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Inside the Trampoline

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Inside the Trampoline

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

Eli Gay

B.A. The University of the South, 2011

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Inside the Trampoline

Having swept and mopped the hardwood floors, having dusted all of the furniture, having stocked the fridge with beer and the pantry with chips and cookies, and having arranged ramekins of olives and wedges of cheese on the kitchen island, Jane assessed the state of the joint kitchen and living room. There was a bright home drenched in light from the wall-length windows looking out onto Bay St. Louis. The windows had been an ultimatum settled upon by Jane's husband, Rob, prior to the building of their vacation home. Rob had insisted on four bedrooms, a master, two for the girls, and one for guests. The white walls, beige accents, and marble kitchen countertop seemed to sparkle as Jane played her usual game: *What Would it Look Like If...*

What would it look like if Jane didn't constantly clean this place? If the sand, carried in from the edge of the bay, was allowed to settle on the floors, to get pushed around by their feet, to pile up around the legs of the furniture? Would Jack or Samantha or Gracie deign to clean, or would they resettle themselves into their new indoor beach? They'd sleep under the covers with sand between their toes.

What would it look like if the couch was, instead, an armchair and ottoman? Or if they exchanged the white shag rug with an oriental? If they installed stained glass windows, like in church?

What would it look like if Jane, carrying a bucket of water to fill the back of their dysfunctional toilet, tripped and spilled its contents onto Rob's beloved sixty-five inch flatscreen TV? Or, if she took Samantha's softball bat and smashed Judge Judy's pixelated face in?

What would it look like if the circus came right through their home and paraded around the kitchen island, cackling clowns on stilts, going around and around?

"Owww!" Gracie yelled, bursting into the house, limping like a wounded hyena. Her older sister, Samantha, was right behind her, and Gus, their Golden Retriever, waddled in, tracking in more sand and a fierce smell of wet dog. Gracie yowled as though she had never experienced as much pain in all of her eight years. Gus ran circles around them, wagging his tail and grinning.

"What's wrong?" Jane said.

"She got a splinter on the pier," Samantha said.

The color of Gracie's skin matched her neon pink one-piece as she tried and failed to talk through sobs. She collapsed onto the couch, and Jane grabbed some tweezers from the all-purpose drawer next to the silverware.

"It's a long way from your heart, Gracie," Jane said.

Jane squeezed the skin around the splinter with her thumb and forefinger so that it poked out. Gracie let loose a sudden, sustained squeal. Careful with the tweezers, Jane took hold of the tiny shard and inched it straight out so it did not break off inside of her. Jane held it out and showed it to Gracie, who took it. No more tears. No more hysterics. Just wide eyes, mesmerized that something so small could cause so much pain.

Samantha wore a plain yellow bikini - it was the first summer of Samantha's life that her bikini top had anything to hold in - and Jane noticed that her skin was already starting to turn pink from the sun.

"You should put on a shirt," Jane said.

Samantha looked at her suspiciously. "Why? It's hot out."

This was new, this combativeness. Samantha had grown wary of Jane, which made Jane all the more protective of her. Matthew Bond was also in the 8th grade, and Samantha clearly realized that a filled-out bikini was a game changer. He would soon be with her, around her, and Jane understood that Samantha was thinking about just that.

"For the sun, Samantha," Jane said. "You're starting to burn."

Then Gracie, having discarded the splinter, bounced up from the couch, popped her hip out to the side and said, "We're *laying out*, Mom. You're *supposed* to get burned."

"Not burned," Samantha corrected. "Tan,"

"In any case," Jane said, squirting some SPF 40 into the palm of her hand, "You both need to come over here and put on more sun block."

The girls came over and she rubbed the lotion into their backs and shoulders. She lowered her eyebrows, remembering when her skin used to feel as silky as theirs, thinking she didn't appreciate it enough when she had it.

Jane had what Rob liked to call 'active' eyebrows. They would drop whenever Jane thought, whenever Jane considered, whenever Jane critically observed, and she would stand there like that until she had worked out how to organize the dinner plates, or what time to marinate the turkey. "Uh oh," Rob would say whenever he caught her in one of these moments, "here comes the forever furrowed brow. Watch out, they might get stuck down there." Although

it had been an instinctual facial gesture for so many years of her life, the attention Rob gave it made Jane hyper-aware every time one or both of those well-manicured, copper-brown patches of hair even so much as involuntarily twitched.

Despite her game, she knew exactly what her world would look like in only a few short hours from now. The floor would be covered in a thin layer of sand, and the wall of windows would be smudged with handprints and dried bay water. The couch would be covered in wet spots from the children's bathing suits. Rob would be huddled somewhere with his childhood friends, Jack and Christine Bond, drinking gin, drunk, rattling off an endless supply of inside jokes.

Rob, Jack, and Christine grew up on the same block in Mobile, Alabama. They went to the same pre-school, the same middle school, the same high school. Jane was from New Orleans. The three kids played together on the playground, got drunk for the first time together, and applied to colleges together. While Jack and Christine went off to Mississippi State, Rob landed a scholarship at UVA where he and Jane met and kindled a partnership rooted in love and sensibility. Rob and Jack had always been competitive, and even though Rob had become a trial lawyer and Jack, a carpenter, Jane harbored a secret suspicion that Rob resented Jack for ending up with Christine.

Jane heard tires roll in on the gravel driveway out front. She went onto the back porch to call Rob, who had just finished blowing up the inflatable trampoline with an electric air pump. He tied it to the end of the pier, and let the massive contraption float off into the bay. It looked like a giant inner tube with a tarp on top, suspended by large metal springs. The height and circumference of the tube created a compartment underneath the trampoline and above the water, with about five feet of space from the surface of the water to the top. Jane liked to swim

underneath. She found a kind of privacy there in the artificial orange light created by the sun's filtered rays. With the echoes of the waves bouncing off the water and plastic, it was like putting on earmuffs and hiding from the rest of the world.

"They're here, Rob!" Jane called.

Rob walked to the house. Jane could already detect a change in his mood, the way he finished each stride on his tiptoes, bouncing as if the pier itself had springs. It looked like what he really wanted to do was to run wildly, like a child, toward the house with flailing arms and feet thudding hard and quick against the wood. For the Bonds, the only evidence of his daily routine in Bay St. Louis, which consisted of lazing in front of the television and drinking beer and avoiding all conversation, would be his ever-expanding gut. The Bonds would break a silence which made him appear to be a willing captive of his own life.

Samantha, wearing a shirt now, stood by Jane at the top of the staircase. They watched Rob and Gracie walk down to greet the Bonds. Jack Bond rounded the hood of his truck, which hauled several ladders and buckets of paint. Jack's ridiculous height and thinness was always the first thing Jane noticed, and when Rob gave him a bear hug, it looked like a squat potato hugging an asparagus. Smiling, Christine waited behind Jack, wearing a casual, patterned pink dress. Matthew looked bemused at the tops of the tall pine trees surrounding them. If Matthew had acquired his father's genes for height, they had not yet manifested themselves. Rob gave Christine a huge kiss on the cheek, one where the lips press so hard they make an indentation into the skin. Jack, meanwhile, wrapped his arms around Gracie, lifted her off the ground and spun her around his waist like a basketball.

"Gracie!" Jack yelled, Gracie giggled. "Your Uncle Jack's back!"

Christine walked up to greet Jane and Samantha.

“So good to see you both,” she said, bending over to hug Samantha and then directing her attention to Jane with a wide, seemingly forced smile. “Thank you, again, so much for having us.”

At first arrival, Christine had this way of playing the role of humble servant to Jane’s gracious host, and it was this artificial ploy, so out of sync with Christine’s character, that bothered Jane so much. Jane could see, in this preface of fake meekness, the way Christine must have perceived her whenever she was a guest at their house. She acted the way she assumed Jane expected a proper guest to present herself, which only made the pleasantries more irksome.

“Hi, Matthew!” Gracie said.

“Gracie! What’s up?” he said. He held up his hand, and Gracie jumped to slap it

Then Samantha locked eyes with Matthew, and they silently waved to each other.

“C’mon Matty!” Jack said, patting him on the back. “That’s your classmate up there. Go give her a hug.”

Matthew walked up the stairs, and they wrapped their arms wide around each other, bending over and touching with as little body as they could manage. They disengaged, and everyone was silent for a long second. Jane held in laughter, but worried she might embarrass her daughter.

“Want to go to the water?” Samantha asked.

“Yeah,” Matthew said.

“Wait for me,” Gracie called.

They ran off.

Want a beer?” Rob asked.

“It’s a vacation isn’t it?” Jack said.

Jane watched the children sprint through the open doorway and down the hall. Matthew tripped on the corner of the rug, and Jane jumped, worried he might fall, but he caught himself, and followed the girls outside. The children reached the end of the pier by the time the grown ups made it into the kitchen. Jane pulled the rustled corner of the rug back into place.

The three of them crowded around the snacks Jane had laid out, and Rob cracked three beers, handing one to Jack and another to Christine. Then, he began assaulting the cheddar cheese. They launched into a conversation, how things had been, how their parents were doing, how were the kids in school. The room was abuzz with their words, and Jane had no window to participate. Where Christine, Jack, or Rob stopped talking, another would start immediately. Jane pulled a bottle of Chardonnay from the fridge and worked in a corkscrew.

“Here,” Jack said, reaching his incredibly long arms out to her. “Let me get that for you.”

Rob’s mouth was full of cheese, and his eyes followed the bottle as Jane handed it to Jack. Jack pulled the cork out with a grunt and gave the bottle back to Jane.

“There you go,” Jack said, with a smile. “A little elbow grease.”

“Thanks,” Jane said. They went back to talking.

Jane poured the wine into a plastic Mardi Gras cup. Jack talked about Mobile, and Rob talked about New Orleans. Christine mentioned a few houses on their old block, three in a row, which were all bought by one couple. One was torn down and turned into a pool area, another was renovated and turned into a yoga studio, and the third, the biggest, was for living (after a renovation).

Jane walked away from them and stood facing the windows. She drank, ignoring the chatter behind her. Through the windows, Jane could see Matthew and Gracie jumping on the

trampoline, but she couldn't spot Samantha. She walked back to the fridge for the Chardonnay, topped off her cup, and walked outside.

As Jane walked down the pier, her feet burning a bit from the sun-drenched wood, she watched Gracie's nimble movements on the trampoline. Matthew stood to the side as she showed off the moves she had learned in gymnastics. Somersaults, flips, and cartwheels. When Jane reached the end of the pier, she found Samantha stretched out on her back, sunbathing on a purple beach towel.

"Don't you want to get in the water?" Jane asked her daughter.

Samantha turned her head and looked at her through squinted eyes.

"I will eventually. When I get a little hotter."

Jane rolled her eyes. After walking from the house to the pier, a grey semi-circle of sweat had begun creeping down the neck of her white blouse. She, too, wore a bikini, but wrapped her waist in a pashmina. Jane lowered herself into the hammock, which was secured by hooks on two of the pier's tall pillars. She watched Samantha lie on her back, eyes closed, chin up, as if she were willing the sun into her pores, which were, in turn, producing steady beads of sweat. Her skin sparkled brighter than the brown water. Matthew looked over at the pier, at Samantha lying there, but turned away when he saw Jane watching him. Was Samantha after more than a tan? Was she trying on her new outfit, her new body, testing its effect?

Matthew, meanwhile was dutifully returning Gus to the shore for the fourth time in thirty minutes. The dog saw the kids playing and desperately wanted to join them, so it would swim out to the trampoline, paddling in tight circles around them. The dog looked up at them, hoping that somehow, by some miraculous interference, he might be raised onto the platform where the people were. Each time, Matthew dropped into the water, and swam the dog back to shore.

“Samantha,” Jane said,

“Mom?” Samantha said, her eyes still closed.

“Go swim. Go jump on the trampoline. Get some exercise for goodness sake.”

Samantha got up, and with a roll of her eyes and not a word, jumped off the pier and into the water. Matthew’s eyes followed the movement of her body. She was a good swimmer. Her powerful legs moved her body through the water, seemingly without effort. She reached the trampoline, grabbed hold of the ladder, and pulled her body out of the water and up onto the polyester platform.

The three of them jumped together awkwardly, landing at different times, the tension in the trampoline loosening and tightening, buckling their knees. Their bodies bounced here and there, at the will of the trampoline, as they tried their best to avoid colliding with each other.

Samantha jumped off into the water, feet first. Matthew followed, splashing Gracie with a cannonball. Gracie stayed on the trampoline and did somersaults. Samantha and Matthew went under the water and their heads did not come back up, but Jane could hear splashing in the space under the trampoline.

What would it look like if Samantha and Matthew decided to kiss? Would Matthew approach her in that private, echoing atrium of water and plastic, and wrap his arm around the small of her back? Would Samantha’s powerful swimmer’s legs keep them level in the water as they passionately kissed? Or was the water shallow enough to where they might both be able to stand? It had been so long since Jane swam in the bay. Would he confidently press his lips against hers? Or would he be timid? If he were timid, would Samantha think it cute? Or pathetic? What if Gracie looked down and saw them, through the woven polyester, locked in a wet embrace?

“Samantha,” Jane called after a minute or so. “Where are you?”

Samantha’s head popped out of the water next to the trampoline.

“Right here, Mom,” Samantha said, flatly.

She climbed onto the trampoline and began jumping. Gus saw this and bounded into the water.

“Matt,” Samantha said.

Jane heard Matthew’s voice from inside the trampoline. “Yeah?” he said.

“Gus is coming. Would you mind grabbing him before he gets to us?”

Matthew came out from underneath the trampoline, intercepted Gus, and dragged him back to the shore. Jane watched Matthew instruct the dog.

“Sit,” he said with his arm out, index finger pointed at an angle.

Gus sat.

“Stay,” he said. He walked calmly back into the water and swam freestyle back to the trampoline. Gus lay in the sand and watched him go.

Later that day, Rob rode the Jet Ski around the bay, pulling the kids behind him on an inner tube. Jane grabbed some beach chairs, and set them up at the end of the pier. Jane, Christine, and Jack lazed in the chairs with cold, sweaty drinks, watching the kids ride around with Rob. The sun was low and mostly dulled by passing clouds. Jane figured that a picture taken of the three of them, sitting in their bathing suits, wearing sunglasses, drinks in hand, with the wooden backdrop of the pier, would make for a nice advertisement for a resort looking to nail down the stressed-out, early forties demographic.

“Christine? Has Matthew had a girlfriend, yet?” Jane asked.

“Oh, no,” Christine said. “Not that we know of. Do we, Jackie?”

“Friends that are girls, sure. A few middle school romances, I’d assume.” Jack sipped on his Corona. “I doubt he’s gone much further than that.”

“It is what I’m asking,” Jane said. She paused for a moment. “It came to me today that I have no idea where Samantha is. Sexually. An entire part of her life about which I have no idea. And it hadn’t even occurred to me to wonder. Or ask.”

“Surely, you’d know,” Christine said. “If she was, I mean. She’s so forthright. And with you being so observant.”

“She is,” Jane said. “I guess I’ve taken it for granted.”

“Well, I’ll tell you one thing,” Jack said. “Rob’s gonna have his hands full with that girl, the woman she’s turning into.”

Jane looked over at Jack. His shirt was wrapped around his waist, and the mass of moss-colored hair covering his chest was sweaty and clumped.

“And to think,” Jane said, standing, “it only took a pair of tits to get me to notice. I’m going to get a refill. Anyone need anything?”

“Tits are powerful things,” Jack said. He giggled. “I’d much appreciate another beer. And another for Christine, here.”

Jane smiled back at them, but their heads were turned out onto the bay, watching the Jet Ski pull their children in circles.

That night, Rob and Jack grilled burgers, and Christine helped Jane with a salad by chopping tomatoes. They had run out of beer and wine, and so switched over to hard liquor. The kids ate their burgers on the couch with windswept hair in their wet towels. The grownups ate at the

circular kitchen table, gathered around a bottle of gin, a bottle of tonic, a heaping bowl of limes, and an ice bucket.

Everyone ate and drank in silence, a room full of tired bodies.

“Can we watch a movie now?” Gracie said, when she finished her dinner.

“What would you like to watch?” Jane said, getting up and retrieving empty plates from the their laps.

“Gulliver! Gulliver!” she said.

Gulliver’s Travels was Gracie’s favorite movie. She loved the Lilliputians.

Jane set the kids up in the guest room, where Christine and Jack had their things, and which had a smaller, but nevertheless serviceable flat-screen TV. The children lay on the floor in a row, Gracie, Matthew, Samantha. Wishing Gracie had lain in the middle, Jane turned off the lights.

The grownups passed an hour playing spades and drinking more gin. Jane’s attention, and her imagination, stayed in the guest room with the children in the dark. This annoyed Rob, who was extra competitive around Jack, and after they lost their fourth trick in a row, he threw a tantrum.

