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Grand Isle

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Grand Isle

A Thesis

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

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

by

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B.A. Florida State University, 1998
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August, 2011

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Abstract

A novel about a man injured while working on an oilrig in the Gulf of Mexico, set primarily in Louisiana, Nevada, and California. While recovering from his injury, the protagonist is contacted by his dead brother's daughter—a person whom he did not know existed—and he journeys to San Francisco in search of her.

Creative Writing, Fiction, Novel, Louisiana, San Francisco

Lately I've been taking notes, trying to write my way through this and that. The story I'm struggling to tell is about some things that happened to me about a year back—in the fall of '07, mostly. At first I tried to write my past like a memory, but I can't ever seem to get going that way. No, it seems like the only time I can get any words down at all really is when I pretend that *then* is in fact *now*, that I'm telling this story even as it is happening to me. It's the false grammar of joke telling—you know, So a guys walks into a bar, says the comedian—and I wonder what that suggests about my life, that I can only pitch so much of it like a joke. And even then this is hard goddamn work.

Still, for some reason I believe that if I write it down I can get rid of it. So why not try?
Here I am sighing, pencil in hand.

R. J.

Lagos, Nigeria

December 2008

FRIDAY

My name is Roy Joseph, and the year is 2007. Yesterday was the first of November—All Saint’s Day—and I guess some time in the early hours a man was stabbed to death on the northwest edge of Golden Gate Park, just a few blocks from the apartment I’ve been subletting since Monday. Still, I didn’t find out about the killing until I turned on the TV this morning, some thirty hours after the fact. On the news they gave the victim’s age (my age, 29), but for now the police are withholding his name. No arrests have been made. Welcome to the big, bad city, Roy.

I’m heading east on the bus they call the 5 Fulton, following the northern border of the park. At Stanyan Street the trees end and things start to feel more crowded, more busy. I’m trying to remember whether I heard anything that night, in the hours after Halloween had slipped away. Whether there was even a moment when I awoke but could not figure out why, just lay staring into the dark feeling that something was off. I don’t think so. Truth is, I probably slept through the whole ugly thing.

And so I’m daydreaming now, trying to picture how it went. A fight between meth addicts, I bet. I see them all the time in the park—rotten toothed, angry and twitching. Who knows? In the end I settle upon an image—the image of two men spilling out of the park to then square off under the streetlight at 47th and Fulton, thirty yards from where my Chrysler LeBaron

sits parked. No one else is around; they're ringed by a halo of golden light. There's the roar of the nearby ocean, a night breeze.

I drift off whenever I fall into one of my daydreams, and by the time I've refocused I'm downtown on Market Street. I do a hurried check of my crumpled transit map, then hop off this bus to wait for another. It's gorgeous outside, crisp. The sky is cornflower. I see the homeless and the tourists. Women march by on the way to lunch, and in their smooth black suits they're like some different species than me.

My next bus is nowhere to be seen, and so I walk a few blocks to stretch my legs, ambling south from Market Street to the next stop on the line. There's less activity here. Three black guys are standing on the corner across the street. They're not men really, just rawboned teenagers. The kids watch me, and I watch them. Nobody's mad, I don't think. And maybe all four of us are feeling good to be noticed, acknowledged. At last the 19 Polk comes rumbling along, and I hop my dumb ass on just as one of them hollers, "Punk motherfucker!"

An old woman frowns when I settle in next to her. I'm not a big guy—maybe 5'9", 5'10" and wiry—but that doesn't matter to this grandmother. I'm crowding her just by existing, and she doesn't like it. Go away, her look tells me. Disappear. Die.

It takes another half hour before I finally reach the shipyards. It's midday, and longshoremen are eating their lunches on the waterfront, throwing brown crusts to dirty seagulls. I go to a corner store and buy a cold drink and some Funyuns, a sandwich sealed inside a triangle of plastic. When I return the men are gone and so are the screeching gulls—but the smell of their cigarettes still lingers and is pleasant to me. I eat my egg salad on stale white and sip my Mountain Dew, munch on the fake onion rings. To my left the I-80 bridge looks like a spider-web dropping into the water, and I can see across the bay to what must be Alameda. I believe my

older brother spent a few months stationed there in '88, right after he finished boot camp up on Lake Michigan—his only two stops before he went down to Coronado to try and become a SEAL. A tanker is leaving; a containership is coming. It's all very pretty. I imagine Tommy sitting on the other side of the bay, still alive and staring right back at me. He's been gone over fifteen years now.

I light a cigarette myself. I'm down to three or four a day, and I figure I can do that for the rest of my life and still get more out of them than they get out of me. This is my first time out here, and I stay for a couple of hours. Watching ships, thinking. At six o'clock I'm meeting a Russian woman for coffee, sort of a blind date, sort of a marriage proposal. My thoughts should be there, but for some reason my mind just won't let go of that knife fight.

Golden Gate Park is a thousand-acre rectangle of land running from about the middle of the city west to the ocean. My two-week sublet is on 46th Avenue, between Fulton and a street named Cabrillo. Four blocks from the cold Pacific, a half block north of the park. This neighborhood is the quietest piece of San Francisco that I've yet to come across, an oft-foggy area that locals call either the Outer Richmond or Ocean Beach or the Avenues.

The Outer Richmond is nice enough, but kind of lonely. My neighbors are mostly Chinese or Russian, and I'm staying out their way because the Outer Richmond is where Viktor Fedorov lives—and Viktor Fedorov is the main reason why I came to California. If all goes well he's going to pair me up with a Russian woman willing to become my American wife. So there it is. A man can only take so much loneliness. That's all I'll say in my defense for now.

Since I've no job or responsibilities I spend a lot of time with my yellow lab Sam, walking the beach, wandering the park. There's at least one of everything I need within a few blocks: a Safeway supermarket and a coffee shop, a hardware store and a barroom, a laundromat, Chinese food, and so on. My LeBaron is a maroon, four-door sedan model set to turn fourteen years old in 2008. As of Wednesday morning the battery won't spark, and so I bought a bus pass and have been riding those rattletrap wagons all over the city, going on little trips like the one I took today to see the shipyards.

I've only been here for five days, but I'm getting to know San Francisco a little bit. The city is different than I'd imagined, and for some reason the park fascinates me above all. The far western portion near where I am living is pretty much empty. There's a sort of fancy restaurant with windows looking out over the Great Highway and the ocean; a dormant windmill and a tulip garden; five acres of soccer fields surrounded by eight-foot high chain-link; an archery range; a nine-hole golf course. Everything else out on my end of the park is either a road or a trail or forest.

And the amount of wildlife in the park is surprising. I keep track of the animals I see—not every different bird, rodent, and butterfly, just the things I never expected to find living wild in a big American city. Raccoons, possums, and red fox, striped and spotted skunks, various hawks and owls. There were even coyotes in the park before I moved to town. That's something Viktor told me. I didn't believe him and so I checked it out on the computer in the apartment. No lie. I guess back in July a couple of them got into it with some woman's dogs. A scientist I saw quoted figured their pack must have cast them out and that set them to roaming. He said they probably followed the beach up from the Peninsula scrub hills, then cut across the Great Highway to make their home in the park, eating feral housecats and such. Outlaw coyotes, that wouldn't do. A government man was brought in and he shot them.

So it seems for now that's it for coyotes, but the scientist swore more would come. He mentioned a deer that crossed the Golden Gate Bridge a few years earlier—and if a thing like that could happen he thought a cougar might even show up in his lifetime.

And besides the animals there are people living in the park, everything from truck campers to loner combat vets to small homeless communities. Just yesterday Sam and I were slipping through the laurel thicket behind the archery range when we came upon five or six

blanket tents set out in a circle. These two young guys were tangled up with this one stringy-haired old girl when Sam went and barked. The woman screamed at us to go the hell away, and we did. Step off a trail and you see so many condoms and syringes and broken bottles that I don't risk wearing anything on my feet but my offshore Red Wings. I keep waiting for Sam to cut his pads, but to date we've been lucky there, knock on wood.

The vagrants are an even worse problem on the east side of the park, though the news says that lately the movie-star mayor has been siccing the police on them, pushing more and more out my way to fight with knives and get high. The east end is where Haight Street kicks off, so you can imagine. It's like the John Lennon song. Imagine there's no country, no religion, no possessions. It's easy if you try. Well, here's what I imagine—

These past few evenings I've walked down to watch the sun set into the ocean. I sit there as night falls and people start lighting their campfires on the beach. That's when the wheels get to turning. I imagine that some really bad shit has happened and that civilization has crumbled. A plague seems most likely to me, a thinning of the herd. Or maybe we have finally run out of oil. Whatever. The point is, I convince myself that the only people left in the city are living like those miserable junkies me and Sam caught screwing in the dirt. I see four or five of those surfer campfires and then envision the city post-apocalypse. There are not five fires but five hundred, campfire after campfire all down the beach. The park is a moonscape of stump-covered sandhills, every last tree cut down and hauled off. Imagine. There are a million people crowded onto this tiny rock of a city, Mr. Lennon. It's really only a matter of time.

I have nine fingers—five on my right hand, four on the other. The pinky is the one missing. I lost it in the Gulf of Mexico, on a fixed platform oilrig that stands in maybe fifteen hundred feet of water, about forty-five miles south of Grand Isle, Louisiana. That was four months before I struck out for San Francisco, and the stump is all healed up now, covered by an itchy patch of marbled skin. I think of melted wax whenever I look at that scar, the hard white fat that runs along the side of a raw strip steak.

I was on the Noble Avis Simoneaux the day it happened. A bluewater island of heat, sweat, and noise. The Noble Avis is situated pretty far offshore for a fixed platform, right on the edge of the continental shelf. Go a little farther south and the real deepwater starts, and out that way you'll find the massive semisubmersibles and other kinds of floating rigs.

And so there I was on the last of the continent, working the second morning of my July stint. I was hitting cat line with a sledge, keeping the steel cable snug on a slow-rolling drum when another roughneck—the big Cajun, Malcolm—called out to me from across the platform. We were fifty feet above that Caribbean-clear water, and it was as loud as it always is up top. I couldn't hear what Malcolm was saying, and so he pointed off behind me. I turned around and saw them coming. A long fishing boat was pulling up on us—a teal Contender pushed by triple 250 Yamahas. Nothing unusual. The barnacle-crusted leg structures of an oil platform create sort

of a reef beneath the surface—and that shelter brings the baitfish that in turn attracts snapper and grouper and fishermen.

Malcolm came over and we watched the boat drop down from its plane. Two-hundred-thousand-dollar setup and a fucking kid was driving. He and his friend couldn't hardly be twenty. They were both shirtless, had gelled hair and lifeguard tans. The friend moved up to the bow. He was wearing white shorts and black sunglasses—Wayfarers, I think. The driver positioned the Contender on the lee side of us, and then young Tom Cruise began to tie a tetherball to the end of a nylon bowline. They were about fifteen yards from the rig when he sent the tetherball flying over one of the horizontal members of our platform, and then he slapped out line until the rubber ball dropped down into the water and began to drift back toward the boat.

Once the bobbing tetherball got close enough the kid fished it out of the Gulf with an aluminum gaff. The outboards killed, and the current pulled the Contender away. The kid untied the tetherball and then hitched the bowline off to a front cleat. The rope went tight and only the bow of the boat was facing us. Though I couldn't see the name painted on the transom, I had a good enough idea—*Cash Flow*, *Boy Toy*, *First Strike*—some bullshit like that. Since 9/11, allowing fishermen to tie up has been against policy on a lot of rigs, but if our toolpusher was supposed to get on the loudspeaker and run them off he wasn't up for that just yet. That's a fuck-you game some pushers will play—let the sports go through the trouble of tying up before you holler at them to piss off. We take our shots where we can, I suppose.

The Gulf was smooth as a forest lake, and the two rich kids were in the stern being cool together when a young roustabout came sidling up next to me and Malcolm. He was new to an oilrig, no older than the boys in the boats. Worms, we call these rookies. We'd shaved off most

of his hair the day before, and so his hardhat was loose and wobbling. I couldn't remember his name right now for a hundred dollars.

The roustabout pointed at the Contender. "Sweet, huh? That a thirty-six?" he asked.

I nodded just to be nice. I was a worm once. All of us hands start out there. "Yeah," I said. "That's a thirty-six."

"Boy," said the roustabout.

Malcolm's not as nice as I am. He was glaring at the kid. "You need something, worm?" he asked.

The roustabout took a step back, and I swear he even blushed a little. "No, sir," he said.

Malcolm rolled his cinderblock head around as he thought that over, letting the answer wash over every part of his brain. "Well," he said finally, "we need something from you."

"Okay," said the roustabout.

"Go and find Johnny," Malcolm told him. "Tell him we need a number-six skyhook and the key to the V-door. Don't fuck it up."

The roustabout said, "You bet," and hustled off. It was all grab-ass foolishness. Johnny would send him to Jimbo, and Jimbo would send him to Mud Duck, and Mud Duck would send him to Luther . . . that sort of thing. Eventually the kid would work his way back to us empty-handed and—if he had any sense at all—realize that there was no such thing as a skyhook, that there is no key to the V-door. No hard feelings. Like I said, we all started out as worms.

I looked down at the Contender. The boys were rigging a free-line for amberjack and maybe cobia when the door to the forward cuddy cabin opened and out came two girls. Blondes. I knew then that—policy or no policy—we wouldn't be hearing any run-offs over the loudspeaker from the pusher, a man sitting high up above us in an air-conditioned office, no

doubt studying on those girls same as me. He was obscured behind tinted windows, but I could picture him up there in his clean clothes, binoculars in his hands.

Malcolm was watching the girls too, and he started punching my shoulder hard enough to leave a bruise even under my stiff work shirt. They were wearing purple gym shorts and neon swimsuit tops—one chartreuse, the other flamingo. The girls lit cigarettes and opened wine coolers, and then they put their thin arms around each other and began swaying to a song I couldn't hear. The boyfriends grinned but kept at that tough work they were doing. They already had two free-lines out and were rigging deep-sea rods. The girls laughed and grabbed beach towels, then they danced their way up to the bow. *LSU* was written in big gold letters across the asses of their shorts. Hey girls, I was a Tiger once. I'm not the moron up here that you think I am. Hell, we were practically the same once, y'all and me.

The girls spread their towels across the flat bow, and I saw that one of them had a bottle of suntan lotion tucked in her waistband. Shit like that kills you when you're out on a rig—especially with thirteen days left in your stint. The boys fished and the girls sunned. We were looking right down on them when the blonder of the blondes smiled up at us—and then she said something to her friend, and they both pulled off their shorts. Seeing them in their bikini bottoms was too much for Malcolm. He put his hardhat up against mine and yelled into my ear. “If she winks, she'll screw,” he said. “Am I right, Roy?”

I laughed. If she winks, she'll screw. That's what we say when we get a seized pipe connection to loosen just a bit, means we'll be able to get it off sooner or later. “Yeah,” I said. “I imagine they'll start climbing their way up to us before too long.”

Malcolm slapped my chest and wandered off. I stayed put, still looking at the girls. They were propped up on their elbows almost like mudflap decals, their faces half hidden by enormous

sunglasses. I pretended that they were watching me right back, and I wondered what I must look like to them. A longhaired and bearded gargoyle in overalls and steel-toes, safety glasses and a yellow hardhat. The shiny blondes leaned their heads back in synch, showing their throats as they stared up at the sun.

And then I did something stupid, something I can't even blame on those girls. I forgot my surroundings for a second—all it takes—and let my hand come to rest up against the drum that I was supposed to be banging on. I felt nothing really, just a sudden burn before I jerked my hand away. I looked down and saw that the thin cable had sheared my little finger off right where it met my hand, did it clean as a razor. I spotted my snipped pinky lying there on the grate, and even as I was bending to pick it up, I was thinking no huge deal, Roy, the doctors can put this back on. I've seen worse out here in the oil patch, much worse.

And I almost had the finger when Malcolm came running. I guess he'd noticed what I'd done. More bad luck for me. His boots shook the grate and jostled my pinky. All I could do was stand there and watch as it slipped through a crack and splashed down beneath us, really not too far from where those girls lay sunning.

I sat cross-legged on the grate and let Malcolm deal with my hand. He was in the Marines and can play hero when he needs to. He held my left arm over my head and then wrapped my hand in a clean rag. The pain had showed up, and the alarm had been sounded. The crew was all gathered around, and a few of them were wearing lifejackets because you never know. By then I was crying a little from the hurt, and most of the guys were looking away so as not to embarrass me. Luther lit a cigarette and put it between my lips. My right hand was still gripping the wooden handle of the sledge, and he asked if he could take it from me. I nodded, and then I think I was about to really break down when instead I started laughing. I was looking at the wide-eyed kid—

the roustabout. Somebody had put one of those little orange safety cones on top of his hardhat without him knowing it—coned him, as we say on the rigs. We'd been doing that to each other all summer. The roustabout was looking at me horrified and saying oh wow, oh wow, oh wow—but of course I couldn't take a coned worm seriously.

And so the tears stopped. I kept laughing. Laughed even though I knew that I'd gone and fucked myself. It was almost an hour before the helicopter arrived to take me to Our Lady of the Sea in Galliano, and the Contender was still tied up to us when the chopper began its slow fall out of the sky. The girls hurried off the bow as it touched down on the pad, the wind from the bird worrying their yellow hair. I saw the three outboards bubble to life, then Tom Cruise went up front to free the bowline. He flashed a thumbs up to the driver, and the Contender took off, heading east to fish an oilrig less snakebit than the Noble Avis.

Jimbo had given one of the medics my duffle bag, and they were leading me toward me the chopper when I finally glimpsed the name scrawled across the transom of that big goddamn boat. *The Great Wide Open*. Picture that written in bold, black cursive.

6:00 P.M. Balboa Street. The Outer Richmond. I'm sitting at the back of Simple Pleasures Café, waiting for a woman named Marina Katanova. I came here straight from the shipyards. So far, I'm liking this place. It's a coffee shop, but I guess they also have food and beer and wine. It's just black coffee for me right now, things are stable.

At the table to the right of mine a guy's giving chess lessons to a schoolboy. The man is different looking but in a lucky way—I'm guessing a quarter, maybe even half, Japanese—and the boy's chocolate-haired, no-wedding-ring mom is sitting across from him with her arm around her son. I watch them and notice something interesting: whenever the kid ponders a move the chess teacher and the woman look at each other, eye-fucking really. And so then I start to wonder—not whether the kid likes chess, because it seems that he does—but whether the mom even likes chess, like does she even care if her boy ever learns to play all that well.

I'm thinking about how it's the mom who's really playing a game when a young gal in a blue nursing uniform says excuse me, then squeezes through the foot or so separating my table from the empty one to my left. She slides by and sits down next to me with a glass of red wine. She's Indian—the overseas kind—and I put my hand under the table so she won't see my bird claw. All of these people—the clueless boy and the handsome chess master, the good-to-go mom

and the pretty nurse with the caramel skin—all of them are close enough for me to reach out and touch.

“Checkmate,” says the boy.

“Very good,” says the chess master.

“That’s wonderful,” says the mom. “You are *such* a good teacher.”

