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If There's Anything I Can Do

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If There's Anything I Can Do

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Pass Me By

We play a show at Dacey's. The whole night I look for Jane in the crowd even though I know she isn't coming. After our set I meet a blonde photographer. She tells me how I fit the bass-player stereotype—quiet, brooding, lithe. I tell her how nice it feels to be labeled and she laughs and tells me to lighten up and that we ought to go somewhere else for a drink because Dacey's is lame. "Nobody goes here anymore," she says. "It's too crowded."

I know I like her when she mom-arms me at an intersection, saves me from stepping into traffic as a truck accelerates through a yellow light.

At Magellan's she buys us drinks and tells me to order a pizza because she hasn't eaten and she can tell I haven't either. "Do you always look so sickly?" she asks.

She tells me about the local magazines she shoots for. I tell her I started piano lessons at age four, guitar and bass at age nine. She wants to travel the globe and take photographs for National Geographic. I want to be a recording engineer, be the guy with a little basement studio that welcomes bands into his home to make records.

"Your parents divorced, right?" she asks.

"Yes," I say.

"Mine too. We just want everyone to be happy, don't we?"

Not until the walk to Cellar Door do we discuss exes. Her James is a talented filmmaker with so much love to give, but too closed off, too insecure. My Jane is a journalist with a jealous streak, but a good listener, with big green eyes like keys that unlock me. Her James moved out west two weeks after the break-up, always running from something. My Jane grew up in this city and will probably never leave. She could be around any goddamn corner. She crossed in front of my car at a stoplight the other day. Smoking a cigarette, eyes locked on her phone.

At Cellar Door the blonde photographer falls asleep at the bar after half a cocktail. As I help her into the backseat of a cab she calls me sweet. "But we're too similar," she says. "And the timing's all off. Sorry."

One winter afternoon I took a photograph of Jane on a sidewalk at sunset. I framed her on the left third, letting traffic work the depth of the right third. I bent my knees to get a low-angle, made her look tall, imposing, dark hair wild in the wind. I was about to snap the photo when a giant white box-truck passed alongside us. For a split-second, sunbeams bounced off the truck's aluminum siding and reflected a perfect, warm fill-light against Jane's left cheek. She gleamed, her pale face glowing like a starlet, all gold and amber. I had my finger on the button, but I hesitated, and as soon as I realized how perfect the light had been, the truck was gone.

Pretend, Elsie

Elsie awoke to a splash of yellow light on the pillow beside her, the spot usually reserved for Greg's stubbled face. She sat up and searched the sheets for her phone, found it dead beneath her pillow, and plugged it into the charger beside her nightstand. The room was a wreck; clothes, shoes, books, hangers, jewelry—all scattered across the floor. Her breath reeked, a foul mixture of vodka and stale morning air. She wanted to brush her teeth. No, she wanted water. She grabbed an empty pint glass off the floor, stepped over a pile of laundry, and walked to the living room.

As soon as she saw the mess she remembered. She threw things. They'd argued. The lamp on the side table leaned against the wall, its shade lopsided. Both stools at the kitchen island had toppled over. Several of Greg's records lay in front of his turntable. She remembered how loud they were. She never shouted like that at anyone, especially Greg. He had shouted too. The neighbors must've heard it all, thin as the walls were.

She gulped an entire glass of water before noticing the smashed flower pot on the kitchen floor. She'd thrown it at Greg's feet after he'd said something especially cruel. She remembered

the motions of their argument, the beats of their back and forth, but she couldn't sort out the details.

She started to sweep up the soil but then heard her phone turn on in the bedroom, a faint vibration against the hardwood of her dresser. She went to it, expecting it to be lunch time. But it was already past four. Her bartending shift at Cellar Door started in less than an hour and Drew would be pissed if she wasn't on time. She began to text him to say she might be late, and then she remembered. It was a message from Officer Stevens that started the fight. Greg had seen his name in her phone.

"Who's this Stevens?" he said. "And what's this about money?" He held up her phone. It had been on the coffee table when it vibrated, and Elsie asked him to bring it to her in the kitchen.

"He's no one," she said, "He's from the bar."

Greg set the phone down on the kitchen counter. "Why does a cop owe you money?" he asked. "You're an informant now?" He laughed nervously and sat at a bar-stool.

Elsie grabbed her phone. "It's nothing," she said. "He's just a drunk cop. I don't know what he's talking about." She lied.

After that, they sat in the living room and drank. When did the argument start? She couldn't remember yet.

She showered as quickly as she could. The warm water dulled her hangover. Since she'd started bartending at the beginning of the year, Drew had grown more strict. She knew he wouldn't fire her for being late, not after she'd been there for so long, but he could reduce her shifts if he wanted, and there were plenty of waiters and waitresses beneath her itching to get behind the bar.

She hardly toweled off before walking back to the bedroom, water dripping down her legs to the hardwood floor. The night before was more clear after the shower, but she still couldn't remember when exactly things had turned loud and nasty. A few weeks ago she'd brought up the idea of moving to Los Angeles at the end of the summer. She needed a change.

Greg worked days as a music teacher, and Elsie worked nights, long nights on the weekends, as late as 3am sometimes. They hardly ever got to see each other anymore. When they did see each other they were tired, and all they wanted to do was drink, eat, fuck, or sleep. Elsie thought California might give their whole relationship a jump-start, something new and exciting. Her sister had moved out there the year before with her boyfriend, Nickel. They worked on some commune or farm that Claire was always vague about. Greg called them hippies. "What kind of name is Nickel, anyway?" he always said. "Sounds like a wannabe drug dealer." But he wasn't, Elsie knew that. In fact, he was a musician. Claire said he knew a lot of people in the recording business out west. Elsie wanted to show Greg's music to Nickel. Maybe someone could sign him to a deal, get his recordings to a wider audience. But Greg didn't like the idea. "That's not what I want, that's what *you* want," he often said.

Elsie sat at her vanity mirror to put on makeup. Her skin was pale from dehydration, and faint red cracks split the whites of her eyes. The only thing worse than being late would be showing up looking like she'd overslept from drinking all night. She knew it was important to look good behind the bar. So much of the job was performance, where to throw your eyes, who to give your attention to, when to smile, when to look serious, when to ignore some drunk asshole and let somebody else take care of him. She was good at all that, and she was even better when it was busy and she had to think fast.

Often, as Elsie got ready for work, she heard piano music from the downstairs neighbors—a piano teacher and her son. She rarely saw either of them, but she always heard the piano in the afternoon. On Mondays, her one day off, she'd read and smoke cigarettes on the balcony, where you could hear the piano best. All spring she'd listened to a stranger improve steadily, to the point where Elsie couldn't even tell who was playing sometimes, the teacher or the student.

But there was no piano music today. She finished her make-up, found some bright stud earrings, and grabbed her purse from beside the bed. She dug through it, looking for her keys, but they weren't there. She looked a second time, thinking her eyes were just skipping over them. They still weren't there. She emptied the purse on the bed. No keys. She checked the hall tree by the front door. No keys. She looked for them all over—the coffee table, the kitchen island, in between the couch cushions. She checked the bathroom. She even checked the trash. No keys.

Greg was good at finding lost things. He told this story about how he lost his phone, how it was gone for over a day, and he had looked everywhere for it in their apartment. "I mean *everywhere*," he'd always say. "I even checked the freezer." He said he just accepted that it was gone, spent the whole day out in the city, stopping for coffee and food, and at the end of the day a few beers. He felt liberated not having the phone, a welcome disconnection from the world. Then he came home, and there it was, just sitting on the couch, dead center on the middle cushion, “like it had fallen from the ceiling.” He always said that line too. He'd go on from there about how, when you're looking for something, you have to forget for a while that you're looking for it, and then it'll appear.

She could've used his luck then. She checked the time: 4:43. It took fifteen minutes to get to work, maybe ten if she didn't hit any lights. She tried again to retrace her steps from the night

before. She'd made her drink, tried to ignore Greg's questions about Stevens, and sat in the living room on the love-seat across from him. She checked beneath the love-seat cushion, thinking maybe the keys had fallen out of her purse, but they weren't there. She remembered the purse beside her as she drank and talked to Greg. He'd asked her if she wanted to smoke with him but she said no. She never liked to anymore, gave her headaches.

She tried to remember what she did with her purse after that, but her mind drifted to their conversation. He stopped needling her about Stevens and instead brought up California, which surprised her. He talked about how his mother used to live there and hated it, and then he went on about how they wouldn't have jobs out there. How would they pay rent? Where would they live? Elsie tried to answer some of his questions but he kept cutting her off, so mostly she just listened and watched the smoke curl out of his mouth into the lamplight. He wasn't really even talking to her as much as the smoke, going on and on about all the obstacles of moving, starting over, learning a new city.

"I like it here," he said. "Work's not perfect but it's getting better. I know people in this city, people I can record music with. Out there I only know your sister and Nickel, and they're both fucking hippies."

"They're not hippies, Greg. I told you, he plays music. Claire says he plays with all kinds of bands there, sits in on studio sessions sometimes. He'd be a good connection. I don't know why you won't show him your music."

"I don't want to go into this again," he said.

"Okay. But why?"

"I just don't want to."

She paused. "You scared of what he might think?"

"What?" he said, looking at her finally instead of his hands.

“I don’t think you should be scared,” she said.

“I’m not scared,” Greg said. “I just don’t want to show him my music because I don’t like him. I’m not scared.”

“Okay,” Elsie said. She remembered a long silence between them, awkward and heavy. She drank fast through the silence, and then said, “I don’t want to work at the same shitty bar forever. I hate it there.”

"You make good money there," Greg said.

"So? So what? I've been saving money. I'm not worried about that."

“Right, because cops give you money for some reason,” Greg said.

Elsie chewed ice from her drink and looked long at Greg.

“Okay,” Elsie said. “You have to promise not to get angry.”

Greg set his pipe on the coffee table. “Angry about what?”

“Officer Stevens is a regular at Cellar Door,” Elsie said. She rose from the love-seat and walked to the kitchen to make another drink while she spoke. “He works vice. He asked me to help him with something.” She opened the freezer. “Do you want another drink?” she asked Greg.

“No,” he said. “Help him how?”

“Look, don’t get weird about this. It’s not weird.”

Greg stared at her, but said nothing.

“He and his team make fake online profiles in order to catch child predators,” she said. “He asked if I’d give him some photographs of me and I agreed. It’s for a good cause.”

Greg stood up. “And he paid you?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m trying to save up for the move, Greg.”

He paced around the living room for a few seconds, then approached her at the kitchen counter. “Do you realize how creepy that is?” he said.

“I knew you would say something like that,” Elsie said.

“Why are you saving money to move?” Greg said. “I don’t want to move.”

“Why are you so scared to take a chance with me?”

"Oh stop that, will you?" Greg’s voice was rising. "I'm being reasonable, that's all. You can’t sell yourself like that. It’s disgusting.”

“Stop it, Greg,” Elsie said. “You’re being an asshole.” She poured her drink.

"Keep sipping that drink," he mumbled.

"Fuck you,” she said.

"Did you fuck Stevens too?"

That set her off. She pushed the basil plant over the side of the island at him and he jumped back. Then she threw the napkin holder. She kept throwing things at him, whatever she could grab—cups, the soap dish, a few coasters. He yelled at her to stop, said he was sorry, but she kept throwing, cornering him into the living room against his record player and the sliding-glass door that led to the balcony. He tripped over a bin of his records and fell over before heading into the bedroom. She stood in the doorway throwing more at him. "Get the fuck out!" she yelled at him. She threw anything she could get her hands on. Clothes, shoes, her hair-dryer. He stood in front of her closet, dodging and ducking, covering his face. She reached into her purse for more things to throw. She threw lipstick. She threw her keys.

Elsie remembered throwing her keys right at him, but he'd ducked out of the way and then pushed past her, yelling something on his way out the door. She just kept shouting at him,

even after he'd left. And then she remembered crying, flopping down on her bed and sobbing, alternating between bouts of anger and sadness until finally her heart slowed down enough for her to sleep, her face flat against the mattress.

She wanted to call Greg and apologize, yet she was still so angry at him. But the keys. They must've been in the closet. She walked into her bedroom and bent down to the closet floor, her hands digging through dirty clothes, tossing everything out. And then she saw something she hadn't ever seen before. A hole. A small rectangular hole in the back corner of her closet about the width of three fingers. How had she never seen it before? She leaned over the opening and looked down, but all she saw was darkness. She threw everything out of her closet—clothes, bags, books, shoes—until the entire thing was empty. The keys were gone. They had fallen down the hole.

In a matter of minutes Elsie was downstairs on the first floor knocking on the neighbor's door, pounding on it. She tried to remember if that hole had always been there, but she knew it hadn't. She pounded on the door again. No answer. Maybe it *was* always there, she thought. Maybe she'd missed it. It was a small hole. The bottom fell out of her stomach, a pang of violation twisting in her gut. The piano teacher's son, his room was probably below their bedroom. What if he'd cut the hole? He was not that young, in his late teens most likely. She'd only seen him once or twice in the hall of their building, and few times out in the city. He was a pale kid, gangly and awkward. Elsie had seen him once late at night when her and Greg were ordering slices from a pizza place on Broad Street. He sat in a corner booth, wearing headphones, not even eating his pizza, reading a book. She watched his lips move while he read to himself. Eventually, he looked up and caught her looking at him. Elsie turned and grabbed

Greg's arm and told him that she wanted to take the food to go. "Why?" he'd asked. She said she was just tired. She never told him about the kid.

She pounded on the door one last time and waited, checking her phone again: 4:54. She turned the knob but it was locked. Shit. She could call Drew and get someone to pick her up but he wouldn't be happy. He'd say this was the last straw and that he wanted to give her shift to Brandi or Michelle. Losing one shift was a slippery slope. Her head still hurt. She almost called Greg, but instead she decided to go around back and see if the neighbor's patio door was unlocked.

The late-April heat surprised her as she exited her building. She thought about the weather in Los Angeles. "Paradise," her sister told her. Greg said it was the same all the time. He liked having four seasons. Why did he hate the idea of moving so much? It made so much sense to her. She didn't want to go live there without him. She didn't want to go alone. She pulled on the sliding glass door on the patio and it slid open. Her hand dropped to her side. She looked over her shoulder to see if anyone was around, then entered and closed the door behind her.

The place was dark and small, with the same layout as her and Greg's apartment. She stood in the living room and called out to see if anyone was home. No answer. The piano was against the wall where Greg's stereo system and record player would be. For a moment she thought she should turn back. The apartment was too still and it smelled like a bad air-freshener, like artificial pine. She reached a finger out to the piano and pressed down the highest note. The light ping calmed her. Above the piano was a paper taped to the wall of the piano teacher's schedule. Next to that was a picture of her with the kid.

She rounded the piano and went into the room situated beneath her bedroom. It was the kid's, just as she suspected. The room was clean, spotless actually. The walls were white,

decorated with only a few framed photographs and an empty corkboard with no tacks on it. A pile of laundry sat folded on his bed. There was a note on top of it. *Benjamin. Put these away. Love, Mom.* Elsie brushed her hand against the clothes, the note.

On the far side of the room in the kid's window was a big potted plant, a fern. It made Elsie remember the other time she'd seen him. It was in the garden section of the hardware store. She had wanted to buy a plant like the one her sister had in her old college dorm room. It was a spur of the moment thing, something she had just decided to do on her day off while Greg was at work. She was walking to the plant aisle when she saw the kid. He was alone, carrying a fern, the exact kind she'd come to the store to get. It had freaked her out, so much so that she just left without buying anything and tried to forget about the whole thing. When she got home she convinced herself it was just a weird coincidence. She never told Greg about it. He was just a kid. A strange, harmless kid.

Elsie opened Benjamin's closet. It was a mess. Clothes stacked on old shoes stacked on board games, laundry hampers and broken toys everywhere. It was the opposite of his bedroom, like he crammed the whole mess of his life into the closet to clean out later. She used her phone as a flashlight and shone it at the ceiling. There was the hole, in the very same corner as her closet. She reached up to the shelf beneath the hole and felt around. Her keys jingled as she pulled them down and threw them into her purse. She reached back up to the hole and slid her fingers through it. There was some space between the ceiling and floor, but not much. She could curl her fingertips over the edge and feel the hardwood of her own closet. The hair on her arms stood up. She reached her hand onto the shelf again and felt something soft. Before she pulled it down she knew it was a pair of her own underwear. She squeezed them. She would have words with the piano teacher. She'd tell him what her son was up to, that little pervert.

Then she heard the front door open. And voices. They were home.

Without thinking Elsie sunk to the closet floor and slid the door closed. As soon as she did, she regretted it. Why not confront them? She hadn't stolen anything. She was just looking for her keys. But for some reason she didn't move. Couldn't move. She sat in the corner of the closet holding her knees to her chest, listening.

There were murmurs from the kitchen, plates clanging, and then footsteps as Benjamin came into his bedroom and shut the door behind him. Elsie tried to breathe quietly. What would the kid think if he saw his neighbor, this girl in a tight black dress, hiding in his own closet? She tried to imagine the expression on his face as he opened the door, for some reason she knew he would smile, some toothy grin. Something was not right with that kid. She'd known it before and she knew it now. She couldn't stop imagining his twisted, smiling face. She snapped her eyes shut.

The kid was moving around his room, he dropped something on the floor, a backpack maybe? She heard the bed frame bend from his weight as he sat. He cleared his throat. The room was silent for a few seconds. He just sat there. Elsie didn't know what to do. Now that she was hiding she couldn't just exit the closet and try to explain everything. She'd have to wait for him to leave the room and then climb out of his bedroom window.

She heard the squeak of the swivel chair at his desk. He was right on the other side of the door. She suddenly became afraid he'd smell her hair, her shampoo. She bunched herself up farther into the corner, wanting to disappear entirely. She heard typing, the muffled sound of music or a video. The kid must've been wearing headphones. He made these little noises with his mouth, little clicks, lip smacking sounds. It made Elsie cringe. Strange, the noises people will make when they think they're alone, she thought to herself. Then she heard him unbuckling his

belt, and all at once she knew what he was about to do, this kid who had made a hole in his ceiling.

The swivel chair creaked again and Elsie put her fingers in her ears, trying to think of something else, anything else. And for some reason all she could think of was Officer Stevens. She was suddenly repulsed by their entire agreement. The violation stung so badly it took the wind from her stomach and she gasped, not loud, but an audible gasp. She covered her mouth. If the kid hadn't been wearing headphones he would've heard it. She thought of the kid staring at her fake profile on his computer, holding her panties in his hand, clicking his lips and cheeks and swishing soda in his mouth. She wanted to scream.