“Janie, where are you?” he whined. “Pay attention.”

Jane got up from the table, leaving her gin, the game, and the conversation behind her.

“Well, I guess we’re done here,” Rob said.

She peeked into the room where the children were watching the movie. The three of them still lay on the floor under the same gray, wool blanket.

Jane wondered how close their arms were to touching. They had to be fairly close to all fit under that blanket. Children are restless. They can’t stay still. What if Matthew’s foot

accidentally brushed up against Samantha's. Would Samantha think it was an accident? Or would she brush it back, intimately settling into a kind of mutual ankle embrace? Would this contact be the first real moment of intimacy they had experienced? Would it be a secret acknowledgment that they like each other enough to tell it with their toes in the dark, under the covers? This covert gesture, such a long way from their hearts, left Jane feeling excited, unbearably nervous, and incomprehensibly silly.

In the kitchen, Christine was sitting in Rob's lap, leaning sideways, with her hands clasped around his neck. Jane made for one of the empty chairs around the table, but Jack reached out and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her in.

"Come here, Janie," he said. "Come sit in Uncle Jack's lap."

Jane fell onto his right leg. He took her by the waist, lifted, and sat her down squarely in his lap with her legs out to the side. They resumed their conversation about the prohibitive cost of college tuition.

"But it's all about making the right investment," Rob instructed. "You make the right investment at the right time, and at a good rate, you can essentially forget it's there and BAM! there's your college tuition right there. It doesn't even sound possible, but let me tell you, Jack, it is."

Looking at the smudged windows, the sand on the floor, the wet, butt-shaped marks on the couch cushions, Jack's bony legs were digging into Jane's quads, so she shifted herself to a more comfortable position. She felt movement beneath her thigh. She shifted again, and Jack became harder still. She wanted to get up, but Jack still had her firmly by the waist, and she worried about exposing what she currently concealed. She observed Rob and Christine. Rob's

eyes were glazed over even as he explained the difference between a hedge fund and a mutual fund. Jane could have sworn that she saw Christine's hips gyrate a time or two.

Gracie came running into the room, crying. Jane and Christine shot up and both men adjusted themselves.

"What's the matter, Gracie?" Jane said, taking her with one arm.

"I don't want to go to bed," Gracie said.

The movie had ended. Matthew and Samantha emerged from the hallway and stood smiling at Gracie's tantrum, like a couple of parents, amused and jaded.

"I'll give you fifteen minutes. Would you like me to read something?"

"Harry?" Gracie said with a smile.

"Sure," Jane said. "First brush your teeth. That goes for you, too, Samantha."

"You too, Matthew," Christine chimed in.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione were putting the three headed dog to sleep, Gracie's favorite part, when Samantha settled into the twin bed across the room. Jane could sense that, although Samantha was curled up and facing the wall, she was listening to her reading. When Gracie quickly fell asleep, Jane continued to read.

But after a few minutes, Samantha turned and said, "She's asleep."

Jane closed the book, kissed them both on the forehead and turned out the lights.

Jane walked into an empty kitchen. Had they said they were going to bed? Did they go for a walk? She checked the bedrooms, but they were empty as well. Tired and drunk, standing in the middle of her empty kitchen, Jane decided she didn't care anymore, about getting along with the Bonds, about Samantha's tits, about Rob, about the goddamned couch. She turned out

the lights in the kitchen and was about to go to bed when some movement caught her attention, out on the bay. She could make them out in the dark, three fully-grown bodies, bouncing silhouettes on the trampoline in the faint glow of a crescent moon.

Jane walked outside, and instead of walking down the pier, she went to the water's edge and removed her shoes. She disrobed, taking off one item at a time. She unbuttoned her shirt, and undid her shawl. She untied the top of her bikini and let it fall to the sand. She pulled down her bottom, and stepped quietly into the warm, calm water.

As soon as she was thigh-deep, she dropped to her knees and began a slow, quiet doggie paddle, so that her head stuck out of the water like a periscope. If they saw her there, in the dark, they might think she was a bird or an alligator.

Moving closer, she could hear laughter, the creaking of the springs as they stretched and groaned under their weight. Then one of the guys sat down, and so did Christine, and by the time Jane quietly swam underneath the trampoline, they were lying on their backs in a row - Rob, Christine, Jack - looking up at the glowing, cauliflower clouds.

From below, the three bodies, skin flattened against the mat, looked serene, but Jane's world was loud and amplified. What few waves that came, lapped against the plastic and any time one of them shifted their weight, the springs ground grotesquely. When they spoke, it was as if they were taking turns holding a megaphone.

"So, work's been steady, then?" Rob asked.

"Yeah," Jack said. "It's been good. Mostly, I'm building cabinets and shit. How's it been for you?"

“Oh. Work, you know?” Rob sighed. “It’s just a grind right now. An endless string of paralegals and judges and ungrateful clients and it makes you wanna just lock the door to your office and ball up in the corner until people start going home.”

“Yep,” Jack said.

“Yep,” Christina said.

Yep, Jane thought. What would you look like if you had some balls?

“That energy is gone, you know? Things used to be new and exciting - I know I sound crotchety - but where do you find excitement in the grind? I envy you, you know Jack. Envy the fuck out of you.”

Jack laughed, but didn’t say anything. Jane wondered whether Jack thought he was crazy, talking like that, with his vacation home and his beautiful children and his retirement plan. Or, whether Jack knew exactly what was enviable about his life, when compared to Rob’s.

“You get to work with your hands,” Rob continued. “To build shit. Heck, you get to put in work and hold your finished product in your hands. Put effort here, ‘look, a kitchen cabinet!’ That’s exciting.”

Rob raised his arms up in the air and clasped his fingers together, stretching.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Real exciting. Quit pokin’ fun, you prick.”

“No,” Rob said. “I’m serious, Jack.”

“I’m sure there are plenty of exciting things in your life,” Jack said.

Rob dropped his arms to the mat. His left hand landed next to Christine’s, and Jane watched him curl his pinky around Christine’s pinky. Jack, on the other side of her, couldn’t see this slight gesture.

“There are some things,” Rob said.

Jane wanted to scream. Then, as quickly as Rob's arms had come down, as quickly as his finger had clamped onto hers, Christine pulled her hand away and rolled on top of her husband. She kissed him.

"Let's go to bed, honey," she said. "I'm tired."

"Okay, my love," Jack said. They stood up and walked over to the edge of the trampoline. Their footsteps tossed Rob's limp body around on the mat until they jumped into the water and started swimming in to the house.

"See you in the morning, Rob," Jack called back to him.

Rob lay on his stomach with his face flat against the mat. Jane moved as quietly as she could to the edge of the trampoline and looked up at him. His eyes were open, but he didn't show any sign that he saw Jane there. He didn't look hurt, emotionally or physically. He looked drunk, he looked tired, and he looked like he didn't have a clue what to do next. Jane thought he might lie there until someone forced him to do something else. In a moment or so, he got up and walked off the trampoline. From inside, Jane heard him climb the ladder attached to the pier and walk his slow, heavy walk to the house.

Jane waited for Rob to reach the house and swam in. The light was on in the living room. Doubtful that Rob was sober enough to wonder where she was before he passed out, and sure that Jack and Christine were either asleep or not asleep in the guest room, Jane put on her shirt wrapped her pashmina around her bare waist, and carried her sandy bikini into the house. She walked past the dirty dishes piled in the sink, and, keeping the light on in the kitchen so that it continued light into the hallway. Rob was snoring in the bedroom.

Jane thought she could use a shower, but before she got to the bathroom, she noticed that the door to the girls' room was slightly ajar. She looked through the crack in the door into the

dark room and saw strewn covers and an empty bed. Samantha's bed. No one in the bathroom. Jane walked down the hall and found Matthew's door closed. She heard, putting her ear to the door, a rustling of bed sheets. Had Samantha snuck into Matthew's room? Had they planned this meeting earlier that day as they floated together inside the trampoline? Or had Samantha acted on her own? Rob's snores echoed down the hall. She reached for the doorknob, but stopped herself. Her body was still wet from the bay, and she could see her breasts through her drenched blouse. What would this accomplish? What would happen if she stormed in, red-faced and half naked, and pulled Samantha out of the boy's bed. What would the Bonds think when they heard and came running, and found them there like that?

'Your boy is fondling my daughter,' Jane might say.

'Looks to me, like your daughter's the one doing most of the fondling,' Jack would answer.

In the end, she decided not to take a shower. She was tired. She walked away from the closed door, and wandered down the hall. As she turned out the lights in the kitchen and living room, she wondered if what her daughter was experiencing was romance, or something else entirely. Would she be able to tell the difference? She imagined them just spooning, fully clothed, holding each other. Then, their naked, sweaty bodies clung to each other in the dark, grabbing, and clutching, and thrusting.

Touching. Jane understood touching. Holding, and being held back. Knowing that tomorrow the Bonds would leave, and the holding would stop.

Jane walked in the dark, through the kitchen, down the hallway, and into her bedroom. Rob's snores were rhythmic and constant. She was so used to them, that she had difficulty falling asleep when he went away on business. She undressed and climbed into bed, her hair clumped

together with dried bay water. She let her body go limp, and she could feel the warmth of Rob's back on her right arm. She lay breathing in the dark, and let his snores put her to sleep.

Smoke

I learned of Matt Dawkins' murder-suicide on a Sunday morning, and instead of listening to my radio morning shows with a pot of French press out on our screened-in porch, I left the house to get away from my wife. I went to a coffee shop down the street. I smoked one of my rolled cigarettes on the way, even though I hated the taste of smoke first thing in the morning.

Connie and I had fought the night before about who had better handwriting. Handwriting! And it wasn't a pride thing either. Neither of us wanted to write the dang thing. Her father had given us a loan, a big loan, to help us get out of our debt. She insisted I write the thank you note because my handwriting was more clear.

"I've got big, bubbly letters. My handwriting looks like that of a thirteen-year-old girl," I said.

"But mine is tiny and scribbly," she said. "You know my father has poor vision. He won't be able to read a word of it."

In any case, we ended up screaming at each other. Real nasty things. Things we'd saved up to hurl at each other next time something came up.

We had been married ten years, no kids. The joy just dropped out of the relationship, disappeared, like a booby trap. It got to the point where, instead of being affectionate with each other, or at least amicable, we became adversaries under the same roof. We still said 'I love you,' and kissed, and had sex a 'normal' amount, according to my therapist, but there was this unspoken tension building up inside of us for years.

I read the headline on the back of someone's outstretched newspaper the way I'd imagine Lex Luthor might learn of Superman's return to Earth in the movies: "New Orleans Ex-Pat Millionaire Kills Wife, Self in Manhattan." But this was a real epiphany type moment for me. Coming to Jesus.

I got up and waded through the sounds of early morning work meetings and took a newspaper from the stacks near the door. It was a headline to pique curiosity, but I was also filled with a sense of dread.

He was one of my best friends from high school. Thirty-eight years old, same age as me, and he jumps from his thirty-third floor apartment in Midtown Manhattan, only after beating his wife to death. I remember when he got married. I wasn't invited to the wedding – we lost touch after what happened to our friend Brian our senior year – but I was nevertheless surprised he had found a woman he could love. And I always doubted it in the way back of my mind, where I could leave it alone, and forget it was there.

Matt moved to New York City out of college and started a tech company called Blind Date. It was a dating app that utilized users' online footprints to make love matches, only users wouldn't know anything about the match until they met each other at a mystery location. The app made billions of dollars, and was only derailed when a string of lawsuits came against the company after users reported instances of rape and battery.

There wasn't much more than that in the paper. New Orleans doesn't have a lot of sympathy for ex-pats. I scanned the page a second time to see if he wrote a suicide note or any kind of rationalization. He hadn't.

All of a sudden, I was hit by a memory. It wasn't Matt's death that felt fresh in my mind, but Brian's. There I was, a senior in high school, sitting with my friend Stu at Brian's parents'

house the day after the crash. We were surrounded by other classmates - Brian was popular - and friends of Brian's parents. People just showed up, to help in any way they could. But everyone was quiet and somber and staring at the floor as if Brian's absence was present in the room and it was not to be acknowledged.

Then Matt texted me, asking us to come outside. Still hung-over, Stu and I were happy to escape the silence that seemed sadder than anything, sadder even than the death itself, which hadn't really hit yet.

We found Matt's car parked down the block and waved our hands at him, holding them over our heads, asking him where he'd been and why he wasn't coming in. He motioned for us to get in. Stu and I both sat in the back seats, out of habit, and out of respect.

"Seriously, Robby?" Matt said. "Neither of y'all are gonna sit up here?"

Stu looked at me, and I shook my head. It was then that Brian's absence truly presented itself in the car. The silence resettled. As Matt pulled out, I smelled the stale smoke clinging to the polyester seats. We had worn that smell like a badge of stoner honor over the course of our senior year.

"I feel like a fucking taxi driver," Matt said. He looked at the empty seat. "Will one of y'all just get up here?"

We were silent.

"Whatever," he said, and drove on.

That silence in the house was in the car too. Brian was always our DJ. After a few minutes, Matt turned it on.

*"Eat, drink and be merry
for tomorrow we die*

'cause we're tripping billies"

"You gotta be kidding me," Matt said, turning the radio off again. Dave Matthews. It was Brian's music. "Makes me wanna puke."

"Turn it back on," Stu said, "It's kind of like Brian's talking to us. He'd want us--"

"Shut up, Stu," Matt said. "That's some bullshit right there."

Stu bent his neck and rested his forehead against the window.

I remember how hard it was watching Matt's broad neck and shoulders from the back seat that day. His stocky frame and blocky arms too closely resembled Brian's, and with Brian sitting shotgun, it had been like seeing two sides of a Rorschach test.

Matt and Brian were teammates on the wrestling team, and it was rare to see one without the other. They lifted weights together, molding their bodies into similar squat and bulky shapes ideal for pinning their opponents. They walked around school with the same gait, deliberate and light footed, as if they were tiptoeing.

Matt drove us out to the Bonnabel boat launch and parked at the edge of the lake. It's a glorified parking lot with a small area to get your boat in the water and a decent view of the Lake Pontchartrain horizon. We liked it because it was usually sparsely populated and lacked security.

"Who wants to roll it?" Matt said, passing back rolling papers and a bag of pot, mostly shake. None of us had perfected the skill of rolling a tight, thick joint. That was Brian's specialty.

"Robby, you do it," Matt said. I took the papers and began loading the folded paper with loose pot.

Stu started to say something, but Matt interrupted him.

"Let's just be quiet for a while, okay?" Matt said.

I was fumbling with the paper but glad for the distraction in the imposing silence that felt as surreal as the last twenty-four hours. Matt and Brian won state, we got very drunk, and Brian died. The paper was crinkling in the wrong places.

We came here after school, multiple times a week. Brian and Matt, the athletes, would buy home detoxes to avoid getting caught when they were drug tested.

“It’s just a piss test,” Matt frequently reminded us. “If it was hair, it’d be a different story. That shit stays in your hair.”

Nevertheless, I feared for Matt, whose father could be seen at wrestling meets, screaming, hollering, with veins popping out of his neck. Anytime Matt got pinned, which was not often, his father would drive home before Matt got out of the showers, and this was before Matt could drive. My parents gave him a few trips home, over the years.

We liked to keep the windows up, hot box, because we thought it got us higher and it wouldn’t look like the car is smoking from the outside. When, after a round or so, smoke began to fill the car, Brian would wave his hand around, watching the smoke curl around his fingers, displacing the air, the tendrils of smoke and air riding the current he had made.

“Woah,” he’d say. “Woah, man.” It would always make us laugh.

I rolled up the joint and licked the paper. Serviceable, but bent diagonally at the middle. I passed it up to Matt.

“This might possibly be the shittiest joint of all time,” Matt said.

“You roll one, then,” I said.

Matt looked at the bent joint. “No, we’re going to use your shitty joint, and get high as fuck.”

Through the dirty windshield, the waves on the lake looked dull. The sun was setting to our left, and a few streaks of orange highlighted the horizon.

I took a hit. I liked the feeling of holding the smoke inside my lungs so much that I lamented the need to exhale.

“I can’t believe,” Stu said, breaking the silence. He took the joint from my hand.

“No,” Matt said. “Don’t.”

I leaned my head against the window and closed my eyes.

“You can’t just pretend,” Stu said. “Can’t just pretend it didn’t happen, Matt. There was a whole house full of people at Brian’s to support his family, and you wouldn’t even go in? What’s that about?”

Matt looked ahead out onto the lake. A swarm of sea gulls flew in ordered disorder. A father was showing his son how they could catch bits of bread in mid-air when you tossed them up. The boy clapped his hands in delight each time one of the birds dipped in flight and caught the bread in its beak. And then I was there, a child myself, bouncing in the breeze on my father’s knee, the spray from the lake wetting my face.