I don’t have a newspaper to read or anything, and so I just stare straight ahead and listen. The nurse is looking across my table now, watching the chess match, and I’m wondering if she can see what’s really going on over there when I notice a white guy in medical scrubs and plastic sandals making his way to the back. He has his shoulders hunched together and is cupping a pint glass of beer like it’s filled with nitroglycerin. He shuffles toward me in his tangerine shoes and then sits down across from the nurse. “Thanks for coming,” he says to her.

“Okay,” she says. “Hi.”

He points at her wineglass. “Have you already paid for that?”

“Uh-huh.”

Obviously. Great question, guy. He hardly looks old enough to drink, but I bet he’s actually about my age. The ID badge clipped to his pocket tells me that he’s a resident over at some hospital. “There’s a lot of people in here,” he says.

“Yeah,” says the nurse. “I guess because it’s Friday.”

“How was your shift?”

“Good,” she says. “Busy.”

And so on and so on. I suppose this floppy-haired guy will be a bona fide doctor soon enough, but I’m not impressed. For now he still talks and acts like a teenager. I’m turning my

attention back to the chess match when things get more interesting between the two of them.

“So,” says the resident, “have you thought about it?”

He starts to say more but the nurse cuts him off. “I *have* thought about it,” she says, “and here’s the thing—you seem like a really good guy but I don’t think it’s such a good idea, you know, me being a nurse, us at the same hospital every day and all—” The speech spills out of her, a speech that I can tell she prepared well beforehand, a speech she wrote out on a clipboard between rounds, maybe even practiced on her hospital buddies. It’s like there’s somebody standing behind the resident, holding up cue cards for her to read. The resident tries to stop her but she rolls on, rushing her words like now her cue cards are on fire and disappearing. “It’s just not worth it,” she continues. “You know, making things weird, us have to work together and so, yeah.”

Her voice trails off, and she’s looking down at her lap. I see now that they’re not on a date, that they’re not even friends, really. This is something like a pre-date, a negotiation to perhaps have a date in the future—a meeting not altogether different than the one Viktor has set up between me and Marina (who’s a half-hour late already). I feel like this nurse’s lawyer or something, the way I’m sitting right on top of her. Good job, honey. Piss on all doctors. May they spend all their nights alone in their big fancy homes, fucking their sterile and perfect hands. I think that even though I’m getting stood up myself. We’re not on the same team, him and me.

And then the resident begins crying, swear to god. He’s saying, “I understand, I understand totally,” when his voice cracks and a tear streaks down his apple cheek. Nobody’s moved a chess piece in a long time; we’re all listening to this death rattle. “It’s just that I really like you,” he says.

Pull yourself together, son, you're a doctor for chrissake. It's all so sad, and I need to get out from between these twin soap operas before I start crying myself. Things sort of snap into perspective right then, and suddenly I see how pathetic it is for me to be waiting to meet some Russian woman I've never even spoken to—a woman who's apparently not even coming. And what if she does show? Then what? I fall in love with her? Actually marry her? Bring her back with me to Grand Isle? Move her into the little trailer park on the bayside of the island where I've been living for almost eight years now? Look baby, that there across the highway is the Gulf of Mexico. You can sunbathe out on that dirty beach, lay yourself down among the jetsam of the oilrigs. Fish and crab, even. Did you ever notice, Marina, that I only have nine fingers?

And that's not even the worst of it. Part of me never really believed that Viktor could come up with a woman willing to have anything to do with the likes of me, and Marina not being here right now seems to prove that out. You see, there's a reason why I've been living the way I have—half the year offshore, the other half holed up in the Airstream that sits on my lot in Pelican Acres. A reason why I've got no real friends and keep so much to myself. A reason why every now and again I find an anonymous letter in my PO Box telling me that I'll leave Grand Isle forever if I know what's good for me—

I jostle the chess table getting up and knock the king and two pawns right over. I say I'm sorry to the master and then head for the door. The 31 Balboa rumbles past just as I step outside, but the bus stop is a block and a half away. It's only about a downhill mile to my place, and so I figure I'll hoof it. I walk past the movie theater, two nail salons, and a corner market, Chinese restaurant after Chinese restaurant as I head toward the setting sun. The air is much colder now, and I pull up the hood of my sweatshirt. There'll be no time for the beach or the park today. Sorry about that, Sam.

The western sky is bleeding in pinks and reds.

*

My whole street is nothing but two- and three-story homes shoved together like the fading toy blocks of a child. The entire Outer Richmond is like this. Row after row built right up on each other. All these shared walls—I'd hate to see what a fire might do here. One old lady buys a cheap toaster and maybe we all die.

The door to my three hundred square feet of San Francisco is cut into the back wall of a two-car garage, and so going there feels something like entering a cave. I have one room of living space, a kitchenette and a bathroom; the floor is all cold, yellow tile. Above me, the Liu family (Honda) lives on the second-floor flat, the Chen family (Volvo) on the third. As far as I know they don't speak too much English. We see each other and we nod.

I can hear Sam whining at the other side of the door as I fiddle with the lock. It's dark in the garage, and I can't hardly see what I'm doing. When I finally get inside he starts whirling around in a circle, his black claws clicking against that ugly tile. He's a good dog, always happy to see me. I kneel down and give him some love, scratch his ears until he's trembling he's so grateful. "All right, settle," I tell him. I empty out my pockets onto the table, and now Sam's on his back, doing some sort of dying cockroach thing. I open the back door and he flips over, then goes prancing out into the yard that I share with the Family Liu and the Family Chen.

The backyard is mostly dust, dust and a few brown weeds. To the east are the blinking red lights of the radio tower you can spot from all over this city. Sutro Tower, I've come to learn. It sits atop a high hill maybe four miles away, dominating the skyline. During the daytime that radio tower looks a whole lot like an oilrig—and in some of my apocalypse visions I see people

hanged from its steel prongs, their bodies left to rot and be pecked at by squawking ravens. I'm not sure why that is.

*

I gather that I was lucky to find a place with even a dirt yard, much less one that allowed dogs. I took a roundabout and rambling way out to San Francisco from Grand Isle, and almost all of this was done over the computer, not a single phone call involved. Step One: find a sublet on Craigslist. Step Two: email a Julie Yang from the business center of a Holiday Inn in Wichita. Step Three: overnight a check to Ms. Yang for two week's rent (\$600, plus a \$300 damage deposit—good Lord). Step Four: On Monday, October 29th meet some guy named Corey out front and pick up the key.

I was half expecting to be conned. God's big gift to me was my imagination, and I live much of my life within the safe confines of my head. Driving across the plains of Kansas and Colorado and Wyoming, through the salt flats of Utah and the high desert of Nevada, I worked out scenarios involving me getting even with Julie Yang for stealing my money. I would scour the earth for her if necessary, track this "Julie" to a youth hostel in Beijing.

Hello there, Ms. Yang. Roy Joseph, here. I think perhaps we know one another.

Things would complicate. As it turns out, Julie Yang is beautiful and needed my money to put toward some noble purpose—a bribe to a Chinese official, the release of a dissident brother. I find myself falling for Julie Yang. We love to tell our friends the story of how we met.

And so when Corey showed and the key fit, it was almost a letdown. That fantasy was gone. I'm not sure now whether Julie Yang even exists. There's no hint of her in the apartment. I have a small bed with a bare mattress, a table and two chairs, a dresser and a desk and a couch. There's a decent-sized TV that gets basic cable, a potted ficus that Corey the Key Master asked

me to please keep watered. If Julie Yang had a phone she took it with her to wherever it is she went off to, and when I moved in her closet was locked and her dresser was empty. There was no food at all in the icebox or the cabinets. The microwave was spotless. The pots and plates and pans seemed never to have been used. No pictures, no books, no calendar on the wall. I suspect the computer that sits on the desk might hold clues, but I can only log in as a guest. Corey told me the password was *Alien12*.

My mailbox hangs to the left of the ones marked *848B Chen* and *848C Liu*. Nothing ever comes for Julie Yang (*848A Yang*), and it seems impossible that anyone lived here last week. I feel almost like I am being studied, like someday I will move a chair a certain way and the mirror on the wall will swing open. I'll see Julie Yang then—a different fantasy this time. My sublesor has returned from her Halloween adventures. She's sitting in a bright white room with all of her possessions piled around her. A stainless-steel table holds bubbling beakers and smoking test tubes. She wears a lab coat, strokes a longhaired cat that hisses at Sam. I run toward her, but the mirror slams shut. I'm left standing there staring at myself, and I see then that I'm paler than usual, that my rig tan has faded away.

Once Sam has finished sniffing around outside he comes over to the doorway and sits on my feet. It's early still but I'm tired, figure I'll take a nap before I go and find dinner. I lock both doors and turn off the lights. My sleeping bag is rolled out across the mattress, and I pull off my Red Wings and lie down on top of it. Sam is on the floor beside me now; I can hear him breathing. I wonder if Julie Yang can somehow see me like this—when it's dark, when I'm asleep. I imagine her coming through that mirror in the witching hours, threatening my dog with her shaggy cat while she conducts her experiments. So I guess this trip is shaping up to be just

one more mistake in my life. If I ever catch her I'll admit to her that it was brilliant, the way that she lured me here.

I hadn't been asleep for more than an hour before I awoke to Sam barking at my cell phone. He does that. I have on my blue jeans, but no shirt, no socks. The tile is cold so I tiptoe around the dark room on the balls of my feet. The cell cuts off before I can find it, and then someone rings the bell to the apartment just as I'm lying back down. Again Sam barks. I stub my toe getting to the door. Fuck fuck fuck.

Viktor, it can only be Viktor. There's really no one else who knows where I live. He did this on Wednesday night and then on Thursday night as well—just stopped by unannounced, I mean. This is his way of keeping tabs on me, I suppose, of making sure that I don't wriggle off the hook.

I flip the light on and open the door. A Chen has come home since I've been inside. Their Volvo is back, and it's parked too far forward in the garage. I slide myself through the narrow gap between the sheetrock and the front bumper of the station wagon. The bell sounds again; Sam barks again. "Jesus," I say. "I'm coming."

A deep voice says, "Okay."

It's Viktor all right. I can already smell his cigar.

Off to the side of the garage is a small concrete room that serves as the entrance to the building. Our mailboxes are in this room, that and the stairs leading up to the two flats. An iron

gate keeps people from wandering in off the sidewalk. I peek out from the garage and see Viktor. He's pacing back and forth on the other side of the bars, and in his black tracksuit he looks a like a zoo ape. It's freezing with the sun gone. "Hold on," I holler. "Let me go put some clothes on."

Viktor grips one of the bars with his big left hand. "But you are already all the way out here," he says.

"Your Marina didn't show."

He tosses his cigar onto the sidewalk and grabs another one of the bars. His fingers are wide and hairy. I'd say he's pushing sixty but, even so, it looks like he could tear that gate off its hinges if he wanted. "I know," he says. "Let us talk."

I sigh and hurry across the concrete to let him inside. He sees that I'm shivering and laughs. I'm sure San Francisco has nothing on Russia. I open the gate and he slaps my bare shoulder, then calls me a word that I'm pretty sure means pussy.

Viktor Fedorov is an international marriage broker. He also owns a car service.

In September I got Viktor's phone number from the captain of one of the crew boats that, over the years, would sometimes motor me to and from the rigs. Captain Terry had a Russian wife who was something of a celebrity among us hands. Irena was her name. She would always see Terry off from the dock—making her the last flesh-and-blood woman that I would lay eyes on for two weeks—and I'm sure I wasn't the only one in the oil patch who kept a mental picture of her filed away in the old shower-time Rolodex. I'm not saying that Irena was a movie star or anything, but she was definitely out of Terry's league. On the rigs a lot of the guys had taken to calling her the Coke Bottle on account of her figure—and yeah, that accent of hers surely didn't hurt her fame none. But what always ate at me most was when she'd be waiting at the dock for Terry on the rebound trip. There I'd be with nothing to look forward to but Sam and the empty Airstream, stuck having to think on ugly-ass Terry getting to go home with that woman. Just one more painful reminder that a normal romance with a normal girl was forever out of the question for me.

To his credit, Terry wasn't shy to talk about this marriage of his. There's this guy out in San Francisco, he told me on the boat once. He runs a first-class operation. None of this flying all the way to Moscow just to meet a room full of white-slave farm girls. No, this guy Viktor

matches his clients up with gals who are already here on work visas. Smart girls like Irena. Women who know the language and aren't likely to get homesick. It'll cost you, but you get what you pay for.

Of course, Terry already knew about my past—seems like everybody knows about my past, even the ones I think don't—but Viktor will work with you on that too, he said. Just be upfront about everything because the feds will be checking if things ever progress to the marriage-visa stage. They insist on full disclosure for foreign brides. That's the law these days. Indeed, Terry knew so much about the law that it made me wonder about *his* past.

That information got filed away, but it was several years—until about a month after I was discharged from the hospital in Galliano, actually—before life gave me the push I needed, and I decided that this was something that I wanted to look into. I finally asked Terry for the number and made the call to Viktor Fedorov. Pictures were mailed. A humiliating little essay explaining both my criminal record and my plans for the future. Bank statements and tax returns (Viktor didn't ask for these, but after writing that essay, I thought it couldn't hurt). In early October Viktor got back to me with some good news. He'd found three women in San Francisco who were at least willing to consider me. Each introduction would cost two hundred and fifty dollars, payable up front, and a love connection would set me back five grand. He sent some photos and the women looked good to me. Beautiful, even. Give me three weeks, I told him. The check's in the mail. I'm coming.

*

Viktor and I had our first face-to-face on Tuesday morning, my second day in the city. The night before I'd mentioned to him on the phone that Sam had made the trip with me, and so he

arranged for us to get together with our dogs in Golden Gate Park. “I will see you at nine-thirty,” he instructed. “By the windmill at the end of Kennedy Drive. Your Sam can meet my Dina.”

I got to the windmill a little early to make sure I could find it, and since I didn’t see anyone else around I decided to let Sam sniff along the edges of the tulip garden that was growing there. I’d just taken him off leash when I saw a big silver-haired guy coming up the sidewalk in a shiny green Adidas tracksuit with red stripes on the sides. He was about fifty yards away and had a dog of his own. It was a saluki, looked sort of like a greyhound—a greyhound with a bat face and feathered yellow hair. More than anything it just looked expensive. The guy saw Sam running loose and stopped. It was Viktor, I realized, looking just like I pictured him to look. He had his sighthound on a leash and so I was the one in the wrong, no argument there. I hollered for Sam but it was too late. He’d seen the saluki and was bounding over to say hello. I kept yelling, but Sam wasn’t listening—he was at least four at the time, but still had a bit of puppy in him. He did until the day he died.

A dog will get nervous if he’s on a leash and gets approached by a strange one that isn’t. I guess Viktor was smart enough to know that, because once he saw Sam wasn’t going to peel off he dropped his leash so that the saluki wouldn’t get flustered. At first the two dogs were getting along just fine—circling and sniffing each other—and I was almost up on them when Sam made a bid at fucking the saluki, and she bit him on his ear. Now Sam was pissed. He tore off after her, but she was the fastest dog I’d ever seen. Viktor was cursing in Russian and I was cursing in English, until finally both of us had our dogs under control and could hardly breathe from all the excitement.

“Are you Roy?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Viktor?”

“Da.”

Sam’s ear was bleeding, and Viktor started apologizing in that thick accent of his. “I am very sorry,” he said. “I have never seen her do this.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s not your fault.” And of course it wasn’t. Still, it made me sick to my stomach to see Sam bleeding like that. He didn’t ask to come all the way out here, didn’t hardly know what a leash was back in Louisiana. I looked over at Viktor. He had the saluki sitting motionless between his legs. “Is yours all right?” I asked.

“She is fine.”

“Good,” I said. “Good.” I turned Sam’s head over and found the cut on the inside of his left ear. It wasn’t more than a scratch really, and he didn’t look to need stitches or anything.

I had a blue Exxon windbreaker on over my sweatshirt, and I found a couple of old Waffle House napkins that I had squirreled away at some point. I was wiping the blood from Sam’s ear when he slipped away, tail wagging, and went bounding back over to the saluki, all forgiven. Things worked about better between them this time, and before long they were rolling around together in the grass.

Viktor laughed and walked over to me. “Dina and Sam,” he said. “They are friends now.”

“Looks like it,” I said.

We shook hands. “How was your trip?” he asked.

“Fine, no problems.”

“You are missing a finger.”

I had my left hand in my pocket, but I guess he must have noticed the stubbed pinky when I was fussing over Sam’s ear. It seems like whenever I start to forget about that lost finger somebody comes along and reminds me. “That’s right,” I told him.

“Did this happen on an oilrig?”

“Yeah. Over the summer.”

“You never mentioned this about yourself.”

“Does it matter?”

“Probably not.” Viktor stuck his own thumb in front of my face like a hitchhiker, an artist measuring proportion. “I had a friend in Moscow who lost his thumb.”

“It can always be worse.”

“Exactly.”

He lit a cigar, and I lit a cigarette. “How is our friend Terry?” he asked.

“Fine, I think.”

“He is still with Irena?”

“Far as I know.”

“Wonderful.” Viktor glanced at his watch, a shiny gold number. “Come,” he said. “Let us walk together.”

And so we leashed up Sam and Dina and began heading east to a bike trail that led through the forest. Viktor did most of the talking. He was telling me about a guy he had had come across in the park the day before—a falconer out hunting for squirrels with his bird. “What a thing,” said Viktor. “To see a *sokolnik* here of all places.” I just kept quiet and followed him, half listening. He mentioned his car service.

“Like limos and all that?”

“I have three limousines and two Mercedes. Some of them are usually parked on the street behind the Safeway.”

“How long have you been here?” I asked. “In America, I mean.”

“Fourteen years.” Viktor stabbed at the air with his cigar. “I came with nothing but my wife.”

“You like it?”

“I like it. A smart man can make a living, raise a family.”

“Do you have kids?”

“I have a daughter in St. Louis, and I have a son in Seattle.”

That seemed crazy to me for some reason—the accent-less, American descendants of this Russian. “Good for you,” I said. “Really.”

After a quarter mile or so the forest opened up and we came to a long and narrow pond. Viktor pointed at a bench near the bank that was sort of hidden under the drooping branches of a weeping willow. We stopped there to sit, and Sam sprawled out by my feet. Dina came over and lay on top of him. I lit another Winston; Viktor was still working on his cigar.

“Now we sit and watch,” he said.

“Watch for what?”

“The nannies.”

“Nannies?”

“You will see.”

It was about ten o’clock, and after a few minutes went by they started showing up—the Russian nannies. Young women pushing baby strollers big as shopping carts. They collected on a gravel bank on the other side of the pond, their strollers parked liked circled wagons. The nannies smoked cigarettes and talked. Viktor saw them and pointed. “Ah, look,” he said. “There she is.”

“Who?”

“In the white sweater,” he said. “The blue jeans. Do you see her?”

I did. She was standing apart from the rest of them. There was mud on her black boots and she was cleaning them with a stick. She was tall and had chopped hair that was a sort of coppery-red color. She finished with her boots and went to join the others. Her body was thin but not too thin, and the way that her chest pushed up snug against the front of that white wool sweater put me in mind of those Fox News anchorwomen that the guys on the rigs liked to stare at. Free porn, we’d call that channel.

