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## Knuckle Sandwich & Other Stories

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Knuckle Sandwich & Other Stories

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theater and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

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## Abstract

*Knuckle Sandwich & Other Stories* is a collection of fiction written in the years between 2005 and 2008. The characters in these stories find themselves trying—and often failing—to cope with loss: loss of a romantic relationship, of a loved one, of youth, of innocence.

## American Plastic

They call the loud one Smitty. I do not know how he yells this much without losing the cigarette from the corner of his mouth, but he manages. He wears some kind of grease in his hair, like Elvis Presley, but Smitty has a fat belly and a stained tee shirt, his voice loud and full of phlegm and not like Elvis at all. He yells when the machines break down. Mine breaks down often. But I am on a new machine almost every day—one day the long one that makes rubber hose, another day the one that spits pieces of rubber siding for a boat. Everyday a new machine.

This one here makes rings for a car engine. I do not like this machine, with its blade that slices fast, hammering, making me blink my eyes. It is a long machine, and I need to keep moving back and forth, shoveling hard bits of plastic into one side, then back to the end after the product feeds through a long trough of cooling water. This is where it can bunch together, curling and pushing itself up out of the trough. My stomach turns sick when this happens, because it looks wrong, and in just a few seconds it will

spill onto the floor, rolling and folding in long wet ropes. When Smitty notices he will march over here, stomping his heavy boots and yelling with his cigarette sticking to his face. He calls me the wrong name. Always the wrong name. “What the hell are you doing now Chink Chong!” He thinks I do not understand English but I understand most. “Look out!” he yells at me, pushing me out of the way with his elbow or fat belly. “You gotta keep your eyes on it, Long Dong! Keep your fucking eyes on it!” He pushes his own bloodshot eyes open wide with his dirty fingers until they are big circles.

I do not tell him that my name is Cu’ong. I do not talk to him, do not tell him that I understand English. Almost one full year and he does not know. Today he pulled my book out of my hands and threw it in the trash pile, told me I cannot read my book while my machine is running. But once I have filled the trays with the plastic chips and set the blade, there is nothing to do until the roll is filled. I have several minutes to wait, to read. School is at four PM and I have chapters to read each day.

“Hey Ho Chi Minh, no reading those frigging books. Not on my time.”

When I finish school in two years, I will quit this place and return to Grandfather. I will quit this place and I will tell this man Smitty, “My name is Cu’ong.”

I spend time thinking about my return home, to Hanoi, the old quarter. What else is there to do? My thoughts have a rhythm that matches the rhythm of the cutting blade, a pulse. It locks me in, this rhythm, keeps me in my dream. I think about going home, walking to my grandfather’s fruit stand in the old quarter where he is stacking bananas and humming. He has just wisps of hair left and large eyeglasses that slide down low on his nose. His body is lean and gristly from years of labor. He hums his songs and moves

bananas, and I stand there, smiling, waiting for him to notice that I am there. I smile, rocking back and forth on my heels. Then Grandfather does see me, looking twice. And he, too, smiles, with new false teeth that are too white. He hugs me into his small torso, telling me that he is proud. I'd done what I told him I would do all those years ago, young and skinny and energetic, unloading crates for him in the summer sun. Told him that I hated bananas and I was going to America one day to get a western education. Grandfather had listened while he moved, always moving and working, unloading the crates. I had not been sure that he heard me, but finally he stopped and stood straight, looking at me, holding a green, hooked banana. He smiled, face creasing. "*Tôi cũng ghét nòng nhữg chuối,*" he'd said, in just a whisper, like it was the greatest secret in the world. *I hate bananas too.*

These thoughts play out in the rhythm I hear, steady. Like the iambic pentameter I learn about. My memories are poetry.

When the lunch truck arrives I ask Frenchie if he will watch my machine for me. Frenchie is the man working next to me today, tall and slouching with a mustache and sunken eyes. I do not know his real name. Smitty calls him Frenchie. He pretends not to hear me, slouched over his machine with his bad posture, one hand on his hip. My machine is loud, so perhaps he is not in fact ignoring me, but I think he has ignored me in the past. He ignores everyone, so I do not take it to heart. But he does talk to himself, low and grumbling.

I give up on Frenchie and abandon my machine. It is what we must do when there is no one to guard the machines. The warehouse has no kitchen and no break room.

We must bring a bagged lunch or buy from the truck. Either way, the machines do not stop, ever. First shift, second shift, third shift, they run forever, all day long. I walk with a brisk step, knowing I have four minutes before the cut slats of plastic siding, falling from the end of the feeder, begin to back up. Smitty does not like the workers leaving their machines, asking us to find someone to work the machine when we need to make the truck, or need to go to the bathroom. But sometimes this can be difficult, or impossible. Such as when the only one near you is Frenchie.

I should have simply left as soon as the horn sounded. Now ten other men surround the truck and my palms begin to sweat. Not enough time. I know what I want—a chicken cordon blue wrap with a bag of Fritos and iced tea, but others are taking their time and talking. The young man working the truck makes change from his change belt too slow, twitching his body in quick gestures to the music coming through headphones that plug his ears, and sometimes he leads customers around to the cab of the truck, where I am certain he sells them drugs. I do not have a watch, but I know I have already lost two minutes.

I try to squeeze in, but can only get one arm through before withdrawing. Two men sandwich me, big men with shirts damp with sweat, smelling sour. It is only May, but already it is getting hot inside the warehouse. Last summer, when I began the job, the heat had been heavy and I fainted the first day, unable to stand in that one space hour after hour. The warehouse runs all twenty-eight machines at once, all of them with loud, churning motors spitting steaming plastic, each adding to the heat. I know now to keep moving and not stand still for too long. Keep the feet going.

Going without a lunch is a mistake I will not make again, so I force myself to wait. I return with my sandwich but I do not feel so hungry, my stomach tightening with a familiar anxiety. I am late. I can only hope that the pile of siding at the mouth of my machine has spilled over and not piled up until it has nowhere to go and backs up the feeder. I crane my neck to see, still meters away. There are tell-tale signs, of course, even from back here. A backed-up machine would be vomiting hot plastic, pushing it up and over the lip of the trough in steamy ribbons of looping, rolling black, like hot squid ink noodles.

But I do not see this. The trough is clear. The blade continues to snap. I see the pile has tumbled over, leaving a messy spread of siding, but this is a small issue. I can clean this up in minutes. Frenchie sits on an overturned bucket, sipping from a thermos and watching me. His lazy eyes blink. “Out of chips,” he says, nodding at the cutter.

At the same time I see that the blade has nothing to cut and smell the sickening burn. I look briefly back to Frenchie, wondering for a moment how he can sit there so calm and indifferent. He pops a handful of sunflower seeds into his mouth. I have to push my nose into the crease on the inside of my elbow. Frenchie watches me. “Out of chips,” he tells me again.

“Thank you,” I say, although I am angry that he has done nothing to help. It is a familiar smell, but not one I am used to. The feeder bin is empty. I fill it three times per hour, fifteen or twenty shovels of plastic chips. How could I have forgotten? Is the machine moving too fast? Is the valve open too much? The smell of the motor burning waters the eyes, and yet I rush toward it. The case that surrounds the motor vibrates loudly without chips, the metal steps bracketed to it blurred with rapid movement. I jump

for the shovel, hoping to feed it before it burns itself out. The smell. I throw a shovelful toward it, and chips spray everywhere. The motor is loud, much louder than normal as it struggles, but over it I can hear Smitty, far off but closing in: “*What now you stupid cockfuck! What now!*”

I shovel, choking on the plastic dust I am creating. But I shovel.

I am asked, when I call back home, how I like America. Have I seen the White House and Disneyland, have I met any Hollywood celebrities. Do I own a cowboy hat. In part they are joking when they ask, but the truth is, in these ten months I have lived here, I only travel in one triangle, from American Plastic, to my night class at Hobbs Hall, to my apartment on Cedar Avenue.

It is almost raining as I walk to my class later in the afternoon. It is too light to fall, hanging in the air, leaving everything moist. Still, after the sweaty factory, I welcome it. I’m reminded of home, all the rain. And again I am left a little homesick. Tonight after class I will call Grandfather. It will be morning back home and he will be just waking up, having his coffee and *banh mi*, scrambled egg and sardines. I sent photos of the tall office buildings, looming above and keeping me in constant shadow. Grandfather asked me about them. I hope my sister prints some from her computer for him to see. He has never been out of the country, choosing to stay in the quarter to be with my grandmother. I do this, in many ways, for him.

Grandfather first saw her—my grandmother, Lam—while working his uncle’s farm, cleaning chicken coops. She rode past on her bicycle along the pebbled path, front basket bouncing, empty. He says he was not even close enough to see her face clearly,

but found himself awed by her grace, the way she peddled, sliding her weight from one leg to the other, fluid and with ease. Her head tilted back, into the sun, like a sunflower, showing him the long elegant lines of her neck. Grandfather stood, transfixed, spade shovel in his fist, chicken shit rolling off. He says he fell in love with her there, struck numb, like a spell. I try to tell him that no, it is impossible that he had fallen in love in such short a moment and from so far a distance. I tell him it was infatuation, a crush, even lust. But not love, Grandfather. Not love. Still, it is hard to argue with fifty-six years.

He followed her back into town, hurrying along the path so as to not lose sight of her, a skinny chicken wedged forgotten under his arm, struggling and nervous. He tells me that he did in fact lose her in the late sun, but, wandering into town, took an abrupt left into an alley and found her bicycle leaning against a stoop. He does not know what drew him into the alley.

The sun beginning to set, Grandfather took a patient breath and leaned on a rotting barrel by the door, swatting away gnats. The chicken tucked its head in for sleep. From behind, Grandfather sensed someone pause at the window, then move away, then return for another look. Grandfather made a deliberate attempt not to turn to peek. My grandmother did not fall for his casual demeanor, knowing full well that he had followed her and was fighting for breath. She let him wait, biting on a smile. She said she thought he was handsome, if not a little dirty.

When she came out to the stoop, Grandfather was quick to lose his nonchalant stance, becoming rigid, pushing off the barrel and scraping his hair out of his eyes. He

introduced himself hastily, giving her, of all things, the chicken. “For you,” he said, repeating it until she at last opened her arms to receive it. “For you.”

He left hurriedly, dropping his head against the sun, shoulders sinking. My grandmother glanced down at the chicken, surprised, even concerned, at its thinness. Probably not good for eating. She looked back to him. “Lam,” she called into the alley, loud, hoping he could still hear. “My name is Lam.”

I like this story. It warms me, always makes me either smile or cry. Grandfather never had any doubts. He knew when he saw her that she was his wife, knew everything that followed would build off that, like ivy climbing a pole, wrapping around it. He left school to work so that they could marry, stayed near Hanoi where she had family, restructured everything to fit. They lost one son in civil war and another, four years later, fighting in Cambodia. And they adapted to this as well.

Even now, a widower, Grandfather is a rock. I do not know how he does it, smiling and humming and appreciating life, selling his bananas, talking to his grandson in the United States and offering him advice. I know where my thoughts are leading me. Anytime I start with Grandfather, and his youth, and chickens, and Grandmother Lam, I know Thi will settle into my head and take root. Tall, intelligent, funny, the only thing she did not want to surrender was Vietnam. Grandfather told me to make my own decisions, to follow my gut, but he had already laid out the example. I only had to follow his lead.

Instead, I push on down Boylston Street with my skin turning clammy as sweat and rain peppers my skin. I am still thinking of Grandfather, and, reluctantly, Thi, when a small, shuddering shadow envelops me, like my personal black cloud. It makes me stop

mid-stride, tilt my head to look upwards. Something is bearing down on me, white and then blue and then white again, churning over, rippling, coming hard. On instinct, and only instinct, I throw my weight to the left, leaving my feet behind. I stiffen in anticipation of a violent collision from above. I stumble into a street lamp, hitting my shoulder, as the object smacks the cement sidewalk with a dense thud. It lands on its side, legs and arms twisted and crooked. Fine speckles of blood fan out from the body in one direction, but I have no idea from where the blood came. I cannot see the face, bent into one shoulder, but I see that the head appears dented and teeth litter the walk, yellow and red and meaty.

I step away from the lamppost, blinking. Fluid pools from the man's underside, and droplets of rain pock his white tee shirt. I blink. A green canvas book bag lies near him, flap lying open, a yellow pencil poking from it. This man, who has just fallen from above, owns the same exact bag as I. I look up at the office building, stretching into the sky, and wonder how far he has fallen. I do not know. I hear a car engine, blink again, and look behind me at a taxi cab rolling by. A blank face in the back seat turns, following this mess. I blink again and look back to the man on the sidewalk, twisted and broken, almost—somehow—inhuman. My eye goes to the canvas bag again, and this time I realize that it is mine, that I dropped it from my shoulder as I fell back and out of the way. I pick it up, try to belt the flap closed with trembling fingers. I cannot. I shake too badly and my eyes keep sliding to the teeth sprinkling the greasy pavement.

I think people are watching from across the street, but no one approaches. Blood buzzes between my ears. I hear myself say, "Sir?" to the man, though I know he is—

must be—dead. I glance left and right at the far-off faces only now beginning to drift closer.

I feel something pushing into my left vest pocket, and look down to see my own hand fishing out my cell phone. I watch my thumb flip it open and then poke the buttons, but it is clumsy, like my hand is asleep.

“Shit man, are you all right?” I hear this voice from somewhere but I am watching my useless thumb tapping over the numbers. The owner of this voice is a fool, I think. I want to say, No he is not all right. Look at him, he’s dead.

“Holy fucking shit. Holy F, man. Are you all right?”

The screen on the phone shows that I have so far dialed 61112. How do I clear this to start over?

“Are you all right?” The same man says this. He looks excited. “You all right, pal?” And then his hands are on my shoulders, turning me. Looking into my eyes. I give up on the phone. It doesn’t work. “You okay or what? He missed you by like two feet!” The man’s eyes dart wildly across my face. Then he looks at the dead man on the ground. Then to the sky, where the man had come from. “Fuck me!” he says.

I stand at the doors to Hobbs Hall. I do not know how I got here, but I must have walked. I cannot remember. People sit along a short brick wall, reading books and listening to iPods. No one looks at me. I wonder if I am a ghost, if the man who committed suicide today landed on me, killing me. Killing us both. I think I am dead.

I long for the old quarter of Hanoi. It is a busy place, like Boston is a busy place, but with motor scooters congesting the streets, weaving in and out of each other's tracks with their high-pitched engines whining. Somehow I long for it.

The image is burned into my eyes, despite my desire to pull in the sights and sounds and smells of the old quarter. That man falling, turning over in the air, legs slapping awkwardly into each other. I wonder if he had died of loneliness. But what is lonelier than lying dead and alone on the sidewalk in downtown Boston, people standing around, telling the story to each other. I saw a woman take a photo with her cell phone.

We make a point of not allowing loved ones to die alone. Even after death, the body is never left. The family members take turns sitting in, forming an honor guard, day and night, until the burial. I remember sitting with Grandfather, late into the night, swallowed by the utter silence. I watched his face, calm and steady, head wrapped in black cloth. Deep lines around his mouth and eyes. He looked older than he ever had, but somehow at peace, too. I wondered how his body was able to hold all that sadness in. I could not see the struggle. Behind him, in the shadow, my grandmother lay, equally at peace, but not more.

On a sheet of yellow paper, one of my uncles had recorded her last words, as is the custom. The paper was kept folded in Grandfather's breast pocket, and every now and then he would reach for it, carefully unfold it and read it again in silence. I watched him from the corner of my eye, my chin low in respect. My uncle, the oldest son of my grandmother, had branded her with a new name upon her death. *Trinh*. Devotion. Names are important in my country, more so than in America, where everyone has nicknames and names that mean nothing. Names they learn from television shows. In

Vietnam, names are so important, they stay in this world even after the person has passed. So my grandmother left behind Lam and was given Trinh.

A man in my night class is named Shen. He is from China, older than I am with gray hair at his temples. He has Americanized his name so that it is easier for others to remember and pronounce. They call him Shawn. I do not like this. He does not look like a Shawn. I try to imagine telling Grandfather that I have changed my name from Cu'ong to something American—someone once suggested Ken—but the thought alone makes me too uncomfortable to dwell upon. Ken!

In fact it is Shen who approaches me during our fifteen minute break. My notebook is mostly empty. Others are shaking their wrists, rubbing out the cramps, but I have written little. My mind is lost—skipping between my grandmother's burial and that man, broken and twisted on the pavement, a discarded candy bar wrapper tumbling across the street and sticking, of all places, to the man's forehead. I tap my pen against the white page.

“Hello,” Shen says, bending toward me. I do not think he knows my name, though we have spoken casually many times, both before class and during these breaks. I stop tapping my pen and look up at him. He appears serious, and I think for a moment that he must be angry with me.

“Yes?”

Shen points to his own face, at his eyebrows, I think, and then his ear. “You have...” He points some more, at his cheek, then touches his hair at the top of his head. “You have something...”

“I have something?” Only a few students remain in their seats, the others gone to the bathroom or the snack machine or outdoors for cigarettes. I glance at the few who remain, but they are reading or texting on their cell phones. Shen taps my shoulder.

“See?”

He pinches the material of my shirt, tugging it. Finally I notice the blood stains he is pointing out to me—two quarter-sized spots on my shoulder. Several smaller pinpoint droplets circle the bigger spots. I think for a moment that perhaps I am in fact injured, and I roll my shoulder in its joint to check. It feels fine. Shen, squinting with concern, now points at my face. “Here, too,” he says. I wonder again if I am dead.

It is the man’s blood, I realize. I touch my temple where Shen is pointing and can feel it, tacky and still a bit wet.

In the public restroom I ball brown paper towels, stiff, and soak them under the cold water. The mirror is not made of real glass but some kind of metal, something that can’t break. The reflection is poor. Still, I can see that my face is peppered with dark spots—at my temple, the bridge of my nose, below my ear. The shirt is certainly ruined. It occurs to me that I’d just sat through almost ninety minutes of lecture, and no one had noticed that I was dirty with a dead man’s blood.