A loud chord from the piano startled her. She took her fingers out of her ears. She couldn't hear if the kid was outside the closet anymore. All she heard was piano music. Maybe the teacher had another lesson, but it seemed late for that. She was about to inch the closet door open, but she couldn't tell if the kid was in his room or not. She listened. Whoever was playing piano was good, very good. It didn't sound like the teacher. For a second Elsie just listened, her body relaxing, the fear easing up enough for her to take a deep breath.

She looked up into the blackness where the hole was and thought about Greg. Once, on one of the Mondays she had off, Greg had taken off too, and in the afternoon they made love and took a nap together in their bedroom, and as they were waking up they heard the piano. It was the only time she could remember them hearing it together. They smiled at each other, and then Greg sat up and pressed his fingers to Elsie's back, touching her gently, moving them up and down from her neck to her tailbone, mimicking the piano music from below. It tickled. They both laughed as Greg kept tapping, playing fake piano on skin. Every once in a while he would kiss her. He said they ought to get matching tattoos together. "Keyboards on our backs," he said.

She'd laughed at the idea at first, but then he said he was serious. They should do it. She said maybe someday. He played for a while. It relaxed her. Then he stopped and lay down on his stomach next to her.

"Now you do it," he said.

She hesitated at first, saying she didn't know how to play. She'd never played. He told her to try, and still she resisted, laughing into her pillow. Then he took her hand and placed it on his back and told her to pretend. She remembered how sweetly he had said that word: pretend. "Just pretend, Elsie." And she did. She played little notes on his back, her hands dancing from the mole on his hip all the way up to his shoulder blades, smiling every time he said it tickled. The whole thing had been so sweet, and she remembered that afterwards they stayed there in bed together until the sunset, and the room turning blue in dusk's fading light.

Greg never brought up those matching piano tattoos, not even once after that. In fact, Elsie couldn't remember one time when they'd talked about that afternoon together since it happened. That made her sad. She resolved to bring it up with him that night, if he ever called or came home. She wanted to call him then, and just as she thought that she felt her phone vibrate in her purse. The piano music stopped in the living room. She sensed the whole apartment going still outside the closet. She was sorry about the night before, about the fight and the mess and the nastiness. She didn't care about the money. She didn't care about Los Angeles or paradise or the hole in her closet. She wanted to play piano on Greg's back while he slept. She wanted to learn how to play for real so she wouldn't have to pretend. She knew it was him calling her, calling to apologize, to say how sorry he was for what he'd said, how he'd acted. She'd say she was sorry too. He'd say that he would go to California with her if that's what she wanted and then she'd say she didn't care about that and it didn't matter what city they were in as long as they could find a

way to spend more time together. She heard footsteps in the living room and then the bedroom beyond the closet door. She sorted through her underwear and her keys and finally grabbed her phone. All she had was a text message from Drew: "Elsie, you're late. Get your ass in here. Now."

Play Your Old Stuff

I first saw Raleigh Wakefield perform at a basement show in a flophouse on the outskirts of River City. I was twenty-one years old, a music-business major that spent every night I could attending concerts, hoping to find a local musician I could help promote. But so much of the local scene felt ham-fisted and cliche to me—punk bands thundering mindlessly through power chord riffs, or folk groups channelling extreme, lingering teenage angst. It was all style, no *songs*. And then along came Raleigh, a tattooed beast of a man that performed alone with a plastic-looking guitar, a beer-stained laptop, and cheap pedals and synthesizers.

I watched him set up his equipment on an ad-hoc stage in the corner of the basement. He made no eye contact with anyone as he prepared, and the rest of the room paid no attention to him until he began to play. He opened with a hypnotic, slow-burner called "Heat," where he sang the line *This heat is getting to me/This heat is starting to...get to me* over and over for the duration of the nearly eight-minute song. At the beginning his voice was soft and light over an automated drum machine, and then slowly he added in other pre-recorded pieces from his laptop

and then guitar, clean at first and then distorted, before speeding up the tempo and really getting the crowd pushing and shoving. By the end, Raleigh's sweat and spit rained over the crowd as he screamed and thrashed around the mic, and then finally, at the height of the madness, the song cut out. Raleigh said ”thank you,” calm and collected, before looking down at his feet and retuning his guitar.

The rest of the set was every bit as compelling as that opener. Raleigh could slow the mood down and play sad ballads just as well as he could blitz through hardcore, 90 second tracks. The crowd consistently bought every shift in mood. At the end of the night when he was loading his gear into his station wagon out in the back alley, I approached him.

“Great set,” I said, extending my hand. “I’m Chris.”

He shook it and introduced himself, said thanks, and then kept loading his gear as if I wasn’t there.

I looked up and down the alley as partygoers stumbled out of the house, loud and obnoxious. I wondered if Raleigh and I were the only sober people on the block. “When’s your next show?” I asked, finally.

“Don’t know yet,” he said. “Maybe here again next weekend.”

He shut his station wagon and leaned against it, and then looked at me for the first time. “You gonna make it out?” he said.

“I have work next weekend,” I said.

“Where’s work?”

“I bus tables at Cellar Door. I hate it, but it’s money.”

Raleigh kicked at the dirt and walked to his driver-side door. “You need the money so you’ve got to play it dumb, but if you play it long enough it’s just what you become.”

I laughed. “Did you write that?”

He got into his car and started the engine. “In this piracy-laden digital age of exorbitant nostalgia, ownership of a genuine idea has become infinitely less important than applying an already established idea to the right context.”

“Right,” I said. He began to roll his window up but I put my hand on the lip of the glass to stop him. “Wait. You ever play a show at Cellar Door?”

He shook his head.

“I could probably get you booked there, like on a Tuesday or something.”

“You’re gonna book me?” he said. “What are you, like seventeen?”

“Not me, but my boss would,” he said. “He’s always looking for new acts.”

Raleigh looked over my shoulder as another band loudly packed gear into a van.

“You need a ride home,” he asked.

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Over the next few weeks, Raleigh and I became fast friends. We were both loners. He’d been a graphic design major, but graduated years ago, and never pursued it as a career. He sold pot for extra cash, but he told me he came into some inheritance money from an uncle, which is why he could afford to live in a small house in the West End.

One day, Raleigh and I played pool in his living room. He’d bought a busted pool table for next to nothing from a thrift store on the other side of the river. The table leaned badly because one of the legs was slightly shorter than the rest. When I asked Raleigh why we couldn't stack some books or something underneath it to level it out, he said he liked it the way it was. "Gives me home field advantage," he said.

We listened to music as we played. Raleigh liked CDs, not vinyl, and he was cynical of the vinyl-resurgence in recent years. "I think it's all a big con job by the industry to get a bunch of fools to pay for the same albums they already own," he said. "You can't blame the execs I guess, given the way the old release model has become irrelevant, but what we've got now are a bunch of idiots talking about how much better analog sounds when they're spinning vinyl on a plastic turntable and tinny computer speakers their parents bought them for Christmas."

I laughed and joked that in another life, Raleigh should've been a stand-up comic, but he didn't hear me. He was not a very good listener, and for someone so funny and intelligent, he lacked an awareness of social and conversational cues. Instead of actively listening to others, I think Raleigh rehearsed whatever he wanted to say next in his head so he could get it exactly right, even if what he said had nothing to do with the current conversation. It was very important to him not to stutter. I'd watch his lips sometimes when I was in the middle of a sentence, and I could see them moving, practicing words, shaping his own dialogue at the expense of digesting my own. His thought process operated in non-sequiturs, and I could see how his free-association brain was both conducive to songwriting, and to the hermit lifestyle he'd been living for most of his adult life.

After shooting a few games, Raleigh offered to show me the new music he was working on.

"I don't play any of these songs live, yet," he said.

He'd set up a makeshift studio in his bedroom, an old MacBook, a cheap MIDI recorder and a few condenser mics, a couple guitars and a bass, none of them in great shape, a small Korg keyboard, and a halfway decent drum machine. He'd bought it all with the extra cash he made from dealing. Despite his selling pot, Raleigh hardly ever smoked, I never saw him drink

alcohol, and he certainly never dabbled into any kind of harder drugs. He didn't believe in the myth of some inebriated, tortured artist that puts his body through the wringer for his work. The only thing he drank on a regular basis was soda and coffee; he got a kick out of sugar and caffeine. In the handful of times we'd hung out, I'd seen him drink an entire case of Mountain Dew more than once.

He sat down at his laptop and started sorting through files. He'd undersold how much recording he'd done. There were hundreds of songs stockpiled on his hard-drive, all at various degrees of completion. There were some more pop/rock oriented tracks, none of which stood out very much, but then there were these wild soundscapes—loops of him humming over monotonous synths, free form acoustic strumming with his guitar tuned to rare configurations, distortion and feedback pitched way up and panned from left to right in rhythmic patterns—and then atop all of it were his lyrics. The stuff was cerebral, lonely, angry and sad one second, hopeful and jubilant the next.

Raleigh had a knack for finding melodies within noises that no one else could, and once he found them he would linger on them, let them repeat over and over until just the right moment, and then start playing with variations, adding little bits of reverb or subtracting the bass for a few measures. Still though, they would've been nothing more than mildly interesting instrumentals without his songwriting and the one instrument no computer could replicate: his voice. The production was raw, of course, but the lyrics and his vocals, I kept telling him, were something special. I could tell Raleigh was flattered, but also wary of my enthusiasm. The one thing he kept saying over and over was that none of the recordings felt finished.

"Some of it I like all right," he said. "But it's all missing something, some kind of edge."

I spent the next few weeks bussing tables, going to class, and then stopping by Raleigh's whenever I could. I'd hang out on his couch laughing and listening to his rants during the day while customers came and went, and at night I'd help him sort through and polish his recordings. Raleigh could only work when it was dark outside. He never slept all that much, and often I passed out around four in the morning on the bean bag chair in his bedroom while he was still awake working on a track.

One night, his computer crashed and he couldn't record anything. At first, he was restless. He kept rebooting until a blue screen popped up and then froze. His shoulders hunched and I could see he was worried he'd lost a ton of progress, but I convinced him to just let it sit for a while and go out to the living room.

"Let it cool down, Raleigh," I said.

I asked if he wanted to play pool, but he wasn't in the mood. I put on an album and tried to calm him down, but he kept fidgeting with the arrangement of his CDs, pulling cases out and finding new spots for them on different shelves. Finally, he went to his room and came back with his guitar and just started playing, sitting cross-legged on his pool table. That's when it hit me.

"Raleigh," I said. "You gotta play some of those songs live."

He ignored me at first and kept strumming mindlessly.

"That's what's missing. If you could put a live set together with the best of those new tracks, then maybe the songs would feel finished."

At first, I wasn't sure if he heard me, but then he got this look on his face, this flooding of inspiration behind his eyes.

"You might be right," he said.

After that night, the focus shifted from polishing his recordings to figuring out how to translate some of the songs to a live show. I suggested trying to bring in some backing musicians, but Raleigh didn't like the idea. He wanted to do it all himself, use his guitar and laptop, his feet, whatever it took. We distilled all of his recordings down to a nine-song set, the best, most accessible stuff, if you could call it that. I asked my boss at Cellar Door if a buddy of mine could play an opening set, and he agreed.

The night of the show, I helped Raleigh set up all of his equipment and then placed a twelve pack of Mountain Dew beside his chair. He hardly said anything to me the whole night, except for just before he went on. He looked at the faces in the half-filled club, everyone talking, paying no attention to either of us, and said, "A taste of honey is worse than none at all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I said.

"Nothing," he said. "Stand in the back and makes sure it sounds okay, all right?"

I sat in the back by the bar and drank a beer while Raleigh settled in his chair on the stage. I tapped the bar with my index finger, and sipped at my glass, studying faces in the crowd that were looking at Raleigh, wondering what was going through their head, how they perceived him, if they'd see the energy and poetry in his music like I did.

He strummed his guitar and raised his hand at me. I gave him a thumbs up, and he began to play.

The din of conversation continued beneath Raleigh's first few songs, but that changed when he got to the third track of his set, "Rain On Bone." It starts as this quiet, acoustic song for the first verse, and then halfway through Raleigh just strums the E-string repeatedly with one hand and plays with these drizzling rain samples on his computer with the other, looping and layering them atop one another, his voice slowly getting louder, before returning both hands to

the guitar and playing a whole new progression for the chorus over what now sounds like percussive, pouring rain. The acoustics weren't great at Cellar Door, and the mix of the rain rhythm being a little too loud probably had something to do with it, but people really began to pay attention when, at the beginning of the next verse, Raleigh stepped on a distortion pedal to turn the rain sound into a warbling, underwater soundscape. Then he started alternating, which he'd never done on the recorded version, using the pedal to go back and forth between the warbling and rain sounds every few measures, his voice remaining quiet and restricted with this tension, like he might implode at any moment. The last line of the song he sings, *All alone...with broken bones/Try to find...someplace to hide inSIDE my head/I'll just go back to bed...where I can dream.* And then he let the rain sound linger for another thirty seconds before fading it out.

The place was speechless. Raleigh stared at his feet and took a sip of Mountain Dew before clearing his throat and starting the next song.

"Who the hell is this guy?" I heard a woman say.

The back half of Raleigh's set was some of his best stuff, and he really hit a stride with his voice by the last two tracks, which were louder and more of these bluesy, growler songs that lightened the mood a bit and even got a few people singing along. He played a few minutes past his allotted time limit, but the my boss stood behind the bar, as captivated as the rest of the crowd. Even the band about to play after him just stood in the back by me, watching.

After the set, I helped Raleigh pack up his equipment, and several people came up to the stage to compliment the act. He was gracious, but also flustered, stammering out "thank-yous" and turning his back to everyone while I told people his name and that he'd have other shows coming soon. Once we loaded his car, I told Raleigh we should hang out and watch the next band, so we went back inside and sat at the bar. People tried to buy him drinks and he just kept

refusing and asking for more water and occasionally a soda. After a while he was sweating a ton and I could tell we needed to leave. It was one thing for Raleigh to play to a basement full of scuzzy drunks that wouldn't remember one song from the other, but all these people at Cellar Door, after just one show, they were asking him about the songs, his gear, his writing process. I could see he was overwhelmed.

"I feel like a freak up there," he said to me on the ride home.

"Raleigh," I said. "The show was incredible. People loved it. My boss wants us to come back next week."

He stared straight ahead through the windshield, following the wipers going back and forth in a light rain, like if he didn't keep his eyes on those wipers, they'd stop working.

For the next few weeks my interactions with Raleigh consisted of him saying he didn't want to play another show and then me convincing him to do just one more. Every time he performed better, and more people showed up, some of them already singing along to certain tracks. We even burnt a batch of demo CDs to sell, which Raleigh disagreed with at first, but then changed his mind because he wanted to use the money to upgrade the hard-drive on his computer. Legitimate buzz grew about him around town. *River City Beat* even reviewed one his shows, calling him "the mystery hippie-singer from the West End," which Raleigh did not like at all.

"Fucking news media," he said while we looked at the article on his computer. "See, this is the hype machine at work right here, Chris. Pretty soon we'll have no control over anything they write." He scratched at his beard.

"Raleigh, it's a local paper. It's nothing. Some musicians would kill for free press like this. They just dig your stuff and want to get your name out there."

"I don't want my name out there," he said.

Despite his skepticism, he kept playing shows. We'd make a little cash from the demos and from the venue at each show and he'd give me a cut. I told him I didn't want any of his money but he insisted. Other clubs contacted us trying to get Raleigh to play, but he said he'd only play Cellar Door, his weekly gig. He felt comfortable there, I think, and finally started to calm down and get into a rhythm, even switching up his set slightly, trying some new tracks, cracking a smile every once in a while. Then the viral video happened.

When he first started playing he didn't care about anyone taking photos or videos on their phones because he didn't think anyone would like the music enough to do anything with the footage. But once the shows became popular, people uploaded his performances online. None of them had too many views or were even all that good, but then some hip music blog out west posted a version of him singing his most frenzied, anthemic track called "Contagious," and the views skyrocketed. Two days after they shared it, the video had a half-million views. I tried to explain to Raleigh that this was a good thing, that the exposure could help his music find more fans, more people that really enjoyed his art, but he could only focus on the negative.

"They took the whole thing out of context," he said. "It sounds like shit. I look like a screaming psychopath up there."

The video sent Raleigh into this creative tailspin, and the timing couldn't have been worse, because around the same time the owner of Cellar Door called us to say an executive from Real Outsider Records, an indie label out of L.A., had emailed him to find out the schedule for the next performance.

The week leading up to that show, Raleigh's behavior grew more and more erratic. He said he wanted to construct a whole new set of songs, create these muddy tapestries from his

previous work, layer samples of the audio from his online fan-videos atop one another. I tried to convince him to calm down, to just play his regular set, not for the guy from the label but for the real fans like myself and all the people at those early shows that cared about his music, but he wouldn't listen.

A few nights before the show, for the first time since I'd known him, Raleigh wanted to leave his house at night and go to bars. He'd take his field recorder with him, tape it beneath his shirt like he was wearing a wire, and then get into these random conversations with people who recognized him around town. Then he'd go home and sample their voices in new songs, except there was no melody or arc to any of it. I told him it sounded mean-spirited and forced. He didn't listen. He recorded these high-pitched sounds; car horns, sirens, whistles, and then create tracks out of them that would make your ears hurt. A day before the show he left his place in the middle of the night, walked a few blocks north to a halfway house, and recorded several lunatic homeless guys just rambling about any and everything. He asked them to comment on "the government's increasing invasion of our privacy" and the "widening inequality gap in our country," and after that he goaded them into speaking even more vulgar, incoherent psychobabble. Then he came home and cut samples from all of it, pouring all the ranting into tracks that amounted to nothing more than jagged collages of sick, deranged voices. The stuff was embarrassing to listen to. Raleigh's eyes grew dark red from all the time spent in front of his computer screen layering voice atop voice.

I tried to get in contact with Real Outsider and tell them the show was cancelled, but they said their guy was already in town and that according to the venue everything was still scheduled as planned. The day of the show I called Cellar Door and told them Raleigh was sick and the owner laughed and said that Raleigh was already there, setting up his equipment.

That night, Raleigh's toothy smile twisted across his face. I tried one last time to convince him to play his usual set, to not alienate all the people that paid money and just wanted to hear the music.

"Play your normal set, Raleigh," I said. "C'mon, trust me."

He didn't even look at me.

By the time Raliegh took the stage, the venue had sold out. I sat in my usual spot at the back of the bar with my head in my hands, occasionally looking up to see if I could pick out the executive from Real Outsider, but mostly just drinking and dreading what was coming.

Raleigh sat down in his seat and cleared his throat.