“Yes,” I said. “I see her.”

“That is Marina,” said Viktor. “She is one of your three. The prettiest, I think.”

“No kidding?” She was so damn pretty. Persuasive as it had been, the photo Viktor had sent me didn’t do her justice.

“You will be meeting her on Friday, okay? That is the soonest that she can get away from her work.”

“Great,” I said. “Works for me.”

“We should go now,” said Viktor. “We should go before she sees us spying on her.”

He stood to leave, but my concentration was still on Marina and that tight white sweater. She was holding her right elbow in her left hand and studying her cigarette.

Viktor looked down at me. “You are not happy? We could start maybe tomorrow with one of the other two that you have paid to meet.”

I shook my head. “No,” I said. “Her first. I can wait.”

Marina was taller than the other nannies, and even though she was standing among baby strollers a single dopey thought would not leave my brain. Bond girl, I was thinking. Bond girl, Bond girl, Bond girl.

Viktor and I are sitting on the brown couch in my apartment. I've put on a thin shirt with pearl snaps, and Viktor's fussing over the scab on Sam's ear, babying him. He says he's come by because he heard from Marina. She told him that she'd had to work late running errands and that she was sorry, that her cell phone was dead and so she couldn't call him to let me know she wouldn't be making our meeting at Simple Pleasures. Right. Viktor doesn't even sound like he believes her—but now he wants me to come over to his place for dinner tomorrow night. He says he'll make sure that Marina will be there this time.

“You're positive?” I ask.

“I am positive.”

“All right then.”

“So you will come?”

“We're still at seven-fifty, right?”

“Of course,” said Viktor. “That is a one time charge. I will not cheat you.”

“Then yes. Thank you.”

“Good. We will have a very nice evening.” Viktor pulls a plastic sandwich bag from the pocket of his leather jacket and shows it to me. “Some steak for Sam.”

I nod and he tosses a few pieces to Sam. A tail starts whacking against the side of my leg, and when the bag is empty Viktor goes into the kitchenette and washes his hands, making himself at home. He drops a paper towel into the trashcan and then calls over to me. “Someone is stabbing people,” he says.

“What?”

“In the park. Homeless people.”

“Oh,” I say. “Yeah, I heard about that on the news this morning.”

“Crazy, no?”

“Sure is. But just the one guy though, right?”

“No, no,” says Viktor. “There have been others.”

“Others?”

“I have police friends. This is what they tell me.”

“Jesus. How many?”

Viktor shrugs at me from the kitchenette. He’s opening and closing Julie Yang’s cabinets for some reason. “They just say to be careful around the park.”

“All right. But who—”

“Do you want to hear another Vovochka joke?”

I sigh. Viktor likes to tell me jokes about a smartass Russian boy named Vovochka. “Go ahead,” I tell him.

Viktor is looking in the icebox now. I have a few beers in there and he pulls out a pair of Budweisers. “Is okay?” he asks.

“Is okay.”

He twists both bottles open and then walks across the room to hand me one. I'm still sitting on the couch, and now he's standing up in front of me. He eases into his joke. "So," he says, "Vovochka—do you remember Vovochka? A boy, maybe nine, ten, eleven?"

"Yes," I say. "I remember him."

"*Da*," says Viktor. "How could you forget Vovochka?"

"Impossible."

"Impossible," agrees Viktor. He takes a pull from his Budweiser and empties half the bottle. "Piss," he says. Then: "Okay, this Vovochka is sitting in the classroom one day. His teacher—Marivanna—she is standing at the chalkboard."

Viktor points at me as he paces and then at himself. I take this to mean that I'm one of the students, and that Viktor is the teacher Marivanna. Sam is sitting on his haunches and watching all of this with his head tilted.

"Okay," says Viktor. "So Marivanna, she draws on the chalkboard." Viktor turns his back to me and traces something like a circle in the air with his finger. He spins and begins talking like a woman. "So what is it that I have drawn, children?"

I shrug. "Beats me."

Viktor pats Sam on the head. "Yes, very good, Sam," he says. "It *is* an apple. I have drawn an apple for you." He then pivots around and makes like he's erasing the chalkboard.

And this is why I don't really like jokes. I just don't have the patience for them. I guess even in Russia you're made to sit there with a dumb look on your face until the third-act punch line finally comes. Again Viktor draws something in the air and again he looks to me. "Roy?" he says.

"A pineapple?"

Viktor frowns. “No.” He puts his ear to Sam’s mouth like my dog’s telling him a secret. “Yes!” he says. “A pear. Beautiful, Sam. Beautiful.” And then Viktor stage whispers to Sam: “This Roy is not so very smart is he?”

“Nice,” I say.

Viktor spins and draws for a third time. It’s a banana, I think. I raise my hand, but he ignores me and points instead at the invisible child sitting to my right. “Vovochka?”—he says this in his high Marivanna voice—“Yes?” he chirps. “What is it that you see?”

Here Viktor runs over and sits on the couch beside me. He lifts his hand and then drops it. He is the student Vovochka now. “Marivanna,” he says. “That is a dick.”

“Oh, shit,” I say.

Viktor stands up again. He waves his hands in the air like a frazzled teacher and pretends to cry. “Vovochka!” he is saying, “No! No! No! I am getting the principal!”

And then he runs out of the apartment, slamming the door shut behind him.

Sam whines and I look at him. “Don’t worry,” I say. “He’s coming back.” I take a sip of my beer, and we wait for the joke to continue.

In a moment the door opens again, and in walks Viktor from the garage. He glares at the spot on the couch occupied by Vovochka. “What have you done to Marivanna this time?” he asks. Viktor says this in a serious voice, a man’s voice, and I’m guessing that now he is the school principal—the principal often shows up in these jokes. He turns and looks behind him at the ghost chalkboard. “My God, Vovochka,” he says. “Last week you broke a window and yesterday you started a fight.” Viktor pounds at the wall with his fist. “And today—today you have drawn a dick on Marivanna’s chalkboard!”

I laugh and Viktor plucks at one of the snaps on my shirt. “You see,” he says, as himself now, “it was a banana.”

“I do see,” I say. “Very funny.”

Viktor sits down next to me on the couch again. He seems a little out of breath. “Yes,” he agrees, “because nothing is like it seems.”

JENNY

Four or five months after the Katrina and Rita double punch—in February of '06, I think—a library up north sent something they called a Cybermobile down to Grand Isle for us to use. Almost two years later that bus was still sitting there in the parking lot of our ruined library. It had pictures of Garfield painted on both sides—he's reading a book with a couple of happy mice. When I wasn't offshore that's where I'd go to check my email, though I don't know why I bothered. Most days nine out of every ten messages has to do with securing a cut-rate mortgage or hard-on pills, shit like that. I don't have any family, and the few folks I might call friends aren't really big on computers. They just see me when they see me.

It was two days before my accident when I received the email from Jenny—my dead brother's sixteen-year-old daughter, a girl I didn't even know existed.

Dear Mr. Joseph,

Hello. I think that a man named Thomas Edward Joseph, Jr. was my biological father. Was he your brother? Was he born in June 1971 in Ruston, Louisiana? Was he in the military? Was he maybe living in the San Diego area in 1990? Do you know if he ever donated sperm at the Fertility Center of San Diego? Please don't be worried. I only want for us to talk.

All best,

Jenny

That was the gist of her message, at least. Holy fuck. It seemed ridiculous to believe—the sort of email you might get from some Nigerian con artist. This girl Jenny had her facts right about Tommy, but why the hell would my brother have been donating sperm? I read and reread that email, even started to type out a reply to Jenny no-last-name at j67789@gmail.com when the librarian told me it was time to close up the Cybermobile for the day. I spent a mostly sleepless night staring at the ceiling of my Airstream, trying to make sense of things, and then dawn finally came and I shipped out on a morning crew boat for my hard-luck stint on the Noble Avis.

Being back at work, seeing all the guys again, that helped take my mind off that email some. I keep to myself for the most part, and the people I'm closest with are the hands I rotate with offshore. But they don't stick around Grand Isle any longer than they have to. Jimbo and Luther live in Texas. Malcolm, Lafayette. Johnny, Baton Rouge. Mud Duck, Arkansas. Those are the five guys I've worked with the longest. I know the names of their sons and their daughters, their wives and their ex-wives—and though they sometimes invite me to come up and visit them in the real world, I never do. I suppose they must understand why I choose to lay low and live year round on the island, but what they don't get is why I'm so sketchy about venturing to the mainland, why I treat Grand Isle like a penal colony. Sure, there is beauty to be found there on that island—the sunrises and the sunsets that bruise the horizon, the tan marsh grass waving against a hot south wind, the slickness of the dolphins feeding in the surf, the glass of the water before a storm, even the baby cries of the gulls as they harass the white shrimp boats—but I'm really not too sure myself. When they ask I just tell them that I like it this way. I keep more money in my pocket, and my life stays simple.

But then Jenny sent her email and complicated things. Like most rigs these days the Noble Avis had satellite internet, plus a couple of old computers in the common room for the hands to share, but I still hadn't made up my mind if I should respond to her. That question was never very far from my thoughts, and my first night on the rig sleep didn't come much better for me than it had that night before shipping out. I'm not saying that Jenny's the reason I lost my finger on that second day, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't distracted.

I'd spoken to some of the guys about it, and their advice was to walk away. "At best, it's a con," Malcolm told me. "At worst, you've got family in California."

"Yeah," said Johnny. "And you don't want no teenager in your life."

And so I had it pretty much decided that I would never be replying to that email. I figured that nothing good could come out of it, and I didn't change my mind until I was laid up in Our Lady of the Sea. I spent three days and two nights there without a single visitor other than an insurance adjuster looking to take my statement, and the only person to even call was Jack Hebert. Jack's retired from flying spotter planes for the pogy fleet, and he lives with his wife Ada and her sister Tricia next door to me in Pelican Acres. Sometimes I play bourré with them in his house trailer. They look after Sam when I'm out on the rig.

I've got nobody, I realized. And here's a chance that maybe I do.

The doctors discharged me home, and I hitched a ride south on Highway 1 with a gravel hauler. The good amaritan dropped me off at the dock so that I could grab my LeBaron, and then that goofy Cybermobile was the first place I went. Still more word from Jenny. My left hand was bandaged up like a club, and so I banged out an email to her with my right. Here's my phone number I told her, maybe give me a call if you still want. I'm skeptical, but I'm willing to hear you out.

Afterwards I drove to Pelican Acres. I set Sam free from his kennel just long enough to say hello, and then I unpacked my duffle bag and cleaned myself up. It was a Wednesday, and at dark I went to the lingerie show at Carl's Lounge. As a way around the city ordinance against stripping, two nights a week the owner brings in these half-naked women to parade around the bar and act like they're hawking underwear. A skinny girl named Sierra had just come by to sell me raffle tickets when someone called my cell. I saw PRIVATE NUMBER and lost my nerve. I was feeling pretty good by then. I'd say that Sierra was eighteen, but not by much. She was from Arabi and wearing red satin. "Wanna answer your phone?" she asked.

I said no and then told her all of it. "What do you think about that?"

"I think it's freaky."

"So what should I do?"

Sierra bit down on her lip, then twirled a finger in her ginger hair. She smelled like baby powder. "I'd buy some tickets," she said finally. "They're five bucks a pop." I passed Sierra a twenty and she smiled. One of her lower canines had been capped in silver. She tore four tickets off from the roll and patted my knee. "I don't think you need to ever talk to that girl," she said. "I never knew my daddy, and I never wanted to."

But then a little later PRIVATE NUMBER called again, and I figured what the hell. You can't unring a bell. I hurried out to the parking lot and picked up. "Hello," I said.

A woman's voice came on the line. "Is this Roy Joseph?"

"Yes. Jenny?"

"No, this is her mother."

Christ. I didn't know what to say, and so I didn't say anything. I've heard it claimed that everyone has an accent of some kind or another—that saying that a person has no accent is the

same as saying that a place has no climate. Maybe so, but the precise and perfect way that this woman had of speaking did make me think of such a place. A bright white room with the thermostat set at seventy-five degrees.

“Are you still there?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m still here.” I walked over to the LeBaron and sat on the trunk.

“Jenny tells me that she contacted you. That the two of you have exchanged emails?”

“That’s right.” There was a pause that she didn’t fill, and so I spoke again. “Was this all some sort of prank?”

“No, it’s true, Mr. Joseph. Your brother was her biological father.”

“But that makes no sense to me.”

“Why not?”

“It just doesn’t sound like the type of thing he would do.”

“I don’t know how to respond to that. For whatever reasons, he did do it.”

“You’re gonna have to prove it.”

“Excuse me?”

“Anybody could call me up and say what you’re saying.”

“To be honest, Mr. Joseph, I’m not interested in proving anything to you.” And then I heard her sigh into the phone. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean for that to sound as rude as it did. My point is that we will be leaving you alone now. I apologize for ever bringing this to your attention in the first place.”

“But I’m not asking you to leave me alone,” I said.

“Well—”

“You never knew him, then? Tommy? Thomas?”

“No. No, I didn’t.”

“And you’re in San Diego?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“You’re not gonna tell me?”

“No.”

I saw a man come stumbling out of Carl’s with a plastic go-cup in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He had his arms stretched on either side of him like he was being crucified, and indeed—emaciated, bearded, hair down to his shoulders—he did resemble Jesus on the cross. I thought that maybe I worked a stint with him once, years and years before. People were always confusing us, saying that I looked like him or that he looked like me.

“How did you get Tommy’s name?” I asked. “Wouldn’t that be confidential?”

She was quiet for a moment, but then she spoke. “Several months ago Jenny and I hired someone to help me find your brother, and that also led us to you.”

“Hired someone?” Jesus had spotted me on the trunk of the LeBaron and was headed my way. I tried to wave him off, but he kept on coming toward me. He was piss drunk and clucking, making these little chicken noises.

“Yes,” she said. “An investigator. It was rather easy to identify your brother, actually. We had his month, year, and city of birth from the fertility center’s donor profile—and we also knew that he was Methodist, that he was in the military, all sorts of details like that”

I covered the phone with my bandaged hand and hollered at Jesus. “Fuck off,” I said. “I’m on the phone here.” He stopped about ten steps away from me and cocked his head, watching, but then I glared at him until he smiled and went wandering away.

“Hello?” said the woman.

“Hi. Sorry.”

“It was something Jenny really wanted—to know who the donor was.”

“And what about you?”

“She can be very persuasive. And in truth I did have my own concerns.”

“Concerns?”

“Yes. About medical history, mainly. I wanted to know if there was anything that I should be aware of. For Jenny’s sake.”

“I still don’t see him going down that road. He shouldn’t have been hurting for cash or anything.”

“I can’t shine any light on his motives,” she said. “I’m just very thankful that he did decide to be a donor. It is an extraordinarily generous thing for someone to do.”

“The gift of life. Saint Tommy.”

“That wouldn’t be much of an exaggeration, Mr. Joseph. Not to me or to Jenny.”

“You can call me Roy,” I said. “Even if you’re not gonna tell me *your* name.”

“Okay,” said the woman.

“So I guess your investigator found out about our parents too?”

“Yes, he did.”

“And then y’all tracked me down—several months ago, you said—so how come no one ever called till now?” I had a pretty good idea why not, but she’d put me in one of my martyr moods, and so I wanted to make her say it. Or at least I thought I did. She started to speak but I interrupted her, figured I should beat her to the punch. “It happened almost ten years ago,” I told her. “I was only twenty years old. That don’t make it right, but you should know that.”

“We do know that. We know all of it, Roy.”

“Not that it matters.”

“In a way it doesn’t matter. You have every right to your privacy, and Jenny understands now that it was a mistake to write you. When you answered her she confessed to me what she had done. If she could take back her email she would.”

“So that’s it?”

“Yes,” she said. “We mean you no harm and we won’t be disturbing you anymore. I’m very sorry for all of this. You must feel completely overwhelmed.”

“You could say that.”

“I’m sure.”

“Hey,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Tommy, my parents, those deaths were all accidents—but there is some bad history. Medical stuff, I mean. Daddy’s father passed in ’87, and not long after Tommy died the rest of my grandparents went, pretty much one every year or so until all of them were gone.”

“Thank you,” she said. “That’s very helpful. We did learn that they died fairly young, unfortunately.”

“Heart attacks across the board—all around age seventy, I think.” And then, because I wasn’t sure what to say: “I’m sorry.”

“Is there anything else you think might be important?”

“That’s all I’ve got insofar as family. My parents didn’t have any brothers or sisters, but I guess you already found that out too.”

“We did.”

“Okay.”

“I think I should probably tell you goodbye now.”

“Whoa—not yet—there’s something that I’m wondering.”

“Yes?”

“Why Tommy? I mean, I don’t know how these things work, but imagine you had hundreds to chose from—so why pick him?”

“Jenny asked me that same question once.”

“What did you tell her?”

“The truth,” she said. “That in many ways it can only be a shallow decision—after all, you’re looking at pieces of paper and trying to decide who should be the biological father of your child—but in the end I think I chose your brother because he stood out so much from the others. He seemed to come from a place that was such much different than anything I had ever known.”

And then I don’t know whether she hung up or the signal was lost, but whatever the reason, the line went dead. I waited for her to call back but she never did. Finally I slid my phone into my pocket and looked across the parking lot. Jesus was over by the highway watching cars blow by. On another night I might have gone over and grabbed the man, steered him back inside the bar before he got himself flattened—but on that night I was feeling selfish and low, and so I left him standing there to fend for himself.

*

Later, around midnight, I won a black lace nightie in the lingerie raffle. Sierra brought it over to me in a white cardboard box. She had changed into jeans and a tight T-shirt. “I made it so you’d win,” she said.

“That right?”

“So now tell me what happened to your hand.”

“Broken finger.”

“Poor baby. You got a place?”

I looked up from my beer. “Yeah,” I said. “I’ve got a place.”

“A real place? Not some fish camp out in the marsh?”

“Real enough.”

“Two hundred dollars, and I’ll make breakfast for you.”

“I’m talking to a cook?”

“Best your ass ever had.”

I’d never really done anything like that before, but things were coming at me fast that night and between the beers and the Vicodin my thinking was off. Here was someone who wasn’t disgusted by me, and so I gave Sierra ten twenties and drove her to Pelican Acres.

*

Some notes on this former residence of mine:

Not long after I first started working offshore I bought a 1988 Airstream Excella 25’ from a dentist in Thibodaux. This had been the man’s tailgating trailer for LSU games, but he told me that he was retiring and looking to upgrade to a big RV for football Saturdays. He wanted \$8500 for the Airstream, and though he wouldn’t come off that price any, he was willing to tow it down to Grand Isle for me with his three-quarter-ton Ford.

Eighty-five hundred might seem like a lot to pay for a travel trailer—especially when you don’t have a truck of your own to drag the thing around with—but this was going to be my home, and so I figured my quarters should have some style and substance. Besides, Airstreams and their shiny aluminum hulls capture people’s imaginations for some reason, and I knew that I

could probably make my money back and then some on mine, considering all the improvements I planned on making.