Afterwards, I return to the classroom where students are beginning to get settled again. The instructor sits on a window sill, talking to a student and swinging his leg. I gather my things, considering for a moment telling the teacher that I am leaving before realizing that I am a ghost. Swinging the book bag onto my shoulder, I shuffle sideways up the aisle and leave. No one notices. This time, not even Shen.

At home, in my apartment, I strip naked and stand under a scalding shower and let the slicing water burn me clean. My head gets light. Swirling steam clears out my sinuses, heating me from within. My legs turn shaky, but I stay here, water beating my head, until it at long last begins to lose its temperature. The neighbors will not be happy.

With the water off, I listen to the drain below gurgle, everything dripping. I breathe deep, and it feels good, feels clean. For once, my head is not cloudy with thoughts of the suicide man, or of Smitty red-faced and yelling as I shovel plastic chips.

The next day I will find out in the newspaper that the suicide man's name was Ramon Lugo. He had a three year-old boy and an ex-wife. For no real reason, I write the name down in small letters on my kitchen wall.

After, wrapped in a towel, I call Grandfather on my cell phone, standing in the kitchen, staring into the refrigerator at soy milk and green beans. I imagine Grandfather's phone, bulky and smudged with fingerprints. He is not answering. Perhaps he has already left for work. I think about the message I might leave: that I miss him, that I want to quit my job at the factory and walk away from the burning plastic and Smitty, walk away from these classes I do not understand. Tell him I think about returning and helping him with the bananas and unpacking crates like I used to. Breathing the fruit and fresh breeze instead of plastic, working in the cool air of dawn. Tell him, even, that when I imagine this, I also imagine that I will keep an eye on the streets as I work, watching for Thi—coming through the crowd, canvas bag on her shoulder, sunglasses high on her head. "Cu'ong," she will say when she sees me, unable to stifle her smile.

The phone continues to ring, eight times, nine. Grandfather does not have voice mail, does not have an answering machine. I listen to its tinny ring again, then close my cell phone.

Later, I take my place on a short stool at the window facing the street. It is raining harder now. I put my elbow on the narrow sill and let my chin sit on my fist. My forehead touches the cool glass. From where I sit I can see, several blocks away, the plumes of smoke vomiting from the American Plastic smoke stacks, snaking into the gray sky. Closer, my eye trains on a waitress who has stepped out the side door of the restaurant across the street. She stands under a thin awning, shoulders hunched in the rain, and puts her cell phone to her ear. Her face is blurred by the rainwater tracking down my window, but I imagine her to be quite beautiful. Like Thi was beautiful, though she too is blurry. I cannot draw Thi into focus, even when I squeeze my eyes shut.

When I open them again a moment later, the woman across the street has closed her phone and is rubbing it absently on her chin. I wonder who she was trying to call. I wonder why no one answered. For some reason she continues to stand in the rain, caressing her phone. I think she is sad.

The rain sliding down the window reminds me of tears, and just like that, I begin to cry. It is a gentle crying, almost without feeling. I let it happen, too tired to breathe it back in. The woman finally slips her phone into her back pocket and wipes at her face, brushing away the rain, or tears, or both. Then she goes back inside, and I can hear the heavy door bang shut, even from over here. When I let out my breath, it fogs the window. I wonder what her name is.

## January Thaw

The shower was running when she came in from shoveling. Thirteen inches of fresh snow had fallen during the night, twice as much as had been predicted. Already Maggie felt the strain of despair making its home squarely between her shoulder blades, a tight pain blooming closer and closer to her ribs with each wet shovel of snow she had heaved aside. Wincing now, she stopped at the bathroom door, palms flat against it, forehead touching the wood, wondering if she should give a light knock and ask her father if he needed any help. At his house, he had had a special chair that he used in the shower, but she had no bathtub, just a shower stall. She wondered she could find him a smaller chair somewhere, but she hadn't gotten around to it yet with Christmas and everything. He was a proud man, though, and she didn't want to embarrass him—he'd only get mad and refuse help anyway had she offered, and so, after a long moment, she slipped away from the door.

When her father came out some half hour later, she was dismantling the Christmas tree in the living room, stripping it of its ornaments and wrapping them in yellowed tissue paper. She had her back to him, but knew he was coming by the clump of the rubber-tipped cane that he used. When she was a girl, he loved to sneak up on her, to give her a scare. Still did, actually, although a mild stroke four years ago slowed him considerably, and coupled with that loud cane, he couldn't scare anyone. But she stood her ground and let him do his thing. She hummed a little tune and watched him in the orange reflection of an ornament, his body contorted in the orb even more that it really was. He wore a pair of gray sweatpants, one cuff at his ankle and the other stuck partway up his calf. The stroke made him look older than his seventy-three years.

At long last the tip of his cane jabbed her buttocks. "Gotcha."

She spun, feigning surprise, and forced a smile that spent most of her remaining energy. She still felt shaky from all the shoveling. "Morning, Dad." She touched his rough cheek and wormed past him with an ornament pinched in each finger. "Remind me to give you a shave later."

"I think I'll grow a beard."

"No, no beards." She knew he was only kidding. He said this almost every day now.

He asked her if he could help with the tree, but she knew he was just being polite. Dad wasn't steady anymore, wasn't strong. Instead, she led him to the kitchen table, where the morning paper and a pair of scratched reading glasses waited, and then brought him a cup of coffee. Maggie's mother had been dead almost three months.

When she unscrewed the tree stand from the base of the tree and began dragging it across the room to the front door, leaving in its wake a path of crisp needles, her father peeked over the top of the newspaper, frowning. “Honey, I can take care of that. Come on, leave that alone.” He pulled himself back up and hobbled over to help, swatting her away with the back of his hand.

“Got it, Dad.”

“We should’ve had Jerry and Jim take care of that before they left.” He was talking about her older brothers who lived in California and had visited with their wives and kids for Christmas. They had gone back four days earlier. Maggie had liked having them all around for those few days, particularly because Dad had only moved in a week before that, in the manic days leading up to the holiday. She worried how she would handle him once Christmas break was over and things returned to normal. Whatever that meant.

“I’ve got it, Dad, really. It’s just a small tree.” But even as she said this she took a step back as he took the tree from the narrow top and gave it a slow tug. She wanted to stop him, but he had her boxed out. He held the tree at the wrong end. Didn’t he see that she’d been sliding it from the heavy end, the bottom? The tree was dried and should have been taken out days earlier, and there was no way now to prevent a big mess of crunchy pine needles from littering her floor, but her father was making a bigger mess by dragging the tree against its grain. Pine needles dropped from the bending branches and rattled on the floor. “Dad.”

He was soon breathing heavily, stifling a grunt as he spoke. “Relax, sweetie, I can do it.”

She tried again to move around him and briefly grabbed a branch, but again he waved her away. She began to protest again, growing more annoyed, watching pine needles litter her floor. “Dad, please, be careful,” she started, grimacing at the grating sound of the hard branches. She had had the floors refinished just before Christmas. Again her father told her not to worry, and he even turned to toss her a gentle smile. This time she stopped, mouth partway open, and she backed off, folding her arms in defeat. A pang of shame brought a cold sigh up her throat as she realized he thought that she was worried about *him*.

A year ago Jack would have been doing this. Not her son Jack—Jackie—but Big Jack, her husband. Ex-husband. Big Jack who lived in Roanoke now, where she bet there wasn’t any snow to shovel, either. Big Jack who had been offered a promotion under the condition of relocating. She hadn’t been thrilled about the idea, but she would have done it. Even if she’d never really come out and told him so, even if she had acted a little cold about the idea, she would have given up her teaching job and moved. She’d just needed some reassurance, needed to hear him tell her that he *wanted* her to go. That’s all it would have taken.

But that never happened. There was no assurance in his voice at all. Instead, he’d sounded worried, hesitant. He kept using her mother’s cancer to push Maggie into reluctance. Then, when that hadn’t quite done the trick, he pulled the curtain back on the relationship itself. Before she knew it, they were combing over every bump and pothole in their seven-year marriage in hushed bedroom arguments, while little Jack, just three then, slept in the next room. She thought Big Jack did this on purpose—discussing it

when their son was just getting to sleep—just to make sure it remained muted and brief. In the end, he went alone. Sort of a try-it-and-see thing. That had been last March.

She missed Christmas already, busy as it had been, and missed her brothers. Though she was, in fact, still upset with them. Why was it that there wasn't any talk about Dad moving out west with one of them? Why was it that the first and only option was for him to sell the house and move in with Maggie? It was clear that living alone was not a good idea, not with the stroke slowing him down, not in that old house by himself. Maybe they all thought that Maggie must have needed the company since being left behind by Jack. Maybe they'd just assumed that her house was too big for two.

When Dad had moved into Maggie's, he hadn't brought much—the furniture and big stuff had been donated. All he had left were his clothes, his books, his golf clubs (for some reason), and a second-hand fish tank that Sherm June, one of his Elks buddies, had pushed on him. Her father usually spent a few nights a week sitting at the Elks club bar, but since Maggie's mother had died in October, he'd upped his visits to just about every single night. Until he had moved in with her and was suddenly twenty minutes from the Elks instead of just three minutes away.

So he brought a fish tank along with him, as well as all the usual accessories: filter, electric pump, a bag of colored gravel, some plastic plants, a fluorescent tube light, thermostat, guidebook to tropical fish, crumpled and dog-eared, and a pink, plastic deep sea diver with one foot planted atop a plastic treasure chest. This stuff took up more room than all of his clothes and books combined, took up more room than even he himself did. Maggie had kept her lips pursed like a good daughter as he hobbled across the living

room and banged the cloudy, moldy-smelling tank into the corner of the room. She had never had pets in this house, despite her son's pleas, borderline-tantrums, and the simple reason why was because Maggie had never been allowed pets when she was growing up. Dad couldn't stand them, thought they were dirty and stinky and a pain in the ass. And after a while, Maggie learned to agree.

When she followed the trail of dead pine needles up the back steps and into the house, she found her father settled in front of the tank. For the next hour or so he proceeded to scrub the tank clean, lining its floor with rocks, assembling the filters and pumps with curls of white-cruded tubing.

Her son was awake now, sitting on the edge of the sofa, blond mane of hair sticking up in every direction, watching his grandfather. Jack turned his head when she came into the house, then pattered into the kitchen looking for breakfast. She rubbed his head and poured him a bowl of Frosted Flakes. "What are we going to do today, Jackie?" He scratched at his ear and shrugged his shoulders in a wide rolling motion, and yawned.

"How about you ask Mommy if she'll take us to the pet store so we can buy some new fish?" Her father pushed plastic plants into the gravel, his labored breath leaving clouded patches on the glass.

Maggie stopped in mid-pour, staring at the wall that hid him from her view, wishing she could see him, let him know how truly pissed she suddenly was. How smart—pretty damn sly, waiting until Jack was awake and alert, still in Christmas vacation overdrive. When she stole a glance down at her son, he was looking back up at her with his eyebrows high—he liked what he heard.

Dad finally took a couple steps backward, out into the open, where they could see each other. “What do you say, Jackie? Want to get us some fishies?”

“You always hated pets. Remember that, Dad? You always hated them.” They were in the far aisle of Puppydog Tails, the local pet shop that she passed by a thousand times but had never so much as glanced in the big front window. Her father eyeballed all the tanks of fish stacked along the far wall. He leaned on his cane with one hand while the other held Jack by the wrist. Maggie hung a few feet back while the two of them discussed what fish they liked. She stared at the back of her father’s head as he failed to acknowledge her question.

It smelled in here. Smelled like dog shit, cat shit, and guinea pig-hamster-gerbil-rat shit. And it was loud, too. The front of the store had three or four tall cages with big green birds in them, squawking and screeching, while no less than a dozen caged dogs yelped and whined from the back. Who the hell would ever work in a place like this? When she got home she was going to go straight into the shower and hose herself off.

In the fish aisle, Dad and Jack had their noses up against the glass, fingers pointing. They were discussing something apparently very important about fish, but whatever it was, Maggie clearly wasn’t included. She folded her arms tight across her chest and stepped closer. “I thought you hated pets, Dad. You never liked animals.” This time she said it conspicuously louder. She wasn’t going to let herself get shut out.

Her father peeked at her over his shoulder, offering her a dismissive smirk. “These are just fish, Mag.” A store clerk lingered at the end of the aisle, yawning.

“Fish are animals,” she pushed. If she weren’t so mad she’d have laughed at herself. God, she suddenly felt about nine.

Now it was Jack’s turn to give her a condescending look. “Fish aren’t animals! They’re fish!”

“Yes, they’re fish, but they’re also…” Forget it, she told herself, flushed with a touch of shame. I shouldn’t be arguing with a five-year-old. “You know what, Dad, I think I’m going to go wait out in the car.”

“Don’t be silly, Maggie.” His back was to her again, his hip pressed up against Jack’s arm, closing her out completely. Her scalp started to itch.

She forced out a short laugh, just to show that she was only playing, even though she wasn’t. But her father was not fooled. He paused long enough to stand up straight and look back at her for a moment. “Honey, come help us pick out some fish. Pick out some that you like.”

“No thanks.”

He smiled. “Are you mad?”

“No, I’m not mad. Of course, I’m not mad. I’m just kidding.”

“Well, come pick out some fish, then.”

He turned away again.

“It’s just that I never had any pets when I was little. You hated them, you forbade them. It’s nice that you’ve loosened up a little.”

She watched him tell the skinny clerk twirling a small fish catching net in his hand that he wanted six neon tetras. Then he said back at her, “You were afraid of animals anyway. You didn’t like anyone’s pets. Still don’t.”

Jack said, “Oooh, I want some of those!”

“I like those ones too,” her father said to Jack, crouching awkwardly next to him with an obvious strain of discomfort. He flipped his reading glasses down from the top of his gray head and read the sticker taped to the corner of the tank. “Those are called Lemondrop tetras. Yeah, those are pretty, huh?”

Jack nodded. “They look like candy.”

“Yes, they sure do!” he said to Jack, then, turning to Maggie, “Sweetie, what do you think of these guys?”

Maggie rolled her eyes. He was obviously patronizing her now, and she knew it. “Those are great,” she said. One of the parrots screeched somewhere behind her, and she grimaced.

“We’ll take half a dozen of the Lemondrops,” she heard her father tell the skinny kid.

Jack spent the remainder of the afternoon watching and helping his grandfather put together the aquarium in the porch. Maggie avoided them altogether. She shoveled out the mailbox, so the mailman could reach it, sanded the walkway and front steps, and came indoors to clean out the fridge, tossing out all the Christmas leftovers. Then she put together a grocery list. Even something as simple as a grocery list had grown more complicated since her father had moved in. She always bought two-percent milk, ever since Jack was a baby, but her father had a stubborn attachment to whole milk. The kicker was that he only used it for his morning coffee. She kept telling herself that one of these days she was just going to switch the orange cap with the red cap, and he’d never

know the difference. But she hadn't done that yet. Instead, she jotted both onto her list—a gallon of two-percent, a quart of whole. Bread was another issue. Jack ate white bread, nothing else. Cheap white bread. Her father only liked Pepperidge Farm Rye, which was two dollars and forty-nine cents for a small loaf. And she and Jack like the small tubs of margarine. Dad was adamant about real butter. Maggie drank an occasional Coors Light; he needed Bud. Bottles. Not those cans. She kept thinking that she was going to need a bigger kitchen. That had never been a problem when her husband had been here.

At last she ventured to the porch doorway, but she would not go in. She thought that she could detect the faint smell of damp rot, coming from that dirty tank or the moldy hoses or probably from the plastic bags of fish that were propped against the cushions of her new loveseat. “I need to go to the grocery store,” she said, holding up the torn envelope that the list was scribbled on as evidence.

Jack jumped off the loveseat and karate-chopped the air. The fish bags rolled and sloshed. “Get Fruity Pebbles!”

“Dad, will you be all right with him if I go shop? For like an hour or so?”

He pulled a wet arm out of the tank and looked at his watch. “Well, are you going back out after that?”

“After the grocery store? No, I wasn't planning on it.” For some reason she looked back at the clock on the microwave oven. It was six-thirty. “Why?”

Her father shrugged. He picked up a plastic plant and turned to bury it in the bottom of the tank. “I was hoping I might be able to catch a ride to the Elks.”

He hadn't been driving since the stroke. He got rides back and forth from the Elks Club and the racetrack, usually from Maggie's mother, sometimes from his buddy Sherm June. Since he'd moved in with Maggie and Jack just before Christmas, he had been to the Elks only once, the afternoon of Christmas Eve, with Sherm. Just once in over two weeks. Maggie asked if she was going to have to pick him up as well, but he said no, said that Sherm was probably already there, and even if he wasn't, there were plenty of other guys who would be willing to give him a lift.

So she took him. It was a little out of the way, fifteen or twenty minutes down Route 19 and through the traffic of the square, but she had to admit it would be good to get him out of the house for a while. Little Jack hadn't been out much, either, and some fresh air would probably do him some good as well.

Jack helped carry the smaller grocery bags into the house and helped unload them too. He liked doing chores, liked being a big boy. Maggie fixed him macaroni and cheese and then let him watch a couple of shows while she stood in the kitchen with the saucepan in hand, finishing what was left. At nine she put him to bed. Because he had slept late that morning, he fussed about it, but nothing too serious. He was a good boy. Even in his protest he let her dress him in his pajamas and lift him to the bed.

"No fooling around, Jackie, okay? You're getting up early for school tomorrow."

"Maybe it will snow some more," he said in between two wide yawns.

"No, no snow tomorrow."

"Is the mailman coming tomorrow?"

She knew what he was getting at. The mail hadn't come this morning because of the snow, and Jack had been checking for a package from his father every day this entire

week the minute he got home from school. They hadn't seen each other this Christmas (Big Jack hadn't returned from Roanoke since Maggie's mother's funeral in October), but he had been calling his son weekly, or close to weekly. Maggie had called him one afternoon about a week before Christmas and reminded him that the holiday was only a week away, and even though he was too selfish a father to come see his son, he damn well better not let the poor kid down by not sending a present. Not if he wanted to live, he better not. The next day he called Jackie and asked him what he wanted for Christmas, then told him to keep a close eye on the mailbox. Now January 2<sup>nd</sup> had come and gone.