“Just give it a fucking minute, would you Stu?” Matt said.

The joint made a few rotations in silence. The immediacy of Brian’s death started to fade as I relaxed into my seat. I could not comprehend the empty front seat.

The previous night, Stu and I watched Matt and Brian lead the wrestling team to the state championship. To celebrate, Brian bought a bottle of Paddy’s Irish whiskey, and drove out to a party at a friends’ house, whose parents were out of town. Brian had starved himself that morning, trying to make weight for the meet, and sucked the bottle down on an empty stomach. Next thing, he was making out with Matt’s ex-girlfriend, Michelle, wobbling about in an

awkward embrace. To everyone's surprise, Matt sat sulking in the corner, watching it happen. Why had Matt not flipped? Why was Matt not clobbering his best friend into a pulp? Instead, he had his head in his hands, and each time he looked up at them, he winced.

The air was thick with smoke, now. Stu lifted his hand and moved it through the air. Matt turned around and watched his hand, apparently deciding in his mind whether this was an acceptable thing for Stu to do in his car. Then he lifted his own hand, moving it up and down, silky curlicues of smoke moving like water around pebbles. I joined them, and we were all moving our hands about like conductors with no orchestra to cut through the silence. We created a current of air in the car that flowed evenly like a whirlpool. We started laughing; a good, shared laugh. We were linked by our laughter and by the smoke, and we understood how we all cared for Brian and were hurting.

"I should have beaten his fucking ass," Matt said.

His words settled in the flowing smoke.

"I should have taken him by his fat little neck and beaten him so badly that he couldn't walk, much less drive."

"You couldn't have known," Stu said.

"What's that matter?" Matt said. "I could have fucked him up. Fucked him up so bad it would have saved the fucker's life."

"It's not your fault, Matt," I said.

"Did I say it was my fault!" Matt said, his voice monstrous and loud. "Did I say I blame myself? No. I don't. I didn't fucking kill him. I didn't drive his car into a fucking cinderblock column and I sure as fuck didn't make those bricks fall and smash through his windshield into his goddamned face. Did I make him run out of the party alone? No, I fucking didn't."

Matt started writhing in his seat and punching the steering wheel. The car was honking, and I was afraid he might break the car.

“Matt!” I shouted. “You’re gonna get us caught, man.”

What I found most strange about the night before was not Matt’s reaction to Brian making out with Michelle, but Brian’s. When he saw Matt sulking in the corner, Brian got angry. Really angry. Threw all kinds of words at him, calling him pussy this and faggot that, and Matt just sat there, drunk, sad drunk, not angry drunk.

“You’re gonna just sit there, then?” Brian asked him. He stood with his arms out like he was waiting for Matt to step inside the ring with him. Brian stepped forward and punched him hard in the arm. Matt did not move. He buried his face into his hands, unable to move, unable to react. Other guys had hooked up with Michelle, even while they were dating, but nothing had ever made Matt breakdown like that.

Then Brian took off. No one saw it coming. And that was it, he made out with Matt’s ex-girlfriend; he was mad because Matt wasn’t mad.

“Why didn’t you?” I said. Matt looked back at me. “Punch him, I mean. You’ve hit guys for kissing Michelle before.”

He took a moment.

“None of those guys were Brian,” he said. “And where the fuck do you get off? Brian meant more to me than either of you two potheads. Just smoke the fucking J.

I saw, looking in the rearview mirror that he was silently crying. Matt was not who I thought he was. He had a tension building in him, too. And it had snapped. But it stayed with him until he killed himself. I knew Matt’s secret, but I kept it hidden, even from myself. I never confronted him about it again, and when we grew apart, I forgot about him, too.

Our fingers started burning on the roach, and we put it out just as the last rays of the day were moving about in the car with us, mingling with the smoke.

My eyes were dry and stinging, and I fixed them onto the empty passenger seat once more, watching the smoke hang, glowing orange in the sun. Streaks of light moved above the seat creating curvy shapes and then he was there, the distinct curvature of his squared-off head and his broad symmetrical shoulders connected by two parallel lines for his neck. The smoke hung in that shape for what felt like minutes, and we were silent for as long as it was there, with us for the last time. He looked out onto Lake Pontchartrain where the sea gulls flew.

Matt started the car and cracked the windows. He pulled out of our spot and drove us away from the Bonnabel boat launch. Little by little, the smoke streamed out of the windows and into the clean air outside until our world was clear and empty and my eyes no longer stung.

The I.T. Guy

“You’re going to see twenty-one hundred, Walter,” she said. “Two thousand to twenty-one hundred. One hundred years. A good, round number of years to live for a good, handsome man.”

“What will I do?” I asked her.

“Be present,” she said. “Just be there, and you can tell me about the world when you come find me.”

I’d be lying if I didn’t say the one thing keeping me from driving off a cliff is knowing that when I find Cynthia sitting on a porch swing up in heaven, drinking a whiskey on ice, I’d catch hell for it. The way she’d look at me. That distinct mixture of disappointment and incredulity. It always made me feel like a foolish child.

Look, I’m not all ‘Woe is me; there’s nothing to live for.’ But the fact is, I’ve got a lot of time on my hands and little to do. Wife’s gone, friends are all dead or moved away, never had any kids. I move about inside my house, room to room, couch to couch, like it’s my primary function, my *raison d’être* to keep the world spinning beneath my aching feet, knees, and hips.

I get some work calls on occasion. I started a business back in the 30’s, The I.T. Guy, just me and a few assistants going house to house, fixing wireless internet connections. Over time, I got older and dumber and less capable, and the technology got younger and smarter and more unfriendly to old farts. But sometimes people still need The I.T. Guy, mostly asking for cheap service, and mostly asking for services I’m not technically certified to provide since I can’t keep

up with the technology, the licensing. Information Technology is a seriously regulated business these days, and it stands to reason.

It's Sunday, and I'm sitting in my desk chair, drinking an ice-cold glass of fresh-squeezed lemonade and streaming a movie on my desktop when the Internet cuts out. So I get up, and I walk across my weathered wood floor, the planks snapping and creaking beneath my feet, which sounds like my back feels. The sound catches the walls in the nearby hallway and I hear the creaks and snaps over there, too.

I shared this house with Cynthia for sixty-seven years and never once heard an echo, but, in the days after she died, there they were. I heard them in those first solitary moments when I returned from the hospital. I had dropped a few cubes of ice into a highball glass and the tinks they made bounced off the wall behind me. I poured myself a glass of lemonade - the last drops of Cynthia's last batch - and the ice ticked and crackled so that I could hear it in the hallway. I put the empty pitcher in the sink, vowing to wash it out later, and when I closed the door of the fridge, it sounded like every wall in my house grunted one after the other. SLAM! Slam! slam.

I get to my wireless router and bend over to look at the blinking lights. They tell me what I already knew, that there was a hiccup in the delivery of the wireless signal. So I unplug the power cord, the lights go out, and I wait a few seconds.

"Patience," my father always said. "You'll never be a doctor without patients."

Then, I plug the sucker back in. The lights are on again, blinking where they should be, solid where they should be, and I strut back to my chair. The world's had to go and make everything so complicated when it used to be as simple as unplugging and plugging back in.

Back at my desk, I get an email.

I.T. Guy,

We need your help. Our portal's busted. My husband Frank tried to fix it and made it worse and now our lights turn out whenever you say his name. That, and the shower won't spray, the vacuum won't suck, the dishwasher won't wash, the garage won't open, the microwave won't cook, and we got children to feed.

We live at 13 East Hannover Dr.

Destination code: 34861011

ASAP,

Lydia Crowley

Red flag number one: her husband tried to fix the portal. This is not only idiotic, but a straight up felony, unless he happens to be a CPT (Certified Portal Technician), in which case he wouldn't need me. The only reason someone would want to get to the portal would be to try to sell it. They didn't break; they just ran out of juice. Red flag number two: East Hannover Dr. was a small, but dangerous street. It was the kind of street that, when people with automatic cars (most cars these days) plugged in the destination code, the car would ask if they were sure.

Cynthia had been all about helping people. She volunteered at all the church picnics and donated all the clothes she had stopped wearing. We never had any room in our freezer because it would be filled with different kinds of casseroles that she wanted on hand in case somebody's husband died or somebody lost his job or just if somebody needed a hot meal.

So maybe that's why I'm gathering my tools and car keys. Maybe I just want to help some people in need. Really though, I'm just curious, a little bored, and if something happens to me, well then I'll be sharing a drink with Cynthia in no time.

I grab my tool kit off the wall, a small computer bag. When I started in this business, I went on jobs carrying two huge tackle boxes full of equipment. Now, you just need a few tools, and a lot of training. My truck, a 2068 Ford F-150, is all rusted over, and I had to swap out its dying, biofuel engine for a diesel one ten years ago.

On the road, the manual lane is empty, as always. I grip the steering wheel and keep the truck moving forward, adjusting a little left, a little right, staying between the lanes. Simple hand-eye coordination. Meanwhile, in the next lane over, folks are moving slow and steady. Men are reading the newspaper, and women are applying makeup. Whole families are sitting in silence, not a steering wheel amongst them.

I don't like looking over into the automatic lane. I'm aware that many of them hate people like me who are still driving manual in 2088. The only people driving manual these days are old people and criminals. With the automatic car, the government could stop you in your tracks whenever it wanted, a lot easier than I thought they could.

I pull up to the house. White, faux wood, with a dirt yard, a chain-link fence, discarded tricycles and deflated dodge balls. The neighborhood doesn't seem so bad, though the sun will be on its way down, and patrol bots, big, black, well-armed drones, move up and down the street, one every hundred yards. I walk up to the house and I knock.

"Who is it?" Lydia says behind the door.

"Walter. The I.T. Guy."

"Open door," Lydia commands.

Nothing happens.

"Open door," Lydia repeats. "See? Ain't nothing working."

Lydia starts tapping on the door, looking for a manual button, I guess.

“Turn the knob,” I say, jiggling it from the outside. “There.”

The door swings open, and a young girl, no older than twenty-two, looks back at him. She’s filthy. Her clothes don’t fit. The sleeves of her stained sweatshirt are ripped in places. Her hair is so frizzy and thrown about that I’m sure she hasn’t showered for days. Of course, I knew that already. I worry she might be addicted to a drug of some sort.

“Jesus,” Lydia says. “You’re like, ninety.”

“Eighty-eight,” I say. Then I turn around and walk back toward the truck.

“Wait!” she calls. “I’m sorry. My mistake. We could really use your help. We’re desperate over here.”

I can see in her eyes that she’s about to cry. No one else is going to help her. I never do well with crying women. If you want me to do something that I don’t want to do, set a crying girl in front of me and I’ll do whatever she wants. Cynthia knew that trick, but she used it sparingly.

I don’t exactly consent to help, but, after standing there for a time, she grabs my arm and pulls me into the house.

I feel like I just stepped into the world’s largest, stinkiest storage unit. What had appeared, on the outside, to be a moderately sized house was reduced to one small pathway cutting through the rooms created by piles of junk. It’s lined with dirty carpet, and it seems like everything they’ve ever owned is piled up on the floors. It smells like wet, moldy cardboard that’s been left out to age. Then I get hit in my hip, almost fall onto a pile of empty Insta-Noodle cartons, and two little boys run by, the bigger flying a red model airplane over his head and the smaller following, his own arms outstretched, zooming through the junk-filled living room. I don’t blame them. I’d like to fly away from this place, too. I wait for Lydia to reprimand the

boys, “No running in the house,” or something, but she doesn’t acknowledge their presence. Not even a turn of the head.

She leads me to the kitchen, which is also carpeted and has so many stains it looks like camouflage, and shows me where the portal is in the pantry.

“Frank doesn’t know you’re here,” she says, and the lights turn out.

“Goddamnit. Frank,” she says, and the lights turn back on. Then she walks away.

The portal is a gray panel secured from behind by two titanium rods always made by Titan Materials Inc. It can only be opened with a portal override key. The only people who are allowed to have portal override keys are those who are CPT certified, but a young assistant of mine, who went on to get his CPT certification, risked a great deal to snag one for me. Of course, no one’s getting CPT certification anymore now that the energy source is on the way out. Causes cancer. Cancer’s a game changer.

“Activate Portal,” I say.

Nothing happens.

“Activate portal,” I repeat.

No dice.

I dig out my portal override key, a small metal cylinder that contains a powerfully charged magnet meant to react only with whatever it is they put into those titanium rods, and bend down to the ground. Before I can press the key into the circular indentation in the door, I notice that it is already open.

This guy, Frank, must have found a way to open this thing without a portal override key. The only way to close it is with a key, also.

I open it up and inspect the core, a ballistic-glass cylinder containing a mixture of Plutonium, Uranium, and Oxygen. After the nuclear scare of 2049, the world's nuclear weapons were disassembled and repurposed as small energy sources to power houses.

The core is not only installed upside down, but its color is actually gray when it should be bright white. What this means is that the core is almost spent, which would have taken at least 30 years. What that means is that this guy, Frank, must have stolen it. These things are not easy to steal. They're miniature nuclear reactors.

So I get up and get out of the kitchen and find Frank sitting in an armchair. He doesn't look at me or show any indication that he's aware of my presence. His eyes are weirdly unfocused, and his light blue irises are milky and staring off in the direction of the front doorway. His left hand is clinging to a glass of water sitting on a side table next to him. And then slowly, impossibly slow, his arm begins to move, and the glass of water rises off the table. His arm is moving so slowly that he looks like one of those street performers who paints his body silver and pretends to be a statue, but who will jump out at you, suddenly springing to life.

I spot a blood-filled syringe on the table next to him. Heroin does this, slows your life down.

His eyes bounce around and focus in on the glass, now halfway to his face. He moves with a kind of stubborn determination, that no matter how slowly he moves, he will not fail in getting a sip of water.

And he does. Eventually, the glass gets to his lips. Slow, so slow, watching the glass come closer to his face. At long last, when he can touch the glass with his lips, he takes only the tiniest of sips, a mere tilt of the cup, and water dribbles down his chin. Then, his arm begins another slow trip back down to the table.

“What are you doing?” Lydia asked, suddenly next to me.

“I was-” I say, but choke on my words.

“Jesus, well are you gonna help us or not?”

“It’s a felony. Well, lots of felonies here. But to open a portal.”

“Yeah,” she says. “We know.”

“Did he sell the portal for drug money?” I ask.

“Yeah, probably. I don’t know, really. I’m just trying to keep my kids alive, old man.”

“Where’d he get this old one?” I ask.

“Do you think even he would know the answer to that? He’s doing the best he can, too, okay?”

I turn to walk back to the kitchen and look at the busted portal again. These people have a house that runs itself. All the technology in the world couldn’t get them off of East Hannover Dr. And what good will fixing their portal do? If I install the spare portal I have in my bag, what will it give them? A family, though. Sticking together.

“Thank you,” Lydia says as she shows me out onto the dark street.

“All right now,” I say. “I’ll send you a bill.”

“Okay,” Lydia responds.

The drive home is dark, but the manual lane is still empty. It doesn’t take long and I’m home again, sitting at my desk. The internet is out, and I unplug the router. I try to ignore how lonely I feel, and I press play on the movie I was watching. I put on headphones so I can’t hear the echoes.

Give or Take

On the morning Grayson Holloway, forty-five years old, was to take his grandfather, Mitner Holloway, ninety-six years old, to the nursing home, he walked twenty blocks from his house to the Garden District, the same twenty blocks he had stumbled down the night before, leaving his car, as his grandfather had suggested. Head throbbing, he walked with his right arm outstretched, blocking the sun from his eyes, but still wincing.

Grayson opened the wrought iron gate surrounding his grandfather's property. He stopped midway between the fence and the house to catch his breath, and he looked up at the porch, the white columns, the intricate glass front door. He grew up in that house, and now they were taking his grandfather out of it. The plan was to sell it. He frowned and shook his head, then walked up the stairs and opened the door.

Grayson began to worry as soon as he walked inside and saw that the lights were still out in the hallway. His grandfather was an exceptionally early riser, even after a night of drinking, and he should have been up. Grayson walked past the staircase and onto the back porch where four mostly empty bottles of wine still sat on his grandmother's rosewood table. In one bottle, nothing remained besides a thick layer of purple sediment.

Miranda Holloway had been a woman who took pride in her belongings. He ran his fingers over the rings of red wine, already settled deep into the unfinished wood. Streams of Cabernet and Merlot had dribbled down the sides of their glasses and settled at the base.

“Sorry, Nan,” he said.

He looked into the kitchen. It was clean, organized. No coffee on the burner, no oatmeal bowls waiting to be cleaned in the sink. He walked back to the staircase and looked up.

“Pop,” he called.

There was no answer.

“You all right, Pop?” Grayson said, his voice careening up the curved staircase and into the rooms on the second floor.