First off, I replaced the old twin mattresses in the back room with a nice, pillow-top queen, and then I tore out the stained carpets—put in hardwood floors that matched up with the natural oak cabinets and paneling. Over time I bought new curtains and cushions, threw down for an AC unit and a TV, a DVD player and satellite television. I always kept everything as tidy as a hotel room at check in—constantly vacuuming, polishing, and sweeping—and though Sam drops hair you'd never know it from looking around. Every month I gave the hull a good bath to keep it from rusting, and—to make sure that all of the moving parts stayed in good working order—twice a year I borrowed a diesel from an old oil-patch acquaintance who now mostly worked stints contra to mine, then made a forced pilgrimage up to Lake Claiborne State Park in north Louisiana (one of the few places other than Grand Isle where I felt anything like peace). Far as I know, I owned the only Airstream that sat permanently on the island, and I had rich sports from New Orleans and Baton Rouge all the time stopping by to ask me what I wanted for it. They thought I was some coonass fool who didn't know what he had.

And my lot in Pelican Acres wasn't too shabby either. I installed a new awning on the Airstream, and then beneath that I built a small wooden deck. (I cooked most of my meals outside—the kitchen stayed cleaner that way—on a thousand-dollar gas Weber with dual burners.) Eventually I poured a concrete foundation out back for a 10x14 steel shed that housed a washer/dryer and a hot-water heater, my tools and ice chests and whatnot—and then later, after Sam came along, I set up a big chain-link kennel and a doghouse. My sewage, gas, and electric were all tied in with the city systems, and the only time things got a little tricky was when a hurricane or some such was on the way. For both Katrina and then Rita—plus a good number of

storms before that—Malcolm drove down in his pickup and helped me out, hauling the Airstream up to his deer lease near St. Francisville while I followed after him in the LeBaron. I spent a good part of August and September 2005 bowhunting feral hogs and looking for Tunica arrowheads.

The secret to living well in a trailer is in not letting the things you own pile up on you. I would shop for groceries every few days, and any pair of shoes or piece of clothing that I hadn't worn in a year got dropped in the donation dumpster over by the library. Two plates, two forks, two glasses, etc. You have to be compulsive about not owning things. That's the kind of discipline it takes, and for a long time that life suited me fine. Indeed, I always accepted that life as the best one that I deserved to hope for.

*

Sierra waited on the deck while I checked on Sam in his kennel. I broke the news to him that he wouldn't be sleeping inside the trailer with me tonight, and when I got back to Sierra she told me to take a shower.

“What?” I asked.

“I'm not planning to rob you,” she said. “Where am I gonna run off to?”

“It's not that.”

“Then go and take your shower. Those are my rules.”

“I already took one today.”

“Then take two. It's a new day today, anyways. Past midnight, I'm saying.”

“Fine,” I said. “All right.”

I unlocked the trailer and Sierra followed me inside. When I flipped on the lights she hopped up onto the counter beside the kitchen sink and smiled. She had to keep herself hunched just a bit so that her skull wouldn't rub up against the ceiling. "Well, this ain't so bad," she said.

"Thanks." It was hot in the trailer, and so I went over and put the AC unit on at full blast.

"You got any music?"

I'm actually not all that into music. I mean, I listen to it, of course, but I don't have a CD collection or stereo or anything like that. They have music stations that come with my satellite television package and that's enough for me. Classic country, jazz, blues, rock—I'll listen to pretty much anything—but no, I don't see the point in owning music. I'd rather just have it come to me. I handed Sierra the remote control. "Check out the high channels," I told her. "Find something you like."

I made to kiss her, but she turned her head. "Shower time," she said. "You promised, baby." She hopped down off the counter and grabbed at my chin in a rough sort of way. "You can go ahead and scrape those teeth, but there's not gonna be any kissing, just so you know."

"Another rule?"

"That's right. And unless you plan on shaving that beard, you won't be going down on me neither."

The shower in any travel trailer is pretty narrow for everyday use, and so a while back I'd put in a fenced outdoor shower on the slab behind the shed. That's where I'd wash myself all save the coldest months, but of course Sierra was right in thinking I didn't trust her enough to leave her alone with all my things. I wrapped a couple of plastic grocery bags around my bandaged hand and then ducked into the bathroom, showering as quick as I could while she flipped around on the TV for a song she liked.

When I came back some boy band song was playing and Sierra was wearing the nightie I'd won. She had her long red hair up in one hand and was spinning in a slow circle. I threw the wet grocery bags in the trash, and she handed me a condom from this little pink backpack that she'd brought along with her from Carl's. "That's better," she said. "You see? I'm still here."

There's this necklace that I always wear, a tiny steel vial that hangs from a chain. Sierra plucked at it with her finger. "What you got in there?" she asked. "Blow?"

"Dirt," I tell her. "Dirt from where I grew up."

"Dirt?"

"My whole family had one of these. It's like a memento."

Sierra frowned. She wasn't interested. "You swear?" she asked.

"What? That it's not coke?"

"Yeah."

"I swear."

"Well that's too bad." She started to tug at the towel around my waist, and I tried to stop her but she got it off. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Wake on up, limpy."

She let my damp towel drag behind her as she made her way to the bedroom in the back. I followed her and then sat down on the bed. "You think you could just lay here next to me?" I asked.

"Well, yeah," she said. "That's how it works."

I handed the condom back to her. "And sleep, I mean. Just sleep. Maybe let me hold you a little."

She stared down at me. First she looked confused, but then she looked pissed—and seeing that change play out so quickly in her face was a lot like watching a snake coil up.

“You’re very pretty,” I told her. “Don’t think I don’t see that. This doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

Finally she relaxed and then shrugged. “Okay,” she said. “But I don’t ever offer no rebates.”

“And I’m not asking for one.”

“You a fag or something?”

“No,” I told her. “I’m not a fag.”

“When I started out some of the girls said that—that a lot of the guys just wanna talk. But I ain’t never seen it till now.” That nightie she was wearing was at least a size too big for her, and one of the straps was hanging down her shoulder. She brushed at the other strap with her hand, and the nightie dropped down around her ankles. She was all bones and hard edges. The AC had cooled the trailer down, and her pale body was covered with goose bumps.

“You cold?” I asked.

“Fucking freezing.”

There was an old Saints T-shirt balled up on the nightstand next to where I was sitting, and I grabbed it for her. “Here,” I said. “Put this on.”

“I’ve got a T-shirt of my own.”

“No,” I told her. “This one.”

“Whatever.” Sierra took the black shirt from me and pulled it over her head. “Thanks.”

“I could maybe try.”

“Forget it.”

“But you’ll stay?”

Sierra stretched herself out behind me, and then she spoke into the space above us like some woman on her deathbed. “Fine, I’ll wear your shirt and let you hug on me, weirdo—but, just so you know, this don’t make you better than me.”

“I do know that. Trust me. I’ve just got a lot on my mind right now.”

“That girl, you mean?”

“Yeah, that girl.”

“Told you not to talk to her, dummy.”

I lay down alongside her and started to pull at myself with my good hand while she watched. The Saints shirt was hitched up around her hips, and I could see that the hair between her legs had been shaved. I heard a sound like cellophane crinkling and realized that she had torn open the condom wrapper.

“You starting to look ready now,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said. My voice sounded like it belonged to someone else. “I guess that I am.”

“You got lube here?”

“I don’t think. Maybe. I could look.”

“Forget it.” She slid the condom on me and then lay back with her legs spread open. I rolled on top of her, and she grunted. “Take it easy,” she said.

“Sorry.” I got myself inside of her, and she lifted her flat ass up off the mattress, stabbing at me with her hipbones. My bandage rubbed against the headboard, and a shock of pain went racing up my arm. I flinched but kept on. “All right,” I said. “Is that okay?”

“Don’t talk to me. Just fuck.”

Every now and then—maybe once or twice a year—I’d meet some good-to-go, from-out-of-town woman in a barroom and we’d have a whirl, but on that night I was caught in an long

dry spell, and so I never expected that I'd last like I did with Sierra. I don't know if it was from the drinking or what, but I didn't feel anything at all, really. I pushed against her and pushed against her for twenty minutes at least, and though I thought that maybe some talking would help me get off, every time I'd say something she'd order me to shut up. Finally she told me that I was hurting her and we had to quit.

“You pumped your money's worth,” she said. “I ain't doing this no more.”

I never got that breakfast Sierra promised. We slept and the next morning she left my trailer in Pelican Acres wearing my prize under an old long-sleeved work shirt I'd given her as well. Jack opened his screen door and hollered attaboy as we piled into the LeBaron. His sister-in-law Tricia was standing there smiling beside him. He once told me that sometimes they fool around when Miss Ada is off getting dialysis. I don't like to think about it.

I drove Sierra to the motel just down the road where she said all her crew was staying. I guess they toured around the parishes like that. I tried to talk to her, but she only stared out the window. Without her makeup she looked damn near young enough to be my daughter. We had barely stopped before she was out the door. She was wearing scuffed heels, had her clothes from the night before in her pink backpack. The motel was built on stilts, and she headed up the stairs, slipped a key into a lock and then disappeared.

I stayed parked there for a long while, thinking on things. I knew there was much more to Sierra's creation than not having a father, but I still couldn't shake one image—the vision of my niece Jenny a few years down the line, out living the life of a lingerie gypsy. Finally I got around to asking myself a question I'd avoided ever since that email from Jenny—that is, what would Tommy want me to do?

My father was a Catholic, but pretty much in name only. And though my mother raised us boys to be Methodists like her, after Tommy's memorial service our here-and-there Sunday churchgoing stopped altogether. Still, I always tell myself that somewhere Tommy is watching. My parents too, for that matter. I do a lot things I'd rather not have any of them see, but to believe otherwise would make my life unbearable. I'm lonely enough as it is. I used to feel certain that a day didn't go by without me thinking of them, but then I lived enough days to realize that couldn't be true. The real truth is that I forget all three of them plenty, and of course there is a betrayal in that. If heaven exists I'm sure that more than anything the cloud-sitters just hope to be remembered by the living. Maybe Jenny's mother didn't want to have anything to do with me, but all of sudden this thing seemed a whole lot bigger than her or even Jenny.

I drove from Sierra's motel straight to the Cybermobile and typed out another email to Jenny. I talked to your mother, and she seems nice. I'm glad that y'all found me, and I'm equally glad that you reached out. If you ever want to write me or call me you just go ahead and do that. I don't mind at all, believe me when I tell you that. We don't have to be strangers unless that's what *you* really want.

Days went by. Weeks. Nothing.

SEA CLIFF

The neighborhood of Sea Cliff sits high atop the northwest coast of San Francisco, overlooking the rough-water channel that connects the bay to the ocean. I've walked through there once or twice. Viktor tells me Sharon Stone once lived in Sea Cliff, that Robin Williams still does. In Louisiana they'd have a fucking moat around a neighborhood like this—a moat full of piranhas and gators and sharks. A fence tinsel with razor wire. A minefield. And if my apocalypse ever comes to pass these rich folks might just wish they had sprung for all of that. I see Sharon Stone enslaved and dancing, Robin Williams made to split park wood.

I'll actually be a rich man myself fairly soon—not Sea Cliff rich—but rich enough to suit my needs, and that's one reason I'm on the market for a bride (though there will be a prenup). I'm not talking about my accident. Since I've got no real disability, I'm guessing I'll only bank ten to fifteen grand when I get around to filing my comp claim back in Louisiana. No, my entire fortune has been built on people dying before their time. I'm a tragedy tycoon.

My mother and father had a financial advisor over in Ruston named Donny Lee Dean, and after Tommy's death in Iraq One—the Gulf War—was made official, he helped them pool Tommy's savings with the quarter million or so that they received in death benefit and life insurance payouts. Mr. Donny Lee said he'd manage everything until they were ready to retire from teaching high school (my father, history; my mother, math), and my parents made me

promise them both that if they died I wouldn't bite into that money before it had ripened like Mr. Donny Lee had planned. And then they died. My sophomore year at LSU a fucking dorm RA sat me down. I'm not sure how that responsibility fell to him. The poor guy said something about an icy bridge and a flipped car and a deep creek, then suddenly he started bawling and trying to hug me. I dodged to avoid him, and the honest truth is that at twenty years old all I felt at that moment was some stunned sense of relief. My parents were kind, kind people. But I'd seen them destroyed by losing Tommy, and I didn't realize until right then in that cube of a dorm room that, ever since my brother had disappeared, I'd been living with only one real goal—just don't let yourself die before they do, Roy. They've had enough hurt.

After they were killed I dropped out for the spring semester and went home to the empty house in Dry Springs—the tiny north Louisiana town where I was raised, just east along the interstate from Ruston. There was a funeral at the Methodist Church that it seemed like the entire town showed up for (the last time I ever stepped foot in a church), and then I finished out the spring sleeping and drinking and crying, boxing up things bit by bit, preparing to put the place up for sale in a half-assed and drunken sort of way.

And then as summer came on during that bad year a neighbor girl named Eliza Anne Sprague stopped by one afternoon with a pan of venison lasagna that her mother had made. That was before I let my hair grow long and ratty, started hiding my face behind a beard. I was actually good looking back then, but due mostly to my shyness I'd also not yet managed to shuck my virginity. I didn't know Eliza Anne all that well—for most of my life she had just been the pigtailed kid on the school bus who lived one dirt road over from mine on the highway—but she wasn't all that little anymore. Still, though I wish I could say that Eliza Anne was fifteen going on thirty or some such, that's not really true. Fifteen is a child. Twenty is a man. I get that, and to

this day I can't have a woman touch me without some part of my mind calling back the dark bleakness of that summer. All I can really say is that she was pretty. That the hot months in Dry Springs will kill you with boredom. That I was out of my mind. That she tapped on my shoulder first, not me on hers.

Eliza Anne hated beer but liked talking to me while I drank, and she would swing by after her parents left off for work. It only happened all the way twice between us, and both times I knew it was wrong—doing what we had done—but I guess I felt like the world owed me something. And then one morning in August that fifteen-year-old girl was standing in my kitchen, sobbing and telling me that she was pregnant. Things happened quickly after that. There was a bad scene with her parents followed by an abortion in Shreveport. It was all supposed to have been kept a secret, but Dry Springs didn't ever do too well with those.

I don't think folks ever thought much of me growing up, and all these doings with Eliza Anne more or less united everyone against me. Still, my dead brother was a hero who had made Dry Springs proud by dying in a war, and my parents had put in a lot of hard years teaching at the high school. For those reasons I think the DA over in Ruston was willing to look the other way, but Eliza Anne's parents were out for blood once the whole town knew their business anyhow. The DA told my lawyer that his hands were tied pretty tight on this one.

Door number one: Stand trial and likely go to prison for a spell.

Door number two: Plead guilty to felony carnal knowledge of a juvenile in exchange for probation and registration as a sex offender—but no time behind bars.

And so in September of that year—1998—my lawyer struck the plea deal. I pulled five years of probation and got marked down as a felon and a sex offender. And I'll forever be both in the eyes of the law. Folks can find me on the internet if they care to go looking, and when I

bought my lot in Pelican Acres all the addresses in my zip code got a postcard with my picture on it from the state of Louisiana. Trust me, a thing like that will keep a man from moving around too much if he can help it.

Anyway, after the dust finally settled a bit in Dry Springs, I figured it was finally time to get my affairs in order and then get the hell out of town. I had no living relatives, and so everything my parents left behind went to me. That fall I rented two big climate-controlled storage sheds in Ruston, and then I emptied out the house and sold it. Next, I signed most of my inheritance and more double-indemnity life insurance payouts over to Mr. Donny Lee. I asked him if it was possible for me to retire at thirty if I left all the money alone till then, and Mr. Donny Lee said, You know, I actually don't see why not, son. That's no hill for a stepper. These are real good financial times we're living in. Just mind where you put your pecker for the next ten years.

Because I knew it was what my folks would have wanted, after Christmas I went back to Baton Rouge so I could start up again at LSU, but of course the school wouldn't let me reenroll. That first real slap in the face—that first actual taste of how hard the world was going to be to me thereafter—knocked the wind out of me. And though I suppose I could have looked elsewhere, suddenly I just didn't have the heart for that.

Baton Rouge was the only place other than Dry Springs that I'd ever called home, and so I found a landlord on the bad end of Highland Road greedy enough to rent to my kind. I worked hanging sheetrock for a little while—and then I tried to follow an older woman to New Orleans, but she ordered me gone from her life when she found out about my past. About a month later I answered an ad in the *Times-Picayune* or maybe the *Advocate*. OFFSHORE VACANCIES: HIGH PAY! NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY!—and I guess demand was high because they actually took

me on. I pissed in a cup and got myself hired as a roustabout in the winter of '99, and after a couple of stints I bought the lot in Pelican Acres and the Airstream, then moved to Grand Isle and never really looked back.

It took me about a year to grade up from roustabout to roughneck, and though it was made pretty clear to me that—on account of my record—it was doubtful that I would ever rise any higher, in truth that was just fine by me. I guess I got sucked in by the rhythm of that world. The two weeks of breaking my back out on some rig; the two weeks of rest and recovery in Pelican Acres. I was biding my time, counting the days until January 7, 2008—my thirtieth birthday, my windfall.

The whole time I still had those two storage sheds, and it was nice to know they were there. Twice a year I'd pass through Ruston with the Airstream—on my way north of there for my biannual week of camping at Lake Claiborne State Park—and I always made it a point to go by Peach City Self Storage to check on my effects. Maybe eventually I'd straighten out and want some of the stuff I was keeping in them. Not all the obsolete appliances and outmoded clothes, but the important things. The family pictures and Mama's quilts and Daddy's box of musket balls and arrowheads, the flag they put on my brother's empty coffin.

January 7, 2008 has come and gone now, but I'll always remember what I was thinking when they were flying me north to that hospital. Hang in there, I was telling myself. In a couple of months you'll be an honest-to-God millionaire and can hit reset. Happy birthday to me.

Door number one: Start a new life in some new place.

Door number two: Buy a piece of land near Dry Springs, finally return home and somehow make amends, try to live the life I was meant to live before everything went crazy.

But for the time being that choice could wait. On that helicopter all I knew for certain was that after some eight years I was finally through with the oil patch. I just didn't have the courage for those rigs anymore. They took my finger, but they wouldn't take me.

And so I was done, retired. Or at least that's what I let myself believe.

1998 LOUISIANA REVISED STATUTES

TITLE 14. CRIMINAL LAW

CHAPTER 1. CRIMINAL CODE

PART V. OFFENSES AFFECTING THE PUBLIC MORALS

SUBPART A. OFFENSES AFFECTING SEXUAL IMMORALITY

1. SEXUAL OFFENSES AFFECTING MINORS

§80. Felony carnal knowledge of a juvenile

BATTLE MOUNTAIN

It was only a few weeks after my thirteenth birthday when Tommy vanished in Desert Storm, and it was just like the movies in some ways. January 1991. I'd stayed home sick with a fake cough, and I was flipping through my back-of-the-closet *Playboy* stash when a black car came crunching down the gravel road to our property. Two uniformed men climbed out. One was a chaplain, the other just a regular officer. I answered the door, and though I suspected what this meant, they weren't going to tell me anything. They were both wearing Old Spice, and even now that smell takes me back to that day.