Maggie cleared her throat. "Yes, he'll be here tomorrow."

"Will you ask him if he has my present from my—"

"Yes, hon, yes, don't worry. I'll talk to him. I'll make sure he brings it." She swept a shock of his brown hair off his forehead and kissed him between the eyes. "I'll take care of it."

She took a long hot shower. That was her custom—get Jack to sleep and then take a nice long meditative shower. That present better show up soon, that was for sure. She decided, as hot spikes of water beat her shoulders and back, she would call Jack in the morning, just to call him a dumb prick, and then go out to the toy store and buy something herself, wrap it and stuff it in the mailbox for Jackie to find when he got home from school.

Jack wasn't a good father. No big secret about that. He'd been a fun boyfriend and even an okay husband, more or less, but Maggie knew, almost from the time her pregnancy began to show, that Jack wasn't cut out to be much of a father. He let her

handle everything, everything that had to do with the baby. Feeding, changing, holding, playing. Maybe it wasn't entirely his fault—he had always worked long and hard to pay for what they had, worked a second job so she could stay home to be with the baby. Not to mention the fact that he himself had been an only child and really hadn't even so much as held a little baby before his own son was born. But none of that mattered now. She didn't need to make excuses for him anymore. He was long gone.

She wished she had realized that about him before. Maybe she had known it, or suspected it, but she'd been too busy being seduced by his motorcycle and hard partying. Even their wedding day had been one gigantic party. To this day, people told her that the wedding had been the best they had ever been to. Maybe it had been the four hours of open bar, or the singer of the band that stepped from tabletop to tabletop, or maybe it was the way the night ended, after all the older people had gone home while the rest of them went skinny-dipping in the ocean. Jack certainly liked to have fun. Even more so, he liked to make sure everyone else was having fun.

She stuck her head under the harsh spray of water and let it hammer her hair flat over her eyes. She blindly knocked the faucet over a notch, a little hotter.

The wedding and the St. Thomas honeymoon had been six years ago. They told each other that they wanted to spend every anniversary right there, on the beach and in the ocean. But a year later she was six months pregnant with Jack. It was the last vacation she had ever been on.

She sat down on the shower floor, as she always did when she was finished washing, hugging her knees and letting the water machine-gun the top of her head and face. No vacation in six years. Now, instead of snorkeling the coral reefs in St. Thomas,

she had a fucking fish tank. She tried not to think about the fish, because she felt nice and calm, feeling good, enjoying the best part of her day right here, right now. Please don't ruin it by dwelling on those stupid fish. She tried to look at the bright side. Jackie liked them; he was getting a kick out of them. Maybe that was good enough.

She put her head back, opened her mouth, let it fill with water. Trying to calm down. She ran her fingertips over her wet shins to determine just how badly she needed to shave her legs. It had been several days. But in the dead middle of winter all she wore were long pants. Maybe she could put it off another day. Why not? She rolled her wrists and squeezed her calves, rubbing them. She had not had sex since...since when? Since before Jack moved away. Must have been several weeks before he moved, which was sometime last February. Thirty-four years old and utterly and completely celibate.

And in fact Maggie had only been out—really out, out with the girls—once, last August. Jack had been gone for a couple of months and showed no signs of hating his job and coming back, and no signs of sending for the two of them. It was time for her to realize that they were on a certain and unavoidable collision course with divorce. So her girlfriends took her out to have a few drinks, do some dancing, act silly. Her mother was not doing well at all, either. She had been hospitalized for three weeks, and the bedside vigil had begun.

Of course, she got completely caught up in the moment, shit-faced even. She met a guy, too—not bad looking, tall and broad-shouldered with a newscaster's wave of sandy blond hair. His name was Mark. Or Mike. Mike. His name was Mike, and they'd danced and talked, danced and talked, leaning over the bar shoulder to shoulder while he fed her drinks, and she tried not to sweat too much with all the dancing. Outside, after

closing, they stood making out against the door of her car. She wanted to take him home, forget about everything and just take him home and have some goddamn fun for once. But she had a babysitter at the house, probably sitting on her couch talking on the phone and watching *Saturday Night Live*. Maggie couldn't very well stagger home with this stranger. And what about the morning? What happens when it's morning and Jack wakes up? What would she do? Sneak Mike—or Mark—out the window? All these thoughts had burned behind her eyes like film stuck in the projector, sitting right behind her sinuses. Suddenly feeling the pulse of a headache, she stopped kissing him. She planted her palms against his shoulders and took a good look at him, deciding if she should call this off. He couldn't have been any older than twenty-five. Practically just a kid. Her girlfriends took her home, and she downed four Tylenol and curled up in the corner of the bed, as she always did, leaving three quarters of it empty. It was the last time she'd gone out.

Maggie got out of the shower and dried off, wrenching her face tight as she tried to forget it all. That was one bad thing about taking long showers—they made her think too much. The phone chirped with its annoying ring, and that jerked her from the memory once and for all. She considered letting the machine pick it up, but then, like always, she worried that it was something important. Especially this late at night. So she pulled the towel tight around her torso and, her skin still beaded with water, danced out on her tiptoes to answer it. “Hello?”

“Hi, is this Maggie?”

She had no idea who this was. She heard a woman with a voice that sounded like cigarettes. “Yes. This is she.”

“Hi there. This is Cindy Dell, from the club.”

Maggie turned to the wall and clamped a palm against her ear. “The club?”

“Cindy from the Elks. The bartender.”

“Oh.”

“Your father’s down here, and I think he’s going to need a ride home.”

Maggie closed her eyes and tried to imagine the smoky and grim barroom that she had never seen. “Is ... is Sherm there? His friend Sherm June?”

“Nope. No one’s here, hon, just me and your Dad. I’m about ready to lock up and he’s sitting here by himself. He’s a little bit drunk. Pretty damn drunk, actually.”

She chuckled, and Maggie, despite finding nothing funny about it whatsoever, returned the chuckle, phony as it must have sounded.

She told the woman she’d be right down and then returned to the bathroom to scrub her hair dry with a towel the best she could. The mirror was fogged over, so she swiped the towel across it, taking an extra look at herself, unaware until now that her cheeks were wet with tears, her eyes bloated. She was crying.

Jack didn’t want to wake up, protesting the entire time, head lolling as she tried to drag his dead weight off the bed. “Come on, honey, just sit up and let me put your boots on.”

He collapsed against her shoulder, smacking his lips with a cry hiccupping in his throat. Maggie wriggled a boot onto his foot and smacked the bottom of it, making sure it was on all the way. Jack started to cry in earnest now, and she realized that she was probably being a little rough with him. She made herself take a breath and then put on his other boot more slowly.

“Where we going?”

She looked at him, and his eyes were still closed, his cheek squished against her side.

“We’ve got to go get Grandpa.”

Jack sighed, picked his head up, blinked. His hair was sticking up all over the place and there was a dry crust of drool curling from the side of his mouth to his cheek. “We hafta go get Grampa?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

She threw her coat on and then, next to the front door, went down to one knee and bundled Jack—ski parka, hat, mittens. He whined and yawned and rubbed the back of a mitten across his eyes. His face looked like it was sinking, gravity tugging it down into a long, tired frown. Maggie picked him up into a bear hug, letting out a strained groan. He was a big kid, and she hardly ever picked him up like this anymore. They went out the door and down the walk, Maggie thrusting her head forward, trying to watch where she was walking, careful not to slip on the ice.

She buckled Jack into the back seat of the cold car and started it. She wished she had brought a blanket and thought about running back in to get one, but didn’t. Just get this over with, she thought. She yanked the door shut and went to throw the gearshift into reverse, then realized that the front windshield was iced over. She started to say “fuck” but stopped herself, biting on her bottom lip and letting the tired air leak through her clenched teeth.

She gave the horn a couple short toots in front of the Elks. A light burned from inside but all the beer signs that crammed the windows were dark. She saw one car in the parking lot, probably the bartender's. Maggie wiped her bare hand across her side window, making a clear thin streak that she could see out of, and watched the front door. Jack was breathing with the long, slow breaths of sleep, and she was glad for that. She beeped the horn again, quick, not wanting to wake him. "Come on, Dad, come on."

Minutes passed, and now she was getting even more pissed. She wouldn't put up with this nonsense, no way. She had a son for Christ's sake, she was a single mother with a five-year-old son, and she didn't have the time or energy to be a full-time babysitter for a seventy-three-year-old man. She looked back at Jack, sleeping with his head leaning awkwardly to the side. Then back at the door to the club.

With a groan, she shouldered the door open and ducked out into the wind and cold. This was unacceptable. She ran to the front door, shielding her left cheek and ear from the wind, and decided that she was going to give Dad an earful. Drunk or not, he was going to hear it. And then, first thing tomorrow, she was calling her brothers in California and telling them that they were going to have to fight it out and decide who was taking him. Because it wasn't going to be her.

Cindy, the bartender, was sitting at the bar with a cigarette in her fingers, counting money. Maggie's father was two seats down from her, his coat on and arms folded across his belly. The jukebox was playing Buddy Holly, and the place smelled just like her father. Beer and stale smoke. What the hell did he see in this place? It was dark, for one thing, and on each end of the bar low-hanging chandeliers made out of deer antlers hung from the low, water-stained ceiling. Maggie couldn't wait to get back out.

The bartender looked at her and winked, then looked to her father. Maggie nodded a hello and came up behind him, putting her hands easily onto his shoulders. “Dad,” she said.

He twitched and moved his hands to the lip of the bar and craned his head around to see her. “Oh, hi, sweetie.” He looked over at the bartender, then back to Maggie. “What’re you doing here?”

“Taking you home, come on.” She swiveled the barstool around and helped him to his feet.

“Goodnight, Rudy,” the bartender said without looking up from counting change. “See you tomorrow, love?”

Her father let Maggie lead him. He lifted his hand in a half-wave. “Yep, ‘night.”

When they got home, the house felt cold, so Maggie nudged the thermostat up to seventy. Jack and her father were both zombies in the car, slipping in and out of sleep. Maggie managed to get Jack back into bed without a fuss. She doubted he’d even remember it in the morning. “Goodnight, honey. Love you.” She gave him another kiss, on the cheek this time, and held it there until his cheek turned warm.

She kicked her shoes into the front closet and went into the kitchen looking for a beer. There weren’t any Coors Lights left so she took one of her father’s Bud bottles. Tasted a little bitter, but she got it down. She heard a small racket coming from down the hall, from her father’s room, so she went to investigate. She found him sitting on the edge of his bed, really just the guest bed, single-sized with a mattress about twenty years old. He was trying to reach his shoe. He had managed to pop one of them off with the

toes of his other foot, but now couldn't get the other one. Since the stroke, he'd had a hard time bending. Maggie remembered that her mother had helped dress and undress him every day, and she suddenly wondered how he had been doing it for himself these last months.

She knelt at the foot of the bed without saying a word and wiggled the loafer off, then continued to peel off his socks. His shirt was already off, his soft belly resting on his belt buckle, his concave chest full of hairs that had long ago gone white. His cane lay across the top of the bed, and she picked it up and hung it on the bedpost. He hadn't unpacked anything at all, she realized. His clothes were stuffed in cardboard boxes on the floor. Another box was full of books and magazines. Even his ceramic horse, the one of the racehorse, whatever his name was, Seattle Slew or something, was lying sideways on a pile of clothes in a box. In fact, looking around the small room, the one and only thing that he had bothered to unpack was a framed photograph that was planted on his otherwise bare nightstand. Even from this far away she recognized it: her mother and father in Vegas, probably five years ago, before his stroke and before she was diagnosed with cancer. She'd seen the picture a thousand times over at the house, sitting on the mantle. They were in front of the fountains at Caesar's Palace, arm in arm, smiling with tanned faces, squinting in the sun. His arm clutched her shoulder, while both of hers wrapped his waist, fingers interlocked.

Maggie stood and looked at the picture from the other side of the bed while her father hobbled over to one of the boxes and pulled out a pair of wrinkled purple sweatpants. She blinked and looked over at him. "Let me give you a hand, Dad."

“No, no, I got it, sweetie. I can manage.” He sat back on the edge of the bed, sighing.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He held the sweatpants up in front of him and eyeballed them with a slight drunken sway, making sure that he had them going the right way.

“Okay then,” Maggie said. She watched him for another minute before picking up her beer and backing to the door. “Tomorrow I’ll help you get this stuff unpacked and put away, all right? You’ve got this nice big dresser right here, might as well use it.”

Her father nodded, glancing at her before going back to the sweatpants. “All right, Mag.”

She said goodnight and then backed out, easing the door shut behind her. As soon as it was closed, she thought that she should have kissed him. She used to kiss him hello and goodbye when visiting, but not any longer, not now that they were roommates. She listened to him struggle through the door, but it sounded like he was getting the job done. She sipped her beer and went back down the hall to the kitchen. The overhead light was on above the breakfast bar, and she went to sit down to flip through the pile of bills that had been accumulating these last few days, but she stopped. Instead, she took her beer over to the porch, where, through the dark, she could just barely make out the smooth, silvery motion of the fish, appearing and vanishing again in quick flashes in the dark, like shooting stars.

She leaned in the doorway, twirling the beer bottle slightly and listening to it slosh. The porch didn’t smell yet—that was a plus. At least it had nice big windows. Once spring arrived, she’d be able to crack them open and keep the place aired out. She

finished the beer, put it down on the table behind her, and stepped into the room. A small wooden chair stood in front of the tank, Jack's desk chair. Too small for her to sit in, she knelt on it instead with one knee. When she reached to the back of the tank and found the light switch, the tank blinked alive with fluorescent light, and the fish scattered.

The filter was running, and a soothing hum emitted from the pump. Bubbles rolled from the filter and popped on the surface. The fish calmed down again and resumed their lazy motion, drifting through the water in small packs, the neon tetras huddling close, the two angelfish following one another, some other little black things with pink bellies poking their heads into the low corners of the tank, looking for a way out. Maggie rested her elbow on her knee and caught her chin in her hand. It was a nice looking aquarium, she had to admit. Looked kind of like the coral reef she used to swim around. She found it tough to imagine that the cruddy old tank could have turned out like this.

Maybe he had the right idea. Maybe that's what you had to do, keep busy and do the best you can. She knew this wasn't what he wanted any more than she did. None of them had planned it this way.

Maggie found the small container of fish food on the windowsill behind the tank, and she reached for it. Her father told her not to feed them because they were only supposed to eat once a day. He had said it just to be a ballbuster because he knew that she hated the fish and wouldn't be going anywhere near them. He'd laughed when he'd said it and poked her ass with his cane, but she didn't even look at him.

She took a pinch of food and crumbled it over the surface of the water, and watched the fish wriggle out of their hiding places and come drifting to the surface. The six lemondrops came out from behind the plants, moving in unison, interested. They were

clear, she realized, almost entirely clear with little swaths of bright yellow painting their backs. Maggie smiled into her hand. Jackie was right, they did look like candy.

## Knuckle Sandwich

If there was a bright side in all of this—and Charley was certainly looking for a bright side—it was that Kate hadn't driven off with his fingers still stuck in the door. At least she had noticed what had happened, opened the door, let him fall to his knees in a heap of agony, and then, after a long moment where she seemed to be considering what to do next, wiped the heel of her palm across her wet eyes and finally drove off.

But hey, what the hell, he'd been expecting something like this for weeks. Not *this* exactly, not getting his fingers almost severed, but certainly he'd known that something bad was looming.

He went back inside the apartment, hunched over and cradling his hand. He knelt on the hard floor of the bathroom, melted over the lip of the tub, and opened the faucet to warm, trying to keep his crooked hand still under a soft patter of water. Strangely, it

really didn't hurt that much, but his ears were buzzing, and it felt as though his body were trying to float away on him. He kept closing his eyes and resting his forehead on the cold edge of the tub, willing away what might have been nausea, only to pick his head up again, surprised that gravity was still holding onto him. He refused to look at his hand. Kept telling himself, don't look at the hand.

The apartment was a mess. For every item she'd managed to stuff into her bag, she'd let two more fall to the floor. Half the stuff was broken. She'd knocked framed photos from shelves and walls, now lying face down in puddles of broken glass. His had been strewn about the living room, half of them cracked, as if she'd slammed the heel of her shoe into them just for good measure. Maybe she had.

It took him three tries to get the number punched in right. The pain was coming on strong now, pulsing. He pawed at a kitchen chair, missing it.

"Hello?" Woman's voice.

"Nikki..."

"Charley?"

"Hi—"

"You just wake up? You sound exhausted...or drunk."

"No, no. Where's Joe? Joe home?"

"Yeah, he's out in the yard." Charley managed to drag the chair out from the table and fall into it. He thought Nikki had already gone to get his brother on the phone and was surprised when he heard her say, "You sure you're all right, Charley? I thought you were starting a new job today?"

He looked at the yellow towel around his hand, roses of blood blossoming in three or four places. He moved the hand to his lap, closer, protecting it. “No,” he told her at last. It was a half-truth. “Can I talk to Joe? Please...”

He might have passed out momentarily. When he finally heard his brother’s voice, Charley picked his forehead up from the tabletop.

“Joe.” He suddenly wanted to act casual. Not get him concerned. Downplay this latest fiasco. Like he always did.

“What’s up, Charley-boy? You okay?”

Charley licked his lips, measured his words. “I’m...yeah, I’m okay.” Licked his lips again. “You busy? I mean today? Right now?” He winced, sliding shaky fingers across the mouthpiece so his brother wouldn’t be able to hear the pain.

“Well, I’m supposed to...I’m supposed—Charley, are you all right? You sound sick or something.”

“Mmm. Fine, yeah.”

Then, from the background, he heard his sister-in-law, Nikki. “He didn’t go to work today.”

Joe, away from the phone, said, “I don’t know. Let me talk.”

Charley put his forehead down on the table “What’s Nikki saying?”