Grayson walked up the stairs and stopped in the doorway of the bedroom. Mitner was still in bed, eyes closed, motionless. His arms lay flat across his chest, his fingers interlinked. Grayson slowly entered the room. He took three steps and stopped. His hands were shaking and he lifted them up.

Grayson ran into the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. He pulled out thirty or so pill bottles that lined the shelves. He picked them up, shook them, twisted the caps, looked inside, and emptied them into his hands. Pills fell through his fingers and onto the bathroom floor. All the prescriptions were as they should be.

Grayson went to his grandfather’s bedside. He reached out and touched his grandfather’s face, but he pulled back his hand as soon as he made contact. He began to cry. Grayson ran through the doorway, down the stairs, out the front door, through the gate, and out onto Prytania St. He called an ambulance, pacing in the front yard, tears falling from his chin.

When Grayson arrived at Mitner's house the night before, there was a pizza delivery man at the door.

"You at the right house?" Grayson asked.

The delivery man took a step back to look at the address on the wall.

"Yep. 2929 Prytania St." he said, pointing at his delivery slip. "But I've been here five minutes. No one's answering."

"It's because he can't hear a thing," Grayson said. He took out his wallet and pulled out twenty dollars.

"Thanks," the delivery man said, already down the steps.

Grayson found Mitner sitting in one of the rocking chairs on the back porch, his eyes closed. He looked calm. Four bottles of wine and two empty wine glasses were arranged on the table around a pot of fake azaleas.

"Pop. Pop!" Grayson said.

Mitner calmly opened his eyes.

"Pop, you knew I made reservations tonight. What the hell?"

"Oh," Mitner said, looking at the pizza box and rising to his feet, "let me go pay for it."

"Sit down. I already paid him."

"Why do you always have to do that?" Mitner said, sitting down.

"My last night in my home and we go out to eat?"

Grayson turned away. He retrieved two plates from the kitchen, added a slice of pepperoni pizza to each, and handed one to Mitner before sitting down in the other rocking chair.

"So what's with all the wine? Trying to drink ourselves into oblivion?"

"It's what's left of the cellar," Mitner said. "I thought we might finish it off tonight."

Miranda Holloway was a lover of wine. Mitner drank wine but did not collect rare or special bottles the way his late wife had done. For special events, like weddings, funerals, and births, Miranda would buy extra bottles of the wine they drank and store them in the cellar as mementos. The wines piled up until the cellar was full, totaling two hundred and fifty bottles in its prime.

“You mean all of it?” Grayson asked.

“What?”

“The cellar’s empty?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?” Mitner asked.

Mitner held the slice of pizza with two hands and brought it shaking up to his mouth. He took a bite, cheese stretching from his teeth, and brought the slice down on the plate in his lap. A string of cheese hung from his lower lip to his chin and out into space.

“I didn’t think I’d see the end of that wine in my lifetime,” Grayson said.

“It’s been a while since your grandmother passed,” Mitner said. He stared out into the backyard. “I’ve had plenty of time to drink it up. Besides, what would you have done with it after tomorrow?”

“We wouldn’t have just poured it down the drain, Pop,” Grayson said.

“Tomorrow, when I’m out of here, and you and Ellen ransack the place. You’d have had no place to put all that wine.”

Grayson looked up at the ceiling.

“Which should we open first?” Grayson asked.

“Open them all.”

“We can’t drink all this.”

Mitner looked at Grayson. Grayson looked at the bottles. A '98 Cabernet, a '94 St. Emilion, a '70 Barolo, and a bottle without a label.

"This stuff is old," Grayson said. "And the cellar fridge was down for months after Katrina."

"Grayson, this ain't wimpy wine. Open them up. Find out for yourself."

Grayson opened the bottle nearest him, a 1998 California Cabernet. He poured them each a glass.

"Label's familiar on this one," Grayson said.

Mitner laughed. "How many years did I take care of you?"

Lately, Mitner had taken to starting new conversations at random. Grayson recalled being ten years old and sitting with his grandfather in the living room. His parents died in a car accident, but not once did he feel alone in the world.

"Ten," Grayson said, "Give or take."

"I'd say more like twenty, with varying degrees of attention, effort, and exhaustion."

"What's it been now, you coming over here to take care of me? Two years?"

"I'd say more like ten, with varying degrees of attention, effort, and exhaustion."

Grayson took a bite of pizza, and started opening the rest of the bottles.

"Huh, still good," Grayson said. "That's good wine, Pop."

Grayson held the wine in his mouth, letting the juice play with his taste buds. There was something familiar about it, very distinct. And then, all he could think of was the night Ellen had their first child. Nan and Pop were there at the hospital, and afterwards, when they were all alone with the baby, Nan pulled out a bottle of wine and some plastic cups.

"We drank this the night Charles was born," Grayson said.

“What?”

“The night Charles was born, this is what we drank.”

Mitner stared straight ahead, drinking his wine. Grayson took a heaping gulp.

“I wish Nan could have seen him,” Grayson said.

“Who?”

“Charles.”

“I wish your father could’ve seen him,” Mitner said. “That would’ve really been something for him.”

Grayson finished his slice of pizza, saw that Mitner was still working on his, and grabbed a second slice from the kitchen. He returned to his chair, finished his wine, poured himself a glass of the ’94 St. Emilion, and set about opening the Barolo. He carefully worked the corkscrew into the cork, which was, in its old age, a bit loose. He pulled it out slowly but steadily. The cork tore slightly, but held up in the end. He sniffed the bottle and squinted his eyes.

“You know what your father said to me when you were born?”

“It’s like I was asleep for twenty-five years, and now I’m awake,” Grayson said.

“Huh, told that one before?” Mitner said. “How’re you sleeping?”

“The same. Usually, I lie in bed wishing I had an On/Off switch in the back of my neck. Still don’t know how Ellen puts up with it.”

Mitner chuckled. “You may find that you have one someday.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Grayson sipped the ’94 St. Emilion.

“We should have had this stuff sitting out for hours. It’s older than my marriage,” Grayson said. “Still good, though.”

Grayson and Mitner drank from their separate wines.

“This is something I’ve had, too,” Grayson said. “It’s so familiar. What’s this from, Pop?”

“Three Holloway boys. Three of them. I’ve seen them all born. All of you, kicking and screaming. Not a calm, agreeable kid amongst you.”

Grayson swished the wine around inside his mouth. It was so rich. Deep cherry. His eyes were closed and his forehead was tightly wrinkled.

“This is so delicious. Where have I had it before?” Grayson asked.

Mitner turned to look at him.

“It’s the wine we drank at your wedding, you bozo.”

Grayson smiled. How could he forget? In truth, he hadn’t paid much attention to the wine that night, but his friends and family made sure that his glass stayed full. The taste was like traveling back to that day, seeing all of his closest friends and family, and celebrating. Such happiness, even memories of such happiness, so rarely came about when life moved like a luge on ice.

Mitner finished his glass and Grayson poured him the ’94 St. Emilion. He poured himself another and drank it down. Then he gave himself a dab of the ’70 Barolo.

“Yep, that was some wedding party,” Mitner said, after drinking from his glass. “You were all head over heels for that girl.”

“I was,” Grayson said. “And I’m sure you were so calm and collected when you married Nan,”

“It’s got some life, but it’s so old. I suppose it’ll open up. Pretty depressing next to my wedding wine, though.”

Mitner looked at Grayson.

“You’re right,” Mitner said. He held out his glass of Grayson’s wedding wine. “As happy as I was at your wedding, this one’s yours. Those other two are for me.”

Grayson handed of the ’70 Barolo to Mitner and took his happy memory from his grandfather. He picked up the unlabeled bottle and examined it. Turning it upside down, Grayson could see half an inch of sediment on the bottom. It was either a very old wine, or a very poorly made wine.

Mitner shut his eyes tightly and left them there. Then he choked, and raised his hand to his forehead.

“Pop, what’s wrong?”

Mitner was sobbing, tightening seemingly every muscle he had control of. Grayson reached his arm out to steady his grandfather’s back, not knowing what else to do.

“Pop, I’m sorry about the home.”

“I’m not crying about the home,” Mitner grumbled. His face was wet, but he had regained composure.

Grayson struggled to think what that wine could be from. 1970. What happened in the mid-seventies?

“Did you drink that wine at their funeral?” Grayson asked.

Mitner nodded.

“You know, when your mom and dad got in that accident, dead on the spot, and we were waiting around in the hospital, getting your arm fixed up, I didn’t understand it. It didn’t seem right that you survived and they didn’t.”

Grayson looked at Mitner and opened his mouth.

“But you know what? I did something not many people get to do. I got to raise the same boy, twice. I got to relive my own boy’s childhood. A pretty good consolation, when you consider.”

Mitner’s left hand rested flat on Nan’s rosewood table. Occasionally, he slid his palm back and forth, his skin following the grainy ridges in the wood with his fingers.

Grayson filled his glass with the Barolo, and tried to think of the few remaining memories he had of his parents. They didn’t talk for a time as they drank. The wet summer air forced sweat from their skin, and their shirts were splotched. The sky had darkened hours ago, and their heads had begun lolling back in their chairs.

Grayson poured the unlabeled bottle into their glasses. It smelled musty, oxygen having sucked away any fruitiness. Sediment piled up in the bottom of their glasses. Grayson took an experimental sip. He made a face.

“Oh man. That’s rancid. How old is this?”

Staring into the yard, Mitner raised the glass to his nose and inhaled deeply.

“Pretty old,” he said. His eyes closed, his chest rose and fell as he breathed deeply. He brought the wine back up to his face, tilting a generous portion of the liquid into his mouth. Grayson waited. Mitner’s body stilled. He smiled and opened his eyes to look at Grayson.

“I think it’s time. Let me show you out,” Mitner said. He used his arms to pry himself out of the chair, but they were not strong enough. Grayson caught him by the elbows before he could

fall back into his seat. They stood facing each other for a moment, then Grayson swayed to the front door and Mitner followed.

“You shouldn’t drive home,” Mitner said.

Grayson nodded.

“You going to be all right tomorrow?” Grayson asked.

“It’s just a new place to go, son.”

Grayson started walking down the steps, then stopped.

“Pop, what was that last wine?”

“What?”

“The last bottle? What was it?”

“It was just another wine.”

Grayson walked down the stairs, and out the wrought iron fence. He turned and watched his grandfather walk past the stairs, probably going back to the porch. He started walking home in the moist, night air, and remembered a story Mitner had told him. He and Miranda had honeymooned in France in 1946, in a small bed and breakfast winery in Chateauneuf-du-Pape. They had put off their honeymoon for years, as so many others had done during the war. In 1938, Pop had jumped out of a plane and landed in that vineyard, and he took Nan there after the war was over. They had a small, private room. It was cool, and they could reach their hands out of the window and pick grapes off the vine.

The Family Man

On 'Scare' and Possible Return

FAMILY TOWN, USA - Family Man is considered questionable to return to the family home for Tuesday night Spaghetti Night after more than a week's absence. He has been staying in Room 23 of the Shady Side Motel, where he claims to have suffered frequent bouts of nausea, vomiting, and general catatonia. He declined comment when asked whether alcohol could have been a contributing factor. His secretary, Tonya, visited after the third day to check on his health. Monday's press conference was called immediately after Family Man checked out of the Shady Side. When he emerged from the room, at midnight Monday morning, after eight days without stepping outdoors, he began searching the parking lot for his Audi A170002.

"It was a scary experience," Family Man said, peering into several car windows. "Just been in an insanely dizzy, drowsy stupor for six or seven days without really moving. I've been sick, and it's been a scary time for me and my family."

Family Man declined comment when asked why he had been staying at the Shady Side, rather than the Family Home. As previously reported, Family Man had not been seen or heard from since last Monday night, when he lumbered out of Family Home around ten p.m. Sources confirmed that he had returned home late that night, yet again, extending a disconcerting streak

of four straight missed family dinners, and bringing his family dinner attendance percentage (FDA) for the month of February down to a meager 22.3%. There were reports that Family Man forcibly halted heated contract negotiations with Family Woman immediately preceding his departure.

“Where will you go when you find your car?” a reporter asked.

“I haven’t figured it out, yet,” Family man said. “I’ll go home. To my family. Where I belong. Where I’m King.

Family Rumble Part 13: The End of the Talismans

“Family Man,” a reporter said, “What happened last Monday Night?” Family Man looked up from the car window he had been looking into, his hands cupped to the edges of his eyes, presumably trying to decipher whether or not it belonged to him.

“Monday night?” Family Man answered. “What day is it?” When Family Man was informed that it was Tuesday, February 25th, and that they were asking about Monday, February 17th, he said, “I told her that I’d had it with those papers. I told her that those papers were a joke. A funny, funny joke.”

Previously, Family Man has said of the contract negotiations, “She wants to rip my clothes off, steal my wallet, not to mention my kids, and leave me naked and alone in the street. Plus, my heart in a glass jar for shattering purposes.” The comments created a firestorm of public vitriol directed at Family Woman. Fans accused her of plotting to steal Family Man’s money, fame, and children. Since then, however, as Family Man’s statistics have steadily and drastically declined, she has made gains in the public eye.

Family Man explained to reporters that they had a shouting match in which Family Woman's statements that she "wants a life" were drowned out by Family Man's repetition of the phrase "I provide. I provide. I provide." Curse words and accusations - "Serial secretary fucker," for instance - were not the only things thrown.

"Family Man," a reporter said, "there were reports of abuse. Can you corroborate?"

"I made," Family Man said, his speech slow, "what will probably go down as the worst mistake of my career. In our fight, I destroyed the talismans."

Anyone who has followed Family Man's career, knows about the talismans. Legend has it, after Family Man bought the wedding ring for Family Woman, he walked into a small voodoo trinket store next door. There, Family Man was taken with two small, marble statuettes, a Gorilla and a Gazelle. On their wedding day, Family Man gave Family Woman the statuettes, symbolizing the strength of their partnership. When Family Son, and then Family Daughter were born, Family Man returned to the little voodoo store and bought a Lizard, and then a cat. These were the symbols of the Family, and the four were arranged together on the mantle in the master bedroom.

"I reached for a talisman, and it was the Gazelle. I had aimed for it to hit her in the stomach. I must have lost balance when I threw it because after the Gazelle hit her in the face and landed on the floor, I was on my back. Its horns had broken off. I think my head hit the bed frame on the way to the ground."

Family Man explained that there was a confusing scramble in which the other talismans, the Gorilla, the Lizard, and the Cat, were all casualties. Family Man and Family Woman were bleeding from scratches, and shattered marble littered the floor. Family Man's foot was pierced

by one of the Gazelle horns when he stood up. He kicked the Gorilla's severed head, and it rolled noisily around the room after he left.

On his way to the door, Family Man passed Family Daughter. Her headphones were on, black torn tights, attention buried in her cell phone. Various unconfirmed reports have been leaked that she has been experimenting with cocaine and psychedelics.

Family Man got in his car and slowly swerved down the street where he spotted Family Son sitting under the big Crepe Myrtle a few houses down from the family home. Family Son was weeping, and Family Man slowed and lowered his window halfway.

"I told him to go on back home and get rid of the tears," Family Man said. "Man-up. He got up and muttered something between hiccups, like, 'where the fuck are you going?' And then I think he called me a pussy."

According to several sources, and backed-up by the yellowish bruise still shining on Family Man's cheek bone, Family Son pulled back the bottle of Evan Williams he had been drinking and threw it, shattering the passenger window and smacking Family Man in the face.

"You know who taught him to throw like that, huh? A waste, that boy. Bottle wasn't cracked though, and still a quarter full after some spilled."

The Shady Side: Fall From Grace or Road to Redemption?

Family Man has indeed fallen from atop a high pedestal. For years, his FDA% was impeccable, hanging at 99%, and his cooks attempted, usually for grill nights and meat dishes, were higher than the average family man, not to mention his cooks completed (including dishes washed) percentage of 90%. His family support numbers gained him widespread acclaim amongst family

man enthusiasts. Through all the accolades, Family Man somehow stayed humble, admitting in interviews that he felt like nothing else existed in this world besides Family Woman, Family Son, and Family Daughter.

Then, rumblings of sexual dissatisfaction, more frequent missed dinners. Cooks Attempted failed to be completed due to ‘freak grilling accidents,’ burned steaks and overcooked burgers. Even more troubling, an incident when he leaned a hand flat on the grill, and when he spilled a high proof onto the flame and singed his eyebrows off.

In the now infamous press conference from years back, an unusually loose-lipped Family Man responded to questions regarding his sex life:

“She says she started withholding after she made me fire the third secretary. She’s ended a lot of poor girls’ jobs. I say the abstinence campaign began three weeks after the honey moon and then another three weeks after Family Son was born.”

“Is demanding sex of Family Woman the best move for you, Family Man?” they asked.