My folks were still over at the high school for some reason, and so the three of us just sat outside and waited. We were on the porch swing, and the chaplain put his arm around me when I started to cry. It was cold out, but I didn't think to invite them inside and they didn't ask. Daddy finally came rolling along in his pickup, and I saw him spider-web his windshield when he spotted us. Mama was out the door before the truck stopped moving, but then her legs collapsed under her. I ran down the porch steps to help her up. I was hugging Mama and Daddy was hugging me. A sad tangle of Josephs hearing a voice like God's voice saying, Sir, Ma'am, I am terribly sorry, your son disappeared in the Persian Gulf during a training exercise. His body is lost at sea.

At dark my parents made room for me in their bed, and we lay there side by side, out of things to say, holding hands like I was still very young and we were off walking together on some sunny afternoon. I didn't know just how bad nightmares could be until that night, and even then I felt like one Roy Joseph was moving out so that another could move in. The old me is someone I can hardly remember.

A year later, after all hope was lost, a service was held at the Methodist Church. The week before we'd gone to a cemetery in Ruston so that my parents could choose a gravesite for Tommy's memorial stone. They bought a plot under a water oak, then put a deposit down on three others adjacent. I probably wasn't supposed to hear that part, but Mama and Daddy were living in such a fog back in those days that sometimes they'd seem to forget that I was around. Within five years they were buried right where they intended. My parents now lie on either side of Tommy's empty grave and there—off to the end, but next to my mother—is the just-in-case spot still waiting for me.

Since I've got no family or final testament I keep one of Mr. Donny Lee's business cards in my wallet. It's tucked right behind Tommy's picture, and on the back I've written down a note:

If I die please call this man. Bury me at Pineview Cemetery in

Ruston, Louisiana. I've got a plot there.

I wrote that out a few years ago, sitting around drunk in the Airstream. Maybe it's dumb, but I honestly don't know how else anyone would have a clue what to do with me.

*

Like I said, a year of purgatory followed that visit from the Grim Reaper Corps before my parents were willing to give up hope that Tommy, or at least his body, would ever be found—

and so his SEAL team platoon was already back stateside by the time we had the memorial service. Five or six of them flew in to pay their respects, and of course most of Dry Springs was there as well. After my folks had gone to bed for the night, a group of us wound up at someone's house over by the interstate. A sad party. I was sitting on a couch—some Puerto Rican kid from Miami and a big guy from out West on either side of me. Both of them were SEALs, and the Puerto Rican was so tired he couldn't even keep his eyes open. They called him Chico. They all went by nicknames mostly. Earlier they'd told me and my parents that Tommy's name was Orion—the hunter.

The big SEAL was drinking way more than the rest of them. He was older than the others, about thirty-five. Old School was his nickname, though once or twice I also heard someone call him Purcell. After the Puerto Rican fell asleep Old School looked over at me and said, I gotta tell you something. I said all right and he stared at me. It wasn't just some stupid training accident, he said. Your brother went out like a hero.

I asked him what he meant by that, but he said he'd spilled too much already. I was just a kid, but I raised my voice a little trying to get more out of him. Tommy's buddies from high school came to make sure that everything was cool, and the SEALs were nice enough not to cripple them. They all had a few beers in them, but those guys acted like professionals when they had to. Even Old School seemed to go from drunk to sober. It was a thing to see, watching them close ranks and be calm all at the same time. Tempers settled, and Old School and the rest of the SEALs pulled out before I could throw any more questions their way. I stayed at the house with the Dry Springs crew, and later that night an old girlfriend of Tommy's convinced the others that she was sober enough to drive me home. I told Caroline what the man called Old School had said

to me, and she just smoothed my hair with her hand and said, Try to forget about it, sweetie. That's not gonna make us hurt any less.

Caroline was twenty-one to my fourteen, and so I took her advice, at least for a while. Still, I did think to find out Old School's real name. Caroline dropped me off in front of my house at some dark hour, and after my mother had finished fussing over me, but before I crashed into my bed, I went and found the guestbook from the memorial service. I read through the names until I hit upon the neat row of SEALs. Lionel Purcell. I scribbled that down on the back of my hand, but there was no real need. It would stay burned in my brain from that day forward.

Years later, once I had an appreciation of the internet and its possibilities, I began to search for Lionel Purcell every now and then on the computers in the Grand Isle library. Nothing showed up until 2003, when I stumbled across a makeshift website. Apparently a guy with that same name ran a guide service out of Battle Mountain, Nevada. I studied photographs of hunters with bloody-mouthed antelope and deer, elk and mountain lions, and then I saw him. He was older and heavier than the man who'd gotten me drunk a decade or so earlier, but—even behind the gunslinger mustache—best I could tell it was him. He was sitting astride a dead buck and frowning at the camera. There was an email address, but I realized that writing him might very well result in *him* googling *me*. Who knows what information that might lead him, and so, out of shame, I never had the balls to push forward. After two years his website disappeared, and I guess I took that as a sign that I should remember what Caroline had told me way back when and leave things alone.

But then Jenny emailed me, and while I waited for her to hopefully write again I decided, fuck it, if a teenage girl out in California could be brave enough to hunt for news of Tommy, then I should suck it up and do the same. Besides, I imagined she would be asking a lot of

questions if I ever found a way to meet her (if she ever even wrote me back or called me, for that matter). Pretty much everything I remembered about Tommy I could tell in under ten minutes, and that had me feeling ashamed. Maybe I was cramming for a test that I would never get to take, but I figured I should at least try to find out what answers I could.

And so one day I went to the Cybermobile and pulled up a map on the computer. Then and there I came to a decision—if I ever actually made that trip to California I'd head north and then take I-80 west. I'd drive right through Battle Mountain and see what came of it. Probably nothing, but at least I could tell Jenny that I'd tried to turn that rock over.

September 2007. The call came very late one night, during the first few days of the month. I was sleeping, and I never heard my cell phone ring. In the morning I saw the missed call—the strange area code that I didn't recognize. Six weeks had passed since I sent that second email to Jenny behind her mother's back, and though I still hadn't heard from her yet, I had a funny feeling that a 2 A.M. no-message phone call might have something to do with this supposed niece of mine.

To the Cybermobile. I searched for the number and found out that it belonged to a San Francisco cell phone. \$4.95 on my credit card bought me a name—Nancy Hammons. So that's got to be the mother, I figured. Either that or Jenny lied about her name.

I didn't find anything about Jenny online, but *Nancy Hammons San Francisco* pulled quite a few hits. I learned that Nancy taught poetry at the University of San Francisco. That she ran a lot of 5Ks. That she didn't look to be married. That she once complained to a newspaper reporter about the teacher-to-student ratio at her daughter Jenny's high school.

The creative writing program's website led me to a picture. Nancy had boy-short hair dyed white blonde and was older than I expected—maybe fifty-five, maybe even sixty. Hell, she could have been *my* mother. Up to that point, for some reason I had Nancy pictured as Tommy's age, were he alive, but of course there was no reason why that had to be. I typed her name into a white pages site, and that gave me an address in San Francisco. So there you go.

I waited a few days, even sent Jenny another email (though, not wanted to spook the girl, I didn't mention her phone call), but I guess whatever nerve she must have built up to reach out to me again had faded away. Still, I had a last name now. I had a city. I had an address.

It was right around that time that I ran into Terry the crew-boat captain and his wife Irena. They were grocery shopping down the road at Sureway, and I pulled him aside to get the number for that marriage broker he had mentioned to me a year or so before. Terry's Viktor was the only other person I knew of in San Francisco, and I suppose I was searching for some reason to maybe find myself there. I wasn't full-on committed to the idea of buying myself a bride—but suddenly everything seemed to be lining up too perfectly to be a coincidence. It wasn't long before I warmed up to the notion.

You see, in *my* mind at least, I didn't come to San Francisco as much as San Francisco came to me.

October 21, 2007. Caminada Pass separates Grand Isle from the mainland, and my LeBaron crossed over the bridge at dawn on a Sunday. I had a sleeping bag and some clothes and whatnot stuffed into my duffle bag, and Sam was stretched out on the bench seat beside me. I'd filled most of a big ice chest in the trunk with food for him, and his bowls and some jugs of water were packed back there as well.

We followed Highway 1 north along Bayou Lafourche, dark and stinking and stagnant, then picked up Highway 90 in Raceland. West of New Orleans we crossed the Mississippi River and quit the highway for the interstate. I-55 took us north to Hammond, and there we left the marsh and the sugarcane and the Catholic majority behind us. We were in the pinewoods now, sweet tea country, and we passed caravan after caravan of dove hunters, on their way to Mississippi to sit in fields of sorghum and millet.

My plan was to stop off in Ruston for one of my once-in-a-blue-moon meetings with Mr. Donny Lee, and the quickest way to get there from Grand Isle is to take 55 into Mississippi, then cut west into north Louisiana on I-20. So first, Mississippi. It was a bit past noon when I hit Jackson and hooked up with I-20. Fifty miles later I arrived in Vicksburg, and since I was hungry and thirsting for a beer, I figured what the hell, I'll quit here for the day. I hadn't made it very

far, but the difficult part—leaving—that had been accomplished. There was need to push myself too hard right out of the gate.

Of course, it's equally true that I was stalling. The high part of Louisiana is just across the river from Vicksburg, and the drive to Ruston would also take me past the exit for Dry Springs. I'd avoided my hometown since my exile in the fall of '98, but for the first time in nine years I was tossing around the idea of taking a look around. That had me feeling uneasy. Maybe just think about it, I told myself. You don't even need to step out of the car.

*

After I got Sam situated in a hotel not far from the interstate, I went hunting for something to do. In Vicksburg that means either the battlefield or the riverboats. I'm not much for stabbing at a draw-to-deal button all day, and so I had a hamburger and a few beers in the hotel restaurant and then went off to look around the park.

Dry Springs is only a couple of hours due west of Vicksburg, and my parents used to take Tommy and me there sometimes when we were kids. Being a history teacher, Daddy loved exploring that battlefield, and there was one spot in particular that he liked best. It had been years, but I found the place without too much difficulty. Along the western edge of the park, about midway up Confederate Avenue, there's a big grassy hill. The states that sent troops to Vicksburg have all erected separate monuments in memory of their soldiers, and atop that hill I could see Louisiana's memorial to its cannon fodder—an eight- or nine-story column of granite crowned with a frozen stone flame. I miss you, Tommy. Thank you for your service and your sacrifice. Or something like that.

I left the LeBaron in the parking lot and hiked to the top of the hill. I was breathing heavily from the climb, and my T-shirt was pasted flat against my back. I looked around and saw

buzzards circling off to the west. This seemed to be the highest point in the entire battlefield. Good ground, those dead generals might have called it. You'd think there would be a constant breeze in such a high place, but there wasn't, at least not that day.

A slice of shade was sundialing off the monument, and even though it was late in October it was still pretty hot outside. I situated myself within the shade and lit a cigarette. My head started to spin, but I kept on smoking. Another drag and I gagged. I threw down the Winston and pressed my hand against the monument to steady myself. The granite was warm against my skin, and my watery eyes focused on the spot where the stone met the grass. I wondered how much of that cut rock lay underground, hidden like the substructure of an oilrig beneath the surface of the Gulf.

I stayed that way—nauseous and propped up by the monument—until finally I heard voices and turned to look behind me. A platoon of Cub Scouts was charging the hill. I wiped the spit from my mouth with the front of my shirt as I watched them come. A dozen or more boys, running.

*

Later, I returned to the Battlefield Inn to walk Sam around the parking lot and then take a nap. I slept longer than I intended, and when I woke up it was after nine o'clock. My stomach was growling, and so I went by the front desk to ask where I might be able to get something decent to eat on a Sunday night in Vicksburg. A pretty girl with a canary yellow handkerchief tied around her neck was working the counter, and she was somehow both freckled and tan. Besides the four casino boats, all she had to recommend was a new place downtown that had steaks and such. She scratched out directions for me. "But you had better hurry," she said.

Downtown was empty and had the stepping-back-in-time, movie-set look of most every downtown in the South—a look like it had boomed once but then died for two generations. Still, Vicksburg’s seemed to be doing better than most, especially for a Mississippi Delta city, and I suppose that’s probably on account of the money that the casinos bring in. A good stretch of the downtown had been cleaned up, and along the brick-paved and lamppost-lit main drag there were a couple of closed-for-the-night antique stores and art galleries, that kind of thing.

The restaurant I was searching for sat on the river side of the street, and I was able to park right out front at the curb. The hostess did her best to smile as I came through the door, but I could tell that her heart wasn’t in it. “Just one?” she asked. Her nametag said Mindy, and she could have been the cousin of the angel over at the front desk of the Battlefield Inn. I envisioned their common ancestor, an Irish cotton trader.

“Yeah,” I said. “Sorry.”

She nodded. “It’s okay. Smoking?”

I snuck a look past her and saw a small bar over in the corner. An old black man was washing glasses and staring back at me. “Can I eat up there?” I asked.

Mindy dealt me a menu from the stack on her podium and seemed relieved. “You bet.” She slid around me and flipped the sign on the door to CLOSED. “Go on ahead,” she said. “Mr. Charlie will take care of you.”

I made my way to the bar and settled onto a stool. The bartender named Mr. Charlie dried his hands slowly on a white towel, but he didn’t look at me. He was staring off at some point in the distance. “Okay,” I said, and he turned my way.

“You about ready?” he asked.

“I guess I am. How you doing tonight?”

“I’m doing.”

Mr. Charlie looked tired. He was too old to be up this late, really, much less tending a bar. “So I guess I’ll have that rib-eye,” I said. “Medium rare.”

“That’d be fine,” said Mr. Charlie, and then he took the menu from me and went into the kitchen. When he came back he handed me a green salad, and I asked him for a double bourbon and an ice water.

Mr. Charlie started to grab a glass but then stopped himself. “Can I see your ID?”

“Come on, really? I’ve got a beard, sir.”

He shrugged. “I got myself in some trouble with the boss lady once. I don’t take no chances no more.”

Son of a bitch. I almost told Mr. Charlie to scratch the bourbon, but I really wanted that drink and so finally I took out my wallet. I handed my drivers license over, then watched his eyes jump when he saw the SEX OFFENDER printed in big orange letters under my picture. I got my bourbon and my ice water, but Mr. Charlie fixed both of them in silence before disappearing into the kitchen again. He’d rather hang out with the chef than with someone like me. There was a TV behind the bar, and I watched NFL highlights as I ate my salad alone. The Saints had beaten the Falcons earlier in the day, but that only put them at two and four for the season. The goddamn Saints.

After a while Mr. Charlie brought the steak out. I went ahead and paid cash so that he could finish doing whatever closing-time things he had to do. He took my money and then went back into the kitchen. Mindy was gone as well, and with no one to talk to I ate quickly. When I was done I waited a bit for Mr. Charlie to come back for some reason. He never did show, and so I got up to leave. For a second I was worried the front door might be locked, but it wasn’t. I

stepped out onto the sidewalk and looked left and right down the street. The LeBaron was the only vehicle around. It was a hot night, and I thought that I heard something like music. I glanced up and then I saw them—small speakers bolted high atop the iron lampposts that lined the street.

I walked out into the middle of the deserted street and listened. It was that old-timey calliope music—the paddleboat kind that reminds me of a circus. Those lamppost speakers seemed like something you would set up in the event of a disaster, a way to calm the masses and keep them from rioting. In an empty downtown it was spooky as hell, and that music made me think that the world had ended while I'd been inside eating my steak. I got into the LeBaron and headed back to the Battlefield Inn. The girl with the yellow handkerchief was gone from the front desk. At some point while I was away she had been replaced by the ugliest man I had ever seen in my life. No kidding. I don't know how to even begin to describe him.

On Monday morning I crossed the river into north Louisiana, pulling into the welcome center to drink some free coffee. I still hadn't decided for certain whether or not to stop off in Dry Springs, but then I got back on the road and as the miles ticked by one after the other and Exit 93 got closer and closer, I guess the need to punish myself somehow won over.

Dry Springs. Population 582. My high school was so small we didn't even field a football team. I had a handful of close friends growing up, but in the end they turned out to be less than loyal. Indeed, the only person from Dry Springs I'd spoken to since moving away was Eliza Anne Sprague, of all people. The first time she reached out to me was not too long after I was turned away by LSU. I'm not sure how she found my address—from the sex offender registry, I imagine—but she sent a letter to my apartment in Baton Rouge. She told me she just wanted to say that she was sorry, that what had come down on me was all her parents' doing, that part of her loved me and maybe always would.

I held on to that letter—even thought that maybe I loved her too—but I didn't write Eliza Anne back. However kind it was for her to reach out, she was still underage. My probation officer had made it clear that I had better stay away from her—that, insofar as the law was concerned, Eliza Anne's feelings on what had happened between us wouldn't change anything for me. All the same, her words did make me feel better. She and I will be tied together forever,

in a way. Things worked out how they did, but they just as easily could have gone differently. In a parallel life Eliza Anne and I are married and living in Dry Springs. We had that kid and are beating the odds.

It was almost six years—in the fall of '05—before I heard from Eliza Anne a second time. I had made my way back down to Grand Isle after evacuating for Rita, and a no-return-address letter from Eliza Anne *Hayes* was waiting for me at the post office. (Again, that registry makes it more than simple to keep tabs on my whereabouts.) Apparently after years of beating herself up for that abortion Eliza Anne had found the Lord, and she claimed that writing me had been her preacher's idea—a tollbooth on her road to salvation was the way he'd put it to her. I was praying so hard for you during the hurricanes, she told me. I really hope you made it through them okay. And she also wanted me to know that I should forgive myself for what I'd done. That I should turn to Jesus myself if I hadn't already because we are sinners all of us. I'm married now, she wrote. My husband Cal is a good man, and we have two precious baby boys, twins. Smile upon the Lord, Roy, and He will surely smile upon you.

The Grand Isle library had been destroyed in Katrina, but when the Cybermobile came into my life in February I wrote to Eliza Anne at the email address she gave me in her letter. I remembered Cal Hayes from high school—he's a year or two older than *me*, for what it's worth. I told Eliza Anne that I was happy for her and that I would think on what she'd said. Lord or no Lord, it was nice of you to write. It does ease my conscience a little to know that you're doing okay.

After that Eliza Anne and I became pen pals of sorts, and we started trading emails every week or so. Over time our notes got longer and longer, more and more personal. I didn't ever ask about Cal, and after that first letter she never much mentioned him. Eventually all talk of religion

fell by the wayside as well—and though we weren't exactly steaming up the Cybermobile—we both took to writing in a playful and teasing sort of tone. That went on for well over a year. I could see that what we were doing wasn't quite right. Sure it was just flirting, but is anything like that ever really harmless?

No, I guess not. One afternoon in June—about a month before my accident—I got an email from Eliza Anne asking for my number, and a few days later she called me. It was just before midnight on a Friday, and I could tell that she'd been drinking. She told me that she was at a camp they'd rented for the week in Toledo Bend, that Cal was out running trotlines on the lake, that the twins were asleep. "I was alone and I wanted to talk to you," she said. "I'm sorry, but my cell phone doesn't work out here. If I have to hang up, don't call this number back."