“You start the new job” Joe asked.

“Naw, no. No. Listen, you busy or what?”

From Nikki, in the background: “He’s drunk again.”

“I’m not drunk,” Charley said. “You can tell her I’m not drunk.”

“So tell me what’s going on. I was going to take Emma to Hampton Beach a little later on. Nikki’s got to work.”

Nikki again. “Hampton’s a pit. What’s up there?”

Joe must have pulled the phone away again. “Emma likes it, that’s all. She likes the bowling thing, the skeeball. The fried dough.”

“So, you’re busy?” Charley said, although Joe might not have been listening.

“And the trashy little high-schoolers, don’t forget about them,” Nikki said.

Joe came back to the phone, huffing. “Anyway. Jesus. So tell me the deal, Charley. What’s wrong?”

“I think I busted up my fingers.” He glanced down at the yellow towel. Looking made it hurt even more. “I think so, yeah.”

“Busted them up how? What, a fight?”

Nikki sounded suddenly closer. “Charley got into another fight?” There might have been a trace of glee in her voice, Charley thought. Of course. *Another* fight. Like there had been so many of them. That’s Nikki for you, though, his wonderful sister-in-law. Always rooting against him, always pegging Charley as the bad guy. One fight he’d been in. *One fight*. Not his proudest of moments, not by a long shot. But Nikki was always more than willing to remind him and anyone else of that night, three and a half years ago—*three and a half* years ago—when he’d punched out Kate’s ex-boyfriend.

“No, I didn’t get into another fight. Tell her I didn’t get into a fight.”

Charley had been with her only about a month, maybe six weeks, but they had gotten serious pretty quick and were spending almost every night together. Kate had just left a year-long relationship with a big-mouthed Fed Ex guy who kept calling her and

leaving long, rambling messages, some of them pleading, some teary, others—the scary ones—angry and endless. All of them were uncomfortably desperate. She'd answered the phone the first few times, let herself get reeled into hour-long conversations that went nowhere and always ended with him calling back two and three times until she had been forced to shut the ringer off. That was when the ex must have decided he needed to show up at her work to get her to talk to him. After the second time the guy had shown up, Charley decided to start picking her up from work himself. He'd told himself it was for her own safety, so he could protect her, keep her from being kidnapped and murdered, stuff like that. Truth was, he was just hoping for a chance to take a swing at this fucking loser.

He got his chance, third night he picked her up. Soon as he walked into the restaurant, there was the Fed Ex guy, blue uniform and everything, sitting at the bar playing with the straw of his Coke. A cellophane-wrapped cone of flowers lay on the bar, leaking water. Only five or six other customers sat at the bar, mostly older men with bad posture hovering over their scotches. Charley grabbed the Fed Ex guy roughly by the sleeve. “Up,” Charley said, buzzing with adrenaline.

The guy resisted, twisting toward Charley with a confused look on his face. He tried to jerk his arm free. “Who are you?”

Instead of answering him, Charley tightened his grip on the guy's sleeve and pulled him to his feet. The bar stool swiveled and banged the edge of the bar. From the corner of his eye he saw Kate, coming up the center of the bar with her cute pink work shirt on and a plate of buffalo wings in her hand. Charley, in that flash of an instant, imagined the fight that Kate was about to witness, and he might have actually had time to

feel a jolt of pride. It felt pretty cool, protecting the new girlfriend, showing her what a rough-and-tumble tough guy he could be, not afraid to mark up his face in the name of love. He imagined fists flying, headlocks, a scuffle that would end on the hard floor of the restaurant with a couple managers peeling Charley off the Fed Ex guy. Charley would be sweating and sporting a good-sized mouse under his eye, but the ex-boyfriend would not be bothering his Kate anymore. Sure, Kate would lecture him about how he shouldn't be taking risks like that, that she could handle herself just fine. And she could, no doubt. But he'd know, deep down, that she'd be beaming.

Didn't happen that way. Charley's fist popped the guy like a piston—*bang*—right in the fucking mouth. Fed Ex dropped like a bag of shit, probably out cold before he even hit the ground. Charley stood over him, arms and fists ready for a fight that he was having a hard time understanding was not going to happen. He blinked down at the guy, acutely aware of Kate just off to his right, standing there with those buffalo wings at her hip. And not just her—everyone was staring at him. He kept looking down at the guy, Fed Ex blinking lazily and bleeding from a bleeding lip that his bottom teeth had punctured. It was tough to keep staring at him, at what he had done, but even tougher to have to look up. To look up and see Kate. Slowly, he let his fists soften and disappear into his pockets. From somewhere nearby—he wasn't sure where—he heard someone say, “What'd he do that for?”

Charley was sitting out on the front steps, hand wrapped in a fresh towel, when his brother arrived some twenty minutes later. Joe knew the history: it was a long story dating back as far as that afternoon Charley had beat up the old boyfriend. The

relationship had been a consistent struggle since. So Charley knew there was no need for any kind of lengthy explanation about what had happened. They had had a fight. Kate packed her shit and left. He followed her out the door trying to talk some sense into her (although her leaving was probably the most sensible thing she could have done), and then, somehow, Charley had managed to stick his stupid fingers in the door just as she slammed it shut.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Joe told him, “this has to be the last fight. Has to be the last one.”

Charley, head back against the top of the seat, looking up at the lights, said nothing. He didn’t want to be having this conversation. Too many people in the room, for one thing. No need playing out his shit life for all to hear. And, anyway, it was a conversation as old as time. Every one of their fights resulted, eventually, *inevitably*, in some kind of sloppy explanation—to his brother, his parents, his neighbors, his friends. Sure, sometimes he’d talk about it just to get it off his chest, give his point of view to whoever he could, try to get someone else to see things his way, make him feel less crazy, less like an asshole. Sometimes he needed to hear someone say to him, “Man, she’s way out of line.” Other times he didn’t particularly want to talk about anything but needed to because the fight had been seen/heard/gossiped about—whatever—and Charley felt the need to go ahead and explain what had happened. Usually, though, and Kate probably was not aware of this, but usually in these circumstances, Charley went out of his way to cover what had happened. No, we’re not in a fight, Kate tore out of here in the middle of the night because some friend of hers got arrested, or some shit like that. He never got any credit for that.

“You agree with me, right?” Joe went on. “Has to be the last of the fighting.”

“She left. I don’t think we have to worry about it.”

“Yeah, I know she did.” He leaned in a little closer. “And she’s also left before. I mean, listen, I’m not telling you how to live your life or anything, but the fact of the matter is, these things don’t get any better. You’ll never get along any better with someone than you do in the first few months, the first year. And, let’s face it, you two never exactly got along all that well even then.”

It was certainly true, Charley had to admit, but that didn’t change the fact that he didn’t need Joe peppering him with advice right now. At least not until he got some meds in him to relieve the cutting throb that pulsed up the length of his arm. He knew, somewhere inside himself, that of course things would never have gotten any better with Kate. But the alternative, lame as it sounded now, was to be alone. And Charley knew that that wasn’t just his own lame excuse—that was the lame excuse of a whole lot of people. No one wants to start from scratch.

He felt Joe lean in. “So, what happened? What was it this time?”

Charley let one eye open. Was this a real question, or a dig? Was he actually trying to open a conversation, or was he making fun of him?

“Come on, man. Give it up. What went down?”

What went down? Talking like a cool guy now. Charley didn’t know how to read him, never really did. He thought Joe might be talking down to him: same old Charley, too young to know his ass from his elbow. He wanted to remind him that he was thirty-three fucking years old, not really a young punk anymore. But he didn’t want to talk. More than anything, Charley just didn’t want to talk. “I don’t want to talk, all right?”

Joe sat forward, resting his forearms on his thighs and folding his hands. He looked up at the TV. “Okay. Whatever. We’ll just sit here and wait quietly. Time flies when you’re having fun.”

“My fucking *hand*...”

For a while things had been going well. He’d been a bartender when they’d met, but Kate helped him get a pretty good gig at her uncle’s car lot, selling new Toyotas. For the first time in his life he’d felt like a grown up, with a live-in girlfriend and a real job, complete with a shirt and tie requirement and morning hours.

Didn’t last, though. He was a lousy salesman. He knew it, Kate’s uncle knew it, everyone knew it. Eventually Charley quit—he couldn’t take for another day the feeling that Kate’s uncle wanted to fire him but wouldn’t. Kate didn’t know right away. Charley left the apartment each morning in his shirt and tie, sent a few resumes out, then went to a movie. Why he’d actually thought that this news wasn’t going to reach Kate, he’d no idea.

Not wanting to have to tell her he was out of a job, he reluctantly picked up a bartending gig at one of those chain restaurants with the annoying jingles everyone hears over and over again on the radio. He’d thought tending bar had been in his rear-view mirror, and he dreaded stepping back in.

But he took the job and, in the days leading up to his first day of training, put the best spin on it possible, for his own sake as well as Kate’s. First, it was just temporary. Temporary gig. Second, always good money, tending bar. Keep up his end of the bills, all that stuff. Maybe take Kate out on a nice date—something they hadn’t done in a long

time—out to dinner, have a few drinks, make a lot of eye contact. Third, it was kind of fun behind the bar, wasn't it? He used to enjoy it—shooting the shit with the customers, telling stories, flirting with the waitresses, the *servers*, as they like to be called now, having a couple drafts after close while cleaning up and counting cash. Not such a bad lifestyle, nice and casual, nice and easy. Take a small pause from all this serious grown-up responsible stuff. Catch his breath and all. De-stress.

So he went into it feeling okay, ready to go, ready to pour beers. The green shirt, he had to admit, was a little cheesy, and so were the big buttons they made him pin to it (*Try Our New Blue Chunk Cheese Salad*), but he could deal with that. Everyone else in the place was wearing the same thing, right? Blend in with the other idiots.

Idiot: first day on the job, just this morning, he was to shadow one of the bar-backs, a young kid by the name of Jet. That's what his name tag said, Jet. The kid seemed all right at first; a typical kid—slouched a little bit, shirt untucked and the sleeves rolled a couple times over, showing off his arms, Charley guessed, though there wasn't really much there to show off.

“Want me show you the beer cooler?”

Charley blinked, surprised that he was being spoken to at last. He'd been sitting at one end of the bar re-reading the bar menu for the fifth time. “Yeah, sure.”

He followed Jet out through the kitchen, pausing while Jet stopped once or twice to talk with a cook or a dishwasher, standing behind him with his hands in his back pockets, waiting for an introduction that wasn't going to happen. Just a kid, that's all. Kids don't know how to handle anything. He tried to shrug it off.

“This is the fuckin’ cooler,” Jet told him, slapping the steel door with his palm. “And over here’s where we keep the empties, against this wall. All the Buds and fuckin’ Bud Lights in these two rows, Coors and Miller Lites and the other fuckin’ domestics right here. Then, um, then the fuckin’ imports, Heinekens, Amstels, Sam Adams, all that’s in these rows...”

“Sam’s not an import,” Charley said behind him.

Jet looked back at him, looked at him for perhaps the first time. “Huh?”

Charley shrugged. “Nothing. Sam’s not an import, that’s all. It’s made here. It’s made in Boston.”

“Whatever. We put the fuckin’ empties in this row, that’s all.”

“Okay.” Charley nodded, sticking out his lower lip, trying to take it seriously. It was all the same, though. Same as the last place he’d been stuck at for six years. The beer cooler, wall of empties, boxes of soda syrup, locked liquor room. All basically the same. Here’s the straws, the cocktail napkins, the dinner napkins, the to-go boxes. Over here’s the wine room. That’s locked too. Ask a manager for the key. Over in these bins are the lemons and limes and oranges. Underneath are the olive and cherry jars. Ask the prep cook to cut some celery stalks for the bar. He had this place figured out in ten minutes.

“It’s all pretty fuckin’ basic,” Jet went on. “The only bitch is humping the kegs down these fuckin’ stairs. That’s a bitch. The two wheeler is over there, behind the door. That’s the only bitch, though. Fuckin’ heavy.” There were three steps leading from the lower beer cooler level to the upper level where deliveries were made. Charley wondered who’s dumb-ass layout that was. Jet pulled a cigarette out from behind his ear and

stabbed it into the corner of his mouth but didn't light it. He had the beginning traces of a goatee circling his mouth, thin and light, something he'd no doubt been trying to grow for months. Charley, for a fleeting moment, wondered what it would be like to punch this fucking kid in the face, knock that stupid cig butt out of his mouth, watch him drop to his ass, face turned up to Charley, eyes bugged out with surprise.

Where was the goddamn manager of this place? How come the manager hadn't approached him, if not to give him the personal tour himself, then at least to say hello, say good to see you, whatever? And where was the other bartender he was working with today? Why the hell was he stuck with the bottom-of-the-food chain bar-back? He missed the car dealership. Missed his shirts and ties. He followed Jet back out to the front of the restaurant, standing behind him for minutes on end while he talked to the first-arriving waitress, a heavy woman wearing a polo shirt two sizes too small.

Eventually he stepped around Jet and stuck his hand out. "I'm Charley," he said to her, biting his annoyance.

Later, Jet left him behind the bar to give him time to familiarize himself with things, Jet told him. The other bartender, Chaz (*Chaz*—Charley rolled his eyes when he heard it), was apparently crippled by a hangover and was going to be late. "Don't go too far," Charley said to Jet just a few minutes before the doors were to be unlocked.

"Naw, I won't," Jet said, wandering off and gnawing on an apple like a squirrel. Of course, fifteen minutes later, when the first couple customers rolled in and stood at one end of the bar, waiting for their eyes to adjust to the dark, Jet was nowhere to be found. Not that it was a big deal. Charley certainly had no problem taking care of these two, but he had no idea how to ring in orders on the computer. He got the couple a draft

beer and a screwdriver and left them with menus. When they ordered, he wrote down exactly what they said and brought the scrap of paper into the kitchen.

“Seen Jet around?” he asked one of the cooks.

“Nope.” The cook scratched his head, one hand on his hip, staring down at a newspaper.

“Okay, well, I got an order here.” He held up the paper scrap. “Can I just give you this? I don’t know how to ring anything in.”

Another twenty minutes passed without any sign of Jet. He had a dozen customers at the bar now, a few of them eating, a few others waiting for their food, still a few others just getting their drinks and menus. Charley had been back and forth to the kitchen ten times, asking the cook if they had rye bread, or brown mustard, or if the Caesar salads had anchovies, or if they had yellow peppers. He didn’t have the slightest clue what was on the menu. And what was he going to do when someone asked for his check? Nothing had even been rung in yet. Where was Jet? Where was the manager? Where was the other frigging *bartender*?

He was pouring another draft beer, just beginning to work up a bit of a sweat, when he looked straight ahead and saw himself in the huge wall mirror that backed the length of the liquor shelf. Somewhere back in his apartment he had a picture in a photo album of himself behind a bar, taken several years earlier. In the photo he was wearing a white tee-shirt with *Crabcakes* stitched over the right breast pocket, ready to stick a swizzle stick of bar cherries into his mouth. His smile looked bright against his tanned face, as did his eyes. His hair was even sunstreaked blonde. He looked happy. It was not a forced, pose-for-the-picture smile, just a genuine, having a good time, smile-slash-

laugh. The picture, he remembered, had been taken by a waitress that he'd just started dating.

That's not who he was looking at now in the greasy mirror behind dusty bottles of J & B and Dewar's. And the difference was more than just a faded tan. He'd long ago buzzed his hair short, tired of trying to spread it across a receding hairline. His face, he noticed, had really filled out. Gone was the lean face, the defined cheekbones. Maybe it was the lighting in here, dark except for a fluorescent light just above the mirror, but he was also taken aback by just how purple the circles under his eyes were. Had he been sleeping okay lately? What was up with the bags? And what about his forehead, those two or three grooves cutting across like dried riverbeds? Where'd they come from?

He lifted his shoulder to wipe away a track of sweat and took the beer over to a customer. The two people eating sandwiches to his left tried to get his attention, something about more water and another napkin, but he tuned them out. Jesus, he suddenly felt old. Well, maybe not old, not *old*, but certainly too old for this. Too old for tending bar. He wasn't that good-natured kid anymore, having fun and making money and dating waitresses. He kept his back to the mirror as he worked, avoiding himself, completely self-conscious. Did everyone else in this place see him the same way he did? Were the customers sitting there eating their B.L.T.s and sipping their C.C. and sodas and wondering what wrong route this old dude's life must have taken for him to be humping drinks still in a dark, depressing barroom? He knew that, yes, they probably were. He could tell by the way that they didn't look at him.

Long overdue, the other bartender, Chaz—fucking Chaz—ducked under the bar, short with sleeves rolled to showcase his big arms in an obvious attempt to distract

everyone from noticing how short he was, black hair messy and spiked straight up, giving himself another two inches. He was unshaven, but probably not because he was running late, not because of the supposed hangover—it was more of a look, Charley figured.

“Sup,” he said to Charley, yawning and glancing bleary-eyed around the bar looking like he had no idea what all these people were doing here.

Charley hated that stupid fucking greeting. ‘Sup. Talk about lazy, talk about not giving a flying fuck. He’d rather the kid just ignored him completely than toss him that little half-assed utterance. He wanted Chaz to stick his hand out for a shake so he could ignore him, so he could *diss* him, diss the ‘sup. But the jackass didn’t even offer his hand. Didn’t even introduce himself. “These need to be rung in,” Charley said instead, pushing a pile of wrinkled slips into Chaz’s chest.

Charley stepped out from behind the bar, tasting a track of salty sweat that had found its way to his upper lip. “Butt break already?” Chaz asked him. He didn’t bother answering, pretended he didn’t hear. Chaz. What kind of nickname was that? Probably for Charles, like his own name. Ridiculous.

He made one pit stop at the dessert station for a bag of Cracker Jax, then, flicking them into his mouth one at a time, made a bee line for the front door. The manager was leaning at the hostess station, the same bald douche bag who’d interviewed him the previous week. He was talking to the hostess, cute but not a day over sixteen, big boobs resting on the counter. The guy hadn’t said a single word to him in the hour and a half he’d been there, but now suddenly had the urge to talk. “Hey, you’re not quitting, are you?” He said it as a joke, Charley guessed, leaning there with a stupid grin under his

cheese ball seventies mustache. The girl laughed out loud. Her boss was the funniest guy around, apparently.