“I don’t know what a family man is supposed to do,” he said, lowering his head and raising his arms like an evangelist preacher. “I never asked to be a role model. So far I’ve just done. And it’s worked out pretty well. One thing I do know is, family men got them, and they fit perfectly into family women. Seems like that’s one thing I’m supposed to be doing.”

“Family Man,” a reporter said. “There were reports that Tonya stayed with you in your room at the Shady Side. Additional reports said that just moments after entering your room, a mini-skirt, the one she was said to have been wearing, was hung up in the motel room window.”

Family Man smiled. “When Tonya came, the first thing she did was turn the off the TV, draw the blinds, and get me some water. She was there to see that I was okay. She helped me, because I was sick. The skirt was mere decoration, the way it hung like a lampshade in the sun.

Nothing inappropriate. Only a coworker with concern for her boss. For my health. I enjoyed having her, but once my head cleared, I told her she had to go. I told her, ‘what might people think?’”

Family Man found his Audi by the dumpster behind the Shady Side. Some trash, a bag full of discarded take out Chinese, lay on the hood. He looked surprised to find his keys in his pocket.

“Where will you go now?” they asked, Family Man sitting in the drivers’ seat.

“First, I’m going to need some gas,” he said. “I’m going to buy some Krazy Glue. That might help put the pieces back together. That might be just the ticket.”

The paparazzi followed him, swerving into the night. Family Man kept his foot on the gas.

Boys Don't Cry

Once, I went to the movies with a girl I did not think I could live without; and she, it seemed to me then, could not live without me. It was for each other that we both had eyes, and thoughts, and arms, and lips, and fingertips. We were seniors at Clearview High, and with each passing day, we felt our separate futures at separate colleges creeping up on us.

We walked hand in hand, our fingers only breaking their weave to carry our snacks, two giant soft drinks, buttered popcorn, and a tray of tortilla chips covered in molten nacho cheese. Searching for a pair of empty seats in the back of the dark theater, I led her down a crowded aisle, inching us past the knees of other coupled teenagers, suave and self-assured. When we sat, she smiled, lifted the armrest between our seats, and curled herself into me.

On the screen, a beautiful couple adopted a puppy, and we watched as it grew and caused mischief. The dog tore into cushions and bedsheets, jumped out of cars, and ate the entire Thanksgiving turkey. When we laughed, our bodies bounced together like pistons in an engine.

The dog grew old, the beautiful couple had children, and one day, they had to put the sick dog down. At that moment, I was ambushed by an onslaught of unbidden emotions, and I did not know what to do. I fought within myself, pushing back whatever it was that was happening to me. I refused to allow myself to cry, and not just because I had my girl in my arms, and not just because people would see. I clenched my jaw and tightened my chest, as if flexing my muscles would hold back the tears. I remembered faintly thinking, through a deafening haze of emotional

confusion, that this battle was a defining moment in my life. I turned my eyes away from the screen. I would not let it happen.

I could feel each whip of the belt in a tense place inside myself. I covered my eyes with my hands as I wept, but I could still hear, between my wailing, the sharp smacks my dog received from my father.

I had been wrestling with Bruce, our three-year-old Golden Retriever. We were the same size, and after grappling him to the ground, we rolled around. When Bruce turned his head, his canine caught me near my eye. I gasped, and then I cried. I cried loud and true, between short intakes of breath. But in the end, my face was unhurt. I had been scared, and then, when the fear subsided, I just wanted the attention; but, no matter the reason, the crying felt the same.

“What happened?” my mom said, when she came running.

“Bruce bit me!” I wailed.

Afterwards, Bruce’s belly was speckled pink, and I gently rubbed the welts with the back of my hand.

*

I was on the mound in the eleven-twelve year-old little league championship game. It was the bottom of the final inning, and we were winning with two outs. The crowd buzzed with energy and anticipation.

Daniel was at bat. A classmate. I wound up, and let the first pitch fly. He watched the ball pass by.

Strike one. The crowd cheered, and a smile forced itself onto my face. I fought to return my lips and cheeks to their normal, focused position. I pitched for the second time, and Daniel swung.

Strike two. The crowd cheered louder still. This time, the smile was full force, my lips stretching so far they became tiny creases. I put my heels back on the rubber, and tried to focus on the third pitch, but I could not. I had to step off of the mound and bury my face in my glove. One more pitch. Eventually, I was able to regain enough composure to wind up. I let the ball go, and this time, Daniel took a ferocious swing. As the bat came around, I noticed his face was screwed up in anger.

Strike three.

After the celebration, Daniel shoved me out of the handshake line, knocking me to the ground. Then, the opposing coach came up to me.

“How dare you smile on the mound like that, kid?” he said.

I did not know what to say. And then I was crying, and I couldn’t say anything. My teammates and I gathered for a picture holding our championship trophies, but the tears would not stop rolling. It was strange how similar smiling and crying could feel.

*

What I remember most about the few days after the storm was the silence and the booze. We evacuated New Orleans the night before Katrina, driving to our plantation home in middle

Louisiana, far enough inland for the storm to be weak. The big house, built in 1858, was empty and dark and quiet. Once the storm passed, there was nothing to do besides make vodka tonics, drink cheap beer, and watch the news on a tiny, rabbit-ear television.

We drank in silence, while people stuck in New Orleans went hungry, went thirsty, were air lifted from rooftops, were killed, were saved. Poor people, who had no means to get out of the city before the levees broke, were dying in the street, while we, rocking in our antique rocking chairs, watched the New Orleans Yacht Club burn down, even as it was surrounded by floodwaters.

My older brother had tears on his face. Eight years my senior, he had bought a house in New Orleans one month before the storm. He pulled me aside, and put his hands on my shoulders, looking concerned.

“It’s okay to cry, you know?” he said.

I had not thought about crying, nor had I felt the need. I had not sorted out what just happened. Those people on television, stranded in the streets of our hometown, did not feel real to me.

He looked at me, waiting. He wanted to see it. He wanted to see me recognize the gravity of our situation. He wanted to see my emotions get the better of me. And he wanted to be the one that made it happen. I rolled my eyes. “I’m fine,” I said.

Nothing was certain. The city was shut down. Where would I go to school? Where would we live? I talked to my friends. They were in Houston, and in Shreveport, and in Lafayette. Then, the chaos of it all shattered what I took to be reality.

I remember checking to see that no one was around. They had all gone to bed, and I found a chair in a dark corner of an empty room. I felt like I had been a shaken can of coca-cola,

and someone popped my top. I could not say what I was crying about. It was not one thing. There was an emotional bouncy ball whizzing around inside my head. I could not identify them as individual things: guilt, fear, embarrassment, uncertainty, shame, fatigue, and a million other things. After the tears stopped, I lay in bed, feeling empty, and light, and in a way, relieved.

*

In first grade, during a morning gathering of the lower school where all of the students sat on the floor, shoulder to shoulder, I felt a familiar gaseous buildup beneath my stomach. Desperately afraid of an audible release, I held it in as best I could, but when I adjusted my sitting position, it happened. I yearned to live in a world where no one had heard it, but surely they had. The entire auditorium heard, I was certain.

Afterwards, a boy who had been sitting behind me gave me a new nickname: “The Fart Master 3000.” The other children laughed, and I ran out of the classroom. The tears were falling to the floor before I reached the bathroom. I looked at my face in the mirror, bright red and soaking wet, and I turned away.

*

To me, it had been a normal family dinner: chicken pasta with marinara sauce, the four of us. Then, my father asked me to leave the room. He had something to discuss with my brother, who was home from college. I got up from the table with a hidden excitement, wondering what my brother could have done wrong to warrant this talk, and glad I was not the one hearing it.

I dribbled the basketball in the backyard. I allowed myself feelings of exhilaration as I blew by imaginary defenders and banked in layups at the buzzer. But where I should have heard the airy yells of thousands of imaginary fans, I only heard moaning.

I could see my father through the window in the den, sitting with his head in his hands, guttural sobs shaking his body as he rocked back and forth. My mother stood behind him with a hand resting on his shoulder, so still, like a statue.

Too terrified to reenter through the back door, I went around the house through the side gate, wondering what unforgivable thing my brother could have done.

Before reaching front door, though, I noticed a dark figure near the street. My brother was pacing the sidewalk.

“What did you do?” I said.

He was weeping audibly.

“Let him tell you,” he said, through gasps.

He walked behind me into the house. It felt like he was pushing me through a gauntlet on the way to my executioner.

My father was no longer crying. In fact, he appeared to have regained complete emotional stability.

“Your mother and I are getting divorced,” he said.

Fear turned to shock, which turned to misery. I was silent and emotionless, and I did not know what to say. I did not remember how to move the muscles in my face.

He stood up, hugged me, and we followed him to the front door. He did not look back at us as he walked out and closed the door behind him.

We left the theater and drove to my father's house. He was out of town on business, and I had told my mother I was staying at a friend's place. The empty house felt alive with potential. We clung to each other, grabbing and kissing, all the way up the stairs and into bed.

When the moment came, I touched myself to her, afraid to go any farther, afraid I had no clue what to do, afraid of taking something from her that could never be replaced. She nodded, and I pushed gently, angling myself, hoping desperately I was lined up right. Our dance was clumsy, and while our lower bodies moved in awkward, apprehensive spasms, our fingers stayed expertly locked together above her head, the way they had been in the theater that night, when the tears rose up and broke out of me, gushing. I had lost the battle, and I hid myself out of instinct more than anything else. I was too emotionally fucked to be ashamed. She had been crying, too, but at least she held it together. I could barely breathe.

But I was not crying because of the movie. It was sad, yes, and it had, with its dying dog and sweet, somber music, probably called up those first few tears. But then something foreign took over, and I was crying for nothing, and I was crying for it all.

The Extrasensory Obstetrician

We stopped talking about our dead son over year ago, mainly because every time we did we ended up sleeping in opposite corners of the apartment, not wanting to look at each other. The pain we suffered couldn't even compare to the pain our child experienced, who was born with kidneys that wouldn't develop. He lived every second of his nearly six days on Earth screaming in pain. The disease is genetic, and doctors told me my own malformed kidney could have played a factor in my child's bilateral renal agenesis.

I leave Helen at home to go sit alone in the park near the fountain where we first made love. Nearby, a boy falls from the monkey bars and, from what I can tell, breaks his leg. He curls into a ball, grasping at his leg, which is twisted grotesquely at the knee. His face contracts into a series of tiny red creases, and I imagine fifteen clothespins clamped to his cheeks. The people in the park turn their heads towards the screams. A few run to the boy's side and put their hands on him, as if touching him might prevent him from further harm. Helen is one of those people. She rushes past my bench to aid the boy's parents, who crouch by his side. She crouches down beside them, the pregnancy not showing on her yet. Helen takes out her phone to call an ambulance, and then asks if there is anything else she can do to help. When they shake their heads, she turns and walks towards me.

"What are you doing here?" Helen asks.

"You were in the shower," I say. "I called, but I guess you couldn't hear."

She looks from me to the boy, all tears and sobs. He had been leaned up against the slide for stability.

“Poor kid,” she says.

"It happens," I say.

"Wyatt," she says, "I know what you want to say, but a boy who falls from the jungle gym is not going to meet the specifications we give to Dr. Shah. He'd need to see a lot more pain in the baby's life to qualify for Plan Z."

"Same principle though, isn't it?" I say. "If he wasn't allowed to play on the monkey bars in the first place, he wouldn't be in the pain he is now, would he?"

“No, Wyatt, it's not the same. We have to do this. If it happens again, I'll be out."

"We had no control over - wait, out of what?"

"I'm not sure, but I will be. And you're exactly right, we didn't have control over what happened," she says. "That's why we have to do this. This way, we have control.

“Oh, you're sure it's us with the control and not some quack doctor who claims to have the power to see fetus futures?"

We walk back to the house in silence. Helen had left a pot of gumbo simmering on the stove, and the smell is overwhelming. On the kitchen table, sits Dr. Shah's checklist, a three hundred and fifty page beast.

"It's time," Helen says.

"It's time for Dr. Daniel's Pre-Premonition Pain and Suffering Chart®" I say, sarcastic.

"How much pain is too much pain? Can we eat first?"

Helen pours two bowls of gumbo over rice, sets them down on the table, and turns to the table of contents. Section one is entitled: "Death of Child Due To:" followed by a long list of

subcategories which include "By Prenatal Complications, By Birth Defects, By Unforeseen Illnesses, By Accident, By Murder..."

"By Murder. Honestly, who is going to murder our child?" I say.

"It's extensive for a reason, Wyatt," she says.

Each page is marked with Dr. Shah's official seal, a golden oval, inside of which a pelican sits on its nest, leaning over and taking an egg in its beak. Helen flips to the By Birth Defects section and emphatically checks off Bilateral Renal Agenesis.

"Does he expect us to do research for this?" I ask, referring to the dizzying number of possibilities of death by birth defects.

"It's categorized by pain for that reason. I have no idea what Hydrocephalus is, but it says it's fatal at birth," she says, checking it off.

"Albinism," I say, realizing what it is. "So, are we okay with an albino for a son?"

"Albinism comes with its own set of difficulties, but it's manageable," she says.

"Right," I say.

"This will make us paranoid," I say.

"It'll do the opposite. We won't have to worry about these things. God willing, Dr. Shah will clear it, and we can put anything we check off out of our minds."

"And if he doesn't clear it?"

"We'll all be better off."

Dr. Shah's office building is a narrow sliver of a strip mall, wedged between a Target and an Applebee's. The placard next to his office door reads:

Dr. Daniel Shah
Extrasensory Obstetrics

Room 203

The waiting room is typical of any doctor's office, the colorful plastic chairs, the television showing slides of medical advice, the nurse in the cutout hole in the wall. Helen picks up an information pamphlet entitled "How Dr. Shah Evaluates Pain." Without looking up, she hands me another, "Dr. Shah's Sixth Sense."

"We're really putting our child's life in the hands of someone who calls himself an Extrasensory Obstetrician? You know that's not a real thing, right?" Helen sweeps her brown curls away from her face and lifts her head from the pamphlet.

"He's proven Wyatt, how many times have I told you? Every prediction he makes comes true. Read this list of testimonials," she says, handing me another folded sheet of garbage. I read the first one.

"Our little Mikey passed Dr. Daniel's Pre-Premonition Pain and Suffering Checklist® with flying colors. We purchased the Extrasensory Package™, and Mikey's bad fever at eight months and his broken arm at age two were both expected and prepared for. Thanks Doctor!"

-The Wilsons

"It's a shame little Mikey has wackos for parents," I say. "Seems like enough pain and suffering right there to fail the test."

Turning her head to me, Helen makes as if to respond, but closes her mouth. The nurse in the hole in the wall clears her throat and points to a sign hanging on the door: "Extrasensory Exam in Progress, Quiet Pls." Behind the door, I imagine a room filled with incense smoke, a couple sitting on oriental pillows amid colorful, woven rugs, everyone peering over Dr. Shah's

crystal ball. A moment later, the door opens and a smiling man follows his pregnant wife through the door. I do not see any smoke wafting through the door.

I pick up another pamphlet. "Accepting Plan Z." There's a photograph of a woman crying, her head buried into her husband's chest. "Plan Z is difficult to accept. The Pre-Premonition Pain and Suffering Chart® is fool-proof and catered to your own beliefs. If filled out in good faith, Plan Z is a painful blessing. When you accept Plan Z, you will undoubtedly experience pain, but you will know that you have prevented unbearable, unthinkable pain from entering this world."

Dr. Shah steps into the doorway and calls, "Mr. and Mrs. Fieldgood?" We stand and walk into the office. The room smells so clean I can taste alcohol swabs. The nurse closes the door behind us, and Dr. Shah motions for us to sit in the two oversized leather chairs opposite his desk.

"Before we begin," Dr. Shah says, "I must know who referred you."

"Becky Salem," Helen says. "An old college roommate of mine."

"I remember Mrs. Salem. You trust her judgment?"

"Completely," she says.

"And what about you, sir?" Dr. Shah says.

"I really don't know why we're here," I say. "I don't think this is natural or right."

Dr. Shah looks over at Helen, and she shrugs.

"I frequently see couples who disagree about this. No need to worry. It's completely normal. I find it helps my patients to learn a little about myself. When I was four, and my mother was pregnant with my brother, Hakim, she offered her stomach to me to feel his kicking. My mother said I pulled away, repeating, through flowing tears, the same words, like an incantation.

‘Down the spares, down the spares.’ I could not be consoled. A few years later, when Hakim was learning to walk, he fell, face-first, down ten stairs in our house. I had been unable to pronounce my t’s. Hakim acquired two broken bones, a cracked skull, a broken vertebrae, and underwent a dozen operations. The pain was so great for so long that he cried most of every day for a year. Then, right when the doctors thought Hakim might be nearing a full recovery, he died of a blood clot in his brain.

“Jesus,” I say.

