the base of the cylinder. It has a railing around it, but Sketch can see that parts of it are missing or corroded, and he doesn't trust it much. He places both hands against the giant metal drum of the tower and inches his way around until he finds the segment that faces back towards Five Points and the drop-in center. He gives the spot one final test, shifting his weight back and forth to make sure the ledge will hold, and then he pulls his bandana over his nose and gets to work.

He takes out the blue first and lays down the face of the letters, making them as tall as he can reach and wrapping them five feet across in either direction. Then he does the drop shadow with the orange. A street light goes out at the end of the block, and he has to focus even harder to see what he's doing. During his first few weeks on the streets, after he quit going by Travis and started writing "Sketch" on bathroom walls with a Sharpie, he asked Rusty why he thought it felt so good to write graffiti. They were drinking forties down by the Platt River, and Rusty rolled the can back and forth in his hand while he thought over his answer. "I don't know," he finally said. "It's stupid, when you really think about it. But it's kind of like telling the world that I'm here. That I exist. Like yelling your name into the Grand Canyon or something."

When Sketch is done with the first can, he drops it down to Ket, but he misses and the rattle it makes is so loud Sketch is sure someone will hear it, so he sets the next one down by his feet instead. Finally he grabs the black and starts the outline. He takes his time, making it thick and bold enough to be read from miles away. Then he adds part he doesn't want to do—the R.I.P. at the front, solid black.

There wasn't a body in the casket at the funeral. They said there was nothing left of him. But Sketch makes sure there is something left—something the whole damn city will see. Something no one can bury.

## VITA

Nicole Mayeux grew up in Metairie, Louisiana and began attending the University of New Orleans in 2006 to continue her undergraduate degree in English. After graduating in 2008, she was accepted into the Creative Writing Workshop and began pursuing an M.F.A. in Creative Writing with a Fiction concentration. Her story “Tall Bike” received an honorable mention in Escape Into Life’s Annual Fiction Contest and was published there in 2012 (under the title “Down the Street”). Her story “Hold Fast” was included in the anthology Tattoos by Main Street Rag Press in 2012 and also won the Kullman Award for Fiction at the 2012 Southern Writers/Southern Writing Conference.