“No,” Charley said, shoving the door open, “just getting something.” He didn’t know why he’d said it. Because, yes, he was quitting. He should have just said so, drop that stupid grin off the guy’s face. Yeah, I’m quitting, fuckwad. Thanks for saying hello this morning and making me feel comfortable. The sky was crazy bright, his eyes recoiling behind their lids. Beautiful day outside. He’d never waste another day of his life behind a bar. That’s what he told himself as he slid into his car and drove off, that bald manager’s ugly mug framed in the take-out window, watching him.

Later that afternoon, Dr. Loaiza sewed up his fingers with 43 stitches—eleven on his pinky, eight on the ring finger, eight along the middle finger, six on the pointer, and ten around his thumb—while the x-ray technician showed him a vague black and white of his hand, pointing out the various fractures and breaks. He couldn’t figure out what she was looking at; all he saw were shadows. He kept glancing at his fingers, his real fingers, not the x-ray, watching the sew job while a nurse with a gaudy engagement ring held his wrist still. Joe stood in the corner, hands stuffed in pockets, clucking his tongue.

“Good times, man,” Charley said to the room, breaking the long silence. “Good times.”

The doctor smiled, cutting suture thread. “Yes, you’ll remember this day, I imagine.”

Joe shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “I’m hungry.”

Charley watched a line of dark thread being pulled taut, lifting the skin on a finger into a high, translucent tent. He stared at it.

“How about you, you getting hungry at all?” Joe continued.

Charley pulled his eyes from his fingers, glancing over at him. “Not particularly.”

A little more than an hour later Charley used his good hand to eat a limp slice of pepperoni pizza. With his other arm he wedged a can of Sprite awkwardly between his wrist and ribcage while they walked. What a day. What a mother-hump day, from trying to go back to bartending, to getting walked out on when he broke the news to Kate, to a three and a half hour emergency room detour, and now here: greasy dinner at Hampton Beach. He followed slowly so as not to lose his drink, lagging a good ten yards behind Joe and his six year-old, Emma.

Charley wasn't even hungry. How could he be? Forget the fact that a steady pulse of pain radiated from his mangled hand. That was only part of it. It was Kate, as usual, that had ruined his appetite. A sick ball of regret had settled in the lower regions of his abdomen, again. He'd acclimated himself to it over the last couple years; that was the good news, he supposed. Tums wouldn't help; puking wouldn't help. Just ride it out. Ride it the fuck out. Kate was gone this time. Gone. Gone but, as the saying goes, not forgotten. Ah, shit. This ball was going to sit in his stomach for a long time, wasn't it? This one wasn't going anywhere.

He tossed most of the pizza slice into a full garbage can orbited by flies. He took a slug off his soda just to try to make himself burp—maybe that would help. He focused on his niece, just ahead, holding her daddy's fingers and clutching a can of root beer that

looked way too big for her hand. What a cutie she was. At least he had that going for him, a cute-as-a-bug little niece. She took about three quick steps for every stride Joe made, hustling to keep up with him. Chubby pale legs racing beneath a light blue sundress with white daisies on it, or were those suns? No, daisies. Nikki had pulled the top of Emma's blonde head into a ponytail that bobbed forward and back. He wanted her to glance back at him, give him one of her famous smiles. One of those would help get rid of that ball of sick. But she was too far ahead, too busy keeping up with Dad.

He followed them into an arcade, and not one of those comfy ones with the glass doors and air-conditioning. This was more like a warehouse, an arcade warehouse, opened to the street on one side, nothing but concrete inside, big rusty fans in the corners blowing around the hot air, bells and buzzers and sirens making it feel even hotter. And none of it helping his stomach. Three steps in and he already missed the ocean breeze. That didn't bother him. Kind of had a nostalgic feel, actually. Gave it that certain Hampton Beach charm that made the 75-minute ride worthwhile.

Standing behind Emma while she hurled miniature chipped bowling balls clumsily up a skeeball alley, Joe backed up a step in Charley's direction and said, "Sorry about this, bro. Not exactly exciting, I know."

Charley shrugged. "Like I got something better to do." He held up his splinted and bandaged fingers gingerly. They hurt when he moved his hand too quick. Then, louder, leaning toward Emma: "Besides, what's more exciting than skeeball?" He fished a quarter out of his pocket and cranked the lever that released a set of balls. He was, unfortunately, a righty, and was forced to reach across his body with his left arm to pick up the balls, then struggled to roll them straight with the wrong hand. Suddenly he

realized just how awkward these next several weeks would be. How would he shift the gears in his car? How would he tie his sneakers?

And Kate was gone. He wouldn't even have her help.

But why would he want her help anyway? For Christ's sake, she was the reason his fingers were practically severed in the first place. How fucked up would that be? One day she cripples his hand, and the next, she's wiping his ass for him. No thanks. Have a nice life, sweetheart.

*Knuckle Sandwich.* That's what the punching-bag game was called. Charley called it Bag-Tag. "Here we go, Joe, how about a little Bag-Tag?"

He'd played this game once before. Few years ago. Kate had been with him. He remembered Kate leaning against one of the other antiquated games, stripping threads from a hive of pink cotton candy, smiling at him as he pumped quarter after quarter into *Knuckle Sandwich.* They'd been together, he was just barely remembering, a short enough time that this was actually a little amusing to her. Maybe it had even been a turn-on. At least he liked to think so. He knew that it was early enough in the relationship that it was important to him that he do well. He remembered beating the shit out of this stupid plastic-leather mitt, showing off for Kate while she stood to the side and watched him, probably bored to death, most certainly bored to death, but smiling and clapping for him nonetheless. *Hot Stuff! Total Hunk!! You're All Man!* He'd landed them all, growing stronger with each adrenaline-fueled punch, with each bright but polite smile Kate threw him. He ate it up.

Joe fisted his knuckles on his hips, looking up at the Bag-Tag machine, *Knuckle Sandwich*. They'd been walking over toward the prize counter so Emma could cash in her skeeball tickets, when they came upon it. The machine was a monstrosity, cornered near the air hockey and football toss, the grown-up games. It consisted of a faux-leather mitt that jutted from the underside of the hood, at the end of a metal arm. On the right was a worn and smelly boxing glove, dangling by a short cord. For seventy-five cents you got three punches. Behind the mitt, on the front wall of the machine, was a barometer that scored your punch. The barometer, like the rest of the machine, was painted with cartoon girls in green bikinis, back-lit plastic giving it a depressing glow. It reminded Charley of an old pinball machine. Bally's Bikini Beach Babes, something like that.

The harder you hit the mitt, the higher the barometer lit, and the higher the barometer lit, the hotter the cartoon bikini babe. At the pinnacle of the measuring stick was the crème de la crème of cartoon bikini babes, tall and impossibly thin with wild blonde hair blazing down her back and impossibly large breasts, popping in their green bikini top like huge rubber balls. She was tanned and sexy, even for a goddamned cartoon, Charley had to admit, with red apple lips and big green eyes, cat eyes. That was the pinnacle. That was the grand prize. No tickets for a plastic whistle from this game, just the pride of a cartoon bimbo's attention. And if that didn't drive home the fact, she had a dialogue bubble pointing to her sexy mouth that said, "*Total Hunk!!*" Of course, below her, her friends didn't quite match up. Sure, the girl directly below her wasn't bad. Boobs not as big, skin not as tanned, legs not quite so shapely. But, hey, not bad. Not

bad at all. This girl was bending forward, hands on her knees, puckering. Her dialogue bubble said, *"You're All Man!"*

Below them were four more levels, each a little less attractive, a little plumper and less tanned. The third girl from the top, giving an 'okay' sign with her thumb and forefinger and winking, said, *"Hot Stuff!"* Her chubby buddy, one step down, had her arms folded across her chest, unimpressed. *"Don't Hurt Yourself,"* she said. Charley disliked her the most. Who was she to judge, standing there with her arms folded like that? Look up and check out your hot friends, honey, before you go rolling your eyes at me. The bottom rungs on the ladder were even worse.

Joe was already fitting the mitt over his hand when he said, "How you going to do this? You're a righty."

Charley glanced at his crushed hand, as if he'd forgotten all about it. He shrugged, started winding up his left arm. "I'll go left. I'll kick your ass left-handed. Ain't no thing."

Joe looked over at Emma. "What do you say to him, Em?"

She giggled, shy, playing with the accordion of tickets in her fingers. "Take it back, Uncle Charley."

"Take what? Take what back?" He glanced over at Joe.

"You said a swear word!" she explained. "You have to take it back."

Charley nodded. He stepped over and touched the top of her head. "Sorry, Em, you're right. I take it back."

Joe fed a buck into the machine. "This will just take a second, Em. Okay? We'll trade those tickets in a minute."

She nodded and watched her father throw a wild roundhouse at the mitt, popping it low and snapping it up into the undercarriage. The machine rocked, slightly off level.

*Hot Stuff!* it read behind a dusty strip of lighted plastic, the third notch up from the bottom.

“Not bad,” Charley said, “not bad.”

Joe slid the mitt off and backed out of the way as Charley stepped in, turning his body to the right. He cut a couple practice punches through the air. His right hand throbbed with the sudden movement on the other side of his body. “This could be awkward,” he said.

He pushed a red button that brought the mitt back down, then, exhaling, lunged forward and threw his body into a sloppy, left-handed punch.

*Child’s Play*, it said, second tier from the bottom. A frumpy cartoon woman in a green one-piece lit up, one hand on her wide hip, the other offering a wave. The plastic across her legs was cracked, mended with a graying strip of scotch tape. Charley looked down at his gloved left hand. “I think I missed it,” he said. “I don’t think I hit it solid.”

Joe’s second punch beat his first throw by one, lighting the fourth square from the bottom. *You’re All Man!* Joe pumped his fist. Emma clapped behind him. “Yay, Daddy!”

Charley’s second throw. He started as far back as the glove’s cord would allow, coiling himself into a low crouch before springing forward and hammering the mitt. A heave of a growl coming up from his throat made Emma cringe. She looked to her father to make sure this was normal.

*Total Dud.* Last rung on the ladder. Even the fat girl had her back toward him, throwing a bothered glance over her shoulder.

“Goddammit!” Charley glanced absently at his bandaged right hand. It was aching now, a strong throb, like heat, pulsing. This just from the jarring left-handed punches, rocking his entire body like seismic waves. “Your turn. Round three. One more.”

“Daddy’s got one more,” Joe told Emma. “Cheer for Daddy.”

“Then I can buy something with the tickets?” She held up her hand with the tickets draped over her palm.

“Yes ma’am. One more big punch, though.”

Charley only shrugged, panting. “Hot in here.”

Joe drew his fist back to his ear, elbow high, back arched. He peeked behind him to make sure Charley was out of the way, then skipped forward and unloaded.

*Hot Stuff!*

Joe dropped his tongue out and shrugged. He shook the glove off. “Hot Stuff again.” He went over and scooped Emma off the Juke box. “Daddy’s Hot Stuff!” he said. Emma nodded, looking past him to the prize counter.

“I’m going to take her over to spend these tickets. We’ll be back.”

“Well wait. Aren’t you going to watch my last turn? I’ve got one more.”

“I’ve already beat you twice. Third one’s meaningless.”

“No, bull—baloney. I’m throwing lefty. I get three tries to beat you.”

Joe sighed, peeked down at Emma. “All right. Let’s go. Hurry it up.”

He stood behind Emma, dropping his hands onto her slim shoulders, giving her a squeeze. Charley winked at his niece and stepped to the machine. He decided to skip the glove this time. Maybe bare-knuckled he'd be able to get a bit more oomph into it. "For all the doughnuts," he said over his shoulder.

"Yup," Joe said, clenching back a yawn. "All the doughnuts."

Charley bent his right arm and pressed it close to his ribs, trying to keep his bad hand still while he threw. Maybe that was why it was aching so much—maybe he had been letting it flail about, not paying enough attention. This time he kept it close to his body and, springing forward, teeth gnashed, smacked the mitt as hard as he could with his left.

*Total Dud.* Last rung on the ladder again. Charley, in a flash, pounded the plastic window with the side of his left hand. The lit square flickered out, popped back on. "Crap."

"All righty, then. That settles it. Heavyweight champ of the world, right here." Joe led Emma by the hand, clapping Charley on the shoulder as he passed. "Let's go buy some bubble gum cigarettes or something."

"Chicken." It was all Charley could think to say. "I'm gonna play this son-of-a-bitch one more time."

Emma, the profanity police, was on him again. "You said another bad word, Uncle Charley."

By now Joe and Emma were halfway across the arcade, their voices suffocated by the bells and sirens of the games. "You've got nothing to prove, Charley. You're punching lefty, for crying out loud. Come on."

Charley waved him off. “I’ll be right over.” Truth was, he didn’t give a rat’s ass about beating his older brother. Joe was right, he didn’t have anything to prove to him. Beating Joe had nothing to do with anything. Silly at it was, he couldn’t let himself settle for one of those low-level ugly chicks, cartoons or not cartoons—game or no game.

He fed the game three more quarters and went to work, skipping the boxing glove as he had with the previous turn, trying to capitalize on any advantage he could. His right hand continued to ache, no matter how close he kept it to his body, no matter how hard he concentrated on not jarring it. He wondered if maybe it was some kind of sympathy pain. Punching so hard with his left that the right hand, badly injured, aches. Sort of like the ache one feels in his own groin watching someone else get kicked in the balls.

*Total Dud.*

You little bitch. Cheating little bitch. He popped the red button with the side of his left fist and the mitt hissed back down.

*Child’s Play.*

A single-notch improvement. But still so pathetic that it certainly didn’t feel like one. One more turn. He hit the red button, turned, exhaling hard, shoulders heaving. His right hand pulsed.

*Total Dud.*

“Fuck.”

Charley searched his pockets for singles. He was pretty sure there were none, but he dragged his pockets inside out anyway. In his back pocket he found a wad of tens and fives. He was reluctant to leave his post, not wanting some little brat to take his game, but he eyed a change machine about halfway down the aisle behind him. Far down to his

left, Joe was holding Emma up by the armpits so she could see into the top of a glass prize case.

He struggled to feed a five dollar bill into the change machine, his left hand shaky and sore. On the third or fourth try the machine grabbed it and, a beat later, a jackpot of quarters rang into the dish. Charley scooped them in frantic swipes, eyeing *Knuckle Sandwich*, making sure it was his. Truth was, and he probably knew it already if he'd thought about it, no one had played the game all summer. The machine had to be twenty years old, a relic from the eighties, tucked out of sight in a dark corner of Captain Shaky's, away from the new, streamlined game consoles that lined the front of the arcade.

He thumbed three quarters into the machine. One of them kept falling through into the coin return. Finally he slapped it down on the lip of the console and dipped into his pocket for another quarter. This time the machine lit into life. Charley backed up, shaking his left hand, squeezing his fingers tight, feeling his nails gouging his palm.

Red button. Mitt hitched down. Charley, chewing the inside of his cheek, eyes squinted in what he hoped was relentless determination, sprung forth, cracking the mitt with a left-handed explosion that was going to create some obvious damage to this machine. The machine rocked back, vibrations pinging all the way up his arm.

*Child's Play.*

He punched again in a flash of violence, even though the mitt was locked up. His knuckles cracked the plastic covering of the barometer, dull backlights flickering in struggle. "Mother-*fuck!*" This bitch was playing with him, had to be. Or else fucking

broken. Old broken-down piece of shit taking his money and fucking mocking him. He banged the red button.

Afterwards, while he had been shaking the cramps out of his hand, Kate had fed a quarter into an old, rusted machine she'd been leaning on and proceeded to crank a metal dial. She pointed the dial to various letters of the alphabet and then, locked on the letter she wanted, tugged back on a side lever, like a slot machine. It seemed to take forever. Charley wiped sweat from his face, trying to catch his breath so it wouldn't be so obvious that throwing just three punches had winded him. He glanced down at her ass. It was, he couldn't deny, a perfect little ass. He'd slept with her for the first time just a few nights earlier. Looking at her now, working the machine, hunched over, he realized just how goddamn lucky he was.

When she was done, the old machine spat out a plastic coin, the size of a silver dollar. One side read, in curving letters that covered its circumference, *Captain Shaky's, Hampton Beach, NH*. On the flip side, uneven letters stamped out: *KATE & CHARLEY, JULY 8... JUST THE BEGINNING*.

She tucked it away in her purse after showing him, and, when he offered her his arm, slid hers through it. They walked out into the salt air, Charley still heaving, tired, beading with sweat. The champ and his girl.

It was not until he saw Emma, in the very corner of his peripheral vision, standing with her arms flat at her sides, plastic crown sparkling on her head, staring at him, that he pulled back. Charley was panting like a fiend, slick with sweat, shirt stained dark and

clinging to his body. On the dusty floor were shreds of browned gauze and tangled medical tape, next to four discarded finger splints, cracked and kicked about. The concrete around this pile was wet with laces of blood, while the lane directly in front of the machine revealed full, and partial, bloody footprints. Charley blinked, felt himself deflate. Blinked again.

The machine had been hit so hard that it was knocked askew, almost 45 degrees to the right of where it had been. Then, just as abruptly as he had paused, Charley kicked the red button with his foot, hesitated while the mitt folded down, and unloaded a wild *right*-handed punch. A faint mist of blood popped from the point of contact. The mitt snapped up and the machine rocked again.

*Hot Stuff!* Third from top.

Charley felt a ring of pain at the end of his arm, but somehow it felt faraway and removed. He took a curious glance at his hand: purple, swollen, bloody cracks split open in ovals. He did not even recognize it as his own. He squeezed it into a fist, feeling the vibration of bones cracking.

“What are you doing?”