“Yes,” Dr. Shah says. “I pursued obstetrics not only because I was curious about my gift. I made it a personal mission to prevent extreme pain from entering the world, whenever I can. Now please, talk this over tonight. I have your Pre-Premonition Pain and Suffering Chart®. Tomorrow, we will either move forward with the procedure, or we will not.

We don’t discuss the procedure. What is there to discuss? Neither of us plans to budge. After a difficult search of the Internet, I find Dr. Shah’s address posted in a forum of people trying to do exactly what I am doing. I tell Helen that I am going for a walk, and when I’m out of sight, I get in a cab and go straight there.

The place is a fortress. Tall beige walls protect his property; his mansion lines a half block of an otherwise workaday street, the walls equipped with security cameras and pointed iron spikes that rise at an angle. A gaudy iron gate marks the main entrance. I think of Helen asleep in bed with our baby, and I wonder if he is awake or sleeping in her belly.

I ring the doorbell seven times, and I hear the lens of a video camera focusing in on my face.

"Mr. Fieldgood," Dr. Shah's voice is tinny in the speakers. "It's 10:00 P.M., please go home to your wife, I am busy."

"No. We have to talk," I say.

"Your extrasensory examination is tomorrow morning," he says. "We can talk then."

"This is wrong. It's so fucking wrong," I say, my forehead against the plastered column underneath the security camera. "I'll never forgive myself. You're a murderer."

After a moment, the security lights snap on, illuminating the courtyard and its meticulously manicured sculpture garden, a maze of big green rabbits and turtles. The gates open. I follow the brick pathway to the front door, which opens before I reach the steps. Dr. Shah emerges, dressed in a plush bathrobe, but still well groomed.

"Come in," he says.

He motions for me to follow him and leads me through a cluttered hallway filled with moving boxes. The house, which on the outside appears so well kept and full, is actually sparsely furnished and messy. Picture frames lie on the floor, propped against the wall, waiting to be hung. A marble statue of a naked woman leans against the wall in the corner of the living room on four rolled oriental rugs. The only furniture in the room is a blue couch and matching ottoman. He sits on the couch, and I sit on the ottoman. The kitchen is connected to the living room by an open archway and, I spot a steaming container of instant mac and cheese on the counter next to an unopened bottle of wine.

"Moving?" I ask.

"Not exactly," Dr. Shah says. He is staring at the statue on the rugs.

I had envisioned storming in with a raised fist and laying down my demands. Instead, I shift awkwardly, feeling childish in such a low seat and wait for Dr. Shah to make the next move.

"I don't normally do this, but I have, in the past, offered an irreconcilable differences contract, in which the beleaguered party agrees to terminate our contractual obligations to deliver a prophecy and act upon it, while allowing their significant other to believe everything goes according to plan. I offer it to you as your risk to take."

"You what?" I ask.

"It means after the exam tomorrow, your wife will think I have made a prophecy, and your child will not qualify for Plan Z, no matter what. Helen will assume that there is nothing to fear with your baby, in terms of extreme pain. You, however, will not know what horrors may lie ahead for your child. The only condition is that you agree not to request the extrasensory package, as that would put me in the position of possibly having to lie, which is not only something that would affect my professional reputation, but is something I am firmly against."

Waiting for me to respond, he gets up and walks into the kitchen. He looks at me sitting there as he spoons a heaping, congealed wad of mac and cheese into his mouth. Then he takes a piece of paper from the drawer in the counter.

"Uh," I say, nervous about how easy that was. "Yes. That would be for the best."

He hands me the contract. It, too, is marked with Dr. Shah's official seal.

"And if I sign this, you'll perform the procedure, but no matter what you see, you won't recommend aborting him?"

"Yes," he says. "That's the idea."

I sign the paper and hand it back to him. We shake hands, and relief pours over me.

“Now,” Dr. Shah says, “I need to sleep.”

“I can show myself out,” I say, and I do.

I walk through the park on my way home. Under the monkey bars, I find the boy’s blood dried against the rubber mats from where he scraped his knee when he fell. I dip my hands into the fountain, cupping them to hold as much water as I can. I splash the dried blood with the water and rub it away with my shoe.

Dr. Shah presses his hand against Helen’s barely protruding belly. The nurses had lathered Helen’s stomach with the gel normal doctor’s used for sonograms. What an act. Dr. Shah’s eyes roll back into his head, and Helen keeps her own eyes tightly shut, as if she is trying to tap into whatever Dr. Shah sees. When he is finished, Dr. Shah’s arm goes limp, and he looks tired. Helen looks at him expectantly.

“Just a minute,” he says. “I’ll be back with the results shortly.”

He leaves the room.

“Couldn’t he have just said?” Helen says. “If he has to take time to decide, does that mean it’s close?”

“No, honey,” I say. “I’m sure it’s just standard protocol.”

Dr. Shah comes back all smiles. “You will not be needing Plan Z,” he says.

Helen squeals with delight and wraps her arms around me. She smiles, unbridled. I have never seen her so happy. Dr. Shah nods to me and walks out of the exam room. All I can think of are genetic codes and probabilities and my malformed kidney. I wonder what comes next.

The Collector

“What’s the story with Ms. Pacman?” you ask the rotund bartender as you sit down on a barstool. He looks down at the other end of the bar, where the machine is. It is smashed in, and a metal puck from the shuffleboard table is embedded in the screen.

“Does Miss Pacman have a story? Man, everything in this spot has a story. Seems the only thing around here without a story is me, the crawfish, and the boudin balls. We’ve been the same for years. The crawfish’ve been getting smaller, though. I guess I’ve got a few more wrinkles than I used to. I’ve weighed two-hundred and fifteen pounds for forty years, and I’ve shaved every day of my life. People don’t expect that from a man in my profession, but being behind the bar at a soul food joint twenty-five years running doesn’t mean I don’t handle myself with respect.”

“Her screen’s all bashed in. I want you to know, since you’re interested, the repair man said it was too smashed, that it wasn’t just the screen, that the pucks got into some of the software, too. Hard drive, computer chip, something or other. ‘Irreparable,’ he said, anyway. Why I’m getting rid of it.”

“You want the story. This Mexican, er, Mexican-American, walked in here one summer about five years ago. He didn’t look all that Mexican, and his name was Joe. He wore a polyester vest, shorts, leather shoes, and a fedora to top his bald head. He asked for an Amber. Smart dresser, Joe, the type of guy that’d wear a bow tie if he ever fully dressed up, which I suspect he didn’t. Smart guy, too; he scribbled constantly in a small notepad he kept in his pocket.”

“Whenever Joe wasn’t talking to me or someone at the bar, or scribbling in that notebook of his, he was playing Ms. Pacman. He liked to play when he had one too many. He was a good drunk that way. Didn’t bother anyone. The joystick had been broken for years; you couldn’t turn right. Made a lot of customers angry. Joe didn’t seem to mind, though.”

“Our first conversation was about Quebec City. Quebec City! I got family there, and it’s the only place I’ve been outside the states, and he’d been there. Been everywhere. Believe that? Coming from a guy born in Chihuahua, Mexico? His dad was an American tourist. Knocked up his mom on a pleasure cruise. So Joe’s illegal, but really he shouldn’t be. He looks more American than Mexican. Regardless, the guy made friends with anyone next to him at the bar. Good friends. He wasn’t just a chatterbox. You know how that can be. He could discuss the life and importance of Nelson Mandela with a deaf, mute Nigerian. Anyway, when he couldn’t find work, he started selling pot and started up a pretty good business.”

“When Emily met Joe, she immediately went goo goo over him. She had been a neighborhood girl for years. She’s a nurse at the children’s hospital nearby; works in the ICU. She’s a bit younger than Joe, forty, but already got five kids. She looks young, too. She doesn’t look many days older than her twenty-four year old daughter. Her youngest is five, Taylor. Emily’s a good girl, but at a young age she developed a habit of running with shady guys; both of her ex-husbands are in jail for armed robbery. I guess Joe seemed like a safe balance between doing bad things and being an outright good person.”

“Joe came to New Orleans because he heard it was a warm space here, in the acting community, unlike anything you could find in New York City.”

“‘It’s hard to break through, though,’ Joe said once. ‘It’s unique because it’s full of locals. They get priority casting. Early on, in a weak moment, I stood up in one of the

productions I was in and called out the lead for being an amateur. I've been essentially blackballed ever since.”

“Right, Miss Pacman. When Joe and Emily got together, nobody blinked an eye. They didn't really have a courtship. They knew, along with everybody else, how compatible they were, and so they started seeing each other. No questions asked. They started hanging out here together. She would get annoyed with him and his Miss Pacman obsession. At first, I think she thought it was cute, a grown man drunkenly playing kids games. But the more he played it, the longer she sat with me, alone at the bar, the more she came to despise it.”

“But they were happier together and that made everyone else happy. They hung out together, they cooked together, and they talked together. The one thing that never happened after a few years was the full disclosure of their relationship to Emily's youngest kids.”

“‘Watch what you say,’ Emily would say to me as Taylor sat happily on Joe's lap, watching him play Miss Pacman, ‘Taylor doesn't know the whole story about Uncle Joey.’

“But there was Joe, bouncing Taylor on his lap, showing her how to play the game.”

“‘Go right, go right!’ I heard Taylor shout.”

“I wish I could, Taylor,” Joe said. He'd never had that much fun playing Miss Pacman. Then, Joe was riding his bike here one day, when he had the accident. Just a couple of kids who were playing with a beanbag on the sidewalk. The beanbag went into the street in front of Joe, who liked to ride fast. The boys ran out to get it, and Joe slammed his hand breaks. It flipped him over, sent him hurling over his handlebars. Apparently, in rotation, Joe got a foot down on the ground and tried to plant it. It might have been that coordination that did his leg in, though. It was just outside, and a neighbor came running in, asking for help. I ran outside and found Joe there, unconscious.”

“His leg was bad; it was no straightforward fracture. Emily said the doctors were amazed he didn’t have any internal bleeding issues after that crash. As it turned out, it was so bad that a teaching hospital in the area was interested in using him as a subject. They would significantly reduce the cost of his surgery if his fracture was ‘interesting enough.’

“They waited days to find out if he’d get the green light from the teaching hospital. On the fourth day, Joe having been stuck in an armchair for half a week, they bumped his surgery from the schedule. I guess it wasn’t interesting enough. Then Emily came to me, frantic.”

“‘He needs a ride to Mexico,’ she said.”

“‘You’re nuts,’ I said.”

“‘There’s no money to have surgery here, and if he waits another week or two, the doctor said he could lose the leg.’”

“The leg was stabilized. So it was mending but without surgery, it was healing the wrong way, and if that happened the thing would be useless. They’d have to chop it off.”

“‘I can’t just get up and go to Mexico,’ I said.”

“‘There’s no one else; I can’t get off work,’ Emily said.”

“And so what did I do? I hopped in Emily’s 4Runner, picked up Joe, and headed down to Mexico.”

“Joe said he had cousins who would pick him up in Juarez, so I didn’t have to drive him all the way to Chihuahua.”

“‘Juarez would have better doctors, anyway,’ Joe said, ‘so I might just stay there. Beats visiting my parents.’”

“It was a quiet ride, and I kept looking over to gauge Joe’s level of discomfort, but he never squirmed or complained.”

“‘I think I’ll check out California when my leg heals up,’ Joe said.”

“‘A little joy ride before coming back?’ I said.”

“‘Don’t think I’ll come back.’”

“Joe looked out the window at the yellow Texas countryside.”

“‘What about Emily?’ I asked. ‘What about your business?’”

“‘You can have the business. If you want it. I’ll start up shop somewhere else. I want to have some kids.’”

“The thought of Emily having another kid is laughable.”

“I drove him into Juarez, and we stopped at a cantina for a bite. We shared the best tacos I’d ever eaten in silence, and I started back to the car.”

“I told him he wasn’t broken. He said he knew that, he was just repurposed. That was a few months ago now.”

“Emily comes in last night. I hadn’t seen her in months. She looked tired but put together, all things considered, and she drank for a while without saying anything.”

“I asked her about Taylor.”

“‘Being a brat,’ she said. ‘I haven’t worked in months. I got sick for a month, and when I got better, I stayed home. The heat is broken, and Taylor and I sleep together, and she hates it. I hate it, too. I hate the broken heater, and I hate the fucking crack in our ceiling. All I do is stare at that fucking crack, and I don’t think about anything. I hate my ex-husbands, I hate this bar, I hate Joe, I hate this city, and I hate you.’”

“She got up and stumbled to the shuffleboard table and picked up the metal pucks. When she got in front of Miss Pacman, she threw a puck as hard as she could at the plexiglass. The puck rebounded but the screen cracked in two. The next puck stuck in the glass. She went from

enraged to thrilled, and she threw three more pucks into the demolished screen with the largest grin I'd ever seen her wear."

"I doubt I will ever see her again. Maybe she'll hit the road, too. Who knows? maybe she'll come in for a beer tomorrow. What do I know?"

"I'm sure I probably talked your ear off. Let me get you the dolly to help you load Miss Pacman into your truck. Did I get you your story?"

"Have you heard from Joe again?" you ask.

"You know, he did send a postcard. San Diego, I think it was. I tossed it in the trash. You look at things differently, when you know its history."

He wedges the dolly under Miss Pacman. Together you and the bartender tilt it back and wheel it out of the bar.

"Come back for a beer, next time," the bartender says.

Puppets

My father killed birds and turned the corpses into puppets. I always knew he worked with specimens he acquired in the wild; I just didn't know it was every single one. Every single species of bird he drew, he had killed at least once. They were everywhere in our house. Even in my bedroom, watching me sleep. The haunts. Sounds from outside became squeals from the watercolor birds, trapped in their frames. The real pigeons I could see flying outside my window became more lifeless to me than the family of swallows grazing in the reeds over our mantle. I have tried ignoring this history, or at least locking it up in a dark, back corner of my mind, where it would not seep into my thoughts, unbidden; but, with Jen pregnant with our first child, it is all I can think about.

The other day, I ventured into the attic and fished out my old tape recorder. It wasn't until my father was dying of prostate cancer, that I thought to have some questions answered, and I went and bought a tape recorder, a Craig 2621 DC. It was a beast of a machine. A hefty rectangle that recorded onto cassette tapes. During my last few visits with him, I'd set the recorder down on the coffee table in my father's den and it would tick and whir as it recorded. My father would look at the hulk of a device with disdain, and his cold eyes would rise to mine, and it made me feel like what I was doing was breaking his heart. I was stubborn about it, though. I was going to have answers.

His den was spectacular. Full length windows looked out over the brow of Lookout Mountain. Chattanooga was there in distance, but you could also see a wide expanse of trees and

forest land. You could see four different states by just looking out the window. Birds of prey hovered at eye level as they surveyed the land below for food. The room was organized around his swiveling Eames chair, which was placed in its exact center. The coffee table was off to the side, so that the chair I would sit in was jammed into the corner. In the opposite corner was an easel, and surrounding the room, covering the walls, in infantry-like fashion, were his birds.

From his position in the room, my father could admire the vibrant blue wings of the Magpie Jay, the ridiculous, rainbow beak of the Atlantic Puffin, and the territorial battle of two Solitary Sandpipers, just by spinning around in his chair.

He refused to speak in front of the tape recorder. This went on for weeks, until his symptoms started taking over and the pain became unbearable. We had morphine, but he refused it until the very end. There's a moment, I think, when you finally cross a threshold, and you know you're going to be gone soon and there's no turning back, that you realize you owe some people some answers. Or at least, you want to get as much out of you as you can before you're gone. Maybe not that you owe anybody anything. Maybe it's just to prove to yourself that your answers actually mean something to someone; the fear that they won't have been the reason you were afraid to voice them until now.

Suffice it to say, that I listened to those recordings over and over, and what I know about my father comes mostly from those tapes. In many ways, he's more alive to me on those cassette tapes than he ever was in person.

It didn't matter to my father whether the birds were overpopulated or endangered. He killed without prejudice. All that mattered was that he get what he needed to make his paintings as lifelike as possible. Kill, paint. Kill, paint.

My grandfather, who was a salesman, taught him to hunt. Among other things, Grandpa sold fishing nets, the kind you drag behind the boat in the hopes of scoring lots of shrimp and bait fish, while also hauling in anything else from toilet seats to sea turtles. His prospective clients were the fishermen along the gulf coast, so he was gone a lot. He was a hobby hunter, and on one particular weekend, he took my father dove hunting in south Louisiana, and showed him how to use a rifle.

Meandering through the woods, my father noticed a hawk hovering above the trees, with its wings set against the wind.

“What about that one?” my father asked.

“You don’t shoot hawks,” his father said.

“Why not?”

“Because they don’t taste right. And you don’t go walking around in the woods, rifle at the ready, to shoot any living, moving creature. You’re after something useful. Something practical. You find a spot, scout it out, and in our case, you go find your blinds, and you wait until you see some doves.”