I hadn't heard her voice since she was a teenager, but even drunk she still sounded just like the girl I remembered. "Okay," I said. "I won't."

There was long silence before she spoke again. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Are you all right?"

She didn't answer, and I thought that maybe she had fallen asleep until she asked me if I remembered our first time together.

I'm not proud of what we did next, in part because it's embarrassing. I asked Eliza Anne where she was. She told me the bed. I asked her what she was wearing. She told me a T-shirt. There was a pause, and then from that point on we pretended that I was there with her—or at least I pretended that. She was moaning and whimpering and even coughing a little before suddenly she hung up the phone, and I took that to mean Cal had come home from fishing. I didn't receive any more calls or letters or emails from Eliza Anne after that night, and I was pretty sure that I wouldn't ever again.

But I did think of her often. Still do—like I said already, we’ll always be linked—and so at the Dry Springs exit I pulled over onto the shoulder of the road and dialed information. The operator gave me a phone number and an address for Cal Hayes, and then, after Highway 80, but just before the train tracks, I made one left then another to hook up with Ballpark Drive. Eliza Anne’s address would be to my right, and I eased off the gas and began reading mailboxes. After a short ways I started to come up on her number, and so I slowed down even more, pushing Sam down flat on the bench seat so that I could see out the passenger-side window as I drove.

Her house was a one-story redbrick with a couple of big pine trees in the front yard, and I almost didn’t notice the girl in the cutoff blue jeans. It was Eliza Anne, I guess. She had her long brown hair tied back, but I couldn’t see her face. She was on her hands and knees pruning an azalea bush. I rolled past, but she never looked my way. When I reached the ballpark I turned around and drove by a second time. Again no look from Eliza Anne, though I did see her quit with her pruning and stare up at the sky. I punched the gas and sped away, the whole time wondering if on that second pass she had somehow felt my presence—even if just as a quick, icy wind on the back of her neck.

*

After visiting upon Eliza Anne I forced myself to head for my family’s old place. I had no real desire to visit—there was no way that could make me feel anything other than sad—but it felt wrong to be back in Dry Springs after so many years and not swing by.

Our property was just outside of town, at the end of a half-mile of gravel that—the year after my brother died—went from being just one more stop off Rural Route 4 to being christened THOMAS JOSEPH RD. We had a little over seven-and-half acres, all of it surrounded by a large tract of pinewoods. There were two fenced pastures and a barn and a garden, a stock pond and a

ranch-style house. My folks were teachers, but they were both raised out in the country and farming was a passion of theirs. At different times we had cattle and sheep, horses and bees. There were always chickens, and every fall we took three hogs to the slaughterhouse. It was work, but fun to grow up around.

I turned off the highway onto my brother's road and drove on down to take a look. It was a Monday so I figured that no one would be home. I'd sold the farm to a young doctor from Ruston with a pretty wife and a baby son. He'd been a nice enough guy, had paid what I was asking without trying to talk me down. It was hard to believe that had been almost a decade ago, that after nine years the farm was every bit their home as it had ever been mine.

Thomas Joseph Road dead-ended at a gate that blocked the entrance to my old driveway, and the first thing I noticed was that my house was gone. Instead of stopping where it was supposed to, the clamshell driveway went straight on through the grassed-over foundation where my house once stood to the far end of the property. There was a new house back there—something of a bantam mansion, really. It had high white columns, wide porches that ran across both the first and second floors.

I studied the young oaks that had been planted on either side of the shell road, and my best estimate was that the doctor had upgraded to his plantation house about four or five years ago. Young doctors with student loans become old doctors with money to burn, and so I guess that made sense. But that didn't make it sting any less. He'd had to take down a fence and sacrificed a pasture to accomplish his *Gone with the Wind* fantasy. What once had been ryegrass seeded here and there with turnip was now as smooth and as clipped as the fairway of some private golf course. I looked east out over the sole remaining pasture half-expecting to see cotton and slaves, and about two hundred yards off there was a herd of long-necked, brown-and-white

some things huddled along the bank of the pond, not too far from the rise in the land where my father collected the dirt trapped in my necklace vial. At first I couldn't quite make them, and so I sat there with Sam until I realized just what I was looking at. Jesus Christ. Llamas.

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In twenty minutes I was in Ruston, and Mr. Donny Lee was locking the door to his small office downtown when I pulled up. It had only been a couple of years—we do most of our talking on the phone—but it was clear that at first he didn't recognize me. To tell the truth he looked like a very different man himself. He was older, sure—close to seventy, I suppose—but that wasn't it. His clothes were the thing. The gray Stetson and the lizard boots, the bolo tie with the silver clasp. He was dressed like an oilman. I apologized to him for not calling first, and he checked his watch and said, No problem, son. I'm off to a card table in Boomtown, but I can always spare a few minutes for an old friend like you.

We met for a half hour in his office, and then I let him split for Bossier City. There wasn't a whole lot to discuss, really, and I spent more time telling him what happened to my finger than he spent talking about my finances. The market had been breaking records lately, and my account was at close to two million dollars. I explained that I was through with working, and then I reminded him that I would be turning thirty in January, that I would soon be looking to start selling some of my stocks and bonds. He frowned when I told him that—but then he laughed and said that he would leave trying to change my mind for another day. Call me after your thirtieth, and we'll talk all this all out. I'll quit making you money if that's what you really, really want. And then he slapped me on the back and we went our separate ways.

My next stop in Ruston was Peach City Self Storage to check on my belongings, and I searched one dusty shed and then the other before I found the big photo album that I wanted to

bring out to San Francisco in case the opportunity to meet Jenny presented itself. Trips to the sheds are always a little overwhelming for me. As someone who goes through such lengths to keep his life simple, knowing that I still have all these things to account for eventually can make me break out in a sweat. I mean, I do want a lot of it—or at least I think I will one day—but then why do I sometimes find myself daydreaming about a fire in Peach City Self Storage? A raging blaze that takes all of it off my shoulders? I love the sound those roll-up doors make when they come rumbling down, the snap of the padlocks before I walk away.

After the storage sheds came the flower shop and the cemetery. I bought three bundles of carnations and set them out along the headstones at Pineview. They looked nice enough, but the petals were already starting to wilt at the edges. I'm always at least six months between these visits, yet I can never bring myself to buy plastic lilies and silk roses. Even dead flowers aren't nearly as depressing as those fake ones are.

I didn't last much longer at the cemetery than the ten minutes or so that it took for me to smoke a cigarette. I guess some people are cemetery people and some people aren't. Me, I see a graveyard and don't feel anything but my own selfish fears. After so many years of being chained to Grand Isle, nothing scares me worse than the thought of spending eternity planted in the same quiet place. It makes me a little glad that Tommy escaped that fate—even though that also means that the grave between my parents is empty. As I was walking back to the LeBaron I remembered that note in my wallet, and I wondered, not for the first time, if it would be too much of a betrayal if I just asked them to burn and scatter me.

Not so long ago I used to make myself cry on these trips to Pineview. In fact I wouldn't let myself take off until I did. I'd stand there thinking about all the bad things that have happened

to me in my life—and yeah, sure, tears would finally come—but when I was through I wouldn't leave there feeling any better. Indeed, if anything all that crying always left me feeling worse.

And then one night offshore I watched an interview on satellite with this beautiful actress. The guys were talking about all the different ways they wanted to give it to her, but I was actually listening to what she was saying. The interviewer had just asked her how she goes about gearing herself up for a crying scene, and the actress was breaking down her method. First I have to go to a dark place in my mind, she explained. I think about 9/11. I think about Hurricane Katrina and all those poor people in New Orleans. She started to cry, right there while she was being interviewed, and as she wiped at her eyes it dawned on me that even that ditzy fucking lollipop might have more of a soul than I did.

You see, I know from all those hours of forced crying I've spent at Pineview that only pondering all of my own bad luck, not the sufferings of others, will ever bring any tears to *my* eyes. And I'm afraid that means that at best I'm self-centered—and that at worst I might even be an evil person, that I might be so twisted and damaged that society would be better off without me. Since none of that is too fun to think about, from then on at Pineview I always just smoked my one cigarette and left.

*

After the cemetery I picked up a few things from Winn-Dixie and drove the forty miles north to Lake Claiborne State Park. With school on and the weekend over I had the whole place pretty much to myself. I dropped close to a hundred bucks for a huge cabin right by the lake, and then for supper I cooked corn and onions and chicken on the grill. Lake Claiborne is another spot that my parents liked to take us to a lot, and I had enough good memories from there that I'd kept on coming up over the years.

I had a tackle box and a little Daiwa ultralight stashed in the LeBaron's trunk, and the next day I woke early and pulled it out. I spent the morning walking barefoot along the concrete bulkhead of the lake, casting a beetlespin for bass and sacalait just like Tommy and me used to do as kids. The water was shining in the sun, and at some point while I was fishing I decided against leaving off for California just yet. I put in for another hundred-dollar night in the cabin, and that last evening in Louisiana, eating grilled fish on the porch with Sam, planning to sleep once more, not in a travel trailer or on an oilrig or a hotel room, but in something like an actual house, I stared up at the star-splashed sky and was certain that the world was getting its first glimpse of what life might one day look like for Roy Joseph, millionaire.

From Lake Claiborne it took me three ten-hour driving days—one night in Wichita, followed by a night in Cheyenne—to reach Battle Mountain. The city sat on either side of three miles of flat, high-desert highway that ran alongside I-80 in northern Nevada. There wasn't much there, and what was left looked to be slowly dying. The railroad—the Union-Pacific, I think—cut through the center of town before continuing on west with the interstate, and the here-and-there businesses I saw were mostly what I'd expected: gas stations and trucker motels, a few dingy restaurants and some sad, sad barrooms and pocket casinos. Somewhere among Battle Mountain's two thousand residents was living Lionel Purcell. Old School.

The trailers in Battle Mountain must outnumber the houses by at least three to one, and west of town the desert rose up into a series of low mountains scarred by fires and strip mines. On the high slope of a near foothill some long ago fool had arranged thousands of whitewashed rocks to spell out "BM" in enormous block letters. Jesus, the work that must have gone into that. I don't know what battle was ever fought up there in those mountains, but if that town holds the winners I don't ever want to see the place the losers were sent to live. These are my people, I was thinking.

That morning I'd stopped at a rest stop somewhere in southern Wyoming to let Sam run around a bit. It was empty save for me and a couple of truckers, napping in their idling rigs. A

chill, dry wind was whipping across the parking lot, and I kept Sam close so that he could hear me if I needed to whistle him in. The barren and brown land that stretched all around us was as level as the Gulf just before a storm, but in the far distance I could see mountains.

The rest stop itself was just a collection of brick buildings surrounded by some metal picnic tables, and I couldn't shake the feeling that some horrible, horrible things had happened there, that after miles of lonesome but beautiful landscape I'd arrived upon a murder stadium, a rape arena. It's as if, with no obvious place to act out and be evil, man just had to go and build one.

I walked to the edge of the parking lot and watched Sam venture into the sagebrush and clump grass. Off to my right a slanted signboard sat bolted atop a rusting pedestal, and I went to it. Sealed beneath dusty plexiglass was the painted picture of a gaunt man pulling a big, two-wheeled cart, that and a photo of an antelope. Positioned between them was a single long paragraph.

THE RED DESERT

At the heart of the Rocky Mountains the Continental Divide splits to form a broad desert basin, one of the most spectacular landscapes in North America. Covering over five million acres of open country, this high-altitude desert contains the largest unfenced area remaining in the continental United States—land that serves as a true “home on the range” for over 50,000 pronghorn antelope, as well as a rare desert elk herd. For thousands of years the Red Desert has been a sacred place of worship for the Shoshone and Ute Tribes—and mountain men, pioneers, Pony

Express riders, and Mormon settlers also found important landmarks among the desert's features, guiding them west toward Oregon, Washington, Utah, and California.

But not Nevada, not even way back then. And that made me wonder about Lionel Purcell, ponder what type of person would choose to put his roots down there. I looked closer at the picture of the man on the signboard. The cart he was pulling was piled high with his belongings, and though the muscles in his neck and arms bulged, his head was craned forward, his eyes gazing earnestly at some distant horizon. It'd been less than two hundred years since Americans started crossing that big desert, but in that time we'd somehow gone from him with his handcart to me with my LeBaron.

I turned and stared at the interstate stretched out behind me. Five cars zipped by, two heading east, three pushing west. At the far end of the parking lot, a trucker was sitting in his rig with the door open, a magazine folded over in one hand, a cigarette cupped in the other. He was a Mayflower driver, and that steel shell he was hauling held most everything some family owned in the world. I looked from the trucker to the signboard and back again. Two hundred years, a snap of the fingers in the grand scheme of things.

And then came the Google car. I watched a tan Chevrolet Cobalt slip onto the entrance for the rest stop, and then eventually it pulled into a parking spot just a few spaces over from the LeBaron. The car had a metal pole protruding from the top of it, and a sticker on the side read GOOGLE MAPS in a rainbow of happy colors.

The door to the Cobalt opened and out stepped a black man wearing khakis and a white polo. I was about fifty yards away, waiting for Sam. The man nodded to me and I nodded back, and then he drained the last sip from a silver can and started walking toward the restrooms. His

keys were in his left hand, and he pointed them back over his shoulder. I heard the Cobalt horn give a quick yelp as its doors locked.

I called Sam in, and we waited until the guy had disappeared inside the men's room before we went over to his car. A kind of steel boom was affixed to the roof, and on top of the boom was a cluster of cameras. I circled around and counted nine cameras in all. They sat pointed just about level with my head.

There was a metallic tick issuing from beneath the Cobalt—the exhaust system, cooling—and a bright glare was coming off the windows. I leaned closer so that I could peer inside. A laptop computer was attached to the console, and the backseat was buried under fast food bags and empty cans of Red Bull. The laptop was open, but I couldn't read the screen.

I turned around and saw the black man easing toward me in a wary sort of way. I put my hands up to let him see that I meant no harm. The man smiled at me. He was older, and a thick tube of fat ran above the waistband of his khakis. Something about him made me think family man, nice guy.

“Hey,” I said to him. “So this is how it's done, huh?”

The man chuckled and then sighed when the cell phone on his belt began to chime. “Just a second there,” he said. He slid the phone from its holster and pressed it against his ear.

I looked around and saw that Sam had wandered. He was back at the desert edge, exploring. I called him in, and while the man saw to his phone call I put Sam inside the LeBaron. None of that took more than a minute, but in that time the Google car left off to continue shrinking the world. I turned and saw the Cobalt gliding back out to the interstate, the contraption on its roof looking like the naked mast of a sailing ship.

It was late on Friday evening when I arrived in Battle Mountain, and I spent my first night in town holed up in a motel/casino/restaurant/bar. My room had no phone, though inside the nightstand I did find a tattered Lander County phone book lying in between a Bible and the Book of Mormon. I'd looked up Lionel Purcell's address, but in the morning the leathery woman at the front desk wouldn't help me with directions.

“What's there?” she asked.

“A man named Lionel Purcell.”

“What you wanting with Lionel?”

The woman's nose looked like a dried fig, as if God had cursed her for sticking it in everyone's business. I told her that what I wanted with Lionel was between me and Lionel, and she just sneered and walked away. To hell with her—I figured I could find his place soon enough on my own. I went back to my room and took a shower. I'd just gotten dressed when there was a knock at my door.

*

Lionel Purcell was as big as I remembered him. Tall—every bit of six four—and built like a steer wrestler. And, indeed, he was outfitted for a rodeo. He had black Justin Ropers on his feet and a straw cowboy hat on his head, was wearing dark blue Wranglers and a stiff turquoise shirt.

“Hey,” I said. “You’re Lionel.”

He looked past me, searching the dim room with flat gray eyes. He had the same moustache as in his photo on the internet, a thick yellow horseshoe like the one Hulk Hogan sports. There were some flecks of silver in it, and I guessed that he was in the neighborhood of fifty. Those eyes settled back down on me. “I am, I am,” he said, his voice deep and drawling. “And you’re Ahab’s kid brother.”

I’d thought Tommy’s nickname was Orion—that’s what the SEALs had all told us at the memorial service—but when he was alive my brother never said anything to me about a nickname, Orion or otherwise. “You mean Tommy?” I asked.

“Right. Tommy.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m Roy. How’d you know?”

“You look like him, man. An older, hairier version, at least.”

“Oh.”

“Good to see you again.” He held out his hand, palm up, and I shook it. Sam had been asleep on the cool tile in the bathroom, and he came out then to see who was at the door. Lionel glanced over at him, and his lips formed a thin smile. “Come on with me,” he said. “I’m not letting the two of you stay in this shithole.”

*

Apparently the woman at the front desk had called Lionel—right after she phoned a cop cousin of hers and had him run my Louisiana tags. Small towns are all the same in a way. After thinking on my last name, Lionel had put two and two together.

I moved my bags and Sam’s bowls to my trunk, then went to square up while Lionel waited in his red dually pickup. Fig Nose was still working. She lit a long cigarette when I came

through the door, and she seemed disappointed that Lionel hadn't murdered me. I laid my key down on the counter, and Fig Nose pointed her cigarette at me like a little wand. I waited for her to speak but she didn't say anything. The glowing tip of her menthol was tracing tiny circles in the air between us.

“Well, all right,” I told her. “You be good.”

The weather outside was nice—fall weather—cold but not too cold. I started up the Lebaron and followed Lionel a short ways east on the main road through town, then we cut left and crossed over the railroad tracks. He was driving his diesel Dodge, and for some reason the double tires on the rear axle put me in mind a giant red spider. A sun-baked sticker on the bumper read: KEEP NEVADA WILD! Rednecks love their stickers. I suppose that's as true in the West as it is anywhere.

Sam sat up on the bench seat, taking it all in with me. Usually he's happy to just stretch out and relax, his head pushed up against my thigh, but ever since we got out of the South he had been showing a greater interest in the landscape. The day before, the salt flats in Utah had seemed to rattle him. As we crossed over that white wasteland from time to time he would glance over at me with a look like, Hey, holy shit, are you seeing all this, Boss?

And that was the exact look he gave me when we reached Lionel's trailer. Lionel lived on a dirt lot next door to a clapboard brothel house, and I think if I had to choose between Lionel or Rhonda's Ranch as my neighbor I'd go with Rhonda and her girls, hands down. A wide, scrap-wood deck seemed to wrap around all four sides of his singlewide, as if the trailer had been dropped onto some kid's clubhouse. Sheets of corrugated tin ran the entire length of one property line—a windbreak, I figured—but Lionel's border with Rhonda's Ranch was unobstructed.

Lionel turned off the road and parked his truck a few yards from the crooked steps that led up to his ramshackle deck. I waited at the curb until he slid out of his cab onto the hardpan. He kicked at a big ball of chicken wire, and it went bouncing across the lot like a silver tumbleweed. Two old tires that had been filled with potting soil were now sprouting high lime weeds, and Lionel motioned for me to pull in between them, pumping both arms like he was parking a fighter jet on the flight deck of an aircraft carrier.