He pushed his broken and swollen and shaking hand into his pockets, going after more quarters. Trying to pinch them with his gnarled fingers, failing, trying again. His hand was hurting, he knew it must have been, but somehow the pain failed to match the way the hand looked. Not much more than a dull ache, actually. Maybe a small cramp.

He dragged his hand back out and quarters rained over the concrete, plinking and bouncing. Still, despite all that he had spilled, he still had five or six in his sweaty palm. He bent at the machine and fed them in.

“Charley...”

The mitt cranked down and Charley stepped back, getting low, and popped the mitt again just as he heard his name from behind a third time.

*You're All Man!!*

Finally, you fucking cheat. You bitch. Finally.

Hands were on his shoulders now. He recoiled, tried to shake away. The hands came back again, more firm this time. “Charley, stop it. *Stop.*” Now he could hear crying, too. From Emma. He looked at her now, his head craned all the way around. She stood, swiveling her upper body nervously, a finger in her mouth and her face red and wet with tears. The crown had slipped and covered one eye.

“He’s all right. He’s okay.” Joe was talking to the crowd that had stopped and turned to watch. They walked up the boardwalk, Emma on Joe’s shoulders, still huffing. Charley was at their side, Joe’s arm squeezing his shoulders, just a bit too firm to be comforting, holding him up and holding him close.

Charley wasn’t looking at anyone else. They were all blurs, cattle, glorified car-accident spectators. Joe held his shoulders so tight it was hard to walk straight. His hand was ruined and it let him know, erupting in sickening waves of blind pain. He pulled it close to his body, pressing it gently against his stomach, but that didn’t help.

“He’s okay,” Joe continued to tell the gathering crowd, a little too mumbled to sound so sure. No one seemed to know whether to look at Charley’s hand or his blood-speckled face. “He’s fine.”

Emma's feet rose off her father's chest and fell back again with each hurried step he took. Her knee was right next to Charley. He reached, with his left hand, his good hand, and touched it, held it. "Sorry, Em," he said up at her, afraid that she might look back down. He didn't want her to, afraid that it would bring him to tears himself. "I'm sorry."

This, for some reason, got her crying even more. Charley's eyes welled up. He put his forehead against her leg as they walked, dizzy and unsteady.

He was in too much pain to have to explain, though he wanted to. He wanted his brother to understand. Hell, he wanted Emma to understand too, especially wanted her to understand. But not right now. Right now he couldn't speak. Right now he could only close his eyes, squeeze them shut and bite his cheek, will away some of this pain.

The doctor had said that the cast would have to be on his hand for six to eight weeks, and that he'd still probably have soreness and difficulty gripping. A constant reminder of getting his fingers slammed in a car door, of bad fights, bad breakups. Of failure. Four months of regret. And he didn't want that. And so now he wouldn't. They were headed to the hospital again, where there'd be more x-rays and more stitches, more splints and tape and plaster. There'd be more damage this time. Most certainly surgeries. A year's recovery instead of a couple months. Soreness and discomfort that was sure to last a lifetime. And he couldn't be mad at Kate for that. Only himself.

There is a stretch of road in Hampton that runs between the beach and the strip of arcades, pizza shacks, and bars. At the north end of the strip, you can continue up toward North Hampton and Seabrook, or you can bear off to the left to a south road that runs

along the back of all the arcades and bars, and then scoop the loop again. This is what all the young guys did, cruising in their modified Mustangs and Camaros and motorcycles, circling around and around, lurching forward in stop-and-go traffic, stereos cranked, bass thumping, smoking cigarettes in their wife-beater t-shirts, howling at the junior high girls.

Charley and Kate sat in this traffic, inching along. It wasn't particularly hot out—it was late and a cool breeze chipped off the ocean—but Charley had the windows up and the A/C humming, just to keep the headache-inducing music out of the car. Instead, they listened to a Red Sox game. They were beating the Devil Rays, 3-1, in the eighth.

His right hand was sore, his knuckles bruised and wrist aching. Might have had a slight sprain. It hurt to shift the gears, but thankfully, in this traffic, he hadn't had to pull it out of first yet. When he'd backed out of the parking space a few minutes before, he'd winced shifting into reverse. Kate asked him if he was all right. "Just sore," he'd said. "Overdid it a little."

She picked his hand off the shift and brought it to her lap, caressing and massaging his fingers and palm. "Showing off for your new girlfriend?" She smiled and glimpsed him from the corner of her eye.

Charley shrugged, trying not to be self-conscious. "Yeah, a little. I admit it."

Kate kissed his knuckles. "Well," she told him, pecking each finger, one at a time, slow and teasing. "I was very impressed."

It was the first time she had used the word *girlfriend*. God, he loved it. The plastic coin she had made hung from the ignition with his keys. Somehow, it felt like a commitment. Like jewelry.

She kept kissing and massaging his hand. It wasn't really helping at all but, still, it felt good. He pressed the brake again, for the hundredth time, and looked over at her, watched her. She wore a navy blue V-neck tee shirt with a Red Sox logo over the left breast. No one could wear a tee shirt like she could. Around her thin, tanned neck was one of those candy necklaces. Pink and white and pale green candies strung along a piece of cheap elastic. It had cost him twelve skeeball tickets.

The next time he stopped, just another five feet ahead, he tugged the hand brake up so he could rest his foot and then, sliding his hurt hand around her shoulders, leaned over to nibble at her necklace. "*Charley!*" Kate squirmed, locking her shoulders up around her neck.

He kept going, biting and licking, sometimes getting candy, sometimes going for the smooth curve leading to her collarbone, tasting the sweetness of the candies with the salt of her summer skin. She laughed, wild and panicked, and he laughed too. Her neck was so goddamn sexy.

The car behind them gave two short toots of the horn to get going. Charley picked his head up, saw the traffic starting to move. He put the hand brake back down. Kate, breathing hard, reached across and wiped wet candy crumbs from his chin. A smile lighting upon his face, Charley stretched toward her one more time and kissed her lips. Then he put the car into first, fisting the gearshift painlessly, and the car hitched forward. The plastic coin, swaying with the sudden movement of the car, glimmered like gold.

## Himalaya

By his own admission, fourteen year-old Nickel Smalls was a shy—painfully shy—kid, and yet the job he wanted to have when he grew up was the one the guy up in that booth had, the guy in the halfway-buttoned red and white vertical-striped polo shirt and white pants, the guy with the creased forehead and dark tan and white teeth, with those mirrored shades sitting up on his sun-stained blonde head. Him right there, up in the booth chewing gum and smiling. Nickel wanted *his* job.

“You’re not paying any attention at all, are you?” His cousin Jocko nudged Nickel in the ribs, knocking him a little off-balanced. “What’re you so spaced out about?”

Nickel regained his balance. He tilted his head toward Jocko, squinting in the tough sun. “What?”

“What’s so interesting over there? I’m trying to point out a nice little Macintosh-apple ass right in front of you. What are you staring at?”

They had wandered off the beach and stood barefoot on the hot blacktop of Shaheen's Funland, almost directly in its center, surrounded by the four or five signature rides that made up the small amusement park. On the other side of the haunted house, running along the beach, were a strip of rip-off carnival games and one of those three-humped slides that you used a burlap sack to ride down. And that was it. You could walk from one end of the place to the other in about a minute, maybe two if you stopped to ride the slide, buy a fried dough, and lose a couple bucks tossing free-throws into a suspiciously small basketball hoop.

Nickel shifted his weight from one foot to the other, giving each a brief break from the hot pavement. "Nothing. Just looking over there."

Jocko looked over his shoulder, toward the Twirlaway and the Himalaya and a ticket booth. "At what?"

"Nothing." Nickel pushed his hands back into his shorts pockets.

"Nothing? Nothing what?"

Nickel started walking. "Nothing. Come on."

"Cripes, Nick," Jocko said, catching up to him in a couple long strides, "you're watching that dude again. That's weird. I'm trying to show you a hot girl and you're watching the DJ guy." He put his hands on Nickel's shoulders and squeezed. "*Weird.*"

Nickel squirmed away. "I'm not watching him. Shut up—it's a good ride. I'm watching the ride." He felt his face flush hot. Jocko liked busting balls, especially lately. Especially since he'd shot up four inches and his voice changed. And started high school. Maybe it'd gone to his head a little, thought he was tough stuff now.

It had only been a couple Christmases ago, at Aunt Jane's house, when Jocko had given Nickel his entire collection of G.I. Joes—the action figures, the vehicles, all the accessories: hand grenades, grappling hooks, water canteens. The whole shebang. Nickel figured Jocko was just bored with it all, a little spoiled maybe, and had moved on to something else. Nickel scooped them up without a second thought, totally psyched. Now, a year and a half later, he realized that yes, Jocko had in fact moved on to something else: girls' asses. Every time they walked through Salisbury Center, Jocko couldn't stop talking about them. Nickel swallowed down a lump of shame thinking of the four or five G.I. Joes that he had brought with him this summer, only to have stuffed them back into the bottom of a duffle bag when he saw how much older Jocko looked this year.

Nickel had been spending summers up at Salisbury Beach for years. Back in the old days, he'd spend the whole summer here with his mother and father. They'd rented the same cottage year after year. But that had ended with the divorce, and now his Salisbury summers were limited to the week-long rental his mother rented with her sister, Nickel's Aunt Jane. And that was fine, he supposed. He was getting older now, and besides, even Salisbury could get boring after a while. His mother's and aunt's rental property didn't even have a TV. Aunt Jane said they watched too much boob tube during the school year. "Read a book," he'd heard her say countless times. Nickel was afraid of his Aunt Jane, so he'd go straight ahead and reach for his book. Jocko, though, would put his hand to his mouth and make a long fart noise.

The best thing about the Himalaya ride, everyone knew, was the music. The centerpiece of the tiny park, the Himalaya not only lit up like nothing else on the beach (at night, of course; the daytime effect was less impressive), but the tunes pumping through the huge suspended speakers angled down from the underside of the ride's tent-like roof made sure that everyone knew that the Himalaya was the main attraction. Sure, the ride itself was fun: a train of carts ripping around a circular track at breakneck speed—sort of a merry-go-round on steroids. As Nickel and Jocko gravitated toward the ride, “Oh What a Feeling (To Be Dancing on the Ceiling)” surged from buzzing speakers as two ride attendants, also wearing the red and white vertical stripes and white pants, unhooked the green chain and let the next flood of riders scamper onto the plywood flooring and jump into seats like some sort of large-scale game of musical chairs. Nickel envied *these* guys, too, not just the DJ. They got to manage the line of excited girls, flirting and shooting the shit during the long waits, walking the stage and checking to make sure everyone was belted in, even giving an occasional belt—attached to a cutie, always—a little tug just to be sure. Not a bad job at all.

“Let's go on,” Nickel said, already digging through his pockets for cash. The two of them stood, not accidentally, directly in front of the ticket window. The ride cost five tickets, the most expensive in the park, for good reason. At 40¢ a ticket, a single ride was two bucks. A day earlier, Nickel's mom had given each of them five dollars for a Ride-All-Day bracelet, and they made sure it got its use. Once for the haunted house, once through the fun house, couple times on the burlap sack slide, once for the Twirlaway (Jocko went solo; Nickel watched) and seven rides, over the course of the afternoon and

into the night, on the Himalaya. Now, not sixteen hours later, they were dropping two bucks each for a single ride. They couldn't help it.

Nickel could tell before they even stepped in line that they were two rides away from getting on. He'd ridden it enough times to be able to eyeball it. One of the attendants stood at the front of the line, chain in hand, watching the crowd rush aboard, smiling for the girls and scowling down at the guys. The other attendant leaned on the side of the DJ booth, one fist on his hip, talking to the DJ.

As the Lionel Ritchie song faded away, The DJ put his lips against the mike, nodding to the attendant as the attendant continued to yap. "Fasten those seatbelts and hold on tight, as we get ready for another wild ride on...the Himalaya!" He spoke rapid-fire, in what had to be a falsely deep voice, dragging out the aaahhh at the end of *Himalaya*. Nickel liked how he said this, so cool and so casual, looking off to the left while thumbing through a stack of records, half-nodding while the attendant, on his right, continued to talk to him. So cool. So. Damn. Cool.

He knew this next song. They played it on the Himalaya several times a day, even though the song was over a year old. "Round and Round," by Ratt. Nickel liked the song because it fit so well to the ride, but he wasn't much of a Ratt fan. Wasn't much of a heavy metal fan at all. That's what the older guys called it—heavy metal. All that long hair and strange eye make-up and scratchy, raw voices. That wasn't Nickel's thing. He was more of a dancing on the ceiling kind of guy.

"Here we go, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, hold on tight—tight, *tight*, *TIGHT*—as we go Round and Round...on the Him-a-lay-aaaa!"

Nickel watched the cars jerk into slow movement. The ride was set up that way, nice and slow to start. Build up the anticipation for a few laps before kicking into high gear. He studied faces, the wide grins of both excitement and anxiety. He knew that ten or fifteen laps from now, the faces would be a blur, the details smeared as the cars whirred around and a blaring siren drowned out both the screams of joy and the thump of music.

Jocko, strangely, wasn't even facing the ride. He stood with his back to the ropes, toward Nickel but looking off in the distance, crowd watching, Nickel supposed. Making sure he wasn't missing anything. As the ride hit its crescendo of speed and noise, Nickel thought for sure that Jocko, in fact, was missing a lot.

"You know what," Jocko said when the siren at last died away and the cars began their long slow-down, "after this we should go back to the towels and practice some more Frisbee." He flicked his wrist a couple times, flipping an imaginary Frisbee. "Don't you think?" This certainly wasn't a surprise. Jocko's big thing this summer was playing Frisbee.

No, that wasn't quite accurate. Playing Frisbee was a fun, easygoing activity. What Jocko liked to do was to wait until late afternoon, after the beach had begun to clear and space opened up, when it had been abandoned of witnesses, and then spend a couple sweaty hours hard-core practicing, as if he and Nickel were training for the Frisbee event at the summer Olympics, if there were such a thing. Catching in stride. Behind the back catches. Under the leg catches. Bouncing it on a fingertip catch, even a double or triple bounce sometimes. Diving into the waves catches. Jocko practiced them all, over and over and over again. And so, as a result, did Nickel.

Jocko didn't really even like Frisbee that much. Not in any kind of passionate way. Nickel just happened to have one with him one day, dog-chewed with a flaking Snoopy and Woodstock on it, and Jocko right away got it in his head that if they practiced every day, and he meant really, *really* practiced, took it totally serious, then soon enough they'd be pretty damn good, and if they were pretty damn good with the Frisbee, girls would notice. Nickel also figured that Jocko liked having his shirt off. Sometime in the last year his shoulders had broadened, rounded. He had a bit of a triangle shape to him these days. Nickel was no triangle. Sometimes he'd keep his tee shirt on, just to cover his ribs and his pale, fish belly skin, his nipples that hung a little loose. But Jocko thought it was odd for a guy to wear a tee shirt on the beach. Especially when Frisbee action was going on.

"They love stuff like that," Jocko had said, trying to spin it on his finger, tongue poking through his teeth in concentration. "That's what they do. They sit on the beach doing nothing except getting tans and keeping an eye out for guys. Active guys. Guys doing things. Not lying on their backs looking at the clouds with their shirts on."

The ride ended, and a Himalaya worker in red and white stripes and white pants, popping cool green bubbles, escorted passengers to the exit. He half-sat on one of the chain-ropes, rocking back and forth, one hand waving people toward him, the other pointing at the exit, all the while not looking at anyone except two girls at the front of the line, waiting to ride next, cut-off denim shorts and bikini tops. He shot them a smile and a wink in between green bubbles.

And that wasn't even the cool one. The cool one was picking out records, a pair of silver headphones covering his ears but—really cool—wearing them upside down so

that the plastic head gear hung below his chin, held there by one fisted hand while he bobbed his head and sung along to The Tubes' "One in a Million (Don't Fall in Love)."

A few minutes later, it was their turn. Jockeying for position was crucial, as far as Nickel was concerned. The cars were tagged with peeling black numbers on their backsides, and Nickel had a few lucky ones that he always tried to chase down. Option one was 22, his birthday. If that wasn't available, he went for 15, the number of his house back home. Six was the fallback choice, the TV channel that played all the good Saturday morning cartoons. Not that he watched Saturday morning cartoons anymore.

Today it was 22, a good sign. Third time in a row in good old deucey-deuce. First one there got the inside seat, which was huge. If you got stuck on the outside, it was a matter of physics that you were going to get crushed. And he definitely didn't want Jocko, outweighing him by about thirty pounds, grabbing that inside seat.

Nickel slid into the seat first and, in one fluid motion, snapped the seat belt tight. Jocko, as usual, wrestled to figure it out. Dozens of rides this summer, *dozens*, and he still didn't know how the heck to lock a seat belt. Nickel couldn't understand that one. The attendant came around, moving fast, snapping green bubbles and giving seat belt straps quick tugs. Then, just like the night before, yanked Jocko's belt, pulling about three feet of loose canvas with him. He stopped, backed up a step, and helped Jocko. Nickel sunk in his seat, embarrassed. They looked like amateurs.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls," the DJ said in his faux-deep voice, right on cue, "hold on tight and don't let go as we get ready for another wild ride on the Himalaya! Aye-aye-aye!"

Nickel liked the way he turned his face slightly to the right and pressed the side of his mouth against the microphone. Sometimes, at home, Nickel pinned a drumstick with a ball of aluminum foil stuck on its end and practiced his game. You couldn't just look at a mike straight on, staring down at it crossed-eyed. Too stiff and nerdy. The DJ made it look natural.

As the train of cars hitched into motion, steel arms rolling beneath thick plywood flooring, "99 Luftbalons" by Nena began, a seemingly curious choice, having that slow, melancholy intro—unfitting for such a high-energy ride—until the synthesizers kick in and suddenly the song and ride match. Nickel pushed his feet flat against the arc of the car's floor, perfectly braced two feet apart, his hands closed tight around the safety bar. The goal was to have the strength not to let momentum pull him against Jocko as the ride sped up. It was a sure sign of weakness, crushing your ride companion and not being able to do anything about it.