"Good evening," he said. He clicked the spacebar on his laptop and the cacophony began. First, it was just voices and chatter, all the field recording he'd done of fans. Then, he strummed slowly on his acoustic and moaned into the microphone, these wordless yawns that got a few audience members giving each other quizzical looks, but for the most part people tried to find a beat to nod their heads to. After about five minutes, Raleigh pumped at the pedals with his feet, which were programmed to play all the screeching sounds. He'd let the sounds linger for a while, and then click them off and try to replicate the siren or car horn with his voice, his vocal chords cracking, the veins in his neck flexing. Again, people were confused, but no one clambered for the exit. Then, he played single notes along the fretboard near the neck of the guitar, just picking them at random and plucking sloppily. The chatter from the laptop faded out of the mix, and the profanity-laced homeless men rants faded in. He had thinned the voices out so they seemed airy and far away, but they were still audible. *What is this? A commercial? Who are you?* Raleigh stared down at his hands and kept playing the single notes over and over. *You ain't no star asshole you're just a fucking errand boy.* There was nervous laughter throughout the crowd. The

man, what about the man? *The man thinks he's the shit, but he's just a big pile of shit and I'll splatter him all over the fucking wall.* Now the laughter turned from nervous to legitimate in some corners and Raleigh's eyes snapped up from his hands to the audience. He looked out at everyone and scanned the crowd, not a trace of humor in his expression, and even more people began to laugh, thinking the whole thing was some piece of performance art, a joke, and now they were really starting to get it. *The whole world's on repeat motherfucker and we just started backwards.* More laughter. Raleigh's face turned red. I stood up on my stool in the back of the bar and tried to get his attention, waving my hands back and forth, trying to get him to stop, and then he slammed his guitar into the ground and swung it at his laptop, sending the whole setup crashing to his feet. He shook a can of Mountain Dew and then poured it over all of his equipment and the PA system. Tiny sparks popped and tones of feedback warped and crackled. Raleigh sprayed soda on the audience, flung the cans at them, and then jumped off stage and ran for the exit.

I got down off my stool and pushed through the bodies, most of them laughing and screaming with glee. People near the front grabbed more soda cans and shook them until they exploded. Others fought over his leftover equipment, tugging back and forth. I managed to work my way through the crowd to the exit, and then ran around the corner into the alley where Raleigh had parked. He stood against his car door, slouched and pale. He was talking to a guy, this stranger I'd never seen before with dark eyes and a shiny earring.

"Raleigh," the guy said, sticking out his hand and smiling. "That was some powerful stuff in there, my friend. Very unique act. I'm from Real Outsider. You got a few minutes to talk?"

Choices

I'm going to be late again and Emma will be pissed. I explain it to her all the time, how I can't just pack up my gear and leave set at 6pm on the dot. Today's shoot is running especially late because the director keeps thinking up new ways to film the same close-up of a 64 oz mayonnaise jar. And then every time he says we're finished, the ad executives, the real bosses, ask us to play back the last three takes, and they inevitably find something they don't like, and we shoot all over again.

It's a goddamn mayonnaise commercial, I want to tell them. *Nobody gives a shit.* I wish I could leave, but I've only been getting hired for jobs like this for a few months. I can't be the guy that points to his watch and says, "Sorry fellas, but I've got dinner with my girlfriend's parents. I need to pack up the camera now."

Emma hates commercial sets. She's done lots of theatre, acted in a few indie features, but the one time she worked on a commercial, she said it made her feel like shit.

"I don't like being called the 'talent,'" she said to me that night after she got home. "I felt icky all day."

I can understand where she’s coming from. There’s no sense of artistic camaraderie on a commercial set. We always shoot in a studio on a mini kitchen or living room set, and every spot follows the same script: an attractive, maternal woman staring into the lens, telling you how great Product X is, how it makes her life *so much easier*. I'll change a few lenses, do a couple short dollies or pans, but the camera hardly moves ten feet all day, so my job is cake.

And yet, the mood on set is weirdly tense, all fake smiles and subtly charged chit-chat. You don't talk to the higher-ups unless they talk to you first. Say the wrong thing to one of those ad execs and see if you get a call for the next product shoot. Paul Fisher made an off-color joke about autism at lunch a few weeks back on the *Febreze* shoot. Paul Fisher didn't know that Creative Director Tom Marshall's oldest son is on the spectrum. Paul Fisher has not worked with us since.

But Emma just doesn't understand, so the texts start vibrating in my pocket a few minutes after six, just as we're setting up for the martini shot. The director snaps at everyone in the crew to keep their phones off, so I power mine down without even taking it out of my pocket, knowing that Emma is about to call any minute and get even more upset because the call goes straight to voicemail.

We have plans to meet her parents at Magellan’s at seven for her mother's birthday. I bought her a coffee table book about birds because she's always taking photographs of birds and posting them online or framing them on the walls in her home. She's a good photographer. Emma and I tell her all the time that she should submit photographs to contests, or talk to gallery spaces in town about exhibits, but she never does.

"One more time, almost there, five more minutes" the director says. He resets the actress to first position, and then we do the shot three times. The actress is good. You have to be to land

a job like this. You have to be able to do the same exact thing a hundred times in a row and not change your performance just because you're bored.

Emma's good too, but she doesn't want to do the same thing twice. She wants to find some variation or something new for every take, otherwise, she says, "it's not really art." And I agree with her. It's not. I love her for that stubbornness. I'm glad she doesn't do commercials. But the money is too good for me to pass up. I tell her that I have to do some jobs for "them" so I can save enough money to make art for "me."

Finally, I hear the magic words—"That's a wrap!"—and I pack up the gear at lightning speed. I turn my phone on and text Emma: *I'm on my way, meet you there. Sorry*. I shake everybody's hand, say we've got to do it again soon. Great shoot, Rick. Great shoot, Zach. I pack everything into my pick-up and slam the tailgate and then I see Tom Marshall striding across the parking lot.

"Michael," he says. "You got a second?"

It's 7:02 pm.

"Of course, Mr. Marshall," I say. I drum my fingers against my khakis and lean against the driver-side door of my truck.

"Good work in there today," says Mr. Marshall. "I've worked with operators twice your age who couldn't complete a shot list like we had."

"Thank you." It's false praise. Most operators in town could do exactly what I did today, but it's still nice to hear. My phone vibrates in my pocket.

"Listen, I wonder if you might be able to help me out with something." His eyes flit down to my audibly vibrating pants. "Should you get that?"

I hit a button on my phone to silence the vibration. "I'll call her right back."

He goes on: "So you know my son, Patrick, yes?"

"Sure," I say. Tom Marshall has never spoken to me about his son before, but of course I know who he is. Everyone knows.

"Well he's got an interest in film and cameras. He's also written a few screenplays."

"Oh," I say. I wave at the director and a few other crew members walking to their cars, all of them grinning like idiots, knowing I've been sucked into the "The Tom Marshall Vortex."

"I wonder if you might sit down with him, show him your gear, maybe read one of his scripts and give him some feedback?"

I strain to keep my eyes from widening and betraying how desperately I do not want to read Patrick Marshall's screenplays.

"Yeah," I say. "Just give him my email and tell him to reach out." I flip through my wallet for my card.

"Here," he says. "I'll give you his cell and you can shoot him a text sometime soon."

It takes longer than it should but we trade the contact info and say our goodbyes, and then finally I'm in the truck racing across town to Magellan's. I call Emma.

"I'm sorry," I say as soon as she answers.

"Oh," says Emma. "It's fine. We're just all here waiting."

"Tom Marshall cornered me."

"Did you remember to bring my mother's gift?"

"Yes," I say. I look over my shoulder into the back-seat for the bird book, but it's not there. I shuffle a few cases and sweatshirts around, digging for it, and nearly swerve into the interstate median. "Actually, I think I—"

"I know you didn't, because it was on the kitchen counter when I got home from work. But I brought it."

"I'm sorry, Emma," I say.

“Just get here as fast as you can.”

This is not the first time I've been late. Set a call time for a job as early as you want—5 am, 4 am—and I'll be on set ten minutes early. But anything else, I just can't make it on time. I was late picking Emma up for our first date over two years ago. It was a concert and we were so late tickets sold out. But Emma sweet-talked the bouncer into selling us two more, making up some story about how we were from out of town and this was her boyfriend's favorite band and we'd never seen them before.

Her parents were used to my tardiness too, and I hated having that reputation. Her mother didn’t seem to care, but her father always made a sly comment or two. Dr. Willis was a surgeon, very punctual, with small grey eyes that rolled often.

I walk into Magellan’s at 7:35pm and there are four salads and a half-eaten loaf of bread on the table.

"Look who decided to grace us with his presence," says Dr. Willis. He wipes his face with his napkin and stands to shake my hand.

"I'm so sorry," I say. I kiss Mrs. Willis on the cheek and sit between her and Emma. "Happy birthday.”

Emma keeps her eyes on her salad.

“Thank you, Michael,” Mrs. Willis says. "Emma already ordered the special for you."

Emma grins at me and squeezes my leg under the table, hard.

"I'm sorry to be late," I say, a little too loudly.

"What was the job?" asks Dr. Willis.

"Mayonnaise commercial," I say. I sip at my water.

"High art," says Emma, smirking. Her mother laughs and I force a laugh too. Everyone settles down, finally. I dig into my salad while Emma tells her parents about the latest play she's doing. I don't know much about it, except that it's some kind of experimental, absurdist one-act that involves papier-mâché heads and lots of fake blood.

"She comes home some nights from rehearsal stained red from head to toe," I say.

The conversation circles the table pleasantly for a while, the three of them catching each other up on family that I don't know very well or haven't met. Emma looks lovely. She's wearing a blue floral dress and a necklace with a shiny teal pendant that catches the light and gleams every time she leans back in her seat. Her big, dark-red hair bounces when she gets excited about something and starts gesturing. She's a natural stage-performer—loud, animated, always making sure the back row can hear her.

We get our entrees and Mrs. Willis tells Emma about the sick family dog, Snoopy, how he's unlikely to make it to another Christmas. I can tell Mr. Willis doesn't like this subject. He loves that dog.

"Any interesting stories from the hospital this week?" I ask him.

He shrugs and tells me about a guy who he had to perform an emergency appendectomy on earlier that morning. As he speaks, I notice a harsh light from above shining down on his balding head. If I were filming his close-up, I'd dim it or take it away completely to help his complexion seem less washed out and splotchy. He was a handsome man, but some lights don't agree with certain skin tones, and often I think of ways to make him look younger on camera, even though I'd never filmed him or his wife.

"He was lucky to come in when he did," says Dr. Willis, finishing up his appendectomy story. He goes on about timing and precision, how his work is all about making the right choices at the right time, and then sticking with them. I laugh.

"What?" asks Dr. Willis.

"Nothing," I say. "That's just exactly how Emma talks about acting. All about choices."

"Well, it's true for a lot of disciplines, I suppose."

I stir my pasta with my fork. Emma and Mrs. Willis have finished talking about Snoopy.

"You know, camera operating is about choices too," I say. "Sometimes you line up a two-shot, but the actors miss their marks, and you're dollying towards them, so the shot starts to split and look ugly because you have too much negative space in the middle. You can't fit both of the actors in the frame at once, so you have to make a choice; load one of them up on a third, and just let other one fall out of frame entirely."

Dr. Willis listens to all of this patiently, but after a sentence or two I can tell by his expression that I've set him up for something. A smile curls at the edge of his lips, some wry comment he can't wait to unload crawling up his throat. "So," he says. "How do you know which actor to go with?"

"Well, it depends, but you usually go with whoever has more dialogue. That's the general rule, at least."

"No," Dr. Willis says, glancing at his wife. "You go with the more attractive actor." Emma and her mother laugh.

"Well, that's probably true," I say, forcing a laugh as well.

Dr. Willis sips his wine and looks at his daughter across the table. "That's not really the same kind of choice though, is it Michael?" He turns to me. "You get it wrong, and you just reset and go back to one. That's what you say, right? Back to one?"

I nod in agreement, but inwardly I seethe a little. Dr. Willis knew phrases like "back to one," but he acted like he didn't as a way to belittle me, to belittle filmmaking. "It's all play-time, isn't it?" he'd said to me drunkenly one Sunday dinner a few months ago.

I don't say much else the rest of the meal until we're eating dessert and Emma says it's time to open presents.

"Open mine first," I say. Emma reaches into a bag by her chair and pulls out the book I bought her mother. I give her a look that means "thanks for wrapping it" and she nods like I owe her. I do.

"Oh," says Mrs. Willis, picking up the present and shaking it like she always does with gifts. "I bet it's a…new sweater." She laughs.

Mrs. Willis opens the package carefully and then studies the book.

"Well look what it is." She flips it around and shows her husband.

“Michael thought it might inspire your photography,” says Emma.

"We already have that one, don't we?" Dr. Willis says.

"Do you?" I say. I look at Emma and she shrugs. "I don't think so. It's pretty new. Some great photographs in there."

"Yeah, I bought this for you at Christmas," says Dr. Willis.

Mrs. Willis nods and thumbs through the book, then hands it to Dr. Willis. "Thank you, Michael," says Mrs. Willis. "It's a great book. You're very sweet."

"Sorry," I say. "I didn't realize… We can exchange it." I reach to grab it from Dr. Willis but he pulls it away.

"Nonsense," he says. "Now we'll have one for the bathroom." He laughs.

“Daddy,” Emma says. She takes the book from him and sets it on the ground beside her chair. “We’ll exchange it. Michael knows plenty of great photography books.”

“Of course,” says Mrs. Willis. She nods at her husband.

Emma lifts another wrapped gift onto the table. "Open mine next," she says. She pats me on the leg beneath the table.

I take a bite of my cheesecake and force a smile.

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Emma's had a few glasses of wine so she decides to leave her car at the restaurant and pick it up the next day. In my truck on the way home she lights a cigarette and rolls down her window. I fiddle with the radio for a while and then shut it off. She looks at me.

"What?" I say.

"You know what," she says.

"How many times do I have to say I'm sorry? It couldn't be helped."

She takes a drag from her cigarette. "It's one thing to make me wait, but don't do it to them. You know how they are."

“I’ll make it up to them,” I say. “I promise.”

"Mhm," she says. "My father says you do it on purpose. He says making people wait on you is a way to assert your dominance."

"That's ridiculous. It's my job. I have to make money."

Emma doesn't say anything. She fiddles with the lock on her door, pumping it up and down with her index finger and thumb.

"Your father was in a mood, tonight, wasn't he?"

"What do you mean?"

“I go out of my way to try and connect to him and he just belittles me like I’m one of his interns at the hospital.”

“He doesn’t do it on purpose,” Emma says.

“And I don’t show up late on purpose, either,” I say.

“Can we just forget about it?” Emma says. “The night turned out fine.”

We drive on in silence until we get to our street and I park in front of our apartment building. "Did you know they already had that book?"

"No," she says. "But we’ll get her something better this weekend."

I open up my door to get out, but Emma lingers. "You coming?" I say.

She sets her purse in her lap. "Let's go out," she says.

"Really? Where?"

"I don't know. Where haven't we been in a while?"

Emma and I have both been working so much I can't remember the last time we went out on a weeknight.

"I'm pretty tired," I say. "And I've got an early call time in the morning."

"Just one drink somewhere. C'mon."

I look up and down our street. No traffic. It's a Tuesday and not a lot will be going on in town. I don't feel like drinking, but Emma never wants to go out anymore. She smiles as me and taps the upholstery on the driver’s seat, inviting me to sit.

“Okay,” I say. I start the truck again and pull out into the night.

***

Cellar Door is more crowded than we expected. There's a band that neither of us know setting up to play. We order drinks and sit in a corner booth that we've sat in many evenings. We used to go out on nights like these all the time when we were first dating, back when I worked at the cafe, and Emma worked at the salon. We'd both get off at the same time, meet up, and then drink for hours and talk effortlessly, conversations teetering between flirtatious and argumentative all night long. I miss that.

Now it seems too loud in Cellar Door for conversation. I scan the room for people we might know but I don't recognize anyone. Any friend of ours probably has early work the next day, like us.

Emma sips her drink across the table from me and scrolls on her phone, the blue light of her screen cooling her already pale skin. I study the dim lighting around us. I'd forgotten how divey the place is. Every light source is outfitted with a different kind of bulb, some warm and yellow, others blue-ish. This random mixing of color temperatures all of a sudden makes me resent the place. Wasn't it somebody's job to make sure all the bulbs matched? Didn't they care about how the place looked? If you tried to film anything in here it would look like shit.

Emma says something to me but I can't hear her. She slides out of her side of the booth and sits next to me.

"Do you want to go?" she says in my ear.

I shrug. "I'm fine," I say loudly. I point at the guitarist as he walks by our table. He's baby-faced, has a greasy ponytail, and wears tattered blue jeans. Emma and I smirk at each other. "The kid looks like he's fourteen years old."

Emma laughs and points at the stage. "The whole band is made up of children."

"We might be oldest people in here," I say. She pokes me in the ribs and I put my arm around her, leaning us both back into the booth. We sit like that for a long while, just observing Cellar Door. The band keeps prepping their instruments, looking like they're about to play, but then sauntering to the bar for more drinks. A group of young women sit at a round table, all of them on texting on their phones. A drunk, tattooed guy with a mohawk flirts with the bartender, his laughter carrying across the room despite the loud music.

Emma and I finish our drinks and both chew the ice at the bottom of our glasses. Finally, she turns to me.

"Want me to get you another one," I say.

"Yeah, let's go in five more minutes," she says into my ear.

"What?" I say. "I asked if you wanted one more drink."

Emma turns and stares at me like she still doesn't understand, like I'm some puzzle, like she's thinking, *Do I really want to solve you right now?*

"It's up to you," she says, finally.

Emma's eyes are glassy but she's not drunk. The teal pendant around her neck is dull and dark in this weak, uneven light. I can't tell if she's having a good time, if she's sad, or mad, or bored, or excited. Maybe she wants me to do something, buy us shots or take her to the dancefloor, anything that will make the night more memorable. But I don't know what to say. We've always had a good time at Cellar Door.

"I'm gonna smoke a cigarette outside," Emma says.

I watch her dig through her giant purse, and study her face. I think about close-ups. A face can tell you so much if you pay attention. Stage performers communicate more with their body. Arms, legs, gestures. They need to project outward and make sure that the farthest audience member can still connect to the show emotionally. But screen actors, they work the lens. Their faces can be 40 feet tall. The little curls of a lip, the subtleties of a brow. The close-up is an intimacy we take for granted. It's invasive, unnatural even. We're not supposed to glare into eyes that wide and well lit.

I imagine lighting a close-up of Emma on a film set, and I realize I've somehow never done this before, never lit and photographed her the way I do for others at work all the time. This confuses me, because I love her, and I think she's beautiful, and I think any close-ups I filmed of her would communicate that love. Why have we never done that? We don't talk about collaborating like we once did when we were hungry for work all the time, hungry for artistic success and approval of the outside world. Now we've got that to a certain degree, yet we've become strangers to each other.