I looked over at Sam and saw that he was still watching me. “Well,” I told him, “I guess we’re really gonna do this.” Sam kept on staring, listening but not understanding, as I slapped the LeBaron into drive and went creeping onto Lionel’s property.

*

Two couches had been wedged inside the living room of Lionel’s trailer, and there were also books and bookshelves everywhere. There was no TV, just a small radio in the corner that was playing country music.

Stationed between the couches was a long, low coffee table made entirely of welded steel. The table was only a foot or so high, and Lionel pointed it out to me as soon as we stepped inside. “Watch out for that there,” he said. “It’s a leg breaker.” He sat down on one couch, and I sat down in the other. Sam laid himself out on the tan carpet, his back pushed up against the side of the coffee table. Both couches were covered in a brown, leatherette material that was ripped in places and showing synthetic clouds of white batting. Thin gold curtains covered the windows, tinting the sunlight amber.

Lionel took off his cowboy hat and placed it among the paperback thrillers and mysteries—field guides for animals and plants and birds—spread across the coffee table. His blond hair was a lot longer than I’d thought; he had it tied up in some kind of samurai topknot. A

ceiling fan above us was rotating slowly, stirring the air, but all those books gave the trailer the musty smell of a library. Sam sneezed from his spot on the floor, and I asked Lionel if it was really all right for him to be in there with us. “I can set him up somewhere outside,” I said. “No problem.”

“Leave him be,” said Lionel. “He’s fine.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay then,” I said. “Thanks for putting us up.”

Lionel nodded and pulled a can of Copenhagen from the front pocket of his shirt. He tapped the edge of the can against his belt buckle and then whipped his hand three times, thumping his index finger against the lid so as to pack the tobacco tight. He waved the can at me, but I shook my head.

“Beer?” he asked. “Coffee? Water? Milk?”

“Water’d be all right.”

Lionel twisted the tin lid off the Copenhagen can, then maneuvered a wedge of tobacco into his bottom lip. When he had his dip situated he replaced the lid and snapped his fingers to clean them. Flecks of tobacco went bouncing across the coffee-table like fleas at play. “Sure thing,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

Lionel went into the kitchen and filled a Tupperware bowl with water. He placed it on the carpet beside Sam’s head, then went back and topped off a coffee mug from the tap for me. He’d grabbed himself a glass jar to spit in, lining the inside with a paper towel to keep it from spilling or splashing. The radio station was playing old country music, the outlaw classics. Lionel settled back onto the couch. His hair had come untied and was hanging down in his face. He flicked his

head back and then spit into the jar. He was looking at my left hand. “How’d you lose that?” he asked.

“Working,” I told him, “out on an oilrig back home.”

“I imagine that’ll do it.”

“It did.”

Lionel scratched the side of his neck. “So I’m guessing you’ve come here to talk to me about your brother.”

“Yeah.” I took a sip of the cool water. “And I’m sorry for dropping in on you like this, but that just seemed easier somehow than calling or writing or whatever.”

“Driving to Nevada is easier?”

“I’m going to California. San Francisco. I found your website a while back, and so I thought you might still be living here. It wasn’t all that far out of my way to swing by.”

“Not really *on* your way though either. And how come now, after all these years?”

“Tommy’s got a kid in San Francisco. A teenage girl.”

“What?”

“The mother tracked some donated sperm back to him, and not too long ago the daughter sent me an email.”

“You’re fucking lying!”

I shook my head.

“Then *they’re* lying, and you’re caught up in some psyops. That dog nailed her.”

“No,” I said. “I think they’re on the level.”

“Why the hell would he be doing that?”

“I have no idea. Maybe money, but I don’t think there’s all that much you can make.”

“You can rule out money,” said Lionel. “Tommy was pulling bank for a single guy.”

“That was my thinking too.”

“So then maybe he was doing it just because he thought he should be doing it—charity, I mean.”

“That’s all I can come up with.”

Lionel shrugged. “I guess that’s sort of nice. Fucking weird, though.”

“He did make one woman happy.”

“And you’ve been talking to them?”

“I just traded emails with the daughter—but yeah, the mother and I have been in touch.”

Lionel ran his hand down across his moustache. “They’re the ones needing money, that or one of your kidneys.”

“I doubt they’d have a claim to any of that. Legally, I mean.”

“I reckon they wouldn’t,” said Lionel. “But that doesn’t mean that they won’t be asking.”

“I don’t think they will be. This was really all my idea, going out there.”

“You sure about that?”

I told Lionel that I was.

“What all do you know about the mother?”

“Not much, really. She’s a poet, teaches at a college out there.”

“What’s her name?”

“Why?”

He picked up one of the paperbacks from the coffee table and waved it at me. The book had a big metal spider on the cover. *Charlotte Lurking*, it was called. “I don’t just like this fun stuff,” he said. “I read some poetry here and there.”

“It’s Nancy. Nancy Hammons.”

Lionel tossed *Charlotte Lurking* back onto the table and then shook his head. “Nope. Never heard of her. Lesbo?”

“Seems likely.”

“Seems more than likely.”

“I suppose.”

“Maybe even a virgin birth then.”

“Maybe.”

“There could be a dozen more kids of his out there.”

“True enough.”

“Want some advice?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

“Then I won’t say no more.” He floated one of his eyebrows. “Man, you seem like a frayed rope. How old are you?”

“Thirty come January.”

Lionel nodded. “Thirty’s a raider, messed me up for a good while.” He rolled his spit jar between his hands and chuckled. “That girl picked a bad, bad time to write you.”

“I’m working my way through it,” I said.

He kicked at the coffee table with the toe of his boot. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have any pictures or nothing. I was never big on all that.”

“That’s okay. I just thought we could talk a little.”

Lionel put on his hat and stood up. “Let’s go sit out back,” he said.

Five dog kennels were lined up along the rear of his property, right where the dust of his lot ended and the crushed-stone ballast of the railroad tracks began. There came the howl of multiple hounds, but Lionel whistled and they immediately quieted. He settled into a rusty folding chair and motioned for me to do the same. The door to the trailer was left open, and Sam lay down in the doorway, staring out at the hounds.

“What you got in there?” I asked.

“Treeing Walkers,” he said. “Those are my lion dogs.”

“Are you still a hunting guide?”

“Sometimes. I’ve let my life get away from me a bit lately.”

Morning had faded, and the day was warming. The sky matched the turquoise color of Lionel’s shirt. Not too far from the hound kennels stood a big windowless work shed made out of the same corrugated tin as his half-ass windbreak. The wide double doors were chained closed and padlocked.

“What do you wanna talk about?” Lionel asked.

“Well, for one, why’d you call him Ahab earlier?”

“Ahab was what he went by.”

“But what about Orion?”

“The constellation?”

“No. As a nickname.”

“*Operator* name, you mean.”

“Okay, as an operator name.”

“Orion?”

“Yeah.”

Lionel shook his head. “No way anybody would ever get called that. We weren’t superheroes.”

“Y’all told my family that it was Orion. I’m not wrong.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

Lionel grunted. “Orion, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Orion.”

“I don’t remember us saying that.”

I was getting frustrated. “Tell me about Ahab then. Why that?”

He sat there on the deck, quiet and thinking. A Peterbilt parked in the wide gravel lot behind Rhonda’s Ranch, then the lanky driver ambled around to the front door of the house and went inside. A long while passed before Lionel spoke. “Okay,” he said finally, “I think I remember now.”

“Yeah?”

“You gotta understand, Roy, these names we went by, they didn’t really mean jack shit. Something would stick and we’d go with it. Old School, they called me—because I was older.”

“I know. I remember.”

“And before that it was Cowboy.” He plucked his finger against the curled brim of his hat. “So then you see it’s not rocket surgery.”

“Fine, sure, but I still don’t get why y’all called him Ahab.”

Lionel stood up and went to the edge of his rail-less deck. Just then the back door to Rhonda’s Ranch opened and a grown woman in teenage pigtails waved to him. She was wearing a short plaid skirt and white knee socks. The skinny trucker came out behind her, and they

walked together to his rig and climbed up into the cab. Lionel glanced over and saw me watching them. “Some of the guys prefer that,” he said. “Don’t like making it on a whorehouse mattress.”

The door to the rig slammed shut. “Seems reasonable,” I said.

The lion dogs were at it again, but this time Lionel let them keep on. “Also seems like a good way for a woman to get herself killed,” he said, and then he turned back around and faced me. His heels were hanging halfway off the plywood. “It was me who thought up Ahab,” he said. “I was older, had already been seven years with Team 3 when your brother was assigned to my same platoon. He came onboard without an operator name and that was no good. Bad luck.”

“So Ahab like in *Moby Dick*?”

“Nah, Ahab like in ‘Ahab the A-rab.’ You know, the Ray Stevens song.”

“What?”

“Ray Stevens.”

“I don’t get it.”

“But you do know Ray Stevens, right?”

“The country guy who had all the joke songs?”

“They weren’t all joke songs. The man sang ‘Sunday Morning Coming Down’ before Kristofferson *or* Cash.”

“All right, *mostly* joke songs then.”

“Mostly joke songs, that’s true. Just not all.”

“So what’s Ray Stevens got to do with Tommy?”

“Ever hear ‘Misty’? That’s an old jazz song he covered in the 70s—his is the country version.”

“Maybe. Is it the one with all the banjo playing?”

“Right. Big hit. And also not a joke song, by the way.” Lionel made double fists and then started to punch his hands together. “The CO at the base in Coronado had this daughter. Misty. Crazy gal, but a fine little thing. She came home from college for the summer and was living on base.” He smiled. “Your brother wouldn’t ever talk about it, but the rumor was that the Coronado police caught him and Misty drinking and fooling around out on the beach one night. Her daddy being who he was, I guess they decided to spare this kid having his balls cut off—but from then on, I’d see your brother, I’d start singing a Ray Stevens song. Not ‘Misty,’ that would’ve been too obvious, but all the rest of them. ‘The Streak,’ ‘Harry the Hairy Ape,’ that one about the squirrel getting loose in the church.”

“And ‘Ahab the A-rab.’”

“Bingo.” Lionel shrugged. “Before long we all just settled on calling him Ahab.”

I waited for him to keep going, but he was through. “That’s the story?” I asked.

Lionel spit and then laughed. “That’s it,” he said. “It’s a nothing story, really.”

I nodded, but I guess it was something. I did like hearing about Tommy on the beach with a pretty girl, a world away from Dry Springs. Young and on his own and happy—at least until those MPs came along. I put up my hands. “But then why the name Orion?” I asked. “Why would y’all tell us that?”

Lionel jumped down onto the dirt, then laid his arms out flat across the deck. “Again, I don’t remember ever saying that, but I’m guessing it was just something we came up with to keep from having to tell your family then what I’m telling you now. I’m guessing Orion seemed bigger, better. Does that make any sense?”

“A little.”

He began to drum his fingers on the plywood. “I’ve got an old Jeep back in that shed. Wanna see it?”

“Sure,” I said. “But not just yet.”

He looked up at me. “Yeah?”

“There were some other things you said to me. You remember?”

“I did a lot of drinking that night. I remember *that*.”

“You told me that he wasn’t killed in a training accident. You told me that he went out like a hero. Those were your exact words.”

“Come on. Really?”

“Yeah.”

Lionel took off his hat and set it down on the deck. “I don’t know what to say. I shouldn’t have ever told you that.”

“If it’s a secret and you can’t talk about it, I understand. I really do—but if you do tell me you have my word that it stays with me.”

Lionel sighed. “There’s nothing to tell. They had us on an underwater training exercise way out in the Persian. Tommy was with us and then he was gone. He must have blacked out or something, got swept off with the current. I don’t know.”

“That’s pretty much the same as what the Navy told us.”

“Well, that was what happened,” said Lionel. “I’m sorry, man. You were just a kid. It’s like with that name Orion. My drunk ass must have thought it might make you feel better about things.”

I kept quiet and stared down at him, trying to make myself mad, but Lionel wouldn’t look at me. Finally I spoke. “That’s the real truth about how he died?”

He nodded. “It is. Again, I am sorry. It was a stupid thing to do if I said that.”

“You did say it. I’ve had sixteen years to think on it.”

“Fuck,” said Lionel. He slapped the deck hard. “Still, that don’t mean he wasn’t a hero, having it happen like it did.”

He did seem upset, and I was pretty sure he wasn’t acting. Not this time around, at least. This had been Tommy’s friend. Hell, for all I knew he *had* indeed told me what I needed to hear that night. “It’s all right,” I said. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

*

I spent most of Saturday in the shed with Lionel, helping him install some off-road KC lights across the hardtop of his Jeep—an old two-seater military Willys from the forties. Lionel had an icebox in the shed that was stocked with gold cans of Coors, and it was nice to take it easy and work at a problem that I knew could be solved.

Earlier Lionel had pointed to a range of mountains off to the east and told me that those were the Rubies. Apparently he spent a lot of time with his Willys up in those mountains, and I had been lucky to catch him in town. He said he paid an autistic kid down the street to check his mailbox and tend to the hounds whenever he was away, and besides monthly bills to send out and government checks to deposit, that was about it for Lionel’s obligations and responsibilities.

I once heard someone say that there are water people and mountain people, and though a man could certainly enjoy both his soul was aligned with either one or the other. If that’s true, then with me it’s water. Even later, out in San Francisco—where people were stacked like cordwood—I would look out at the Pacific Ocean and feel a loosening. I appreciate the beauty of mountains, but after a while among them I start to suffer from an awareness of being landlocked, hemmed in.

Lionel Purcell, on the other hand, was a mountain man. That was clear enough. I remember the way he would squint at the distant hills while we talked, like he couldn't wait for the conversation to end so that he could bolt on up there. I sense he got more than his fill of water during his career in the Navy, that for the sake of his soul he planned on spending as many of his remaining days as possible in the high country, righting his balance after so many lost years. He could go and get lost in his mountains, and thinking on that, I suppose it's true that whatever freedom I see in water is mostly an illusion—that water traps more than it liberates me, that, gazing at the sea from some beach or some oilrig, I'm no more free than a man staring out the window of a prison cell.

*

It was late in the day when we finished wiring the KC lights. The temperature was dropping, and I walked Sam to the outskirts of town and let him run the desert. When we returned I saw Lionel standing at the edge of his property line, talking to one of the girls from Rhonda's Ranch. Despite the cold she was dressed like a pink genie, was even wearing a bubblegum veil and heels. Lionel waved when he saw me, then he said something to the genie. She rubbed at her bare arms and then hugged him before wobbling back inside.

I waited for Lionel on the deck of his trailer. I was thinking about my sad night with that poor lingerie girl Sierra when he came striding over. "You hungry?" he asked.

Except for a few strips of elk jerky that he'd given me earlier in the shed, I hadn't eaten since my four-egg breakfast that morning. "Yeah," I told him. "Let me buy you dinner somewhere."

"No need," said Lionel. "We just got invited to supper over at Rhonda's."

"By who? Was that Rhonda?"

“There’s not a Rhonda. Not no more.”

“I’m not looking for anything but dinner.”

Lionel laughed and climbed the cinderblock steps up onto the deck with me. “You think I am? I get to see the monkeys who come in and out of there. No thanks.” He opened the door and let Sam inside the trailer. The sun was setting over the hills to the west, and Lionel went silent to watch it. For a minute or so the entire world was red. “Let’s go,” he said at last. “You don’t even need to bring your wallet.”

“Why then? Let’s just hit a restaurant.”

“You like football?”

“I like football.”

“Fucking Tiger fan, I bet.”

“Sure. Maybe not as much as I used to be, but yeah.”

“Just like Ahab.” Lionel vaulted himself off the deck, spreading his long arms like he was a batman. His boots landed hard in the dirt, and he stumbled forward but then caught himself and turned. I could tell that he’d hurt himself a little. It was a dumb thing to do; he wasn’t a young guy. He started walking backwards toward Rhonda’s. “So then follow me,” he said.

*

The front door to Rhonda’s opened into a large room that served as the lounge. The thick carpet was the color of dried blood, and there were couches and a few scattered tables, an ATM in the corner. Along one wall was a bar with eight stools, and behind the bar was a framed and smoke-stained painting of a naked woman with long black hair and melon tits, hips like the flanks of a quarter horse.

The bartender was an older woman with big glasses and red hair. Her name was Alice. Lionel introduced us, and she shook my hand without saying hello. Off to the side of the painting a small TV stared out from a cluster of liquor bottles. Alice passed Lionel the remote, and then she gave each of us a bottle of Coors as he flipped through the channels. He clicked his bottle against mine without looking away from the TV. We were alone now. Alice had disappeared somewhere down the hall. The television was on mute, but there was music playing—Top Forty stuff, mostly.

“Where are the girls?” I asked.

Lionel grinned. “Change your mind?”

“No. Just curious what we’re doing here.”

“Alice has a big group coming in tonight. She wants me to hang out and look mean.”

“You do this a lot?”

“When I’m in town.” Lionel lifted his bottle. “She feeds me for it.”

He’d just found the football game he was searching for when the front door opened and about ten guys came walking in. They were all young men in their early twenties, and from their jeans and dusty work boots I had them figured as mineworkers, construction crew. They gathered in the center of the room, stealing shy glances over at us as they milled about.

Lionel spun around on his stool, lifting his cowboy hat in the air until the boys looked at him. “Go on and kick back,” he told them. “Somebody’ll be right out.” He whistled and then from down the hall I heard Alice say, All right, all right, I’m on my way.

In a few minutes Alice came hurrying into the room, and by then the ten boys had arranged themselves on the various velvet couches and chairs. Lionel wasn’t paying her any mind. His attention was on the football game, some Mountain West matchup I couldn’t have

cared less about. LSU was off for the week, and so I didn't even have a score to look for. Instead I had my back against the bar and was zoned in on Alice. She'd lit herself a cigarette and was pacing. "Listen up," she said. "I recognize a couple of your faces, and if you already know the drill then I apologize."

Apparently that was news to those boys. They were needling one another, trying to figure out who had been to Rhonda's before, when Alice snapped her fingers and all eyes went back to her. "Bear with me now," she said. "The quicker I'm done, the quicker you can get started." She jerked her thumb in the direction of the hall behind her. "That there," she said, "is what we call the Hallway to Heaven. I've got four rooms, and inside each room I've got a lady. To save all of us some time, we're gonna do without the usual meet-and-greet."

Lionel shot her a look. "So no lineup?"

"No lineup," said Alice. "I'm trying something new."

"Interesting," said Lionel.

Alice went to the end of the bar and rifled through a stack of laminated pages. Each had a name written in pink type beneath a photo of a woman. She set aside four of these, then handed them to the closest of the miners, a big-eared kid in a wrist cast. "Tonight there's Ruby, Lolita, Fawn, and Jeannie," she said. "You boys figure out who wants who, and then I'll send you on down to her room and we'll get this party started. The ladies are in there waiting."

"Ruby like the mountains," Lionel whispered to me.

A boy in a black Dale Earnhardt jacket raised his hand, and Alice pointed at him. "Go on," she said.

"What if there's one of them ain't none of us wants?" he asked. "Or like what if all of us want the same one?"