The beginning of the ride, although slow, was fun. Anxiety building as the cars lurched a little faster and a little faster with each rotation, but still slow enough for riders to focus on the music and the people on the pavement watching and waving. There was time to dance in your seat for a few laps, clap your hands, snap your fingers, bite that lower lip, roll your shoulders. Then, a dozen laps in, the surge of wind dulled the music and it was time to hold tight. Nickel, of course, had been holding tight all along. For him, the Himalaya was serious business.

One of the attendants, smiling and twisting his hips to the music, suddenly stepped onto the running board of one of the cars, holding on with one hand while the ride took him for a couple laps. Nickel loved it when they did this. Talk about cool.

This was it. This was totally it right here. How'd they remain so casual when they did that, only slightly leaning, holding on with fingertips, still maintaining a little bit of a dance. Nickel would have been scared pissless that the force would send him pinwheeling into the glass of the DJ booth.

Two laps later, the attendant stepped off just as casually as he had stepped on, sliding his hands into his pockets as he did so. These guys were good. The DJ, Nickel noticed, had pulled his headphones down around his neck so he could talk to a girl who was suddenly standing next to the booth, on her tiptoes to lean into the window to be heard over the music, which was now fading from Nena to Huey Lewis and the News and "I Want a New Drug."

She must have been requesting something. Girls were always doing that. Attendants were always letting them through the line, letting them duck under the ropes, so they could visit the DJ and request songs. Once Nickel saw the DJ invite a girl into the booth. It looked like she had stood between his legs, facing away from him with her butt wedged against him. He let her play with all the buttons, making the ride's lights flash, while he laughed and flicked his eyebrows up and down toward one of the attendants.

This girl wasn't invited into the booth, but still, she was up there for a long time, almost an entire song, leaning in, the toes of one foot scratching the ankle of the other, showing Nickel the dirty bottom of her foot. She and the DJ couldn't have been more than six inches from each other's faces. The DJ kept turning his head to her, and she'd push closer, yelling into his ear. She was making him laugh about something.

As the ride thrust into a frenzy, the cars lurching wildly over the hills and valleys of the track, a siren screamed, two red and blue police lights whirring, signaling to all that they were now going *fast*. After half a dozen blurring laps, the siren deflated and the cars began to slow. Nickel peeked around. Riders laughed in relief. A girl two cars ahead grabbed her boyfriend's shoulder, shaking her head. It looked to Nickel liked she had to pee.

"Stay seated and hold on tight," the DJ said as the cars came to stop, "as we get ready to go even *faster*..." He had his face sideways to the mike again, the cool way. "...the other way." The girl standing next to him began bobbing her knees to the new Rick Springfield song, "I've Done Everything For You (You've Done Nothing For Me)." The cars surged backwards. Hands shot up into the air. Nickel heard, from somewhere behind, calls of "*Wooooo!*" Jocko startled him with an elbow in the ribs. Nickel somehow had almost forgotten he was there, even though he was pressed against him. Jocko pointed with his chin at the girl talking to the DJ. She was up on her tip-toes again. "Look at those calves." He turned his head to Nickel, snapping his jaw shut a couple times, cracking his teeth together. "I wanna bite 'em, don't you?"

The girl's name was Stacey. Nickel knew this because Jocko told him. Jocko knew this because after the ride he followed her around the park, going through the haunted house one car behind her, riding the slide after her, standing in the soft serve ice cream line three or four people behind her. When she sat on a green bench, carved with initials and speckled with flakes of long-dried bird crap, Jocko, pursing his lips casually around his own ice cream cone, stopped and leaned on the back side of the bench. Nickel stuffed his

hands into his pockets. It was turning dusk, a lavender haze settling over the park as the lights came on—and the Himalaya, Nickel noticed, was growing crowded. Night was when the ride came to life, bright and loud, the center of the bubble gum universe.

It was while Nickel was watching the ride that Jocko somehow started talking to Stacey. She had a friend with her who looked a little older than Stacey, but that might have only been because she had a chest. Nickel wondered how old they were. They had to be high schoolers.

He was caught in no man's land, too far from the three of them to be involved, too close to be able to walk away clean. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, in turn glancing at them, then looking around the park. Jocko was telling the two girls something about his Frisbee-playing skills, probably boring them senseless, Nickel guessed. From afar, a young terrified cry shot like a piston from the Twirlaway. Nickel watched as the ride came to a merciless stop and a young blonde girl with her father got off, the father walking quickly behind her to keep up, hunching over and stroking her head in apology. Way too young for that ride, Nickel thought. Nickel himself hadn't tried that one yet. Too nauseating, that's what he told himself. Not to mention he would be cheating on the Himalaya.

“Are you his friend?”

The voice came from behind. Nickel turned halfway, hands tight in his pockets. It was Penny, the chesty one. He blinked. “What?”

She tilted her head toward Jocko. Jocko and Stacey were engaged in more Frisbee talk. Stacey, Nickel assumed, had to have been feigning interest. “Are you his friend?”

He blinked again. He couldn't stop blinking. "I'm his cousin."

"Hey, she and I are cousins, too. That's funny." She was sitting on the bench next to Stacey, but twisted completely around facing him, her chin resting on the back of her hand.

Nickel licked his lips, waiting. He nodded.

"So I'm Penny," she said.

She wore a peach bikini top under a loose white tank top with big black lettering that said *FRANKIE SAYS RELAX*. Nickel took a breath and tried to relax.

Penny shook her head on her chin and smiled. "And you are..."

"Nickel," he said, instantly hating the way it sounded. Sounded stupid. Suddenly he was angry at his parents. "Nick."

"Nicholas?"

"No, Nick. Just Nick." He felt himself flush. It was a lie, really. Nick was his father's name. No one called Nickel Nick.

"Nick," she repeated. "*Nick*." She said his name in a deliberately deep voice, and he realized that she was making fun of him. Without knowing it he had introduced himself with a phony voice, deeper than his own. "How old are you, *Nick*?"

Great. Here we go. Now she'd make fun of how young he was. Once again he was the sidekick, too young and too small. He had the sudden awful feeling that just by looking at them, the girls could tell that Jocko had a full set of pubes below the belt and he, Nickel, had nothing. Nada. Nil.

Even as he opened his mouth he wasn't sure if the truth would come out or another lie. "F...fourteen." One lie was enough.

“Hey, I’ll be fourteen next month,” she said.

Fourteen? *Fourteen?* Man-o-man, he had her pegged for sixteen. Easy. He nodded at this new piece of information, nothing to say, and then looked down at the pavement, at a discarded paper cotton candy cone.

Jocko jumped up onto the bench, startling him. Then he leaped over the back of it and landed next to Nickel, Nickel bracing for the full force of Jocko’s weight that never came. “Hey! We’re all going on the Himalaya!” He grabbed Nickel behind the neck and shook him. “The Hima-*freak-in-laya!*” he said, following it, for some reason, with a loud dog howl.

Penny clapped her hands. She wore white fingernail polish, Nickel noticed. He thought it might have been Wite-Out. “I wanted to go on it a little while ago, but Stacey wouldn’t go. We got in the line and then she backed out.”

“No sir. I just had to go the bathroom, that’s all,” Stacey said. Nickel looked at her. She certainly didn’t seem nervous.

“See?” Penny said. “She had to go to the bathroom. She was so scared she had to pee.”

“Penny, shut up.”

“It’s so true!”

“It’s so not true.”

The group headed for the ride. Nickel trailed them. This wasn’t really a good idea. It was growing dark fast, and their mothers would be expecting them back. They still had beach towels and a Frisbee and a small Styrofoam cooler with baggies of

goldfish crackers floating in melted ice still out on the beach. They really had to be getting back. Nickel caught up to Jocko, tugged on his shirt and subtly told him this.

“We didn’t give them a time.”

Nickel swallowed. “Yeah, well, still, they’re going to wonder why we’re not back yet. We’ve been gone all day.”

Jocko wrinkled his face like it was the craziest thing he’d ever heard. “Who are you talking about? Rizzie and Jane? You think they’re waiting for us? They’re not waiting for us. What’s the matter with you?” Jocko checked his voice, made sure the girls couldn’t hear him.

“Nothing. I’m just saying.”

Jocko raised his voice. “Hey, Nickel, did you figure out yet that you and Penny are both named after coins?”

Stacey opened her mouth, surprised. “Really? That’s so cute.”

Penny put lip-gloss on her lips while she walked, holding a compact mirror in front of her face. “What’s your name again? Nicholas?”

Jocko answered: “No, Nickel. It’s just Nickel.” He clapped Nickel on the back with a hollow thump. “They left off the ass, because he has no ass.”

They were in line now. Too unorganized to be a line, really. Not much more than a mob. Nickel didn’t like it when it got like this. Too busy. Too much pushing and shoving. People didn’t know how to stand in a civilized line. He quickly eyeballed the crowd and knew that the wait was three rides long. Too long. Too much time. He didn’t want to do it. He wondered how they were going to sit. The bench in each car really only fit three people comfortably. Sometimes four squeezed in, but that was usually

when little kids were involved. Nickel doubted the attendants would let this fly. If they didn't, Nickel knew for sure that Jocko, in front of him, was going to grab a car with Stacey. And then what? Penny would have to sit alone with him, and she wouldn't want that. She wouldn't say anything, of course, but she'd hate it and he'd have to try his absolute hardest not to let the g-force pull him into her. Either that or they'd all squish into one car and even then Penny would be stuck next to him. He'd be invading her personal space and she'd roll her eyes every time Nickel wasn't looking. And what if the three of them got in one car and the attendant made Nickel sit by himself? Then what? Smile to the crowd and wave?

“Hey. Jocko,” he tried to say. “Jock.”

Jocko couldn't hear him. They were too close to the ride now, too close to the speakers. Jocko pumped his fist in the air singing along to Def Leppard's “Photograph.” He was such a phony. He never sang along like this. The girls cracked up laughing, and Nickel didn't know why. He was full of it. Jocko never sang.

The ride ended and the line moved up. For the first time in his life Nickel did not want to go on. He wasn't even sure why. He imagined high tide coming in, washing away their beach stuff. He didn't want to do it. Penny moved up next to him. Her tanned, bare shoulder touched, fleetingly, his own shoulder. “Have you been on this before?” she asked him, nearly shouting to be heard.

Rather than answer, he backed away, bumping into someone's beer gut before turning around. He could just make out Jocko's voice: “Where the hell you going?”

The only excuse he could come up with was the same one that Stacey had used. “I gotta go the bathroom.” He tossed it over his shoulder but was too far away now for

them to hear. But he didn't stop. He folded his arms over his chest, feeling the chill of a sharp ocean breeze as he moved beyond the motor of the Himalaya. Finally through the line and past the crowd, he glimpsed the three of them over his shoulder. He saw Jocko shrugging, no doubt telling the girls what a strange little cousin he had.

He turned to head for the beach, where he would scoop up their stuff and follow the surf line back to the cottage. The Himalaya DJ, he noticed, wasn't in the glass booth. One of the other attendants had taken his place. Just as well then, Nickel thought. Just as well. Why ride it without the real deal? Why settle for the B team? He felt better already.

Between the Himalaya and haunted house was an alleyway. A single yellow light bulb poked askew from a back door to the haunted house ride, above a cinder block turned up on its side as a makeshift foot rest. Walking past, Nickel noticed the white pants and red stripes, dulled yellow and orange by the light. Nickel slowed, then stopped completely in the shadow. He watched, letting his eyes adjust to the muted lane. A red pinpoint glow burned at the DJ's fingers. When he brought his fingers to his lips, the glow brightened.

Nickel, without realizing it, gravitated toward the alley so he could get a closer view. The DJ looked different now, outside the booth. He'd never seen him below the waist. The lower part of his striped shirt, stretched tight with the push of flesh, folded over his white belt. Something was on the back of his pants, right on the bottom of his ass. As he looked harder, standing square in the alley now, out of the darkness, he saw a wooden popsicle stick stuck to the back of his pants. Nickel wondered why no one had told him.

Turning, the guy put one sneaker up on top of the cinder block, resting his forearm on his thigh. A plume of smoke blew from the corner of his mouth as he looked directly at Nickel. Nickel stared back, caught, stuck. He couldn't decide whether to hurry away or stay and say something. Maybe introduce himself, maybe tell him that he liked the ride. In the end, he did neither.

The DJ took another drag and, white smoke swirling from his nostrils, flicked the cigarette away. It bounced off the bare plywood of the Himalaya's side wall, unpainted and warped with rot, and landed among a pile of a hundred other crushed cigarette butts.

He came toward him now, coughing into his fist, kicking a beer can with his first, awkward step. Nickel, in that moment, couldn't tell if the guy was coming to say, "Hello, young man," or coming to grab him by the shirt and tell him to get lost and stop being so nosy. Instead, he brushed past him, fumbling to unwrap a stick of gum.

Then Nickel was alone, staring at the yellow light bulb and cinder block, shaking off an ocean chill. The discarded cigarette smoldered in the pile, its fading glow reflecting off a hundred broken chips of glass. Blinking, he looked back to the Himalaya, where the DJ was calculating the metal steps while giving Penny, close to the front of the line, a slow, clumsy nod hello. Nickel watched Stacey blow a bubble that grew big and heavy, until Jocko leaned in and popped it with his tongue. They both laughed. Penny, folding her arms tightly across her chest, smiled down at her sneakers.

## Tastes Like Bitterbitty

This here wasn't anything new. Teresa had always been stubborn—yes, stubborn to a fault. Gets one thing in her troublesome little mind and that's it, see you later, show's over. Don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to complain. It was just this same stubbornness that got her as far as she did. Got her, for one thing, the man she wanted—me—and got her the home she wanted, the one she used to walk by on her way to school as a little girl, with the stone wall and the double-hump hill, the one we bought in 1958 and live in to this day. All because of her stubbornness—determination, she liked to call it. Stubbornness, determination. Either way, it was enough to drive me straight to hell crazy. So this thing is about her, my wife, Teresa.

Our youngest was pregnant with her first. Twenty-six years old. I'd thought she was the career-type, finish grad school, get established, all that stuff. Always had been like that, independent and driven, kind of like her mother. I was proud of her and wasn't too thrilled when she went ahead and got herself married—moved out of the downstairs in-law apartment and married Todd. And then, to top it all off, a month later pregnant.

Took me nine kids before I had one that took the initiative to get herself educated. I've got three sons that work like sonsabitches, twelve hour days framing houses and installing plumbing, coming home filthy and beaten. And I've got five other daughters, all married now with kids, part-time careers as bartenders and florists and assistant managers over at the shopping mall. Then top that off with seventeen grandchildren, honest to God, seventeen grandchildren. Adorable little critters, but plenty of them. No shortage of cute kids.

So Allie got pregnant with still three or four courses to go for her master's. She said she'd finish up in the next year or two, but I'll believe it when I see it. Teresa, though, couldn't have been more thrilled. Through the damn roof thrilled. Seventeen of them. Why not eighteen, right? What's one more? Keep 'em coming.

I keep my mouth shut, though. These days I don't say anything. Especially to Teresa. I used to. I used to complain to her about the kids, who was getting into trouble, who was screwing up—bitching the way a dad is supposed to. But not no more. She was seventy-two years old, my wife, three years younger than I. And women live longer than men, supposed to anyway, that's what I hear. So I'd had every reason in the world to think that I'd be down in the ground before her, and, Christ, I'd spent half my damn life trying to set it up for her so she'd have everything laid out perfect—the house, the finances, all that stuff. But it wasn't going to happen that way. She'd fought it off like a tough little son-of-a-gun twice before, but this time it was in her good. Had its hooks in her good. All the chemo, radiation, and whatever all that Yoga bullshit was, weren't going to do her any good. The doctors sent her home six weeks before Allie went into

labor, with a discharge slip, a pile of pills, a portable oxygen tank, and a home nurse.

There wasn't much of her left.

Still, this didn't stop her from proceeding with her crazy ideas. When the phone rang at 3:30 the morning of November 2<sup>nd</sup>, I knew I was in for trouble. I'd been expecting the call for some time, of course, since Allie was already more than a week overdue. Still, I was hoping that someone was going to step up and be smart enough not to bother Teresa in the middle of the night. But no such luck.

"Come on there, Bruce," she'd said to me, her voice more awake and with more strength than I had heard in months. She'd given my chest a pat with a chalky palm.

"Up and at 'em."

I kept my eyes closed, pretended this wasn't happening. It was my worst fear—one of the girls calling in the dead of night to get Teresa all riled up with this baby nonsense. I'll admit that, more than a few times during the previous week or two, I'd gone and switched the phone ringer off when it got to be a little too late in the night to be getting any exciting calls. Each time, though, I chickened out. Each time I climbed back out of bed, took a leak, and thumbed the phone back on. Teresa would've throttled my throat if she'd missed this, I knew. Beaten down with sickness or not, she would've throttled me good.

"Bruce. Up." Another pat on the chest, a little more vigorous, more like a slap. "Allie's in labor."

She was down to a hundred pounds, hadn't been able to talk in anything but a scratchy whisper since summer, could hardly keep solid foods down, and needed help with her bathroom activities. I'd been cranking the thermostat up to about eighty-five

because she was always cold. A result of all the weight loss, I suppose. Now she wanted to go out into a November night. You could hear the wind moaning.

“Teresa, you’re not doing this.” I dragged a corner of the bed spread over my shoulder and rolled over.

“I’m not, am I?” She tried to push herself into a sitting position. She moved the way I did whenever I threw my back out. I felt her struggling through the mattress, even felt the small vibration of her shaking arms trying to support herself. The wheels of her oxygen tank grumbled over the floor as she sat forward, dragging the tank by the tube clamped over her nose.

“Teresa, please. Be reasonable.” I hadn’t moved, hadn’t opened my eyes. Maybe I could will her to give up. I don’t know. “Stay in bed—you’ll hurt yourself.”

Still she struggled. Now I was awake, not because of her movement but rather a swell of anger that pushed through me. I wanted to know who’d called her, who was dumb enough to call my dying wife and get her all worked up in the middle of the goddamned night. That’s what I wanted to know. Probably Penelope, our oldest. She was closest to Teresa, and I’d bet it was her who helped with this whole half-assed idea to begin with. Had to be her.