The band begins to play. Couples sway by the bar. Guys scan the room for dancing partners. I sip my drink as Emma struggles to find her cigarettes, throwing keys and receipts onto the table. I reach for her bag to try and help her look, and she swats at my hand, annoyed. She keeps searching, emptying the whole bag onto the table in a frenzy.

“Emma,” I say.

She peers into the bag one last time and then slides it across the table. She brings her palms to her face like she’s about to cry.

“Emma,” I say again. “What is it?”

I put my hand on her shoulder, practicing the face I'll make when she finally looks at me, bracing for what's coming.

This Tree Is Scheduled To Be Removed

Our neighbor’s fucking someone again, and even with my sound system cranked up, I can still hear them. When it was hot outside, Lily and I's bedroom AC unit drowned out any noise from next door, but since the temperature dropped, we had to turn it off. Now I can always hear Erica chewing cereal in bed, laughing at bad television. Some nights I hear her goddamn vibrator.

At first I'm pissed, but then I tell myself it's probably better to listen to *How Do I Know* for the first time on headphones anyway. It's the Oncelers' fourth LP, and first in almost two years. Right after they surprise-released it earlier that afternoon I got a frantic email from Justin with the whole album attached as Mp3's, saying he wanted a review by the morning.

I feigned being upset to Lily. We had plans to go cosmic bowling with her coworkers, but with my new deadline I had to stay behind. She knows I don't like a lot of the people she works with, all those copywriters and art designers blowing smoke up each other's asses, like we need more bullshitters in the world peddling packs of gum and mayonnaise to witless consumers. Of course, I never say any of that to her. I told her I was sorry but I should stay behind and listen to the record and get a draft down at least. I told her to go without me and to call me later if she

needed a ride home. She was disappointed, but she knew I'd only stay behind to write about a Oncelers record, which really was true.

"I didn't even know they were recording," she said as she put on the earrings I bought her the Christmas before last.

"No one did," I said. "Apparently they built a studio in Canada, recorded the whole album themselves in a giant barn."

She kissed me on the cheek, told me to come meet her later if I finished early, and texted a coworker to come pick her up. I could see she was disappointed, but we both knew she'd have more fun bowling without me. When I'm around her coworkers, I can tell she's anxious. She's always checking up on me, asking if I'm okay. *Do you want a drink, Sean? Do you need anything, Sean? Have you met so-and-so?* Her anxiety makes *me* anxious. She's always saying how everyone at the agency likes me. They think it's sweet when I show up at the office to take her to lunch.

Under normal circumstances, I really would've gone and been a good sport, but a new Oncelers LP is big news for Eardrum Media. We were one of the first music sites to write extensively about them years ago when they'd only released a demo. Our Oncelers reviews are some of the most trafficked articles we've ever posted. The band's big everywhere now, but especially big in River City. They perform downtown to a sold out crowd once or twice a year. Lily bought us VIP tickets for my birthday that past Spring. The first music festival we attended together, The Oncelers headlined. I hadn't heard a new song from them in ages, not since before Lily and I got serious, before we'd even entertained the idea of sharing an apartment.

For writing record reviews, I have a ritual. I clear my desk except for my lamp, my hourglass, my notebook, and my snake bowl, just in case I need extra inspiration. I flip the hourglass, and then play the record straight through, writing whatever comes to mind as I listen.

The first track catches me off guard. Slower than usual, some uncharacteristic organ flourishes, an almost R&B vibe to the chorus. Vocals still sound like the Oncelers, but there's an urgency missing. I knew not to set my expectations too high, and I also knew that the best records usually grew on me. Favorite albums takes time to work their way into your subconscious, reveal their themes, stamp themselves against pleasant memories.

At first, the second Oncelers album, their self-titled, major-label debut, sounded like over-produced, aggro-punk bullshit to me. Nothing like the psych-folk and garage rock n roll of the first record. But on subsequent listens I found myself singing along to almost every track, trusting the transitions, the experimentation. It was different, faster, still not my favorite compared to the first and third record, but I understood its place. You can't blame a band for pushing their sound in new and unexpected ways.

I think about this new album title, *How Do I Know*. The lack of a question mark puzzles me. I find the album artwork on my computer. An all blue cover, a blurry photograph of water, an indoor swimming pool maybe? The image blurs around the edges, like whoever took the picture was moving fast when they snapped it. I decide it's a photograph of the deep end, except the camera is high above the water, pointing straight down, like the perspective of a high diver plunging into a chlorine abyss.

Around the fourth track I hear pounding against the wall again from Erica's bedroom, so hard my desk rattles. Who the hell did she have in there? I take a hit from the snake bowl, thinking it might help me focus. But for the rest of the album, the intermittent pounding distracts

me. By the time I get to the end of the record I've written less than half a page. I flip the hourglass and start the album over again.

For the next few hours, I repeat this—writing, listening, trying to ignore the noise from next door. I listen to it four times and then read through my notes. Was it just me, or was this Oncelers record terrible? It had no energy. No flash. There was only catchy song, and it was too simple, too easy a chorus. Where was the depth? The offbeat guitar tones? The weird song structures? Oncelers songs often started with wild guitar solos or ambience. Sometimes they repeated a lyric over and over for the last few minutes of a track as a way to emphasize and hypnotize. All the songs on *How Do I Know* were, I hated to say it, kind of boilerplate. Same lengths, same verse-chorus-verse-chorus-solo-chorus construction. They lacked substance, felt uncomplicated and gimmicky and just... simple.

I took my headphones off and checked my phone in the other room. The Oncelers are Lily and I's favorite band. Maybe I'm just not in the mood for them right now. Maybe I'm stoned. I can get overly critical when I'm high.

I have a text from Lily: Want to come pick me up?

I realize it's past ten o'clock already. I tell her sure, I'll be there in thirty minutes. It'll be good to get out of the house. Maybe the record will sound better in the car. Some records you have to drive to.

Outside, my car's the only one parked along Monument Avenue. Signs had been planted in the grass beside the curb earlier that week saying "No Parking Friday after 7am - Construction." All up Porter Street they've been cutting down trees left and right because they're either dead or growing into power lines and causing outages. We have a giant oak outside our apartment building, beautiful tree with thick branches that extended right up to our second-story

bedroom window. Before moving in with Lily, I'd never had an east-facing bedroom window. Every morning we woke up to direct sunlight. It would've been too bright if not for the oak tree. Lily and I had left the wall adjacent to our mattress blank so in the morning we could watch the swaying shadows of tree branches extend and distend across the beige canvas.

Now they were going to cut the tree down, or at least that's what I figured the spray-painted orange "X" and crumpled flyer stapled to the bark meant. I'd hoped they'd forget about it, move on up to the next intersection. Then again, it was about to be winter, so maybe all that sunlight in the morning would warm Lily and I better without the tree in the way.

The roads were empty and dark. Weekday nights in the city are cold and lonesome the first few weekends after daylight savings time. I drive to the Nickel Bridge toward River City Lanes in south side.

The third track on *How Do I Know* is the poppiest track I've ever heard by the Oncelers. A weirdly smooth song about lust, with a repetitive chorus of "Dream Girl, Dream Girl." Soft "ohh's" and "ahh's" beneath the vocals all over the place. It's catchy in a mind-numbing way. The Oncelers had explored early sixties guitar-pop territory before, but they usually distorted or deconstructed pop songs, not just recreated them.

On their last record the final song was this slow-burning acoustic ballad, a simple track about two separated lovers longing for each other from two sides of the world. Every verse alternates back and forth from each of their perspectives, both characters filled with heartache, but also with appreciation for knowing how badly their lover wishes to be with them. Toward the end, just as the final verse is concluding and you think the record's about to sum itself up, all hell breaks loose. Drums and guitar distortion and horns and some kind of warped harp instrument interrupt the vocals mid-sentence and mix with the simple acoustic chord progression that's been

played along, all of it mashing against each other for two solid minutes. It's a discordant, orchestral mess—one that, I argued in my review, proved to the listener how every melody, and by thematic extension, every love affair, is teetering on the edge of chaos and disorder. Just when the lover's bond seems strongest and at its most complete, unexpected chaos interrupts and complicates.

That's the level of thought and complexity Onceler songs and records always evoked, but this "Dream Girl" track, I've heard it five, six times now, and what's the underlying message? Where's the social commentary, the musings on love and loss, the sly digs at the record industry, the satire, the "fuck you?" It can't just be about a dream girl.

I cross the Nickel Bridge and remember the walks Lily and I used to take across it back when I lived in a cramped studio in south side. It's a two lane bridge with these old-timey street lamps lining the outer railings. You could get to south side faster by using the interstate, but that bridge was all concrete, a wide-angle eyesore. No character. The Nickel Bridge, now that's a bridge. Though nowadays it cost fifty cents to cross.

The sixth track on *How Do I Know* irked me the most, so much that I had to start skipping it. The Oncelers are not a trendy band. They don't incorporate the current "next big thing" that every other up-and-comer tries to cash in on. So far in their discography, at least, they've avoided hopping on the electronica/dance music bandwagon so many other modern artists are riding. But this sixth track features a synth-driven, computerized keyboard and some lazily auto-tuned vocals throughout the verse. It's awful.

The bowling alley parking lot is packed. Thursday night cosmic bowling is a big draw, I guess. River City Lanes is a new alley that tries to brand itself as an "upscale bowling experience," whatever that means. They cater to big corporate parties. They have two floors, the

second floor designated as the VIP Lanes. I took Lily on a date years ago to the dinky bowling alley in the West End, but we hadn't been since then. River City Lanes probably put it out of business.

A tattooed door man tries to get me to pay a cover. Apparently, there's a band playing too tonight.

"I'm just here to pick up my girlfriend," I say.

The doorman looks me up and down. I'm wearing my Grimey's Record Store sweat-shirt and faded jeans, a far cry from the business casual I assume the rest of the patrons are sporting. The doorman nods and I walk upstairs to find Lily.

River City Lanes is a sensory overload of televisions, flashing lights, various songs from competing sound systems, and the crashes and thumps of bowling balls against slick lanes and heavy pins. I see Lily at the two corner lanes, beer in hand. They're all still in work clothes.

"Sean," Lily says when she sees me. She grabs my arm and pulls me into a conversation with two guys I can't remember if I've met before. She introduces us all again, Brad and Clark. I shake their hands and look at the scoreboard.

"Any perfect games tonight?" I ask.

"Not tonight," Brad says. "Clark's the big winner so far."

Clark shrugs and takes a final gulp of his beer. "Lily's better than I expected."

I nod and place my hand against Lily's back. "You ready?" I say.

"You don't want to stay for a beer and one game, Sean?" Clark says.

I force a smile and begin to make up an excuse, but then Lily chimes in.

"He's got a deadline," she says. "Let me use the bathroom and then we can go."

She disappears and I stand in the circle with my hands in my pockets. The rest of the group sits by the bowling ball return carriage. There's maybe ten of them, more men than women, most a little older than Lily and I.

"Brad," someone calls from the scorer's seat. "You're up."

Brad walks to the lane and grabs a bowling ball. I glance at a TV by the bar behind us.

"So what's your article?" Clark asks me. "You're a music writer? Am I remembering that right?

"Yeah," I say. "It's just a record review."

"What band?"

Clark's got a crewcut hairstyle, big shoulders, a wide face. He's a bit wobbly on his feet. With a brief glance I realize the whole gang's drunk. There's at least six empty pitchers scattered across various tables.

"The Oncelers," I say. "You heard of them?"

"Shit yeah," Clark says. "They got a new record? How'd I miss that?"

“Just announced today, surprise-release," I say. My attention strays to a commercial playing on a TV at the bar. The bowling alley music goes quiet between songs, and fuck if I don't hear the guitar riff from "Dream Girl" playing softly as a sedan drives off into a sunset. "Motherfucker," I say.

"What?" Clark says, following my eyes to the TV. "You and Lily in the market?”

“That was them," I say. "That's a new Oncelers song."

"That's *their* song?" Clark says. "I like that song. That commercial's been playing on Sundays during football the last few weeks."

"That's a shame," I say under my breath, but Clark hears me.

"Why's that?" he asks.

"Oh, nothing," I say. "It's just a bummer."

"To have your song in a national TV spot? Sean, you know the royalties they're making? Good for them."

I want to tell Clark that licensing your song for a commercial just aligns you with a corporation in a senseless, insincere way. "Dream Girl" is not a song about a car. I want to say that using it is a calculated and depressing attempt by suits to be hip. But instead I just shrug and force another smile. "I guess you're right."

I see Lily returning from the bathroom. She stumbles a bit and uses a bar stool to regain her balance. "Ready?" I say to her.

She nods and starts a parade of hugs and goodbyes. I shake a few hands and then we leave, Lily holding my arm the whole way. When we get to the parking lot I exhale.

"That place gives me a headache," I say.

Lily laughs. "I broke a hundred on my first game," she says. "But after that, not so much."

We get into the car and I turn the heater on. Lily blows into her hands for warmth and bounces in her seat. "So, how's the record?" she asks.

I turn the heat up another notch, unsure of what to say. I don't want to influence her by saying how much I dislike it so far, not that Lily's easily influenced. I just want her raw opinion. If I say I dislike it right off the bat, she'll work harder to find reasons to like it. Lily's a natural contrarian.

"You tell me," I say as I start the album from the beginning. We drive for a few tracks without any conversation. She taps her feet on the floorboard, her fingers on the middle compartment.

"Clark's got his own bowling ball," Lily says. "You believe that? Maybe we should get our own balls and join a league. I like bowling."

"You know we don't have the time for that every week," I say. "Besides, it's more fun if it's just every once in a while."

We turn onto the access road to Nickel Bridge when a pick-up truck flies out of nowhere and nearly merges into the passenger-side door. I swerve and brake suddenly as the truck accelerates past us. Lily immediately rolls down her window and yells at him.

"Get off your phone, ya dickbag!" she says. "You believe this guy?"

I laugh. "How many beers you have tonight, Lily?"

She shoots me a look. "How many bowls you smoke tonight, Sean?" Her look melts into a smile and she gives me a playful shove.

"Fair enough," I say. I put my hand on her leg and she pats it.

We're almost at the edge of the bridge when Lily says, "I'm hungry. Let's go to 29 Diner."

I'm about to refuse and then I realize I haven't eaten since lunch. "An omelet sounds delicious right now," I say.

On the way to 29 Diner I keep expecting Lily to offer an opinion about the record, but she doesn't. She hums along occasionally, checks her phone, stares out the window. I want her to really listen to it, think about it, critique it, but she's treating it like background noise.

Deborah's our waitress again at 29 Diner. Lily always says she reminds her of her grandmother.

"Well," Deborah says. "Haven't seen you two in a while."

"Been working," I say. "Both of us."

"All grown up," Deborah says. She's been serving us since Lily and I were still in college, frequenting 29 Diner every other weekend to nurse hangovers. "The usuals?" Lily and I both nod and Deborah takes our menus.

"And ice waters too, please," Lily says. She slouches on her side of the booth, sliding her feet into my lap. "Written your review yet?"

"It's coming," I say. "Erica's fucking some dude next door again."

Lily laughs. "I swear, you're imagining things. I never hear a peep from her, and when I do I just ignore it."

"It's getting worse. We should talk to her about it."

"Oh stop it. You know it turns you on." She presses her toes to my inner thigh as Deborah drops our waters off. Lily chugs half of hers immediately.

"So," Lily says. "Today, we pitched this new toothpaste ad that Clark and I have been working on the past few weeks. The one I told you about, remember? Where it's just the two mouths on screen, and the one clean mouth is trying to get the other one to smile."

"Did they go for it?" I ask, knowing she'd only bring it up if the client liked it. "Yeah, Gene loved it," she says. "We're casting next week."

"How do you cast that?" I ask, my fingers tapping her feet in my lap.

"Mouth models, Sean. You want to read for it? With those pearly whites?"

We both laugh and stare around the diner together. It's a little shack of a place just off Route 29, only eight booths, and then a counter with a soda fountain on one end and a jukebox on the other. Every year I read a news article about how 29 Diner's about to close up shop, how

no one ever goes anymore, but somehow they keep pulling through. It's Lily's favorite breakfast place to eat, usually because of the oldies jukebox. But tonight the diner's quiet except for the clang of dishes and pans and occasional stovetop sizzles from the kitchen.

Deborah drops our omelets off and asks if we need anything else before disappearing. Lily always orders the veggie omelet, and I order the western with extra ham and no mushrooms. We both take our first bites.

"Why do we not come here anymore?" Lily asks, her mouth half-full.

I eat another fork full and then realize Deborah forgot about the "no" mushrooms.

"What is it?" Lily says, noticing my face twist.

"Nothing," I say. I grab my napkin and spit the mushroom out.

"Mushrooms?" Lily asks. "Shit, let's tell her and get you a new one." She scoots to the edge of her seat and looks for Deborah behind the counter.

"No, it's fine," I say. "I'll just pick them out."

"Deb," Lily calls out.

"Lily, stop it. It's fine. I'll just eat it, really."

"Sean," she says. "You hate mushrooms. They'll make a new one. No big deal. Deb!?"

I hear Deborah shuffle in the kitchen and head towards us. I reach out to Lily's arm.

"Seriously, don't. I hate sending things back. I'll—"

"But it's not what you ordered," Lily says.

"I said *no*, Lily." I say it louder than I intend to. She looks to me, mouth half open.

"More water?" Deborah says, oblivious, pouring into both of our glasses.

"Yes, please," I say. "Thanks."

Lily stares at me as I take another bite. I'm careful to avoid a mushroom.

"What?" I say. "Just eat, will you? I gotta get back and finish writing."

She picks up her fork. We eat the rest of our meals in silence, her eyeing the pile of mushrooms on my plate, but saying nothing. I want to apologize for raising my voice but instead I just keep eating. We pay for the check in cash and leave without saying goodbye to Deborah. On the car ride home I'm about to skip the sixth track of the album when Lily stops me.

"I want to listen to it straight through," she says.

The song plays for another minute, the synths and warped vocals bothering me even more now. "What do you think?" I say.

Lily sits up in her seat. "It's different," she says. "Kind of weird, right?"

I smile. "I know. I'm not sure I—"

"But I really like it," Lily says. "It's clean, you know? Bigger, bolder, better produced, more modern. Ready for radio."

I turn the volume down a few notches. "Yeah, but that's not them, Lily. I'm not sold on it yet. Feels forced to me."

"You've always like their weird shit the most though."

"I like when they're challenging. This is fluff. Music for car commercials and TV shows."

Lily laughs. "God forbid they make a little money, Sean. And what do you care? You don't watch TV anyway."

"It's the principle, Lily. I just expect more from them."

"Well, I'm sorry you're disappointed." She listens for another minute or two before we turn on to Porter Street, just a few blocks from home. "I don't think it sounds that different," she says. "Give it some time."

"It sounds gimmicky," I say.

"It's fun, Sean," Lily says. "You're being cynical."