“How do you know they don’t taste good?” my father asked. He never got a good answer.

While my father didn’t get his first kill that day, he saw his first dead bird, speckled with dark, red blood. He watched the way its head bobbed about on its neck as his father handled it and placed it inside his game pouch. A treasure in a treasure chest.

When my grandfather gave his son his first rifle, he must have had no clue what it would mean. My father would hunt every day. At first, he stuck to the rules, killing pigeons and ducks and turkeys. Things that taste good. But then, he started shooting swans, and squirrels, and

pigeons. He skinned and butchered these animals himself, and brought the meat to his mother to cook, passing it off as guinea, or duck, or rabbit. He wanted to taste everything. He wanted to see why he couldn't kill everything. What he found was that he could.

It wasn't long thereafter, that my father started perfecting his system, and his art. Bird after bird, and specimen after specimen, my father harvested his muses and propped up their corpses in his room where he could see them from his easel. He described it as a kind of dance. He would pose them in various positions, carrying them, flying them around over his head, like a boy with a model airplane. He would nail their outstretched wings to the wall, hunched in, angling for the most realistic position. All of his watercolors are life-sized. With some of them, he even plopped the bird down onto the canvas and did a stenciling. He'd fill in the intricacies of the feathers and contours later. His watercolors became prints that were shipped all over the world. Critics were wowed. They claimed he had the ability to capture the soul of a bird on canvas. They were more right than they knew.

As a child, I made the assumption so many others in the public made about my father: that he was an advocate for environmental conservation. Surely, anyone with so much reverence for the majesty of wildlife would be. At the very least, someone whose livelihood depended on the existence of those birds, would want to preserve them. It was my dream to become a conservationist. An ornithologist. To preserve and protect living creatures. After his death, I was transferred from Tennessee Wildlife to Louisiana Wildlife, and we moved to New Orleans. From there, I was able to explore the wetlands, the area where my father gave birth to his thirst for blood. I was struck by the abundance of life, and I worked hard to preserve it.

There was an incident that my father described to me on the last night of his life. It involved a flock of ospreys, majestic white and black blurs across the sky. My father shot one,

and then another. He only ever intended to shoot enough to have a suitable specimen for his work. Sometimes, if his shot was off, the bird would be unsuitable as a model, mangled as it was. He liked to kill a couple, just in case. But on this day, his finger didn't pull away from the trigger until every last bird he found in the sky lay cold and bloody on the ground. He shot, and he killed, and he repeated, and when he was done, his thirst for killing hadn't been quenched. So he shot at a squirrel in a nearby tree. In all of my recordings, this was the only episode that caused my father to show remorse.

"I didn't like the way I came out that day," he said. "I dropped all those birds in about the same spot, and when I found the bodies, on the ground and in the trees, blood and carnage, I felt scared, a little bit. I told myself that I had gotten carried away. That what I did wasn't right. But there was something inside of me that didn't really believe that. Have you ever seen my painting of the osprey? They say it's one of my best."

They did say that, and I used to agree. The painting is unquestionably violent. In two stages, the first stage depicts the bird, with its sharp, curved beak and talons outstretched in a dive, it's wings like arrows at its side. In the second stage, the bird rises, wings extended, carrying a wriggling, bloody bass, pierced by its long talons.

There are always unintended consequences. In birding, setting out nets in the hopes of catching banded birds, the birds sometimes thrash about in the nets so wildly that they get tangled and break their legs or their wings. I've seen birds strangle themselves.

My father laughed in my face when I joined up with Tennessee Wildlife. I'm sure he couldn't comprehend how skewed an influence he was on me. How could that man's son, that man with the bloodlust for endangered species, become a staunch conservationist? What actions

will I make, intentional or otherwise, that will affect my own child's future? So often, it's what we try to control, over which we have no control.

The Incline Railway runs up the side of Lookout Mountain. That train is quite a machine. Built in the 19th century, the locomotive goes straight up the plateau. Near the top, it's so steep you feel like you could blast off into space.

My father rode it as a kid. He admitted to being somewhat underwhelmed by the 'ride,' but shared with me a pocket of a moment he shared with a hawk by his window. The bird sat still on a branch, hidden by the leaves, as the giant locomotive rumbled up the gorge with three feet on either side. The train was at its steepest point, and the excited faces of all its passengers stared straight ahead. My father, though, saw this hawk and looked directly into its deep, black eye, and the eye looked back into his.

"The eye was hollow," he said. "And I wanted so badly to -" and for the life of me, no matter how many times I listened to the tape, I couldn't tell if he said 'kill it,' or 'fill it.'

Dragon Team

On date night, Mark crouched on a footstool in the walk-in closet. So low to the ground, with his head held down and his chin pressed against his chest, he looked like a large, sick frog. Apart from a few drawers, and a section of the hanging rack in the unlit corner of the room, the closet belonged to Amy. Patterned flower dresses. Rows of stilettos like soldiers in lines. An entire secretary filled with oils, perfumes, and jewelry.

Mark looked backwards at himself. His hanging manhood inside his drooping boxers. The incision scar was still pink. A vasectomy he never wanted. But the nursery had been converted into a bathroom. A large bathroom. Who needs a second kid when you could have a great, big shower? Heated marble floors? Two sinks?

He heard the sounds of Amy primping. Slosh of water in the jacuzzi. Whoosh of the hairdryer. Snips of tiny scissors. A ritual that, at one time, he believed had been performed to attract his attention. If it ever was, it was no more.

“Finished my homework!” Brandon called from a room downstairs.

Brandon would be starting up his new video game. A good kid. Fourteen now. Got good grades. Respected elders. Every babysitter said they didn’t need to be there, so no more babysitter.

Mark and Amy were still trying to make it work. They had had a discussion. They didn’t want the boy to get hurt. Not yet. Not by them. But they had to know if seeing other people was

the right thing to do. So, date night started once a month. Perhaps, they said, when Brandon entered high school, he would be old enough to understand.

Amy's footsteps sounded in the hallway, and Mark stood up. Amy opened the door. They edged by each other, making eye contact. Forced smiles. Like greeting a stranger on the street.

They walked downstairs together, though Brandon was not near the staircase to see them, and together they went to the study where Brandon had just turned on the video game console, his completed math homework out on the desk. Amy picked up the algebra and looked it over.

"Okay," she said. "This is everything?"

"Yes, ma'am," Brandon said.

"Eighth graders have it easy these days," Mark said, even though he hated people who talked like that.

"We're off to the movies, Brandon," Amy said. "Back by ten. We love you, little guy."

"Bye. Have fun," Brandon said. On the screen, a fire-breathing dragon flew in circles above a small, hut-filled village. A man and a woman, dressed in armor, scaled a rocky incline.

They kissed Brandon on the head, went outside, and walked to their respective cars.

"Have fun," Amy said. "Remember, if you get back early again, park down the street until I get back. Not in the driveway."

Mark nodded, and got in his car. He drove, following Amy's brake lights to the end of the block, where he watched her turn away. Waiting at the stop sign, he felt suddenly sick. Like he could vomit. And tired. Tired of this game. Tired of drinking at the bar around the corner, waiting for Amy to finish finding. . . what? Love? A fuck buddy? He was too ashamed to ask if she'd found anyone of interest, yet.

He'd gone on a few dates, when they started this thing. Most of them divorcées. They were nice women, but his heart hadn't been in it. He went on a date with a widow whose husband died in his sleep of a brain aneurysm. She just woke up one morning, and there he lay, stiff as a board. Mark kissed her, when he dropped her at her house. He hadn't kissed anyone but Amy in twenty-eight years. But he felt nothing. Nothing in the loins. Nothing in the heart. He stopped with the dates after that. He briefly entertained the idea that Amy might be pretending, too. Just drinking alone somewhere, waiting for ten o'clock. Too often, though, she'd come home with smudged lipstick, or mussed up hair.

He was tired of driving aimlessly around the city on date night. Tired of sitting at the bar around the corner, drinking gin, until it was time to meet Amy and walk, together again, into their family home. He would, this night, stay home with Brandon. He felt like he should spend some time with the boy. One on one time. Father and son. Mark pulled a U-turn and parked back in his driveway. Walking into the study, Brandon had not heard him come in, engrossed as he was in the video game.

"Having fun?" Mark asked, sitting in the chair next to Brandon. Brandon looked at him, confused.

"Thought you left," Brandon said, looking back at the screen.

"I wasn't feeling well," Mark said. "A headache. But your mom wanted to see the movie, so I told her to go on."

On the screen, a woman lay asleep in bed. The room was furnished entirely of wooden objects, stools and armchairs. A line of morning light traveled across the floor and passed over the woman's eyes, and she awoke. The boisterous din of a crowd could be heard in the background. She got out of bed, fully dressed in a gray tunic, which was separated at the waist

by a thick, brown belt. Her eyes were big and green, and her hair was straight, black, and shoulder-length. She took a step, hesitated, and then walked outside.

A mass of people cheered and chanted her name.

“Leona! Leona!” they shouted.

Mark watched his son stare at the television. He held the controller in front of him, like an offering, and pressed buttons.

The streets were so filled with people that Leona had nowhere to go. She took a step forward, and the crowd parted for her. She walked through a narrow path that sucked her in and closed in around her.

Brandon’s controller vibrated noisily.

“I can’t move her where I want,” Brandon said, moving the joystick in all directions.

The crowd pushed Leona through the streets and into the main plaza. The village was nestled between two large hills, beyond which a great, gray mountain loomed. Its peak was obscured by high-hanging clouds. Occasionally, a spray of fire burst forth through the clouds.

The crowd ushered Leona to the middle of the town square, where the village mayor, wearing a large sash, stood on a large, circular platform. Leona was raised onto the stage.

“Leona the Warrior!” the mayor shouted. “You have proven yourself to be the most accomplished, the most coveted, the most enviable, the most fierce, and the most deadly fighter in the village. You have been chosen to lead this year’s Dragon Team. The Dragon Team is the most honored, sacred union in the history of our land, and every year, the Dragon Team takes with them the privilege, and the duty, of bringing us peace. Your charge is to climb Mount Matrim, to overcome all obstacles before you, to avoid harming innocents, and to reach the peak, where you and your partner must attempt to slay the Mother Dragon.”

The crowd roared. Brandon's controller buzzed. Mark saw a second controller on the floor by the television.

"Can I play?" Mark asked.

"I'm not sure if it's two-player," Brandon said. "You could try."

Mark picked up the second controller and sat down.

"Now, it is time," the mayor continued, "to choose your partner. Let the trials begin."

Instructions came onto the screen.

PRESS 'A' To Punch

PRESS 'B' To Kick

Use the Joystick To Dodge

"Arturo!" the mayor announced. A hulking man with boulders for biceps rose onto the stage and froze. Statistics flashed onto the screen.

ARTURO.

HEIGHT: 6'8".

WEIGHT: 300.

ATTRIBUTES: SLOW, POWERFUL, INTIMIDATING.

When play resumed, Mark found that he could control Arturo. They fought. Leona anticipated each of Arturo's slow, predictable moves, his punches moving through the air in wide swaths. Leona calmly moved around him as he swung, and when a hulking fist caught the air beside her head, she threw a powerful kick to his stomach that knocked him to the ground.

"Will you choose Arturo for your Dragon Team?" the mayor asked.

A = Yes.

B = No.

Mark watched Brandon, his eyes focused on the screen. Leona kicked Arturo, and he slid out of the ring and back into the crowd.

“Lee!” called the mayor. A small man wielding nun chucks climbed into the ring.

LEE.

HEIGHT: 5’9”.

WEIGHT: 160.

ATTRIBUTES: SPEED, INTENSITY, ELUSIVENESS.

Lee’s nun chucks spun at his wrists like black disks. He went after Leona in sharp, wild strikes. She dodged every attack, bouncing about the ring like a rabbit. Lee was too fast for Leona to counter-attack, but Lee quickly began to slow, and without a blow landed by either fighter, Lee dropped to his knees, breathing rapidly, and the fight stopped.

The mayor asked again, and Leona kicked Lee out of the ring, as she had done Arturo.

“Gangulphus!” the mayor announced.

GANGULPHUS.

HEIGHT: 5’11”

WEIGHT: 180

ATTRIBUTES: INTELLIGENCE, BALANCE, DEDICATION

Gangulphus was unarmed. Mark pressed ‘B’ and Gangulphus fired his leg with speed and precision directly at Leona’s face. Leona blocked the kick with her forearm, and the fight began. They traded blows. Punches and kicks were parried away. When Gangulphus landed an elbow to her gut, Leona smiled. She counter attacked, bringing her knee into his forehead, which sent him

stumbling backwards. Gangulphus lowered his shoulder into Leona's chest, and they were on the ground, writhing. When they separated, blood trickled down Leona's chin, and Gangulphus clutched at his stomach.

“Will you choose Gangulphus for your Dragon Team?”

PRESS 'A' FOR YES

PRESS 'B' FOR NO

Mark looked over at his son. Brandon smiled. Leona took Gangluphus' hand in hers, and the mayor brought their hands up into the air. The crowd screamed.

“It's a fun game,” Brandon said. Mark nodded. He was having fun.

The mayor spoke. “Climb Mount Matrim. Kill the Mother Dragon. But, be sure to avoid killing any innocents. It is an honored quest you set out on. You are charged with maintaining the sanctity of that honor.”

Leona and Gangulphus stepped off the stage and the crowd parted. They followed the path of villagers, and along the way, people gave them gifts. Sacks of food, mostly. Nuts and berries and grains. Things they would need for the journey. Many people donated sacks of gold pieces, in case they needed money on the road. They were greeted by an armorer, who held up two ornate, gold-coated chest plates. The armorer dressed them in the chest plates, and added the rest of the suit, covering their whole bodies in golden armor. He deposited two helmets on their heads. Lastly, he gifted a long, shiny sword to Leona, and a bow and arrow quiver, to Gangulphus.

The music turned ominous just as Leona and Gangulphus left the village walls. This was to be no easy ascent. They set off on a narrow, winding road that immediately became rocky and steep. Visibly slowed by the armor, the weapons, and the supplies they carried, Mark and

Brandon's controllers vibrated lightly as Gangulphus and Leona plodded along. The road was cut short by a ten-foot rock wall of jagged stones. Mark and Brandon furiously pressed buttons, urging their characters up the wall. Gangulphus, nearing the top of the wall, lost his grip and fell on his back, knocking off his golden shoulder pads. Without them, Gangulphus could move more freely, so he left them there. Leona, who had cleared the top of the wall, reached down to pull Gangulphus up with her.

Leona and Gangulphus ate raspberries as they continued up the road. The food raised the levels on their health meters. Soon, they came upon a bridge, and a creature came out from underneath.

"Ah!" said the creature in a low, rasping voice. "There's two of you. That's double!"

"Double what?" Leona asked.

"How much money have you got between you? We trolls take tolls," the troll said, cackling.

Gangulphus looked into his sack and pulled out a handful of gold coins. He handed them over to the troll. The troll inspected them.

"It's not enough. No no no, it's not enough."

More trolls came out from under the bridge. They surged forward, and Leona pulled out her sword and thrashed it about, catching several trolls with three swipes. Gangulphus fired arrows at any troll who charged their way.

They fought through the trolls, sustaining some damage, and losing some of their sacks of food to theft. They walked until they came to a clearing. Ahead, there were two paths to choose from. One path looked steep, rocky, and treacherous. The other looked to be a mild incline, with

no visible dangers. Gangulphus walked to stand in front of the treacherous route, and Leona the other.

“Dad, that way looks like an easy way to die.”

“But it looks faster.”

“It won’t make a difference how fast it is if it kills us.”

“Your way might kill us, though. We lost most of our food, remember? Look at our health meters. They’re low. You’re limping. We need to get up the mountain as quickly as possible and defeat the dragon.”

Leona, as the leader, had to make the decision. She walked down the path with the smooth ground and Gangulphus followed.

It was as Mark had feared. The road was not treacherous, but it was very long. They walked, and they walked, moving slowly up the side of the mountain. The scenery didn’t change. They met no one in the road.

“Well,” Brandon said. “This is boring.”

“We’re not in good shape,” Mark said, gesturing to their health meters.

“I know, I know,” Brandon said, exasperated. “But we can’t turn back at this point.”

The kid was right. Things would go badly for them if they doubled back. They had to press on. They walked and walked, were not threatened with any obstacles, until, at long last, they could see the summit.

By the time they reached the summit, their health meters were barely a quarter full. They moved slowly, and at the top, they peered down into what seemed a giant crater. It was a dormant volcano, steam rising from the black ground. And there, in its center, was the dragon. Its scales were brownish green, like the color of the forest floor after a rain, and shaped like large

spades. It looked to be impenetrable, but for the dragon's yellow underside, devoid of armored scales. Swinging back and forth, the dragon's tail was equipped with giant white spikes, like rhino horns, but arranged like the end of a mace. Beneath its legs was its baby. It had not grown its scales yet, and its skin appeared smooth.