I opened my eyes finally and peaked over. She was up on one elbow, grunting and trembling. “Teresa, did you hear me? You’ll hurt yourself.”

“I’ll hurt *you* if you don’t keep quiet.”

Could’ve been Leah. Leah’s always been a little flaky, you didn’t hear it from me. A little on the flaky side, though. Could’ve been her. Not to mention she lives right

down the street from Allie and would have been the first to know about this labor thing. Either way, someone was going to get an earful from me, that was a promise.

Once she was up and out of the bed, I couldn't ignore it anymore. I was going to have to get up and do something about this before she did something stupid. Nine children we had, nine kids and seventeen grandkids, and all of a sudden out of the blue she decides that now she wants to be there. She *has* to be there, she kept telling me. "I know, Bruce," she'd said to me countless times these last few weeks, "I know I've had nine children, but I've never *seen* one born. I've never experienced *that*."

"Me neither," I'd said, "but I don't let it bother me."

"Well, that's what I'm going to do before I leave this Earth."

So that's where I was at. Following her around the house at 3:40 in the morning in my bare feet trying to inject some sense into her. She wanted to be there, in the room with Allie when she gave birth. It was her final wish, and they all knew it—Penelope, Leah, Karen, whoever else, I can't even remember. The things they come up with. They all supported Teresa's wish, all agreed that they were going to do whatever it took to help make sure that their mother got to witness this final "miracle". Never mind that she's lost forty-some-odd pounds in six months, never mind that the doctors all said that her immune system was down to almost nothing, never mind all that, right? *Ma wants to see the birth*. Great, so where were they all now? Why was I the one tagging along behind her in the middle of the goddamn night?

"You're going to catch pneumonia, you know that?" I tried to tell her, looking for my slippers. I thought I had left them next to the new sofa. "You'll catch pneumonia for sure."

“Oh, stop it.” She eased herself down onto a kitchen stool and tried to wriggle her ankles into a pair of sneakers. One of the girls this summer had bought her a pair of tennis shoes with Velcro instead of laces.

“Okay, well what about me? *I’ll* catch pneumonia. You hear that wind?”

“You’re being a bitterbitty, Bruce.” The tennis shoes were on, except that she hadn’t gotten her heels in, the backs of the shoes crushed beneath her feet. She didn’t care. Now she had a pale yellow scarf in her fingers and was folding it, I guess, into a triangle, the way Penelope had shown her.

“No I’m not. I’m just being smart. You should try it.”

She gave me a huff. “Tastes like bitterbitty to me. You want to help me with this kerchief, or you want to keep on being a pain in my ass?”

“You don’t need a kerchief. You need a wool hat.” She didn’t wear it for warmth, I knew that. She’d lost all her hair during the treatments over the summer. It had begun to grow back in a few stray places, but honestly I’d gotten used to her bald. The thin locks of grey made her look even sicker.

I watched her from the corridor, a step away from the bedroom. She sat on that stool with her back three-quarters to me, fidgeting with the kerchief. Her robe sleeves fell up and exposed her forearms, thin as sticks. She tied the back of the kerchief behind her head, but it was lumpy and uneven, not at all the way Penelope did it. “Teresa, please come back to bed.” I leaned in the direction of the bedroom, hoping, I suppose, that my movement would somehow draw her into my gravitational pull. “Listen to me. Listen. Let’s sleep a few hours, and in the morning we’ll have one of the kids take us both to the

hospital. Doesn't labor last a long time? Some broads, some women, are in labor for twenty-four straight hours, isn't that right? That's true, isn't it?"

She had me tuned right out. She pushed up off the stool and hobbled around the house again, that oxygen tank grumbling along, probably scratching up my hardwood floors with those lousy plastic wheels. She disappeared into the breezeway, but I didn't follow her. Maybe she thought I was going to chase her around wherever she went. But I stood my ground, braced against the doorway to the bedroom. I called after her: "We're still two and a half hours away from sunlight, you realize. You know I don't drive after dark." I knew she could hear me, but I went louder anyway. "No driving after dark, right, Teresa?"

I waited a beat for a response but instead heard the porch door catch the wind and bang open against the iron railing. By the time I pushed off the wall and hurried around the corner, the whole house was twenty degrees colder. She'd left the door open and the oxygen tank standing there by itself. I tugged my jacket off its hanger and left the house with only one arm in it. "*Teresa! Goddamit!*"

I've got a bum knee that really sings in the cold, so I wasn't able to get myself down the walkway any faster than she could. I wanted to keep calling after her, let her know just how pissed off I was with her ridiculous behavior, but the neighborhood was heavy with dark and silence.

She got herself into the passenger seat of our car and sat there waiting for me with her hands folded calmly on her lap. My whole chest was thumping when I reached the car, out of breath and my mouth dry. The driver side door came open with a crackle, the thin seal of ice broken. "You can't go anywhere without your oxygen, you know that."

I'd lugged the damn thing all the way down the walk and wrestled it into the back seat. Teresa, doing her best to drive me batshit, looked straight ahead with her chin high.

I dug the keys out of my pocket and folded myself into the car. "I can't believe you've got me doing this, you know that? I really can't believe it." I started the engine and then realized that the windshield was frosted over. I wasn't even sure where the scraper was, since I hadn't had to use it since the winter before. I turned the blower on and held my palm over it. Ice cold. "I don't understand what the big attraction is anyway, Teresa. What is it? What do you need to go rushing off in the middle of the night to see all that gore for?"

She sighed deliberately. "Bruce—"

"I'm not trying to be coarse, now. I just don't understand you sometimes. I think you might have radiated some of that brain away..."

"Bruce, a little less talk. Please." Then she was back to looking straight ahead. I gave her my meanest glare, which she refused to look at. Groaning, I shouldered the door open and stepped out again into the wind. I popped the trunk and fished around for the scraper, and then, finding it, started scratching the ice off the windshield.

That was eight days ago. Today, under the warm blue of an Indian summer sky, we buried her. I'd known it wouldn't be long. Even up on the maternity ward that morning, despite myself, I'd not been able to hold back. I'd known at the time that I was dampening everyone's precious moment, but I couldn't help it. At least I kept it out of Allie's room, withholding my tirade for the waiting area. "You realize your mother's immune system must be down to absolutely nothing? You realize that, don't you?" This

to my oldest, Penelope, who, with that big smile on her face just a moment before she sat down next to me, could not have been expecting this.

“This is what she wants, Dad...”

No one else was in the waiting room. Other than us, a couple nurses stood down the hall at the nurses’ station under the humming fluorescent lights. Somewhere down at the other end of the hall, Allie was in labor, with her husband, Todd, popping in and out of the room, and Teresa by her side. I’d helped Teresa into the room an hour or so earlier, said hello to Allie with a kiss on her hot cheek, and since then had been reading yesterday’s coffee-stained newspaper by myself in the waiting room. The early hint of a headache had formed in my sinuses, either from not sleeping or the white lights or the stress. All three, most likely.

Even though I was talking to Penelope, I kept my face in the paper, despite the fact that I couldn’t see anything without my reading glasses. “Yeah I know it’s what she wants, I know that, but so what.”

“So what?” Penelope sat forward. “What do you mean, so what? She doesn’t have much time left, Dad. This is what she wants. Don’t spoil it.”

She’d dropped her hand easily onto my knee. With a slide of my heel my knee moved and her hand fell. “What am I spoiling? I’m sitting out here minding my own business.” I turned the page. “I’m not spoiling a damn thing.”

Leah, one of my other daughters, came hurrying down the hall with her hair pulled in a gnarled ponytail and her nose red from cold. “Here’s Leah,” I said.

When she approached, neither one of us was talking anymore. Leah stood for a moment, glancing from Penelope to me and then back at Penelope. “Hi,” she finally said.

Penelope gave her a flat smile. “Hi.”

“Everything okay? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Dad’s mad.”

“I’m not mad,” I said.

Leah looked to her sister. “Mad about what?”

“I’m not mad,” I said again.

Penelope stood up. “He doesn’t think I should’ve called Ma tonight. He thinks I should’ve waited until the morning.”

“How’s Allie?”

I huffed and turned the page. No one gave a shit what the old man thought anymore, that was for damn sure. Leah leaned down and kissed my cheek. “It’s all right, Daddy. She’s happy.”

Penelope took her down the hall to see if they could say hi to Allie and their mother. I folded the paper and put it down beside me, pushed my hands against my knees. I just wanted to get back into my bed, and I wanted to get Teresa back into bed, where she belonged, with her oxygen and her medicine and her bedside TV with all her DVDs piled on the nightstand.

I might have nodded off but picked my head up to the sounds of footsteps. Todd came down the hall, all gangly and skinny in his oversized tee shirt and wrinkled pants. He had to be a foot and a half taller than Allie. I don’t know why she’d want a guy that tall, with those skinny, feminine wrists. He threw me a tentative wave. “Hey, Bruce.”

I acknowledged him with a nod.

“I’m running to get the girls some sodas. You want one?”

My ass tingled with pins and needles. I winced and tried to get up. “No, no thanks.” He put his hand on my elbow to help me, and I did a good job of not knocking him away. I might be old, but I can still stand up, for Christ’s sake. “How’s it going in there?”

Todd shrugged, smiling for some reason. “Making progress. Might be a while still. You sure you don’t want a Coke or something? Ginger ale?”

I shook my head. “Actually, I’m going to go home...”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. So tell Teresa to...tell Penelope or Leah or someone to call me when the baby comes and I’ll head back over here.”

He stood there watching me. He didn’t respond.

“All right?” I asked, fumbling with my jacket. One of the sleeves was inside-out.

Todd shrugged. “Yeah, sure. I’ll tell them.”

I gave up on the jacket and rolled it into a ball under my arm. “Good luck,” I told him over my shoulder. “With the women, I mean. If it was me trapped in that small room with all that estrogen, I’d be itching to go run a soda errand too.”

That had been eight long days ago. Seems like forever. So much has happened, with the baby coming the next morning and then Allie and Todd taking him home and stumbling into a big surprise party, and then Teresa having a relapse and ending right back in that very same hospital three days later. God, I haven’t slept eight hours the whole week, I don’t think. I haven’t slept, and I haven’t had three private minutes to myself to so much as take a solitary piss.

The funeral service, of course, was no different. We've got a large family, a large circle of friends and, to be perfectly blunt, a shitload of acquaintances who love nothing better than a good funeral. The kids arranged most of it, thankfully. The service, the flowers, the cemetery plot. They picked out Teresa's outfit and Leah even dry-cleaned my suit and bought me a new tie. They also invited everyone back to the house after the service, where we had about 5,000 slices of various deli meats and half a ton of potato salad, a tray of lasagna and four or five coolers of beer. It's a small house to begin with, and this scene was worse than even the holidays. I forced myself to have one beer and a sandwich, sitting in my chair, lost in my own living room. People I didn't even know were staggered on each of the steps going up to the second floor, sitting with paper plates of food on their knees and cans of beer wedged between their shoes. I shook all the hands and accepted all the hugs, did all the right things. Then, after retreating to the kitchen to throw out my plate and steal a second beer, I ducked away to the basement apartment.

I'd built this downstairs apartment originally for my son, Charlie, about ten years ago after he'd been laid off his job. He stayed for three years before getting married and buying a condo. Allie moved down here after that, while she was in school, and left after she'd met Todd. Since then, it's been open, and I've gradually transformed it into my own little hideaway, much to Teresa's disapproval. I'd watch the game down here and read the racing form. I told the kids that if any one of them gets the boot, gets divorced, then the in-law apartment is there for the taking. I'd hate to give it up, though. The 42-inch TV won't fit upstairs.

I sat with my beer and listened to the footsteps on my head. Sounded like the ceiling was going to give way. I turned on the TV, machine-gunned through the channels, and then, just as abrupt, clicked it off again. It occurred to me, just as I heard the door open and someone begin to step delicately down the stairs, that my wife was in fact gone.

Penelope came around the corner, sleek and black with her hair drawn tight. Now that she was getting a little older, I saw that she looked a lot like Teresa. “Here you are,” she said. She ducked her head under a heating duct and leaned in the doorway.

“Here I am,” I said, looking down at my beer.

“Did you get to eat? Want me make you something?”

“No, I ate. I had a sandwich.”

She nodded. “Nice service, wasn’t it?”

“Very nice, yes.”

“You know, Allie was just looking for you. Todd’s here with the baby.”

“I saw her at the church, a few rows behind us.”

Penelope folded her arms, looked at me for a moment.

“What?” I asked.

“She thinks you’re upset with her. She thinks you think this is her fault.”

I looked at my beer again. *Miller Lite. True pilsner beer.*

“Dad, she’s afraid you think that her coming out to the hospital in the middle of the night caused her to die.”

All I could do was shrug. I glanced at the blank television.

“You don’t think that, do you, Dad?”

I didn't like the way she was standing there with her arms folded like that. Interrogating me. Interrogating an old man who's mourning his wife. "Why do you think I made such a fuss at the hospital?" I said, suddenly looking back at her. "No one listened to me. The poor woman used the last of her...her *soul*, for God's sake, to go there. No one listened to me."

Penelope looked down at her blouse, straightened a couple wrinkles with her fingers. She allowed the silence to hang between us before saying, "I think you might be wrong about that." She turned back for the stairs. "I'm going to tell Allie you're down here."

For a few minutes I sat there, knee bouncing, the last few drops of beer tinkling around the can when I shook it. Maybe it was time to go make another appearance upstairs, get a beer and thank people for all their help and love and whatnot. I'd been down here for twenty minutes. With a grunt and a squeeze of back pain I got up off the chair. I stepped over toward the staircase, wondering if Teresa would have agreed that I had worn the suit long enough and could safely go ahead and strip off my tie and pull a sweatshirt on. I thought maybe I should wait awhile longer, though, wait at least until everyone but my own family had left.

I was two steps up the flight when the door swung open again and light spilled down the staircase. I stopped with a hand on the railing, squinting in the light. Allie stepped through the door with a white blanket draped over her arm, stark white against her black dress. "Hey, Dad," she said, pushing a lock of brown hair off her forehead. "You coming up?"

I held the empty beer can up to show her I needed a beer, then realized my hand was empty. “I was going to get another beer.”

“Oh.”

With the door open I could hear all the commotion up there still going strong. Maybe it was too early for that appearance. “Did you, uh, want to come down?”

Allie nodded. “Yeah. I’ve got Devin here with me.” Devin was the new baby.

“Okay, yeah. Sure.” I stepped back off the stairs. “Come on down, then. Be careful. Careful on these stairs.”

I backtracked to the sofa and moved a throw pillow out of the way to make room for her and the baby. It was a twenty year-old sofa, brown and black, demoted to the in-law apartment after our kids bought us a new living room set last year. I thought maybe I’d see if the boys could move it back upstairs for me after all this was over, make the upstairs a little more comfortable.

“Nice and quiet down here,” Allie said at the bottom of the stairs. “And cool. It’s hot up there.”

She stood in the middle of the room, rolling her hips with an easy sway, soothing the baby. I patted the cushion next to me. “Get off your feet. Sit down.”

“I thought Ma wanted to get rid of this couch. She know you snuck it down here?”

Teresa had hated it with a passion, it was true. Keeping this thing was one of my few small victories. “She let me hold on to it. So I’d have a place to sleep when she kicked me out of bed.”

She laughed and swatted my arm. Once she was seated next to me she leaned in and tried to pass the baby.

“No, no, hon. That’s okay...”

She looked at me with a wrinkled brow. “Dad, why? You can hold him.”

I hadn’t held the baby yet. In fact, except for the surprise coming-home party earlier in the week, I hadn’t really even seen him. Even that night, I never got close to him. Too worried again about getting Teresa back home safe. She’d already been feeling much weaker by then.

“My, my hands are shaky these days. I don’t think...”

“Just put your arm like this. Stick your elbow up a little. It’s not even holding him, he’s just going to rest on you.” She didn’t give me much choice, manipulating my hand and elbow and fitting the infant in the nest of my bent arm. There was almost no weight to him at all, warm and tiny, completely covered with a knit blanket except for a small window to his soft face, and one tight, angry pink fist poking the air. His eyes were closed, squeezed almost, his face folded tight and quietly pissed off. “He’s cranky today,” Allie told me. “Too many people, I think.”

“I agree with you there, Devin.” I ran my thumb over his fist. “Eighteen grandchildren. We can have a baseball game.”

“Yeah, I guess we could.”

Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, Devin loosened. His face went soft, fist splaying into a fan of frail fingers. A dark blue eye opened and his small mouth strained into a yawn. I felt myself gasp, and took an embarrassed peek at Allie to see if she’d

noticed. I couldn't tell. She was smiling and chewing her lip at the same time. I turned back down to the baby. "Handsome little devil," I said. "Devin the devil."

And somehow, just like that, I loosened too. I could feel his little lungs exhaling against my arm, and within seconds I'd synchronized my breathing with his. He smelled good, like life. His other eye slowly blinked, peeling open, and he peeked around with a confused frown. I was wrong. About everything. Somehow, buried under all my worrying, I had missed that. I had it all backwards, didn't I? Teresa had stuck around for this. I knew it now. She was ill and weak and ready to go, she had nothing left, but she stayed with me. Stayed with me for, how long? Weeks? Probably weeks, yes. Stuck it out until she was able to meet this little devil. And I had to tell Allie this. Tell her all this. So she knew too.

I lifted my head and looked at her, even dropped my jaw to tell her. But I had no breath. She watched me with her crooked, lip-chewing smile. All I could do was blink at her a couple times and then, still with no words, looked back to the baby. Both eyes open and alert, he stared up at me with amazing interest. Like he was memorizing me. I breathed, finally and at last, pushed my nose a little closer to him. And memorized him right back.

## Vita

Sean Conway received an undergraduate degree in English, and a graduate degree in Education, from the University of Massachusetts Lowell. He lives and teaches outside of Boston, where he is working on a novel, *The Empty Space Between Stars*.