"You know all about 'fun,'" I say. Our entire block is empty, but it's cold and I don't want to walk an extra ten minutes so I park right in front of the oak tree outside our building.

"Now you're just being mean," Lily says. "Save it for your review."

"Remember when they played at The Factory downtown a few years ago?" I say.

"That was fun," Lily says.

"They played all the hits, start to finish. Singer jumping around like a goddamn mad man. Remember, he climbed up to the second floor balcony? That was a hell of a show. You can't put that show in a car commercial. Though I'm sure they'll try."

"Don't park here," Lily says. "See the signs?"

I turn the engine off and open my door. "I'll move it in the morning," I say.

"Is that a joke?" Lily says. "You're going to sleep in later than me and you know it."

"No, I won't. I'll move it. C'mon. It's cold."

"Sean, they're gonna tow you, and then I'm gonna have to drive you back to south side to the impound lot. Will you just move it, please?"

"I said I'll move it in the fucking morning."

"Don't yell at me."

"No one's yelling," I say. I take a breath, shut the car door, and put my hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Lily. Let's just go inside. I promise, I'll move it in the morning."

Lily jerks her door open and hurries up the stoop into our apartment building. I get out of the driver's seat and survey the empty block. Our tree's the only one left. I walk over to it, tear the flyer off of the bark, and throw it in the trash bin beside our stoop.

Upstairs, Lily's already in her sweatpants, brushing her teeth in the bathroom. I lean against the door frame and watch her.

"Look, I'm sorry," I say. "I'm just... I'm disappointed, I guess."

Lily spits her toothpaste into the sink and dries her face before turning to me. "It's just a record, Sean," she says. "Finish writing and come to bed." She kisses me on the cheek and walks to the bedroom.

An hour later I'm at the desk beside our mattress, still struggling to write the review, listening to Lily's light snores. I finally give up and decide I'll wake up early and revisit it. I get into bed with Lily and she sidles up beside me, lying on my arm until it falls asleep. I doze in and out all night, thinking I'm hearing noises from Erica's bedroom constantly.

In the morning I hear trucks, far away voices, beeping, engines. Lily sleeps right through it all. I lie there, eyes open. The morning light shines bright against the oak tree, casting hard shadows of tree leaves against our wall, and against the outline of Lily's body beneath the comforter. I want to move my car, but I also want to watch the light, because this might be the last time. Lily groans in her sleep and turns her back to me. Is this what it feels like to drift apart, or is this what it feels like to settle down? I wonder what it means that I can't tell the difference between the two.

There's a loud banging on our apartment building's front door, a gruff man's voice from below yelling up to our window. "Hey, anybody own this green sedan out here? Tow truck's on the way."

I'm about to get up, but Lily reaches out for me, slides her head over my outstretched arm again, pins it against the bed. One more minute, I think. Another minute and I'll move the car,

and then I'll write a review of *How Do I Know* while they chop down the very last tree on our block.

At The First Sign Of Trouble

My sister called me at work to tell me she had a baby.

"He looks like you, Russell," Celia said. "Let's try and start fresh."

"Are you sure Bruce would be okay with me coming?" I asked.

"He's okay," she said. "Come home. Can you do that for your nephew's sake?"

I wrote down her new address on a bar napkin and told my manager to find someone else to work my shift, because I was taking the first bus I could home to River City. I'd always wanted to be an uncle. Fatherhood seemed hard, all that pressure and worrying. But an uncle? An uncle can pop in once every few months with a gift, take his nephew to the park, buy him ice cream, teach him card tricks. An uncle stays cool forever.

Celia and I were born the same year but she's older than me. Irish twins. We were close as kids all the way through high school. At fifteen we started to drink and get high every night in the backyard after our parents went to sleep. We spent everyday together—"partners in crime," our father used to say. He died of a heart-attack when we were seventeen. Died in his recliner on

a Sunday afternoon watching a football game. I remember the score of the game when I found him: 56-7. The whole funeral I couldn't stop thinking, "I wish he'd died watching a close game."

Our mother was never the same after that. She locked herself in her bedroom for days at a time, left us notes on the kitchen table: "You're on your own for dinner." Without any oversight, Celia and I grew reckless. After we crashed the family minivan into a telephone pole, Mom shipped us both off to The Center to get sober.

I didn't take any of the meetings at The Center seriously, but Celia did. She met Bruce, and he became her sponsor and eventual husband.

I haven't been welcome in their lives since Bruce and I argued about Christmas trees three years ago. I told him he ought to buy a real tree instead of the fake one he'd decorated in the living room. "Bullshit plastic tree" is what I called it, I think. I was only having fun with him, but he cussed me out. Called me a burnout, so I punched him. I'm not proud of that. But I did it. He threw a punch back but missed me and fell to the ground. I pinned his shoulders to the carpet with my knees. Only after Celia pounded my back over and over did I let him up. They asked me to leave, and a few days later she called me to say I shouldn't come around anymore.

"I'm sorry, Russell," she said. "Bruce says you're a bad influence."

I moved south after that. Worked in kitchens and bars in various towns, scraped by. Celia and I only spoke on the phone a few times since that incident. I missed her, the old her, not the sober, scared Celia that took Bruce's word as God's. I wasn't bitter though. I knew I was a hard person to be around. This time however, I wanted to show both of them that I was fit to be an uncle, that I could be a positive force in my nephew's life.

On the bus ride north I thought about the times I'd gotten sober since my short stay at The Center. Usually I'd straighten out briefly for the sake of a relationship, but sooner or later it

all went to shit, whether I was on the wagon or not. Like with Evelyn. I came home one evening and she told me that she slept with a musician who played every Sunday night at the bar below our apartment. I didn't have to be drunk to pull down the shower curtain and swing it at her. I nearly smacked her in the temple. Thank God she ducked. She said I had anger problems, "emotionally abusive tendencies," and that I should see a therapist. I did for a while, but it was all a bunch of horse shit, just like at The Center. All I really remember was one thing the therapist said. "If you feel yourself getting angry or upset, or feel like you're going to do something you'll regret, walk away. Remove yourself from the situation at the first sign of trouble." I tried to live by that, but it didn't save Evelyn and I. Or Rachel and I. Or Julie and I. Trouble always found me whether I recognized the signs or not.

When I woke up in the middle of the night on the bus, we'd been pulled over by the police. Passengers mumbled and yawned, asking what happened. An officer led the driver out to the street, and I watched through the window as they argued for several minutes. Then the officer told us that our driver was operating with a restricted license, and we'd have to wait for a replacement driver. We all sat there on the side of the highway in the dark, cars whooshing past us, gravel spitting across the asphalt, waiting for a sober man to arrive and save the day.

The bus grew hot and stuffy, so I decided to walk up the shoulder to the nearest exit and find a cup of coffee. The officer warned that the bus might leave without me, but I told him I'd be quick. I brought my bag along to pack it with snacks for the rest of the ride.

In the gas station I stared at the rows of coolers filled with cheap beer. Sometimes I tried to estimate how many swimming pools of beer I'd drank in my lifetime. Not gigantic Olympic swimming pools, but small above-ground pools, like the one my father bought and installed in

our backyard the summer before he died. My mother, sister, and I spent every day that summer lounging on inflatable rafts, our pale skin bronzing in the sun.

That summer was the only time I can remember my father coming home smiling. I'd hear the minivan pull into the driveway out front, the brakes squeaking to a halt, and then he'd walk straight to the backyard, wouldn't even bother to go inside first.

"How's the temperature?" he'd ask, dipping his fingers into the water, and then he'd check the thermometer, nod his head, and go inside to drink beer and watch the evening news. He rarely swam in the pool himself.

By the next summer though, the pool filter broke and nobody bothered to fix it. For years the pool decayed in the backyard, the water brown and slimy, dotted with dead leaves. Then my mother passed in her sleep when I was 20, so Celia and I sold the house and buried her next to Dad. We left the pool for whatever family moved in after us. I was always curious if the young family that bought our house swam in my father's pool, or sold it, or bought a new one.

As I paid for my coffee and a few bags of chips at the counter I noticed a teenage couple pumping gas outside. The girl stared me down as I crossed the parking lot back to the main road.

"Hey mister," she said, jogging over to me. "Hey, excuse me, but, um, my boyfriend and I, we were wondering if you could, well, buy us a case a beer?" She tilted her head to the side and let her straight hair dangle. Her shoulders were bare except for the single straps of her white tank top.

I laughed. "Sorry," I said. "I don't do that sort of thing." I walked away before she had the time to pout or ask again, but once I rounded the highway ramp I saw the bus pulling back into traffic.

"Shit," I said. I turned back to the teenage couple. They were sitting on the hood, waiting for another mark to "hey mister."

I made a deal with them, a case of beer for a ride, and they agreed to take me the rest of the way to River City, said they were headed that way for a music festival that started the next afternoon.

"So, what are you going to town for?" the girl asked me over her shoulder from the front passenger seat. She propped her foot on the dashboard and took nervous sips of beer.

"I'm an uncle," I said. "My sister just had a son, and I'm on my way to meet him for the first time."

"Hell yeah," the boyfriend said. "Uncle Russell. That's got a nice ring to it. You want a beer, Uncle Russell?" He handed me a cold can.

"No thanks," I said. Best behavior, I thought to myself. No trouble.

After each of them had a beer or two, I offered to drive the rest of the way. They both sat in the backseat and drank and told stories before passing out on top of each other. I drove through the morning, admiring the sunrise to the east as we approached the River City skyline.

I parked at a drugstore a few miles from Celia's house. I asked the couple if they needed anything, but they just moaned in their sleep. Inside, I walked the aisles, inspecting cheap stuffed animals and toys. The kid was a newborn, so plastic was out. Couldn't have him choking. I'm sure he already had plenty of stuffed animals. Too easy. I settled on a balloon. Red. That was always my favorite color, and I thought maybe if I started him off early, it could become his favorite too. I'd have plenty of time to buy him more permanent toys soon enough.

I paid for the balloon and walked back the parking lot, but the couple and their car were gone. The little shits took off with my bag too. I had no phone or clothes or wallet. Just a couple

of bucks and a red balloon tied to my wrist so it wouldn't disappear into the sky. I started walking, passing morning joggers, mothers pushing strollers, a few kids with backpacks on their way to bus stops. They all stared at my balloon like it was floating treasure.

I hadn't been home in so long, but very little had changed. I walked down Grove Avenue, a street lined with row-houses and apartment complexes. I remembered the time Celia and I staked out her ex-boyfriend's place on Grove, waiting for him to leave so we could break in and steal his television set. Bruce called me a bad influence, but before our stay at The Center, Celia was the schemer. Her relationship history was as embattled as mine, filled with infidelity, heated arguments, blocked telephone numbers.

"There he goes," Celia said to me, pointing at her ex as he pulled his car into the street. We climbed a wooden fence beside his apartment building, and walked around back to a window Celia knew he always left open. We walked right out of there with the TV and a few bottles of liquor we swiped from his freezer.

"Now what?" I said. We didn't need a TV.

"Let's go to the Nickel Bridge," Celia said. She took a swig from the liquor bottle and grinned the whole drive to there. When we got to the bridge, we parked right at its center, then tossed the television into the river, heard it explode into the current before jumping back into the car and speeding off. This is the kind of petty, juvenile shit we dedicated our youth to. Back then I never worried about consequences. Nothing felt permanent. Not until Dad died, at least.

I reached Celia's new house and knocked on the front door, balloon still in hand. The house was smaller than I thought it would be, but in a good neighborhood, only a mile or so from where we grew up. The driveway was empty, the house dark. The yard wasn't as manicured as I

pictured. Clumps of dead grass sprouted at various points beside the driveway. Damn Bruce. Couldn't even take care of his own lawn.

I knocked again, harder this time. I peeked into the window and saw the kitchen, stacks of mail spread out on the table, dishes in the sink. Celia was usually organized, but I figured with the new baby she must've been too busy or exhausted to keep the house tidy. With Bruce was out teaching history to high schoolers all day, I decided I'd clean the house for them, try and get on Bruce's good side for once.

I knocked one last time but no one answered. I couldn't call Celia without my phone, so I climbed the fence to go around and see if the back door was unlocked. The backyard was small, with a few young trees along the far fence-line, and a tiny patio with a table and two chairs. I tried the sliding glass door, but it was locked too.

"You from The Center," someone said over my shoulder. I turned to see an old woman leaning her arms over my sister's backyard fence, smoking a cigarette.

"No," I said. "I'm Celia's brother, Russell." I walked to her. "You live next door?"

She nodded and took a drag on her cigarette. "They're not here," she said. "Haven't seen them today."

"You know where they might be?" I asked.

The old woman stared at my balloon and shrugged. "Don't know. Either The Center or the hospital would be my guess." She pointed her cigarette at my balloon. "That's for the kid, right? He's a beautiful boy."

I nodded and looked around the backyard, all of a sudden feeling like I was trespassing.

"Celia never mentioned that she had a brother," the woman said.

"I've been out of town," I said. "I think I'll wait out front. Nice meeting you."

I walked to the front of the house and sat on the stoop. With no trees in the yard to create any shade, the sun baked the lawn. I leaned my head against the door and looked at my balloon. If Celia and Bruce were at The Center for a meeting, then I didn't want any part of it. But a morning meeting was unlikely. Maybe they had a check-up for the baby at the hospital, but I thought Celia might've mentioned it. I wanted to call her but I didn't have her new number memorized. I thought about the teenage couple with my bag, using my phone, wearing my clothes, eating my snacks. I couldn't help but laugh, knowing that it was the exact kind of thing Celia and I would've done just a few years earlier.

Finally, I decided to walk to the hospital. It would take the rest of the morning, but I couldn't sit and wait all day. Each street I passed triggered another memory of Celia and I. The time we ate mushrooms and ended up racing each other on foot up Grace Street in the middle of the night. Or one Fourth of July when we walked around all afternoon lighting firecrackers, tossing them into sewers, listening to them reverberate beneath us. Those years felt like a movie in my head. I could play the memories over and over, rewinding and pausing wherever I pleased. I tried to explain that to Celia one night not long after our mother passed, right when Celia had gotten sober again.

"Life doesn't feel like a movie to me, Russell," she said.

"What's it feel like then?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Like a straight line I guess. It just keeps moving forward. Like a bullet, really."

I walked into the hospital hungry, drenched in sweat, realizing that I hadn't eaten anything since before my bus ride the evening before. My balloon was in great shape though, still pulling tight against my wrist. I told the front nurse my sister's name and she searched for it

on a computer. I caught a glimpse of myself in the reflection of a window and tried to straighten out my hair with my fingers.

"Sir," the front nurse said. "Are you family?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm her brother."

She looked me up and down.

"I've been on the road all night," I said.

"Do you have any identification?" she asked.

I reached into my pocket, then remembered about my wallet.

"It was stolen," I said. "Look, I brought this for my nephew." I held the balloon out to her. "I came a long way."

She looked to the computer. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't give you any information without identification."

"I'm her brother, Russell." I squeezed the edge of the front desk, digging my palm into a corner.

"If you have a seat, I'm sure they'll be out soon," she said.

"But…" I took a deep breath and tried to grin. "Okay, thank you."

I turned away. No trouble, I thought. Besides, at least now I knew they were there. I sat in the lobby for a few minutes, and then when the front nurse wasn't paying attention, I walked through a side door into a long hallway, searching for the maternity ward. The place was a labyrinth. I untied the balloon from my wrist and held it to my chest, trying to conceal it so I wouldn't attract attention. I eventually landed in a skylit room with a moving walkway stretching down a long hallway toward the maternity ward. I was about to step onto the walkway when a voice stopped me.

“Are you going down there?” someone said. I turned and saw an old man in a hospital gown with a cane. He approached me in a hurry. “There’s no one down there,” he said, pointing down the hallway.

“Excuse me?” I said. “Do I know you?”

“Come, I’ll show you,” he said, shuffling me onto the walkway and then standing beside me. “There’s no one down there,” he said again, shaking his head. He held onto my arm firmly. We stood side by side, still, but moving.

I looked around. A few nurses and doctors passed, but no one paid any attention to us. The old man was thin, his skin pale. He smelled like cough medicine. He held me tight, and there was nothing I could do, so we stood there together.

“Is that for me?” the old man said.

I looked at him. He eyed the balloon.

“It’s for my nephew,” I said.

He nodded and looked forward again, still clutching my arm. “They’re not here,” he said. “You’ve been duped, son. No one is here.”

I pulled away from him. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t know you.” I wanted to ask a nurse or doctor to take the old man away from me, take him back to his room, but we were already moving, rails on both sides. We were trapped. I started to walk forward.

“Will you take me with you?” he said.

I turned back to him. “Where?”

He pointed his cane down the walkway. “There,” he said. “I don’t want to go alone.” He looked at me, pleading.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

A woman raced down the walkway toward us. “Dad?” she shouted.

“Look,” I said, pointing over his shoulder.

He didn’t look. “Take me with you,” he said again. “So I can see.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Dad?” the woman said again as she finally reached us. We all stepped off the edge of the walkway, the woman clutching the old man’s arm. “Where are you going, Dad?” She looked at me. “I’m sorry. He’s very sick. He just took off. Where were you going, Daddy?” She gave me a weak smile and turned her father around. He looked at her, confused, and then looked to the floor. They walked slowly to the parallel walkway that led back to where we came from.

“It’s all right,” I said to their backs. I watched them move down the walkway. For a second I almost called out to the old man. I wanted to invite him to come with me, to see my nephew. But instead I just turned away and rounded the corner down the maternity ward hallway.

I peeked into every room as I passed, but I was distracted. My grandparents all died before I was old enough to remember them, and of course my parents didn’t live long enough for their minds to start slipping. For a second I was almost grateful for that. I never wanted to see my father, or see anyone, so lost and confused like the old man.

I kept checking room windows, so fast that I almost missed the face of Bruce. I’d finally found them. I held the balloon by the string and craned my neck to see my sister and Bruce sitting beside each other, her head on his shoulder, asleep. Bruce stared at an empty hospital bed in front of him like he was lost in a trance. I took a step backward from the window.

“Sir,” I heard a nurse’s voice say from the end of the hall. She walked toward me. “You can’t be here.”

I stared at the door knob to the room. I heard the nurse's footsteps getting closer. I wanted to see my nephew. I realized that I never even asked Celia his name. What was the little guy's name?

"Sir," the nurse said. She stood right next to me. "This is not the place for visitors."

I let go of the string and the balloon floated up to a fluorescent light in the ceiling. I looked at the nurse. "Okay," I said. "Okay."