"What do we do?" asked Mark.

"One last crazy rush, I guess?"

Gangulphus flung shot at arrow at the Mother Dragon. It hit her in the shoulder and bounced off. The dragon made as if to brush a fly off of its shoulder.

"We have to hit it in the underside," Brandon said. "Maybe, if I distract it, you can get a clean shot."

Leona ran down the side of the crater, health meter dropping. Gangulphus watched. The dragon roared, watching Leona charge toward it, sword outstretched. Gangulphus flung a few more arrows, to no avail. The dragon seemed to be waiting for Leona to attack.

"I wonder why it doesn't just fly around and kill us," Mark said.

"Protecting its baby, probably," Brandon said.

He was right. When Leona was in reach, the dragon stretched out a long arm and wrapped Leona inside its sharp claws. Holding her up into the air, her legs flailing, the dragon screamed.

Gangulphus fired another arrow, but this time with a lower trajectory. The arrow flew just under the dragon's outstretched arm and landed squarely into the chest of the baby dragon, who let out a high screech. Mother Dragon dropped Leona. Leona went in underneath and thrust her sword upwards, sticking Mother Dragon deep into the chest. The dragon stumbled backwards and fell on its side, the area around the long sword spewing green blood.

“Yes!” Mark yelled, punching Brandon in the shoulder. Brandon smiled and laughed alongside him. They had defeated the dragon, and Leona and Gangulphus climbed out of the crater. Leona and Gangulphus began the descent back to the village.

“Listen, Brandon,” Mark said. “There’s something I- something your mother and I have been meaning to tell you.”

“Wait,” Brandon said. “Why is there no cheering? No happy music? We just beat the game, didn’t we?”

Leona and Gangulphus were reentering the village, and the people were gathered again in the village square, but everyone was silent. There was no cheering, no victor’s march. The village had their backs turned to them. When they approached, no one parted to let them through.

“We did beat the game,” Mark said. “What gives?”

“You killed that baby dragon,” Brandon said. “We weren’t supposed to kill innocents.”

“It was a dragon!”

“It was the only thing we encountered that could have been innocent. It had done no harm to anyone.”

Just then, Mark heard the front door open, and Amy stormed into the study, red in the face.

“What are you doing, Mark?” she said.

“I’m playing this video game. Remember, I wasn’t feeling well, so I let you go off to the movies on your own?”

“I- I- You’re playing a video game?” she said, looking from Mark to Brandon.

“Do y’all really think,” Brandon said, tears suddenly filling up his eyes, “that I don’t know you’re getting divorced?”

“What!?” Amy said.

Brandon got up and ran out of the room, choking back sobs. Amy also turned and left abruptly. Mark stood up. He was proud of Brandon, and a little sad, but relieved. Leona and Gangulphus walked away from the village, and when they came to a fork in the road, they took separate paths.

Mark found Amy in the kitchen, elbows on the counter and head in her hands, grasping at strands of hair on either side of her head with her fingers. He pulled a bottle of red wine from the back of the liquor cabinet. It had been a gift from someone, nicer than they normally drank, so they had saved it for a special occasion, only no occasion came, and they quickly forgot it existed. Mark found the corkscrew and popped the bottle open.

“Like a glass of wine?” Mark asked.

“Have you lost your mind? Why would you go and do something like that?”

“It’s been there for years,” Mark said, pouring himself a glass. “Had to drink it some time.”

“I meant Brandon, Mark. How could you do that to Brandon? Our son?”

Standing over the kitchen counter, Mark took a large swallow of wine. It was rich, and good, and made him feel light. He felt rejuvenated. He felt as if he could climb the highest mountain, and slay the world’s fiercest dragon. Amy slapped the counter and bounded out of the kitchen. Mark heard her footsteps quicken, and he listened to her close the bathroom door behind her.

“Together, we raised a good kid. He’s going to be fine.”

Animators

You're about to leave for work when you notice Queen Mab looking lonesome in your living room. Even with her whole kingdom, its fields and its swamps, its knights and its knightesses, its turkeys and its dandelions, encircling her in vibrant acrylic color on your walls, are lowered and morose.

"What's with you?" you ask of your queen. "All the time with this sadness?"

She looks with pity and sadness on the glory of her kingdom, which you created for her, and ignores you. You know you will be late for work, but you take a pencil to the wall anyway and sketch an outline of a fat, healthy baby to fit into her arms. Then, you sketch a large, heavily armored man with gigantor biceps, someone to protect her and her babe. You grab your travel bag, which you always keep stocked with paints, pens, charcoals, and pencils, and walk out into the morning. When you return to your queen in the evening, you will decide what would make her happiest, the baby or the man.

Waiting for the bus, you cannot help but think about Queen Mab's child. Would its cheeks be fat and pinchable? Would it be a cryer? A laugher? Would it be beautiful? Mab is sternly beautiful, with a prominent brow and long, flowing golden locks. The baby might be happy, always smiling no matter how glum its mother appeared to be. Maybe.

On the bus you look exclusively at the surface of your thighs. Spontaneous chatter with strangers is something you avoid at all costs, but you understand that your painted, neon green

wingtips and orange Dumbo tie don't help in this regard. The bus stops at Disney, and you disembark incident-free.

At work, they ask you for sketch ideas of 'a new concept' they seem excited about: a quirky talking duck who goes around causing harmless mischief. On most days, you would remind them that Disney already has a famous character with similar characteristics, or you would draw them a sketch of their request in a blue and white sailor's outfit to see if the wheels start turning. Not today. You thank them and go sit at your desk.

You bang out a series of ten sketches, drawing, as you rarely do, exactly what you know they want: a happy, smooth, likable duck with no rough edges, blemishes, psychological or physiological flaws. You make sure it is distinguishable from Donald, so that your bosses remain ignorant, and you can go home early.

They're thrilled with your ducks. They tell you you're on your game today. They tell you this duck will be the new face of Disney. You do not show your chagrin. They tell you to take the rest of the day off, to come back tomorrow with the same intensity.

You stop at a flower stand on your way out and buy a bunch of lilies, a reward for your vainglory-less work, and a peace offering for your queen.

From the bus stop bench, you can see, about a mile down the road, the flashing lights of various emergency vehicles surrounded by a wall of cars. The bus will be delayed and you sink into a dreadful pout, lilies bent over your knee, thinking of the lost time that could have been spent encouraging your poor Queen Mab, when a girl next to you asks, "Do you have a cat?"

The first thing you notice are chains, six of them, three on either side of her face, looping from nose-rings in her nostrils to earrings embedded within her earlobes, earrings that stretch out the cartilage into quarter-sized holes. She's about your age and her skin is your same shade. She

looks just like one of your Grunts, the wicked Prince Deviant's team of nefarious henchmen, whose forces have been, for a few months now, reasonably contained in your pantry. After an unprecedented tenure of peace in Queen Mab's kingdom, it seems Prince Deviant's forces are now on the move.

"Yes," you say, before gathering up her words and recalling that you do not, in fact, own a cat.

Suddenly, she extends towards your knee her arm, which is tattooed, a pink rose vine spiraling up into the sleeves of her black leather jacket. Her hand moves quickly and hovers near your thigh before an overwhelming series of mental and physical convulsions erupt within you, as if you had been struck in the leg by a high-voltage Taser gun. In one instant, you wonder if she will touch you, hurt you, or rob you.

She laughs delicately at your spasm, hesitates, and then snatches your flowers.

"I think I'll be keeping these, then," she says.

You turn up your palms, unable to voice your confusion.

"Do you want your cat to die?" she asks.

"No," you say, disregarding the fact that it does not exist.

"Then I wouldn't bring home poisonous flowers," she says. "Instead, I'd give them to a friendly stranger who could use a happy day."

She closes her eyes, lifts the bouquet to her face, and breathes them in through her mask of stainless steel accessories.

'What the hell?' you think. You wonder what this kind of woman is doing in this neighborhood, where all there is to find are strip malls, condos, and office buildings leased by lowbrow lawyers and pediatricians. And Disney. She had come here, you conclude, to prey on

people exactly like you. You look straight ahead and keep your mouth shut, hoping the flowers were all she wanted.

Then she asks, “What’s with the getup?”

What you wouldn’t give to be back home with Queen Mab, painting her a new, happy baby, the heir to her throne. She may be upset about something, but at least she protects you.

“Sorry,” she interjects. “I just had a meeting with a hideous lawyer, and your tie and your shoes and your flowers are so pretty, is all.”

Forced compliments. She’s trying to butter you up. You feel that to ignore her might make things worse.

“I’m an animator,” you say, pointing out the beige brick building behind you. “For Disney.”

“That’s Disney? What about the mice and men in dog suits?”

You tell her about the entrance around the corner, at the front of the complex, with the three story tall Mickey hat and the columns made out of all seven dwarves.

“I always thought the Snow White story treaded the date rape line,” she says. “I’m an artist too. I make tattoos.”

You ask what kind.

“Any kind you want. Usually it’s barbed wire and flames and hearts with people’s names in them. I spray murals on walls, too.”

“Graffiti?” you say, before you can stop yourself.

The bus arrives, and you scamper aboard before she can begin her attack. You find an empty seat in the back and take out a sketchpad. You’re already outlining Mab’s baby, with your

head as low as it will go, when the pierced woman sits beside you. You hope that, your head buried in your sketchbook, she might grant you some privacy.

The baby starts out fat, then, you round it out softly in charcoal, curled into the shape it would take in its mother's arms. You struggle with its stomach, which is rotund and protruding and stubbornly insists on looking pregnant. In dark pencil, you bring the baby's face into focus with the pronounced brow of its mother, rounded cheeks, and thin, straight lips. The infant's eyes come out almond-shaped and mischievous, and you see its burgeoning personality as wild and irrepressible as its mothers'. What will this child mean for your kingdom?

"Do you have one?" she asks.

You pull your head up from your sketchbook. You remember that you're on a bus and you're sitting with this strange woman, and that she scares you. You don't know what she is talking about.

"A baby?" she asks.

"No," you say.

You return to your drawing, and the woman gasps and starts to cry. Her head crashes onto your shoulder and wedges itself under your chin. You can feel her warm tears falling onto your neck, a tingling sensation down your side. Suddenly, you realized you cannot remember the last time you have had actual, physical human contact.

"My baby," she says.

Those few who have boarded since you sat down now turn at the sound of this hysterical woman. The bus arrives at your stop, but you now feel like a prisoner, with the weight of her head pinning you to your seat. The bus rolls on, and she continues to cry.

You return your pencils and sketchbook to your bag, sketching now impossible. A few stops later, she lifts her head from your shoulder, gets up, and runs off the bus. You follow.

“You live in this neighborhood?” she asks.

“No,” you say. “But I missed my stop a while ago.

She lifts her palm to her forehead, wincing. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m not sure what came over me,” she says. “You’re a good drawer.”

You thank her. You have never been to this part of town. The storefronts and buildings are dotted with graffiti, mostly tags, initials, gang symbols. Nothing seems to be open, even though it’s one in the afternoon.

“Well, you’re here,” she says. “Would you like a look around?”

“Eh,” you say, “I probably ought to catch a bus back the other way.”

“Suit yourself,” she says. “Sorry about the crying. I needed that.”

Before you can cross the street, people are hollering at your girl.

“Sandra!” a woman shouts from a nearby stoop. “Where you been, honey?”

“Had to go meet a lawyer,” she says, and she grabs you by the shoulder. “Here’s a friend, Virginia. I’d like you to meet – I never got your name.”

“Digby,” you say.

“Virginia, this is Digby. Digby works for Disney.”

“Disney?” Virginia says, excited. “Like Mickey Mouse Disney? Lanette! Come out here, child.”

A little girl with pink barrettes in her hair comes running out onto the stoop.

“This man works for *Disney*,” Virginia says. “Digby, would you give my daughter an autograph?”

You walk up to the little girl, pull out a piece of paper and a pencil, and make a quick sketch of Mickey. You hand it to her.

“You didn’t sign it,” Lanette says.

She hands it back to you, and you scribble ‘Digby’ in a corner. Lanette takes it and hugs it to her chest, smiling. “Mickey!” she yells, running back into the house.

Despite being uncomfortable in this new environment, you feel helpful and a sense of warmth.

“Sure you don’t want a look around?” Sandra asks.

“Very well,” you say.

She takes you down the block and around the corner where she stops at what you presume is one of her murals. A girl is curled into a ball of pain, brandishing her knee. Her mother kneels over her with a rag, dabbing at the blood. A detail catches your eye that feels out of place. The mother’s voluptuous breasts hang out of her apron in elaborate, pornographic detail. From her bag, Sandra takes out three cans of spray paint. She turns to you and says, “Teenage boys can be so creative, can’t they?”

She begins covering up the mother’s breasts with yellow, blue, and red spray paint.

“It’s not perfect,” she says. “But I can’t carry every color around with me for touchups. I only work in aerosol.”

You notice the precision of the girl’s pain, the crumpled wrinkles in the corners of her closed eyes, the distress of the contorted angle of her body. You see Queen Mab as a suffering figure, but her damage is subtler, closeted inside.

“There, nearly good as new,” she says. “What do you think?”

“It’s great,” you admit.

Despite never having told a single living person, you tell her about Queen Mab and Prince Deviant. You tell her how Mab is the protector of the realm you created, and how she is in a constant battle against the evil Prince Deviant and his army of Grunts. You tell her that Mab is beautiful and strong, though sometimes sad. You tell her that you sometimes feel you are not good enough, that the work you do can never live up to the Queen's expectations. You tell her how often you touch up your work. You change the angle of an arm, or advance Prince Deviant's army from the living room into the kitchen. You do it so often that ghosts of the previous versions eventually show through the new additions of oil, making Queen Mab look like a many-armed Hindu god.

She laughs. This makes you nervous.

"Why are you laughing?" you ask.

"I've never thought about making murals in the inside of my house. For me, art doesn't exist unless someone else sees it. I don't do much fantasy, but I've got something you could relate to. People from wealthy communities come to our neighborhood and scoop up our kids and teach them something called "Conflict Resolution." Isn't that the most bullshit term you've ever heard? What conflicts in your life ever get resolved? So I created, The Solver. When he shoots two people in an argument, they come to a compromise. When he shoots a criminal with a handgun, the weapon turns into a flower."

She leads you down another block and turns into an alley, which opens into a courtyard. The rear walls of the buildings are covered in her murals. In one, a black teenager runs with an outstretched gun, which spits out, in the direction of another kid running away and looking over his shoulder, a flag reading 'bang.' In another, an old, white man lounges asleep in his Eames chair, facing a threesome of golfers: a Latino, an Asian, and a black man, the three of them

surrounding the flagpole, putters at the ready. In another, floating faces of children - yellow faces, brown faces, black faces, white faces, pink faces - hover around each other, ranging in emotion from melancholy to mildly content, under which appear the words "Our Future."

You follow her to a nook in the corner of the courtyard where she stands. You cringe to find that she is crying again. The wall she stares at has recently been whitewashed.

"It's not that I can't just paint it again," she says. "It's just, when you want one thing in one day to go right, you know? Just once."

You both stand there, staring at the carelessly applied white paint. Then she turns and walks away, and you watch her go.

You take the acrylics out of your bag, a yellow, a blue, and a red, and you begin mixing colors. You get your thickest brush and start with the feet, bare, and planted firmly in the white space.

"Hey," Sandra says. You turn around to find her walking towards you. She takes out her spray cans. She flips the yellow and the blue in her wrists and starts spraying a green, grassy ground around Mab's feet. From there you raise two slender legs, rising into a knee-length, black skirt, a massive sword hanging from the hip. Sandra continues with a backdrop of fields, rolling hills, trees, and horses and deer. The torso rises rigid and erect, a chain mail jacket protecting the heart and vital organs. The arms you pull across the body, and you clamp both hands onto the hilt of the sword. You paint the helmeted head and fill in the face starting with sharp eyebrows. The nose you point toward the center of the courtyard and the lips you purse, thinner than usual. The eyes are round and alert. Lightly, you add the wings, splayed out like ghosts behind her back. In the far corner of the mural, Sandra has drawn an evil figure, dressed in black and red, sitting on a throne.

“What’s that?” you ask.

“Prince Deviant,” she says. “My version.”

“The whole point is to keep him away, though,” you say.

“The only way to defeat him, is to know him, and confront him,” she says.

You walk up to the wall once more, and paint a pink rose on Mab’s right forearm. Queen Mab likes her tattoo.

VITA

Eli Gay was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English from Sewanee: The University of the South in 2011. He joined the UNO Low Residency Creative Writing Workshops to pursue a Masters in Fine arts in Fiction in 2012.