If There's Anything I Can Do

I never liked flying, but I loved watching planes land with Walker at our secret spot beyond the woods in my backyard. We grew up in a subdivision a few miles west of the airport. Planes flew over the houses all day long, but the air grew loudest at dinnertime when business flights from across the country made their final approach, one after the other, all 747s or hulking jumbo jets thundering across the night sky, rattling dining-room windows. At the dinner table my father would ask about my day. The rumbling engines interrupted conversation so frequently that I learned to keep my answers brief: "fine," "busy," "not bad." Most nights the three of us chewed quietly and took turns staring at the dining room's red and white striped wallpaper.

Walker lived down the street. We were best friends since as long as I could remember; played on the same little league teams, watched R-rated movies at sleepovers after our parents went to sleep. His family never ate dinner together, but mine did every night except Friday, which my mom called "on your own night."

So on Fridays when we were kids, Walker and I would bike along a dirt trail through the woods behind my house to a clearing between subdivisions, a rare stretch of undeveloped land with overgrown grass that ended at a chain-link fence plastered with "No Trespassing" signs. The fence line marked the opposite border from the airport terminal, so we hardly ever saw any security. If we did spot a car or golf-cart on the other side of the fence we just tucked into the woods until they left, then returned to lean against the chain-links, searching the sky beyond the clearing, guessing which specks of light were stars and which ones were planes.

My favorite part was the anticipation, arguing over an incoming plane's size, betting if the noise would pop our ears or not. Only the biggest planes produced this effect, but it wasn't always easy to spot the huge ones, not until they were right above you. We always laughed and yelled as the noise escalated, Walker sometimes shouting, "Whoa, that's a Big Momma!" like it was a prize-winning fish to reel in. When they were close, Big Mommas rattled the air, flapping the cheeks of our open mouths, but we learned to avoid the taste of jet-engine fuel and hold our breaths. Walker's favorite part was the brief moment when the force of a plane's approach generated so much wind that he had to lean forward to keep from falling over. He said if he timed it right, for a split-second, he'd feel weightless. I always let the wind push me over, my back bending the chain-links, bowing it sideways like a hammock in a hurricane. Lights beneath the plane shone straight down on us like UFO beams, but only for an instant before the plane crossed over the fence and descended to the runway, the thunder fading, until all was quiet and dark enough to start searching the horizon for the next one.

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Walker was bigger than me, a linebacker's build with a short blonde buzz cut. When high school started he played football, trading Friday night plane watching for varsity games with his new teammates. At the beginning of freshmen year we rode the same school bus, but it wasn't long before he got rides in the morning from his older friends on the team. We'd still say hi to each other in the halls, but we didn't have any classes together. After football season ended I called him one Friday to see if he wanted to go watch planes, but he had plans to go to some party.

"We'll pick you up if you want to come," he said. I could hear chatter in the background on the phone.

"No thanks," I said. I didn't want to tag along, and besides, everyone would be drinking there and I didn't want any part of that.

"You know you don't have to drink if you don't want to," Walker said, reading my mind.

"It's not that," I said. "Maybe next time. Let me know if you ever want to go watch some planes."

That night I snuck out of the house to go to the airport spot by myself. I sat against the fence and tossed gravel into the tall grass. For hours I opened and closed my phone, wondering if I should call Walker to get the address and bike to the party, but the thought of walking through the door by myself, everyone turning their heads as I entered, people whispering to each other, "who's that?" It all made me anxious, and on top of that I knew they'd wonder why I didn't drink, and I didn't want to explain myself. In health class videos they always said to tell people, "My parents won't let me," or "I'm fine with water," but I was afraid Walker's friends would laugh at me.

I didn't want to explain about my cousin Kevin, how he died in a drunk driving accident when I was eight and over the next few years his whole family fall apart. My dad's brother,

Uncle Joe, drank more until he lost his job. Aunt Mary became depressed and would hardly ever leave the house or cook dinner like she used to, and Kevin's little brother Bobby dropped out of high school a year after the accident and left town. We didn't go to their house for Christmas or Thanksgiving anymore. Whenever I asked about them, my mother would just shake her head. "Sad, what happened. So sad." My father warned me not to let him catch me drinking until I was twenty-one, and even then, he said, be careful.

That whole side of the family disappeared from our lives, all because Kevin and his buddy had gotten drunk at a party and swerved into oncoming traffic on the way home. At his funeral I promised myself I wouldn't ever drink, and so far I'd kept that promise. Against the airport fence that night, waiting for incoming planes, I first understood what a lonely promise it could become.

***

Sophomore year I took an interest in photography. I shot some photos of sporting events and assemblies for the school yearbook. I was good at taking pictures, capturing a moment, and I especially liked spending time in the dark room, the smell of film and developer, the safelight bathing my skin in amber-red hue.

Midway through the year, Walker transferred into my photo class. He had a good football season that fall, was second on the team in tackles. We hardly ever saw or spoke to each other anymore, and when he first came into classroom I expected him to sit with some lacrosse players in the back who always slept the whole period. But he didn't. He sat down beside me and grinned.

"Shit," he said. "Haven't had a class with you since seventh grade."

"Sixth grade, actually," I said. "English."

"Oh yeah, I remember Ms. Torbert. That woman hated me."

I tapped my pencil on the desk.

"What did you transfer from?" I asked.

"Shop," said Walker. "These hands aren't cut out for making birdhouses, Dalton." He looked around the room, eyed some prints on the wall. "I don't have a camera. Is that a problem?"

I laughed. "Only if you want to pass," I said. "You can use mine for now if you want."

For the next month we shared my camera and I taught him everything I knew about photography—how to develop film, use the enlargers in the dark room, dodge and burn his prints to even out exposures. When Mr. Fisher partnered us together for an assignment, we shot a bunch of rolls one Sunday afternoon around the old neighborhood—basketball courts, creeks, the playground at our old elementary school, and the airport spot. I took a cool long-lens portrait of Walker at dusk wearing this goofy cowboy hat, leaning beside the "No Trespassing" sign, the flat runway behind him disappearing into the right third of the frame.

On Friday of that same week, Walker caught up with me after school to see if I wanted to go watch planes that night.

"Sure," I said, trying to hold back my excitement.

That night at sunset, I waited with my bike in the cul-de-sac in front of my house but he never showed. I texted him and got no response. An hour after I went back inside I heard a knock on the door. It was Walker and his friend KC from the football team, a redheaded junior running-back.

"Hey," Walker said. "Let's do this." KC stood behind him tapping buttons on his phone. We had first period physics class together, but he hardly said a word to me all year, except for when he asked me for answers to a worksheet.

"It's late," I said. "There might not be any landings."

"There'll be a few. C'mon." He turned away and started back down the walkway. KC looked up at me.

"Hey, Dalton," he said. He leaned in the doorway and looked around before pulling a flask from his jacket. "Got some bourbon from my dad's liquor cabinet." He winked and motioned for me to follow. I stared at the freckles on the back of his neck and stepped out of the house. Walker stood in my front yard looking up at the sky.

"Walker," I said. "I should probably stay home tonight. It's getting—"

"Whoa." Walker pointed up into the distance. "You see that one? Dalton, come here."

KC stared into the sky.

"What?" KC said. "I don't see anything."

"That speck right there. See it?" Walker pointed again.

I walked out to the two of them and searched the stars. "I can't tell," I said. I looked at Walker and I could see in his face that he was trying to hype it up for KC, so I said, "But it could be a big one."

"It's huge," Walker said. "I'm telling you. C'mon, we gotta catch it." Walker took off around the side of my house into the woods. KC followed him. I stared back at the sky again and squinted. No planes. I wanted to go back inside, but I heard Walker shout my name from the woods again, so I ran to catch up.

When we got to the fence-line, all was quiet, just like I thought. KC was disappointed, but Walker assured him.

"Just wait a few minutes," he said. "It's like a roller coaster flying through the sky. You'll love it."

The three of us sat in the gravel, Walker in the middle. He and KC traded sips from the bottle a few times before KC handed it to me.

"No thanks. I'm good," I said.

"It goes down real smooth," KC said. He shook it and some liquid spilled out from underneath the cap onto Walker's pants.

"Hey, watch it," said Walker, pushing KC's hand away. He rubbed at his pant-leg with the sleeve of his jacket.

We sat in silence for another minute. KC fidgeted and tossed gravel over his shoulder through the fence onto airport property. The airport was more quiet than normal behind us, and I worried that there would be no landings at all.

Walker leaned his elbows against his knees, staring hard at the sky, like he was trying to will a plane onto the horizon.

KC took another sip from his flask and said, "We can still make it to Ben Lambert's party before it's over if we leave now."

"Where's that?" Walker said without looking at him.

"His place. His parent's are out of town." KC extended the bottle to me again. I looked at it and shook my head, but he kept holding it in front of me.

Walker rubbed at his pants. "He's said he's good, man. Back off."

KC held the flask steady. "What's the big deal, Dalton? Just try a little bit. Won't hurt you." He held it to my face and the smell burnt my nostrils. I turned away. I wanted to grab the flask and toss it over the fence.

Walker shoved KC's arm away from me, hard. "Back the fuck off for Christ's sake. He doesn't want to drink."

KC laughed a short grunt of a laugh and put the bottle back into his jacket. "Well," he said. "You two can stay out here all night waiting for your roller coasters, but I'm getting the fuck out of here." He started to stand up but Walker grabbed his shoulder to bring him back to the ground.

"Five more minutes," he said. "I'm telling you. Give me that bottle." As KC reached for the bottle again, I saw a light expand on the horizon. I stood up.

"There's one," I said. "See it?" I could start hear the faint rumble of its engine. "See it?" I said again.

KC slouched against the fence. "That?" He pointed. "That's what we're here for?"

Walker stood up beside me and took a step forward, jutting his neck out. "Listen," he said. "Hear that?" The engines grew louder. It was a big one, we could both tell. Headed right for us.

KC stood up slowly and trained his eyes on the descending plane.

"Watch," Walker said. The light was more than a speck now, growing with every second, the way a firework shines just before it explodes. The tall grass in the clearing swayed gently at first and then as the full shape of the plane revealed itself the grass blew sideways.

"Holy shit!" KC shouted. The plane thundered overhead as I stepped backwards. Walker held his arms in the air and let his jacket flap in the wind, screaming before remembering to hold his breath. KC stumbled into the fence and then squinted as the lights illuminated all three of us,

necks craned, hair blown straight back. I turned around and watched the plane finish its descent to the runway, the lingering boom of engine noise reverberating in my ears.

Walker yelled and shook the fence. "What'd I tell you? Fucking crazy, right?"

KC ran his hands through his hair and stepped away from the fence. He spit into the grass and scrunched his face into a knot. Walker and I laughed, knowing the jet-fuel fumes had gotten into his mouth.

Then KC grinned at me, wild-eyed, and said, "We gotta have a party out here."

***

The next week at school KC told any and everybody about the airport spot. I passed him in the halls and heard him telling a couple guys that it was "like a dragon flying over you," and then again in the lunch-line telling two girls that it was "louder than a goddamn volcano, trust me." I tried to ignore him, but he was always so loud, his nasally voice carrying into what felt like every corner of the building.

On Friday in physics class he sat down beside me.

"Dalton," he said. "We're all set for tonight."

"For what?" I asked.

He chewed gum and leaned close to my shoulder. "The airport party, you idiot. Remember?"

"I never said you could—"

"I told everyone to park down the street so your parents don't suspect anything."

“Are you crazy?” I said. “We can't bring a bunch of people out there. It'll attract too much attention."

"You worry too much," he said. "Besides, Walker said if anyone shows up, we'll just scatter back into the woods. He said you guys used to do it all the time."

"Gentlemen?" Mr. Moore stared at us from the front of the class. "Anything you'd like to share with the class?"

KC and I both looked down at our papers. I pictured a dozen guys drinking and laughing with their backs against the fence. Drunk. Loud. My parents would find out. Or security would come. They'd keep better tabs on the area after that, maybe even fence it off. I'd tell Walker to put an end to the idea. It was our spot, not KC's. He would understand.

"Hey." KC tapped my worksheet with his pen and whispered, "What'd you get for number six?"

***

That afternoon while we made prints in the darkroom, Walker told me I was overreacting. "It's just a small group," he said. "KC invited some girls out there too."

I dropped a 4x6 into the developer with a pair of tongs. "Why can't you just tell them to party somewhere else?"

"I thought you'd be happy to have a party in your own backyard."

"I don't care about any party, Walker. You know that. You can take them out there, I'm staying home."

He leaned against the counter beside a photo enlarger, a red light shining across his broad shoulders. "Look, I'm sorry about this Dalton, I really am. But it's too late. If I try to cancel it now, KC and the other guys will think we're both losers. And they'll probably go out there

anyway. If we go along with it, then we'll at least be able to control everyone and get them out of there if security shows up."

I moved the print from the developer to the stop-bath for a second, and then to the fixer. It was one of Walker's photos, an underexposed and out of focus shot of me turning the fake captain's wheel at our old elementary school playground.

"And I want you to come, man," Walker said. "You'd like some of these guys. They're funny. Trust me."

I poked at the print in the pan of fixer and shook my head. I didn't want to disappoint Walker, and maybe he was right. Maybe it would be fun.

"Okay?" he said.

"Fine" I said. I pointed at the underexposed print. "Print another of these and give it a little more light."

***

That night, just after dark, the main street adjacent to my cul-de-sac filled with cars. KC and most of his friends lived on the other side of the school district nowhere near the airport, where the houses were bigger and spaced farther apart. He and most of the kids from his neighborhood drove brand new cars their parents bought them on their sixteenth birthday. Walker and I still weren't old enough to drive, and we knew that neither of us would get a car for our next birthday. I told my parents that Walker and I were going to the movies and then I met him in the woods beside my house. KC and about twelve others snuck back into the woods, a few of them carrying cases of beer under their arms. KC shushed them as Walker and I led the way. A lot of the guys I

recognized from the football team, and there were four girls who I'd seen too. One of them, Michelle, was in physics class with KC and me.

We got to the spot and it was just as quiet as the week before. Everyone sat in a circle in the gravel and started drinking. The sky was quiet and cloudy, with hardly any stars. I sat next to Walker and didn't say anything. He kept glancing at the horizon. KC talked endlessly about the planes.

"The wind is insane," KC said. "Almost knocks you over."

"Yeah?" One of the bigger guys said, like he didn't believe him. "Well, when's the show start?"

"Just wait for it," Walker said.

Everyone drank and talked over one another, their voices carrying more than I liked. A half hour passed without any planes landing. I kept looking over my shoulder past the airport fence, making sure no one could see us.

"So who found this place?" Michelle asked.

"Dalton did," said KC, grinning. "Ain't that right."

I felt everyone's eyes on me for the first time. I cleared my throat. "Walker and I used to come here all the time when we were younger."

"Must be pretty loud with planes flying so close to your houses all the time," KC said. He took a long gulp of beer and burped softly.

"It's not so bad," Walker said. "No louder than your screaming on game-days." The whole circle laughed.

"Well," Michelle said. "How about a beer for the host then?" She tossed a beer at my feet.

Walker reached for it before I could. "Dalton's staying sober tonight," he said. "But I'll take it. Thanks." He popped it open and took a quick sip.

The big guy stared at me. "You gotta drive or something?" he said. "I thought your house is right there."

Before I could say anything KC chimed in. "Dalton doesn't drink. Period. Never has." He crushed a can in his hands.

I looked from the big guy to Michelle, both of them staring at me, and then at each other, like they were waiting for a response from me. I stared at the ground, trying to think of something clever, but instead there was just silence.

KC stood up and chucked his crushed beer can far out into the tall grass.

"Hey," Walker said. "Pick that shit up. No littering out here."

KC laughed and reached for another beer. "What?"

"Pick it up, man. This ain't your goddamn backyard."

KC laughed again and looked around at everyone in the circle, trying to get others to laugh with him, but they all just stared at their beers. "All right," he said finally. He walked out into the tall grass slowly as conversation picked back up. A few seconds later he shouted, "I think I see one!"

The whole crowd gazed at the horizon, and one by one stood up. "I see it," Michelle said.

The engine noise grew and I looked over at Walker.

"Here comes a Big Momma!" he shouted.

"KC, get back here," yelled the big guy.

KC stood frozen in the tall grass, fifty feet or so in front of the rest of us. The airplane grew as it descended, the first hints of wind blowing against our faces. Without saying anything everyone took a step forward, drawn to the approach.

I heard KC yell, "Jesus" and then as the plane was almost right above him he turned and started running back at us, as if to race it. Everyone shouted and reached back for the fence to steady themselves. KC ran with his tongue out, zig-zagging, pretending to evade gunfire, then when the lights beamed down on him he jumped into the gravel like he was shot, making his own sound effects, flailing his arms. As the plane flew directly overhead half the group craned their neck to follow its path while the other half doubled over laughing at KC. A few of them coughed from the fumes. Michele clung to the fence and watched the plane until it touched down on the runway. KC got to his knees, covered in dirt and grass. "That was fucking awesome," he said, completely out of breath. Walker reached down to him and brushed him off.

After that, all of us were amped up, talking louder than before, each person describing the wind, the noise, the vibrating chain-links. I spotted the next plane ten minutes later. KC set his beer against the fence and grabbed a few guys, running out into the grass.

"C'mon," he yelled back at the rest of us. "We're gonna race this bastard." Walker looked at me and shrugged and then we all ran out and formed a line in the grass. As the plane approached, I bent my knees in anticipation of running.

"Wait for it," KC said. The headlights doubled in size. "Wait for it." The ground vibrated from the noise. "And, run!" I stumbled at the start but Michelle pulled me up. The wind at my back gave me speed and I sprinted ahead to the front of the pack. I zig-zagged and looked back at the others. KC tripped and Walker reached down to sling him over his shoulder like a war buddy,

both of them screaming. I reached the fence just as the plane crossed overhead and then Michelle crashed into me, breathing hard.

"You're fast," she said, wiping the grass from her jeans.

I rested my back against the fence, and then felt it shake violently.

"Hey KC, quit it." Walker yelled. KC was climbing the chain-links, almost at the top near the barb wire, shaking it so hard I could feel it twenty feet down the fence-line. Walker pulled at KC's jacket, tugging at him hard until they both crashed into the gravel in a heap.

"What the fuck, man?" Walker said.

KC rolled over on his back. "Somebody get me another beer," he said. Everyone laughed and caught their breath.

Walker stood and shook his head. "Maniac," he said.

Michelle pointed back at the horizon. "I think I see another one!"

Then we lined back up in the tall grass and raced again.

***

We raced planes until close to midnight, and then Walker noticed a bright light turn on near the runway. After it flashed yellow once or twice he looked at me and said, "Time to go." We all picked up the trash and scrambled to the woods.

I stood at the edge of my yard and told everyone to stay quiet. A lot of the guys patted me on the back, saying "fun times," or "see you next time." Michelle smiled and said she'd see me in Physics class. At the end of the line, KC stumbled behind Walker.

"Get it together you goddamn fool," Walker said.

KC put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Hell of a night, my friend. More parties to come." I nodded and then he started off into the yard.

"He's fine," Walker said. "I'm sorry about the security, but I think we got out of there fast enough. I'll see you tomorrow." He jogged off into the cul-de-sac towards his house.

I went inside and knocked on my parent's door to tell them I was home. My mom said goodnight through the door and then I went to bed, fully clothed and covered in grass stains, listening for planes overhead. Even in the middle of the night I always heard at least one plane overhead before falling asleep, but that night there was only the buzzing in my ears from night's many jet engines, and a constant wind blowing against my bedroom window.

***

I woke up at noon Saturday, sore, and spent most of the day at my house recovering. That afternoon, Walker and I had plans to take more photographs for a new project. I called him twice and he didn't answer. Just before dinner he called me back.

"Hey," I said. "Where you been? Still want to take some pictures?"

It took me a moment to realize he was crying, sniffling, trying to say something.

"Walker," I talked over him, letting out an uncomfortable laugh. "What's wrong?"

His throat lurched and he said, "You didn't hear what happened?"

"No." I'd never heard him sound like that. It knotted my stomach.

"KC got into an accident last night. Dalton, he's dead."

He kept crying into the phone and I couldn't say anything. I tried to make words, say I was sorry, tell him it was going to be okay, ask him what I could do, but each phrase flew through my brain so quickly I couldn't process any of it. Sweat formed on the back of my neck and I rubbed

at it with my fingertips. Before I knew my mouth was moving I said, "You don't want to take any pictures then?"

"What?" he asked between sniffs.

I blinked and my throat went dry. "Sorry," I said. "I gotta go." And I hung up.

I sat on the bed and stared at nothing. I thought of KC's funeral. His friends all wearing suits, Walker as a pallbearer. I remembered him running through the field with the plane at his back, cackling with glee, and the sound of his laugh over the jet engine. I gritted my teeth and squeezed my phone. Goddamn son of a bitch KC.

I went to the bathroom and washed my face, splashing water into my eyes, scrubbing at the acne on my temples and forehead, washing over and over, water drenching the front of my shirt. I noticed a line of ants on the wall beneath the medicine cabinet. We always had ants in the bathroom, no matter how many traps my Mom bought. I wet a wad of tissues and smashed them, wiping them into the sink, drowning them. There were more in the corner behind the faucet, scurrying, panicking, trying to get away. My mother knocked on the door. "Honey," she said. "Honey come out here. We just saw something on the news." I dropped the wad of tissues and pressed on the ants with my index finger. "Honey?" My mother knocked again. I kept killing them until there was only one left. I watched it make a break for a crack in the caulk beneath the sink, my finger hovering above, creating a shadow. When he disappeared into the crack I froze and said, "Go back and tell the others not to come here."

The Optimists

My ex-wife picked me up at sunrise. I expected her to ask me to drive but she didn't. She handed me a cup of coffee. I didn't even take a sip before she said: "Glen, do you think it's our fault?"

"No, Annie," I said.

We were driving eight hours south to get our son, Louis, out of the University Psychiatric Services Center. The campus police arrested him for attacking his ex-girlfriend. They called Annie the night before to say they were holding him in the hospital because he might be a threat to himself. Our boy, a threat to himself. I couldn't wrap my head around it.

"He's just heartbroken is all," I said. "And confused." I glanced at Annie. We'd been divorced for seven years, but she looked the same as the day on our front porch when she told me she wanted to end it—same curly red hair, same bags beneath her dark eyes, same long fingernails tapping against her coffee cup.

"We shouldn't have let him follow her down there," she said.

"Don't start that," I said. I looked at my boots and realized I'd tracked dirt into the car. I pushed the dirt chunks underneath the seat with my heel. "You let me know when you need me to drive," I said.

She nodded and merged onto the interstate ramp a little too fast, causing our bodies to lean left. I had to grab the handle above the passenger side door to keep from crashing into her shoulder.

"Easy," I said. And then, after a long silence: "It's going to be okay."

***

I consider myself an optimist, possibly to a fault. When our basement flooded and ruined my vinyl collection, I spent an entire afternoon blowing Annie's hair dryer against each record, thinking, knowing, I could save them. I couldn't. Annie told me this. But I spent the day drying anyway. It was only after spinning them on my turntable and hearing the deformed grooves warp every song into garbled yawns, that I realized she was right.

After the divorce, Louis was just as optimistic that his mother and I would get back together. He'd spend his weekends with me at my apartment, and I'd ask him what he thought about love, about his mother and me splitting. He was twelve years old then, and I didn't want him to think that every marriage ends in divorce.

"You just need some time apart," Louis said to me once at the dinner table, his voice a calm mimic of one of those self-help talk show hosts. "It'll work out eventually."

What could I say to that? *No, son. Your mother left me for another man. It's really over.* He didn't want to hear that, so instead I said: "I hope you're right," and tousled his hair and told him to eat another forkful of pasta.

***

The last time Annie and I took a road trip alone was to her parents' cabin in the mountains a year before Louis was born. I wanted to ask her about that trip as we drove south to River City, to see if she remembered us curled up in blankets on the living room floor, each with our own bottle of wine, staring into the fire place. But I knew this was no time for reminiscing.

"Thank you for coming with me," Annie said after an hour on the road.

"Of course," I said.

"Doug wanted to come, but he had work."

"I took off," I said. I closed the air-conditioning vent on the dashboard. "I mean, this is something we should do just the two of us."

"You cold?"

"I'm fine," I said.

She turned the air-conditioning down anyway.

"Did Louis say anything else to you on the phone?" I said. They'd let him talk to Annie the night before, his one phone call. It stung to know that when shit hit the fan, he thought of her first.

"He just kept apologizing," she said, finally. I was surprised at how Annie was holding up. No tears, no outbursts of anger at Louis or his ex, Miranda, who she never liked. "I can tell she has wandering eyes," she once said to me, and I wish I'd said back to her, *You would know how to spot that, wouldn't you?* But instead I just told her that a girlfriend was good for Louis. He worked with her at a restaurant his senior year of high school. She was a few years older, but they got along better than any friend Louis ever had.

When I visited Louis during his first semester at school, I took them out to dinner. I'd never seen him so happy. He'd been a smart, but depressive teenager, prone to long stretches in his room reading or listening to music. But Miranda was loud and boisterous, and it was almost like Louis needed to match that energy, like they were always competing with one another for attention. They looked good together, but she was also Louis' first serious girlfriend. I never thought it would last, or turn so ugly. You can't predict what heartbreak is going to do some people.

***

Louis was always obsessive. As a kid, he'd reorganize his books every few weeks, sometimes by color, sometimes alphabetically. A few weeks before Annie left me, I remember standing in his bedroom doorway, seeing him cross-legged on the floor with stacks of books up to his neck. I watched him open each book, bring it close to his face, and then set it atop a new stack.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Organizing my books by the way they smell," he said without looking at me.

I nodded. I stood there a long while watching him concentrate, wondering if I should tell Annie about his behavior. But her and I fought so much back then, and I worried she'd find some way to make Louis' strange habits my fault. So I never told her. Now, years later, I wish I had.

***

At noon I told Annie we should stop for lunch.

"I'd rather just drive straight through," she said.

“You’ll get a headache if you don’t eat,” I said.

“They said if we don’t get there by six that they’ll have to keep him for another night.”

“We’re making good time,” I said.

“But what if there’s traffic?”

“Annie,” I said. “We can’t just go all day without food. I’m starving. I want to get there too, but we can still have lunch.”

She checked the rearview mirror and switched lanes to pass a car. “Fine,” she said. “But I don’t know how you can eat right now.”

A few exits later she pulled off the interstate and stopped at a roadside diner attached to a gas station. She ordered an omelet and I ordered half a turkey sandwich and vegetable soup. When the waitress walked away Annie stared at me.

“Soup? I thought you were hungry,” she said.

“I don’t eat burgers for every meal anymore, Annie,” I said, laughing.

“Oh,” she said.

“I stopped eating red meat after the heart trouble,” I said. I’d had a minor artery blockage a year after the divorce, nearly gave me a heart attack. My doctor said it was mostly stress related, that I had to take better care of myself—change my diet, exercise more, drink less.

“That’s good,” Annie said.

We sat there in silence and sipped from our water glasses. The diner reeked of grease and bleach. All the stools at the counter had rips in their upholstery. I tried to think of something to talk about with Annie, but what could we say to each other anymore? For years, I’d rehearsed long speeches, how I was sorry for being distant, how I couldn’t believe she’d betrayed me, how

if she would just listen, she would see that we could be a family again. But in that diner, all those years later, with her right in front of me, I couldn't bring myself to say any of it.

"Are you still seeing that woman," Annie said. "What was her name, Cara?"

"Carol," I said. "No. She moved west for work."

"You could've gone with her," she said.

I laughed. "I don't want to live out there, Annie."

"Why not? There's nothing keeping you here."

"Louis is here," I said.

"Louis is away at school and—"

"Carol and I didn't work out, okay?"

She leaned back in her seat and shook her head. "Okay, shit," she said. "Sorry I brought it up."

"When's the last time you spoke to Louis before all this?" I asked.

"Earlier this week," she said. "He didn't even mention Miranda once. What about you?"

"A while ago," I said. "Too long." I tore little pieces from the corner of the napkin beneath my water glass. Annie reached over the table and grabbed my hand.

"Hey," she said. "You couldn't have done anything more. Neither could I, right?"

I squeezed her hand and nodded. Our food came and we ate quietly. Every once in awhile we'd make eye contact, and I'd try to smile, and then we'd both keep eating.

"When's the last time we had a meal together like this?" Annie said.

"You mean just the two of us, or at a place this classy?"

Annie laughed. "Seriously, I can't even remember—"

"It was a week before the divorce," I said. "A Friday night when Louis stayed over at a friends. I made us steaks."

Annie nodded. "Yes," she said. "Now I remember." But I could tell she wished she hadn't brought it up. That was the night she first told me about Doug, who she'd met at a work conference a few months before our divorce. "I didn't mean to talk about that." She glanced over her shoulder to signal our waitress for the check.

I leaned my forearms against the edge of the table. "Annie," I said. "Did they tell you what Louis did, specifically?"

"No," she said. "They said he grabbed her."

"Have you ever, *ever*, seen him get violent with anyone?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "You?"

I shook my head. The waitress came and I tried to pay the check, but Annie insisted.

"You get the next one," she said.

On the way out of the diner, Annie stopped and stared at a painting on the wall beside the front door.

"What," I said. I looked at the painting. "It's just a bowl of fruit."

She pinched the edge of the frame and tilted it slightly, then stepped back to make sure it was straight. "Let's go," she said.

***

Before Louis was born, when I had a week off between construction jobs, I decided to teach myself how to play harmonica. I spent a week practicing, using a little book and listening to a cassette tape of easy-to-play tunes over and over, trying to replicate the sound. I was never much

of a musician, but I played guitar and piano as a kid, could read music for the most part. I practiced "You Are My Sunshine" over and over all week, and then on Friday, I called Annie at work and played it for her over the phone.

"Oh Glen," she said after I finished. "You're making me cry in my goddamn cubicle."

Years later, after the divorce, Louis and I found that old harmonica in a box in my closet.

"I didn't know you could play this," he said to me. He was about fifteen then, with long hair and a growing interest in guitar.

"I can play one song," I said to him. "But I don't play anymore. You take it."

For a few weeks I heard him blowing into the harmonica from his room, trying to play simple songs like "Hot Crossed Buns" and "Row Row Row Your Boat." He was terrible. One night I heard him trying to play "You Are My Sunshine" and I couldn't take it. I banged on the wall that separated our bedrooms.

"Louis," I yelled. "That's enough. Go to bed."

But either he didn't hear me or ignored me. He kept playing. I got out of bed and banged on his bedroom door. "I said cut it out. You can practice more tomorrow."

"Fine," he said through the door. I heard him throw the harmonica onto his bedroom floor, the cheap metal thudding across the hardwood.

"Good night," I said. But he didn't respond.

***

When we arrived at the hospital in River City, a nurse took us straight to Louis. He sat up in his bed, his eyes vacant, his skin even more pale than usual, a large bruise in the center of his forehead. He hadn't shaved in weeks and the scruff made him look older and somehow thinner.

As soon as he saw us the waterworks started from him and Annie. We both embraced him and then I sat beside the bed.

"Tell us what happened," Annie said.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry," he mumbled through a sob.

His hair was greasy and clumped. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him cry.

"It's okay," Annie said. "Just tell us what happened."

Louis pressed his face into her shoulder.

"Louis, tell us."

"Annie," I said, trying to get her to back off. "Just give him a second."

We sat there for several minutes, but Louis wouldn't talk, even after he stopped crying. He just sat at the edge of his bed and stared at the floor, totally shut down. I nodded at Annie as if to say *it's all right*, but he was worse off than I thought he'd be.

***

The doctor and a police officer explained that Louis showed up unannounced to Miranda's apartment. She let him in, they got into an argument. Then she told him to leave, but he refused.

"He threw an ashtray at her," the police officer said. "And he grabbed her by the neck."

"Jesus," I said. I looked at Annie. She held her hand over her mouth. "He told you this?"

"She told us. He hasn't said much of anything to us." He looked to the doctor. "When we brought him to the campus police station and put him in holding, he started to bang his forehead against the wall, and he wouldn't stop, so we brought him here."

"Can we take him home?" Annie asked.

“In cases like this,” the doctor said. “We like to keep patients under observation for at least 36 hours.”

“He’s just going through a rough patch,” I said. “She cheated on him. Did she tell you that?”

The doctor and policeman exchanged looks.

“She showed us emails from your son as well,” the policeman said. “He threatened her repeatedly. I can show you—”

“Where is she now?” Annie asked.

“She doesn’t want to press charges,” said the police officer.

“Is she here?”

“M’am,” the doctor said. “Does Louis have any history of violence?”

“No,” I said.

“Not at all,” Annie said.

They asked us about our lives, Louis’ history, and I could tell they expected him to come from a tortured home with a history of abuse.

“He’s a normal kid,” I said. “He’s an art student. He’s just sensitive.”

The doctor told us that he thought they should keep Louis until the morning, but that ultimately, the decision was up to us. “In the morning, his advisor wants to speak with you both about his classes,” he said. “I’ll give you her contact information.” Then he and the officer left us alone in the office to make our decision.

I put my hand on Annie’s back as she grabbed tissues off the doctor’s desk.

“That bitch,” Annie said. “I told you, Glen. Didn’t I tell you?”

“Stop,” I said. “What do you want to do?”

"Well, we're not leaving him in here another night."

I didn't say anything.

"What, you think we should?" Annie said.

"No of course not," I said. "We'll get a hotel room."

"He doesn't look good," Annie said.

"It'll be okay," I said. "Trust me."

***

We checked Louis out of the hospital and got a room at a hotel. We tried to get him to eat, but he wouldn't. Annie set up a meeting with his advisor for first thing in the morning, and then we'd drive home.

The three of us watched television together for the first time in ages, Annie sitting with Louis on one bed, and me on the other. It was a moment I'd dreamed of for years, us together again, sharing a family moment, but now it felt wrong. I couldn't take it.

"I'm going for a walk," I said. "Louis, you want to go for a walk?"

He acted like he didn't hear me. Annie shrugged.

"Louis," I said. "I asked you a question. You want to go for a walk?"

He shook his head.

"All right," I said. "I'll be back."

I grabbed my wallet and keys off the dresser. Before I left I looked at Louis again. "It gets better," I said. I gave him and Annie a smile, and walked out into the night.

***

I walked for half an hour to a bar called Cellar Door, where Miranda worked. I walked around the block twice before deciding to go inside. I wanted to see her. I wanted to understand.

I sat at the end of the bar, the oldest patron by at least a decade. I ordered a drink and watched as a band set up to play. The place reminded me of a tiny jazz venue Annie and I used to go to when we first started dating.

I'd been sitting for at least ten minutes when Miranda exited the kitchen and walked behind the bar. She didn't see me at first, and I tried not to stare, but I couldn't stop looking at the light bruises on the left side of her neck. It made my heart race to look at those, to know my son had been so careless, violent, unhinged. I finished my drink and stood to leave, but then Miranda saw me. For a second I thought she might ignore me, but after a beat she walked to the end of the bar.

"What are you doing here?" she said. She wore large hoop earrings, and had her hair pulled back into a ponytail. I noticed a tattoo on her arm I'd never seen before.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know. I just wanted—"

"I'm not going to press charges. Did they tell you that?"

"Yes," I said. I felt like a fool for being there.

"I think you better go," she said.

"Wait," I said. "Can you just tell me what happened?"

"Didn't they tell you already?"

"No," I said. "Not that. Before, I mean. Why'd you... You both seemed so happy."

She looked up and down the bar. "I'm sorry," she said.

"You can't treat people like that," I said.

"I think you better go," she said again.

"I want an explanation," I said.

She shook her head, grabbed my glass from the bar, and disappeared into the kitchen.

***

When I got back to the hotel, Louis was standing outside the entrance smoking a cigarette. I expected to him to try and hide it or put it out as I approached, but he didn't.

"You smoke now, huh?" I said when I got close.

He shrugged. "Where have you been?" he mumbled.

"He speaks." I smiled, but Louis remained stoic. "I told you," I said. "I went for a walk."

He nodded and exhaled. He caught me staring at the bruise on his forehead. "It's not as bad as it looks," he said. And then: "I'm sorry, Dad."

"It's okay," I said. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He shook his head. "I fucked up," he said.

I waited for him to say something else, but he didn't. I put my arm around his shoulder and we stood there together, father and son. I couldn't help but think of him as a little kid again, stacking books in his bedroom, trying to make sense of a fast-changing world that often left men like us isolated and confused. I wanted to tell him again: *it gets better*. But I wasn't so sure I believed that anymore.

Flickinger Paragon

I untangled a rat's nest of speaker wire and watched Maggie parallel park outside my front window. She fit her car into a tight spot between my truck and the neighbor's van, didn't even turn her music down. I could hear the bass blaring from her stereo. Mark always used to turn the music off when he parallel parked. I thought of that every time I parked since the morning I found him hanging from the ceiling fan in his bedroom.

Maggie trudged through the snow along the walkway to the front door, nearly slipping on black ice as she climbed the front steps. She was my ex sister-in-law.. Her and Mark had a split that past summer. She'd been overseas since then. Took me days to get a hold of her on the phone. When I did finally tell her what happened, all she said was: "I'm so sorry, Ray. I'll be there soon." That was two weeks ago.

Maggie knocked on the door. I decided to make her wait in the cold as I finished unknotting my wires. I'd bought the mess from a local radio station. It was off-brand, antiquated wire, doubly insulated to prevent the copper from frying in a power surge. I thought it might be

the missing piece Mark and I were looking for. We'd been retooling a Vintage Flickinger Paragon 24-Channel Audio Console in the basement for the past year. Dubbed the Cathedral of Tomorrow back in the 80's, the Flickinger was a thing of beauty, the perfect mixing console for the dream-studio we'd been constructing to record Mark's next album.

The only problem was we couldn't get the thing to work. We powered it up a few times, but as soon as we connected any mic or amp to an input, the VU meter light flickered, the needle danced for a second, and then the console went dark. We'd troubleshot all year, replacing inputs, circuits, knobs, switches, faceplates, bulbs, faders. None of it made a difference. The Flickinger never stayed on long enough for us to mix or record a single note. The old engineer we bought it from said the console was cursed. "There's nothing wrong with it," he said. "Except it won't fucking work."

Maggie knocked again just as I lay the wires flat on the living room carpet. When I opened the front door she had her back to me. She wore the tan, wool cap Mark bought her a few Christmases back, but even with the cap, I could tell her red hair was shorter than the last time I saw her. When she turned around, I expected her to have bags under her eyes from jet lag or crying. But her eyes were as big and green and vacant as ever.

"Ray," Maggie said. She stood there, probably deciding if she should hug me or not. She didn't. "I came as soon as I could."

I nodded and she entered, wiping the snow from her boots on the welcome mat. Wind whipped into the house just before I closed the door. The snow was supposed to get worse that afternoon. I had told Maggie it might be a good idea to wait a day before coming, but she insisted.

"The house is clean," Maggie said.

I shrugged. All I'd done since Mark died was either clean or work on the Flickinger. "Been trying to tidy up," I said.

Maggie took off her gloves, coat, and hat, then set them on the sofa and stared at my wires, all twenty-four of them parallel on the floor. She looked like she wanted to ask about them, but instead she walked to the kitchen.

"Can I make some coffee?" she said. She didn't wait for me to say yes before grabbing a filter from the cabinet. Maggie lived in the house with Mark and I until the morning she left with a man whose name I never knew.

I leaned against the oven and watched her. I'd spent the last two weeks rehearsing what I wanted to say. I thought about it constantly. How I would berate her, make her feel ashamed for betraying my brother, for ruining him. But for some reason, now that she was right in front of me, I couldn't remember any of the sentences. I just wanted her to leave so I could go back to the basement and work on the Flickinger.

"Still running the soundboard at Dacey's?" Maggie asked.

"They gave me leave," I said. "Told me to take as much time as I need."

"Not a lot of shows this time of year anyway, I guess." Maggie walked to the sliding-glass door that led to the backyard. She pressed a finger against a smudge on the glass, then turned to me. "Look, Ray. I don't know what to say. I know you hate me. I feel…"

I shut my eyes and tried to focus on the sound of hot coffee dripping into the pot. Maggie's voice reminded me of Mark, of listening to them bicker in the kitchen while I tried to sleep or worked in the basement.

"I never wanted to hurt anyone," she said. "You know that, right?"

I nodded as if I knew.

Maggie walked back to the coffee pot and poured herself a cup. Her hands trembled. She spilled a little on the counter, but didn't bother to clean it up before taking a long gulp. It was too hot. She gasped and set the mug down, hard.

"Fuck," she said. She turned on the faucet and stuck her head in the sink to drink from the tap. She drank for a while, and then slowly slid to the kitchen floor, back against the cabinet, legs tucked into her stomach, staring up at me.

"What do we do now?" she said.

"Let me show you—"

"No, I don't want to."

"There's a note," I said. "It's to you."

She shook her head. "I don't think I want to read it."

"C'mon," I said. "Let's go upstairs."

"Goddamn it, Mark," she said to herself. I didn't bother helping her up.

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The three of us bought the Flickinger console on Maggie and Mark's third wedding anniversary. We rented a box-truck and drove into the mountains to Sun Dog Studios, a secluded recording space turned museum for analog audio equipment. The old man that owned the place walked us through his giant house that connected to a studio in the backyard. He pointed at photographs on the walls of every musician he'd recorded.

"Mr. Cash slept right there when he visited for his session," he said, pointing at a plaid, green couch with rumpled cushions in his living room.

Mark sat on it, bouncing up and down. "Come sit, Maggie," he said. "You too, Ray."

We both sat, Mark in the middle, and the old man told us we looked like a family band.

"We are," Mark said. He hopped to his feet. "Now how about this Flickinger?"

The old man kept the console in its own room in the studio. It was smaller than I thought it would be, but clean and ergonomic, constructed with fine oak wood, lacquered on every surface except for the shiny, metallic motherboard. I expected it to be dusty, beat up, but it looked almost new. Mark and I inspected it while the old man told Maggie the story of how he hired the famous Daniel Flickinger to build him the console.

"Dan was a genius, but he was also a huckster," the old man said. "He told me he could build this in a month. So I let him stay here, left him alone. A month passed, I checked on his progress, and he hadn't done a thing. This room was all wires and bulbs and boxes of equipment. Coffee cups and soda cans everywhere. He told me not to worry. He had a plan. 'Twenty-four channels,' he said. 'Not sixteen, twenty-four. Won't cost you a penny more. And it'll pull half the power.'"

Mark sat at the motherboard and slid a few faders up and down their tracks, his slender fingers dancing across the silver surface. He grinned at me, flashing the two crooked teeth behind his lower lip, and I could tell his mind was made up. We would be bringing the Flickinger home, whether it worked or not. He turned in his seat and listened to the old man's story.

"So another month goes by, I give him a little more money, try to be patient. If it was anyone else I would've kicked them out. But I'd heard a lot about Dan from friends across the country. 'He's eccentric,' they'd say. 'But wait 'til you record on his console. That *sound*.' Just the range, the way you could manipulate each channel on the fly. The clarity. I was foolish to believe any of it though. Dan was a goddamn lunatic towards the end. I'd hear him in my kitchen on the telephone talking all night long, arguing. He'd say it was his business partners, but I

picked up and listened a few times, and it was some woman, his wife I thought, pleading with him to come home."

Maggie walked to Mark and stood beside him, her hand on his shoulder. She glanced at the console, then to me. I shrugged as if to say, "Looks fine to me," and she nodded, tapping her chewed up fingernails on the wood.

"Finally, he finishes," the old man said. "We toy around with it for a whole weekend, and it works like a charm. I mean everything you've ever heard about a machine of his, it's true. Magic stuff. So I write him the final check, and he packs up and hits the road, leaves me a telephone number and mailing address to contact if there's any problems. The very next day, I try to turn the thing on, and it won't work. I mean it'll jolt to life for a few seconds, but then it shuts down whenever you start plugging up the inputs. I spent months trying to contact Dan, but he disappeared. To this day, I haven't heard from him. No one has. It's been twenty-some years, not a word. I brought in other engineers to take a look. They all say it looks fine. Maybe you three know something I don't, but I doubt it." The old man laughed.

"Well," Mark said. He stood up, ready to accept the challenge. "I think we'll give it a whirl. How much you want for it?"

Mark cut him a check, and we took the thing apart as best we could before strapping it into the truck piece by piece. Then, I drove us home, back down the mountain, my ears popping the whole time. Mark and Maggie talked plans.

"We get it up and running," said Mark. "Then I'll record a few old songs, something simple on piano or guitar, and we'll call it 'The Flickinger Sessions.'"

"You get that thing working," said Maggie. "And some other bands would pay us for their own Flickinger sessions. Could be a real draw."

They went on planning like that for the whole descent, and then as the sun went down and the terrain leveled out, they fell asleep on each other against the passenger side window. I drove us home in silence, thinking how easy it could be for the two of them to be happy, thinking how you never really have a home until you drive your sleeping family back to it in the dark.

***

When I opened the door to Mark's bedroom, the ceiling fan was on, the blades clicking in sync to a cheap clock hanging on the wall. Mark liked clocks. He wanted one in every room of the house, except the basement studio. "Can't be worrying about time while we're down there," he said.

Maggie stepped into the room, a room she'd shared with Mark for nearly a year. We hadn't always lived together. She and Mark rented a cheap apartment for the first two years they were married, but after Dad died, he left Mark and I the house, and we all decided it was a good idea to shack up together, save money that we could use for the album. Seemed like such a great idea at the time.

Maggie rubbed her arms for warmth and pulled the ceiling fan chain to turn it off. "Was it in the morning?" she asked quietly. I could barely hear her.

"Yes," I said.

"How was he the night before?"

"How do you think?" I said, hoping the words would bite.

She turned to me and I could see her holding back tears, and for some reason I softened.

"He was quiet, Maggie," I said. "No different than any other night since you left."

She noticed the envelope with her name on it resting on his pillow. Mark had left me a note too. It didn't say much except that he was sorry and that he wished he could fix everything. He said he wished he could turn back time and fix it, and even though I knew he wasn't talking about the Flickinger, that's all I could think about.

Maggie sat on the bed and stared around the room, chewing at her nails, rubbing her forearms. I watched the ceiling fan come to a complete stop, and then decided I'd had enough. I walked to the closet.

"Here's all your shit," I said. I lifted a large crate from the closet and set it on the bed beside her. "I looked in every room, cleaned the whole house, and this is everything."

She thumbed through the crate, all books and records, a few scarves and T-shirts. She'd already taken most of her belongings with her when she left.

"Now, I think you should go," I said.

She looked at me, a look I knew well, the same pleading look she used to give Mark when she wanted him to quit working and come to bed. "Wait," she said.

"I've got nothing left to say to you," I said.

"I'm sorry, Ray."

"Please, Maggie," I said. "Go."

She picked up the envelope from the pillow. "Can you give me a second to read this?" She held it tight between her fingers and shook it at me. "Just let me sit in here alone and read it, and then I'll go."

"Why did it take you so long to get here?" I said "You couldn't come for the funeral? He was your husband."

"I don't know," she said. "I was angry at him. I'm still angry at him."

And I could tell by the way she shook her head that she regretted it, regretted waiting. It took everything I had not to feel sorry for her.

"Just give me a few minutes," she said. "That's all I ask."

I looked around the room at Mark's possessions, his clothes, a few guitars, an amp or two, stacks of vinyl that I couldn't bring myself to sort through yet.

"What? Am I gonna steal something, Ray?" she said. She looked at me, pleading. I couldn't take the sight of her anymore.

"I'll be in the basement," I said. "You can let yourself out." I clicked the ceiling fan back on and shut the door behind me.

***

Every day after Maggie left that previous summer, Mark and I either worked the sound for shows at Dacey's or troubleshot the Flickinger. I never knew what to say about Maggie leaving. Usually we talked about equipment or theories on why the console kept misfiring. I missed those conversations, the excitement in his voice when he thought he finally figured it out. Mark was an optimist, or at least he played the part of an optimist well. His music was always so hopeful. But every time we tried something new to fix the Flickinger and it didn't work, he'd get angrier. He'd smack the side of the motherboard or kick his drum set, cursing.

The only time Mark ever talked about what happened between Maggie and him was one night at the kitchen table a week before he died. After Maggie left, we always ate in silence. If Mark ever said anything, he complimented my cooking. Mostly he just stared over my shoulder into the living room at the front door.

Then, out of the blue one day, he said, "Ray, you're lucky you're not married."

"Oh yeah," I said. I shook some salt onto my pork chop.

"Maybe it works for some people," he said. "But not us, right? You're lucky."

"But you were happy for a while, Mark," I said. "Weren't you?"

He held a steak knife in his hand and stared at his plate. "All of a sudden it was over," he said.

"What happened?" I said, and as soon as I said it, I regretted it.

Mark stabbed his knife into his pork chop and held it up, twisting it back and forth, his elbow on the table. "She was unhappy. She kept saying that every night, and I kept asking why? How? What can I do? She'd get mad when I worked all night in the basement."

I shrugged and took another bite.

Mark kept staring at his pork chop. "She came home one night, a few nights before she left town, and she told me she'd met someone else. Some lawyer. You believe that? Maggie fucking some lawyer." He shook his head and brought the pork chop to his face, but instead of taking a bite, he just pressed it against his cheek, hard. I could see the point of the knife starting to poke through the meat.

"Mark," I said.

"I hit her, Ray," he said, leaning his face harder into the pork chop, his eyes growing glassy. "I can't even remember it happening. I was drunk. She told me about this lawyer, and I just—"

"Mark, put your food down," I said. "It's okay."

"How could I do that?" he said. He gripped the knife tighter. I could see his knuckles turning white.

"What are you doing?" I said. "Stop."

"I fucked up," he said. "I'm sorry." He jerked the knife away from his face, set it down on his plate, and stared out the sliding-glass door into the dark backyard.

I took the knife and pork chop from him and set it beside my plate. Mark went through mood swings, sure, but that was the first, and only time I'd seen him do something like that. I tried to think of something to say, some solution to his problem, a sentence that would help him forgive himself, but what can you say to that?

"Ray," Mark said quietly. He raised his eyebrows at the door, signaling for me to look, and as soon as I did, a bird flew right into the glass. We both jumped in our seats.

"Jesus," I said.

We sat there, stunned by the impact, and then Mark looked at me, and he laughed. After a few seconds I was laughing too. Mark stood up and unlocked the door.

"Where did you think you were going little fella?" he said to the bird as he slid the door open.

"Is it dead?" I asked, staring at the tiny smudge on the glass.

Mark picked it up and brought it to the kitchen table, cupping the lifeless red bird with two hands. He looked at me and smiled with pleading eyes. "Can we keep her?" he said.

***

In the basement, we had gear stacked everywhere. You could hardly walk without stepping on a cable or pedal or mic stand. I liked the chaos of it. Down there, you could discover something you'd lost forever ago and it could feel new again.

I began to install my new wires to each input beneath the undercarriage of the Flickinger. I listened carefully for the sound of Maggie's footsteps, or the opening and closing of the front

door, but I heard nothing. The wire installation didn't take very long, and I grew content with the monotony of the work. I even started to fool myself into thinking it might actually do the trick.

But even if I did get the Flickinger working, what would I do with it? I was no songwriter. I just fiddled with the levels, set up the mics, mixed the channels. Mark was the writer. He could come up with a simple acoustic song in five minutes, then howl his way through it with his gravelly voice. He was so skinny, but his singing voice was deep, like a boulder rolling down a mountain, stone on stone.

I thought maybe I would get a bunch of local musicians together to record a tribute record for Mark. One by one, all the artists and bands that came through Dacey's could come to the house and record one song. They'd show up late after their concert, and I'd cook them dinner, and then we'd stay up all night recording, right up until everyone was exhausted. They'd all sleep in different rooms of the house, and in the morning I'd wake up first and brew coffee, a new version of one of Mark's old songs playing on repeat in my head.

But first I had to get the thing working. I was almost finished connecting all the wires when I heard Maggie walking down the stairs. I slid out from underneath the Flickinger and looked up. From the rafters of the basement ceiling, Mark had hung the dead red bird from a string. We had a friend from work that taxidermied it and everything. I watched it dangle for a few seconds, and then turned to see Maggie at the foot of the stairs, holding two mugs of coffee. She offered one to me. I sat up and looked her over, and then I lay back down and slid beneath the undercarriage to install the last few wires.

I heard Maggie walk toward me and set the coffee mug down on the console.

"Don't put that there," I said.

"It's really snowing outside," Maggie said.

I stripped the insulation back from the end of a wire and fed the copper into input twenty-two. “You better get going then,” I said.

“Ray, we ought to sell this thing.”

I laughed. “Sell what thing?”

“The Flickinger,” she said. “It doesn’t work.”

“It’ll work,” I said, feeding copper into input twenty-three.

“No, it won’t,” Maggie said.

“You never believed it would work in the first place,” I said.

“I did,” she said. “But I don’t anymore.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw her kneel to the ground. I locked the last wire in place to input twenty-four.

“We should sell it for parts,” Maggie said. “That’s what Mark wants us to do.”

I slid out from beneath the machine and sat up, our faces just a few inches from each other. Maggie held Mark’s letter in her hand.

“Like hell he does,” I said. I gripped a screwdriver by my side and pressed my back against the wood of the console.

“He says we should sell it for parts and split the money. He says there’s no use. It’s broken.”

“You’re lying,” I said. “I’m getting close.”

She held the letter out to me. I stared at it.

“I already got my letter,” I said. I stood up and so did Maggie.

“Ray, listen,” she said. “It’s not going to work. Don’t let this thing ruin you. You know we could both use the money.”

"We?" I said. I picked up the coffee mug she'd set on the Flickinger and brought it to a shelf across the room. "There is no 'we.' Besides, what do you need money for? What about the lawyer?"

"That's over," Maggie said.

"We're not selling anything," I said. "My letter doesn't say anything about that."

"Well this one does," she said. "Read it."

"I don't want to fucking read it," I yelled. I took a step towards her.

She backed away and tripped on an amp, almost falling over. "Stay away, Ray," she said.

"What?" I said. She stood right beneath the dangling red bird, her lips trembling. I realized she was afraid. This must've been what my brother felt. The pain of seeing someone you love, seeing your family, look at you like you're dangerous, like you're violent. I dropped the screwdriver.

"Please," I said. "Just go." I stepped over some boxes to walk behind the Flickinger so I could turn it on.

Maggie stood her ground and watched me. "I'm sorry for everything," she said. "But you know this is the thing to do. It's what he wanted."

I laughed. "No one's taking this thing away," I said. "So just drop it."

"You're being a fool," Maggie said. She paused, waiting for me to say something. When I didn't, she said, "It's not my fault he couldn't forgive himself."

I plugged the Flickinger into the power box and hit the "on" switch. It came to life, all the bulbs shining red or yellow in the dim basement light. The lights remained fully lit, not flickering on and off like they had in the past. I rounded the console so I could sit at the motherboard. I

grabbed a cable, plugged one end into the first input, and searched the box at my feet for a microphone to plug the other end into.

"Don't get your hopes up," Maggie said. But she took a step toward the console and surveyed the lights. I could hear in her voice that she wanted it to work. She wanted it to work just as badly as I did.

I found a mic and held it one hand, the cable in the other, but I didn't plug it in.

"Well, go ahead," Maggie said.

I looked at Maggie, and then at the red bird dangling above her head. I could hear the Flickinger humming faintly, the whir of every circuit and bulb in sync. Each piece had a purpose if they functioned together, but if one part failed, the whole machine failed. I thought about Mark, his voice, his thin hands, and for the first time I got angry at him. How selfish of him, to leave us alone, to tell us to sell the console, like he was the only one invested in it.

"Ray," Maggie said. "Plug it in already."

But I didn't. I couldn't. I just sat there and closed my eyes, listening to the Flickinger breathe, never wanting that sound to stop. I felt Maggie's hands on my shoulders, and all I could think of was my brother's last words to me. We were in the basement, me at the console, him at the foot of the stairs, about to turn in for the night. All he said was, "Ray, no matter we do, or how hard we try, we're still going to be alone."

Vita

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