Alice shrugged. “We’re open all night,” she said. “Play it however you wanna play it.” She made a finger pistol. “Some fellas even like the gangbang experience, so if you want maybe I can put three or four of you in the room with Fawn at once. That something you might be into? I can ask her.”

Earnhardt shook his head.

“Well, think about it,” said Alice. “It’s not out of the question.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Earnhardt.

“Okay,” said Alice. “Once I put you in a room, the lady will go through a party menu with you. From that point on all negotiations are between you and her. After you choose, she’ll do a quick DC—dick check—to make sure that you’re okay down there, and assuming that you are, you’ll be asked to pay before she starts the clock. In that room she’s the boss, got it?” The boys all nodded, and Alice clapped her hands together. “Great, then that should about cover the basics. Lionel over here just has a few things to add.”

At the sound of his name Lionel broke from the TV and stood up. The boys were all staring at him, but he let things get more even uncomfortable before he spoke. He tilted his neck, and I heard something crack. “No drugs, no mouth-to-mouth kissing without permission, and no rough stuff,” he said finally. “And when the gal says leave, you leave. Your time’s up, it’s up. Understood?” There was a scattering of yessirs, and Lionel laughed. “Of course, always feel free to pop early if you like.”

He looked over at Alice, and she frowned at him. She was pointing at her crotch.

“Oh, yeah,” said Lionel. “Jesus Christ. The most important one—you will wear a rubber. You even say the word bareback and the gal’s gonna holler for me.”

One of the boys pulled a pack of cigarettes from the front pocket of his flannel shirt and opened the door. Alice called out after him that he could smoke inside, but he kept going. I got the sense that he wasn't coming back.

"Or go stand around in my parking lot and shiver," said Alice. "Now who all's up?"

Lionel sat back down beside me and shook his head. He pointed to a sign behind the bar that read:

RHONDA'S RANCH
IF THESE WALLS COULD TALK . . .

The words were spelled out by the mangled lariats of two cartoon cowboys.

"If they could talk, they'd bawl," Lionel whispered. I looked over at him, but he was already back to watching his football game.

After the first four boys disappeared down the Hallway to Heaven, the others ordered pitchers of draft beer and sat around drinking, quietly waiting their turns. Alice had brought out a frozen pizza she'd warmed up for me and Lionel, and when we were done with that first one she fixed us a second. She set it down on the bar and leaned closer. "They're just lambs," she told us. "Take off if you want."

Alice left us to go and collect empty pitchers, and Lionel spun around to face me. "You still set on San Francisco?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm due there the day after tomorrow."

"And you're sure you wanna go?"

"I feel like I've got to."

Lionel rolled his eyes but then nodded. "I doubt I'll ever see you again."

"Maybe."

"So do me a favor."

“What’s that?”

“Stick around till tomorrow at least. Come on and let me show you the mountains.”

The Ruby Mountains lay to the east of Battle Mountain—back the way I’d already come—and after we left Rhonda’s that night, Lionel cranked up his Willys drove us twenty miles on I-80 to the city of Elko, then we left the interstate and went south for another ten.

Lionel had painted the Willys dull brown and mounted electric winches to the front and rear bumpers. The tires were wide rock-crawlers, and there was a spare bolted to the back along with a fuel canister. The hardtop was nothing but thin steel, and though the Willys could only make about fifty or sixty miles per hour, between the wind and the hum of those off-road tires it was too noisy for much in the way of talking. Instead I just sipped on a can of beer and looked out the window. It was a black night, and once we put the casino lights of Elko behind us, the sky became measled with stars.

The highway kinked and twisted as it rose into the Rubies. It was very cold out now—at least for my Louisiana blood—and the Willys didn’t have a heater. Earlier I’d pulled a pair of sweatpants over my jeans, and Lionel had given me a heavy canvas coat to wear as well. The Carhartt was big on me, but did the trick, kept me warm enough. I thought about Sam, locked up in an end kennel beside a pair of those rangy Walker hounds. Stay warm too, buddy. Try and eat your food. I’ll be back tomorrow; this is just something I think I need to be doing.

We made another sharp turn, and the headlights of the Willys played across the smooth white trunks of aspens. Lionel slowed down, and we left the blacktop for a narrow dirt road that led up into the forest. He flipped on his new KC lights and smiled. “And away we go,” he said. “Hold on, little brother.”

The dirt road started off all right, but as the grade steepened it began to deteriorate. The dirt gave way to rocks, and the Willys bucked and bounced as we crawled over them. I could see then why Lionel had said we should leave Sam behind. He’d have hated the hell out of this.

After a long, breakneck hour the aspens thinned out and pine trees appeared. My ears popped, and Lionel told me that we were up high now, around eight thousand feet. “Just a little farther,” he said.

There was a final maze of sharp switchbacks, followed by a straight-up climb that pinned my head back against the seat. I couldn’t see past the hood of the Willys, and lying back like that—staring at the stars through the windshield, feeling the weight of my own body as we pushed directly up the slope—I felt like a rocket man.

Lionel focused out to his left as we churned along, keeping us straight on the narrow trail. I could see that on either side of us the ground fell away into blackness, and when at last the trail leveled he looked at me and smiled. “We’re here,” he said. “Come sunup you’re gonna shit when you see what we just did.”

We drove on through a level forest of pines before the trees suddenly quit. Lionel killed the engine and mashed down on the emergency brake. He’d brought us to a flat, grassy plateau of some sort, and all around us I could see the peaks of higher mountains blocking out some of the stars. On distant mountainsides a few campfires were burning. “Hunters,” said Lionel.

“Elk?”

“Probably.”

It was close to midnight, and I was drowsy from our day of beer drinking. Lionel left the KC lights on, and I helped him make camp. Quick enough. He pulled two clear sheets of Visqueen from the back of the Willys, and then, after we’d spread the plastic out flat over the grass to keep the dew off us while we slept—me just a few steps from the Willys, and him about twenty yards off—he staked down a pair of one-man tents that looked like big neon cocoons.

Lionel punted a sleeping bag at me, and I caught it like a medicine ball. “There you go,” he said. “I’m gonna make a fire.”

“Thanks.” I pulled the sleeping bag free of its shell and then squared it out inside my tent. Somehow with my bed all situated and waiting I wasn’t as tired as before. I went over to Lionel and saw that he was hunched over a round pile of rocks stacked about a foot high. Inside the fire ring he was arranging wood into the shape of a cabin. I walked up on him, and he handed me a long black flashlight like the ones that cops sometimes carry.

Lionel pointed off into the darkness. “Follow that trail a little ways till you reach a cluster of pines,” he said. “I’ve got a stash of dry wood hidden there under a tarp. Maybe grab me another bundle if you don’t mind.”

I did as he asked, and by the time I made it back a fire was crackling, softening the cold, and Lionel had shut off all the lights on the Willys. I dropped my wood beside the fire and sat down on the warm ground across from him. Lionel tossed me a tin mug and then a short bottle of Jack Daniels. “Take some,” he ordered. “Beer’s for town.”

I poured a few fingers of whiskey into the mug and took a gulp. “So,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Lionel. “So.” He had his boots off and was rubbing his socked feet. The grass around the fire ring had been beaten down, and he stretched himself out across it, tilting his

cowboy hat so that the brim covered his eyes. “I fall asleep you just let me lay,” he said. “I’ll make it to my tent on the by and by.”

I said all right and lit a cigarette from the punk end of some kindling. It was nice up there, calm. I watched the fire for a while, the sparks chasing sparks. Lionel had begun to snore, and I shook my head. I guess a part of me thought he was bringing me up there to tell me some great secret about Tommy, some mystery he couldn’t risk whispering in civilization. But that didn’t seem to be the case. Here was just a man who loved mountains.

In the morning I awoke to a sound like distant thunder, and it was only when I heard a second far off and echoing boom that I realized someone was firing a high-powered rifle—that somewhere an elk was probably dying.

At some point the night before I'd left the fire for my tent, and it took me a few clicks to remember where I was exactly. My boots and sweatpants and Lionel's thick coat were off, but I was still in my jeans and my shirt. I felt greasy and feverish. My head was killing me, and I reeked of stale wood smoke.

I unzipped the tent and pulled on my Red Wings. The morning was crisp and beautiful—though in that thin, dry air it was tough for me to breath. Birds were calling, the sky as blue as I'd ever seen it. It seemed that our campsite was at the flat top of a sort of half-mountain, and the snowcapped peaks of higher mountains encircled us. We were in the last of the treeline, and our clearing was surrounded by tart-smelling pines.

I walked over to the Willys and then found the road we'd taken up the night before. I followed the road into the pines for about a hundred yards, stopping where the trees ended. Here the land dropped off at my feet, but the road kept on, running down the bare backbone of a steep ridge that connected the top of this hill to the midsection of a far away other. Deep gullies

flanked either side of the ridge, and its sheer slopes were scaled with loose plates of shale. A few feet to the left or right of those twin ruts and that Willys would have rolled no problem.

Considering that ridge set butterflies aflutter in my stomach. To be perched so high up reminded me of a nightmare that I have sometimes out on the rigs. I dream that all of the water has receded out from beneath me, that instead of waking up on an oilrig in the sea I find myself trapped atop a watchtower in a desert—hundred and hundreds of yards above the wet sand surface of the earth. I'm searching for helicopters, but no one comes to save me.

Far down below the ridge I thought I could see a stretch of blacktop, but from where I was standing it looked no wider than the veins in my wrist. My stomach did another little dizzy jump, and I forced myself to turn away before my knees buckled. Eventually we would have to come back the same way we came, but there was no point in thinking on that then.

Lionel's tent was still zipped up, and so I figured I would let him sleep it off. I'd brought a few necessities with me, and I opened up the lid of the big steel box in the Willys and found my small backpack. There were all sorts of supplies stored away in the Willys. I sat on the bumper and brushed my teeth with water from a gallon jug, then stripped out of my clothes and threw on some of my deodorant, changed socks and boxers before putting my same jeans and shirt back on again.

Then, with nothing else to do, I filled a metal pot of Lionel's with water and took a half bag of coarsely ground Folgers and an old barbeque grate with me over to the fire ring. A few red coals were still buried in the ashes, and I pushed them together with the blade of my pocketknife. Next, I added shavings from one of the spare logs, blowing softly until I had coaxed out a flame. Once I had that good and going I started feeding sticks and then logs into the fire, then I laid the barbeque grate across the rocks of the fire ring for the pot to boil on.

You lose time when you're building a fire. Some ancient part of you kicks in. Off and on for a thousand years or more men had probably sat hunched over in this clearing doing what I was doing then, and I was thinking on that when I heard a whistle and saw Lionel emerge from the pine trees.

"Hey, hey," he said.

I stood up and slapped the ash and dust from my jeans. Lionel was walking toward me, and he had a big camouflage bag strapped over his shoulders. The bag was shaped like a coffin and looked big enough to hold a set of golf clubs. Whatever was inside, I could tell that it was heavy.

"Thought you were asleep," I said.

"Not me. Been up since first light." Lionel pulled the bag off and then hung it by its straps from the broken limb of a pine. He came over and stood across the fire from me. "Pretty up here, right?"

I nodded.

"Coffee," he said. "Good. And I've got eggs and bacon in one of them ice chests. I'll cook us up some breakfast."

I pointed over at the bag. "So what's that?"

"You call that a drag bag."

"Okay, but what's in there?"

"A Barrett M82," he said. "My baby."

"A gun?"

Lionel laughed. "More than a gun. Fifty cal sniper rifle. Ten thousand dollars she cost me."

“Fifty caliber?”

“That’s right.”

“Jesus. Is that legal?”

“Is in Nevada.”

I watched him to see if he was fucking with me, but he didn’t seem to be. Steam had started to slip out from under the lid of the pot and he took over. He pulled a rag from his back pocket and lifted the lid, then dumped in a long measure of grounds from the bag of Folgers. “What do you need a sniper rifle for?” I asked.

Lionel’s shoulders bounced. “Just keeping sharp, doing a little target practice. I trained on a fifty with the SEALs.”

“Two shots were all I heard.”

He winked at me. “Maybe cause I don’t need much practice.” He went over to the Willys, then starting digging around in the back. He returned with a cast-iron skillet and a small ice chest. “Let’s eat,” he said. “I figured I’d give you a demo later.”

*

After breakfast Lionel and I hiked about a half mile from camp, and to be helpful I volunteered to lug the Cordura bag that held the Barrett rifle. The drag bag at least forty pounds or so—but had dual shoulder straps and a waist belt that allowed for it to be carried easily enough.

A little after nine o’clock we came to a shelf of rock separated by a deep valley from the next mountain over. We were level with the spot on the mountain where its own pines petered out, surrendering to steep rocky cliffs dotted with patches of green grass and dirty snow. Far down below us, at the very bottom of the valley, I could see a silent ribbon of whitewater.

Lionel took the drag bag from me and set it down gently on the bare granite. Stacked boughs of freshly cut pine had been arranged in places along the edge of the rock shelf, and I realized then that this was a blind of sorts—a sniper’s nest that he must have built that morning. Lionel opened up the drag bag and I got my first look at the Barrett. It was five feet long, and except for the big scope mounted atop it, the jet-black gun resembled an extremely large M16 more than it did a rifle. He screwed a two-foot length of steel tubing into the muzzle. “That’s a suppressor,” he explained. “Helps knock down the recoil, but also hides the muzzle flash and cuts back on my dust signature, that and screws with the sound of the report quite a bit.”

“So then no one knows where you’re shooting from.”

“You got it.”

Unzipped, the drag bag flattened out into two padded shooting mats. Lionel situated the Barrett between them, propped up on the steel legs of its folding bipod, and then he removed a pair of Zeiss binoculars and a Swarovski spotting scope from a day pack he’d brought along with him.

“Ever hear of a Himalayan snowcock?” he asked.

“A what?”

“It’s a big gray bird,” he said. “About the size of a chicken.”

Lionel sprawled out to the left of the Barrett, and then he motioned for me to lie down to its right, on the other half of the drag bag. “They’re from Asia,” he said, “but about four decades ago the state started releasing them all through the Rubies. I guess this terrain is enough like where they’re from for them to take to it. They say there are upwards of a thousand now. Our own resident population right here in Nevada.”

I knelt down on the drag bag. “Why go through all that trouble?”

“Good fucking question,” said Lionel. “Good fucking question.”

“And you like to shoot them?”

Lionel took out his can of Copenhagen and rolled onto his side. “Look around you, man. The Rubies are about the sweetest land we got left in the States. Can’t you see that?”

“Sure.”

“All right,” said Lionel. “So then tell me what kind of person looks at these mountains and says to himself, Hey, what we need here are some birds from Asia—who the fuck thinks that way?” He worked a big pinch of tobacco into his mouth and then put the Copenhagen can back in his shirt pocket. “People need to learn how to leave things alone. And if they can’t do that then they should be putting grizzlies back in these hills. Wolves, even. I don’t care what the ranchers or anybody else says.” He turned his head and spit into the pine boughs that were bunched around us. “But I guess that’d be just too fucking real. It’s all about creating the fucking *illusion* of wilderness now.”

“And the law?” I asked. “I imagine they’d frown on what you’re doing up here.”

Lionel glanced over at me. “Why are you always asking me about the law? You on the lam or something?”

I shook my head, and for a second I thought that maybe Lionel actually knew more about me than he was letting on. “No,” I said.

“And what kind of law are you talking about anyways?”

“The kind with the badges and the guns.”

“Well, sure,” said Lionel, “on the one side you got the government and it piles and piles of laws, but then on the other side you got what they call natural law.” He made a splitting motion with his own hands. “When they diverge I go with the Greeks. End of story.”

I nodded like I knew what the hell he was talking about.

“So, you see,” Lionel continued, “I aim to exterminate as many of these fucking things as I can. I won’t make any real difference, but it does make me feel better.” I was still kneeling and he slapped at my half of the drag bag. “Now hunch down lower and help me look,” he said. “It’s the right thing, trust me.”

*

Lionel and I lay side by side in his sniper’s nest as we glassed above the treeline on the opposite mountainside—me with the binoculars, him with the spotting scope. That morning while I slept he had seen a flock of about a half-dozen snowcock on this mountain we were watching. He’d picked off two of them before the flock scattered. Lionel thought the rest of the birds should be in the area still, that they might return to resume feeding as the day wore on.

And so we glassed. I concentrated with the binoculars on a grassy crack that ran in a jagged zig-zag up the mountainside, while Lionel slowly swept the spotting scope back and forth. After about a half hour of this he directed me to a small herd of mountain goats bedded down among the high rocks. I searched with the binoculars and finally I was able to locate them. Save for their black horns the mountain goats looked just like distant patches of snow.

Lionel looked up from his spotting scope. “How far off you think they are?” he asked.

“You gonna shoot one?”

“I’m not just some fucking outlaw, Roy.”

“Only making sure.”

“Well,” he said. “How far?”

Without the binoculars I couldn’t see the white goats at all, but I had their approximate location high on the opposite mountainside marked in my head. I drew a mental line across the

valley from me up to them, then started laying imaginary football fields from end to end across the sky that separated us. “Beats me,” I said. “Five hundred yards?”

“Yeah?” said Lionel.

There were no reference points between us and the other mountain to aid me in calculating true distance, so I wasn’t doing much more than guessing. “Yeah,” I said.

“I’ll say six-fifty. Let’s see.” Lionel unzipped one of the compartments of the drag bag and pulled out what looked almost like a little handheld video camera. “Laser rangefinder,” he explained. “Cheating.” He put the rangefinder lens to his right eye and closed his left. A few seconds passed as he searched around for the mountain goats. Finally he spoke again. “Six hundred fourteen yards,” he said. “You were pretty close. Not bad at all.”

“Thanks.”

Lionel set the rangefinder down next to the Barrett and caught me staring at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Isn’t there anything more you can tell me about Tommy?”

“What? Like war stories?”

“Anything.”

“We trained together for a year and a half once he was assigned to our team, but our platoon only spent about a month deployed before he died. That’s really all I can share on that. Our operations over there were classified.”

“And that’s what I thought you’d say.”

“I’m sorry, man.” Lionel punched a fist against the palm of his hand. “They pound that into us, you see. We take an oath. It’s one of the biggest things that comes with the job.”

“I hear you.”

“But I can tell you that Ahab was a very tough kid.”

“Okay,” I said. “But was he happy?”

“What do you mean? What a question. How would I know?”

“Did he seem to like his life? That’s all I mean.”

Lionel was quiet for a moment, like he was really thinking hard about the question.

“Well,” he said finally, “I’m pretty sure he liked being an operator.”

“Yeah?”

“I think so,” said Lionel. “It’s hard to say. He was a quiet kid. Serious, like you.”

“I’m not all that serious.”

“*He said seriously.*” Lionel handed me the binoculars and grinned. “Let’s get back to hunting. Me and a Joseph boy watching for the enemy on a nice still day.”

*

It was almost noon when Lionel announced that some snowcock had appeared on the mountain. We were both wearing foam earplugs now, but I could hear him easily enough.

I wasn’t able to find the snowcock with the binoculars, and Lionel passed me his spotting scope so that I could get a better look. There were four of them, and he thought that they were most likely the remainder of the flock he had busted that morning. I watched one of the birds through the spotting scope while Lionel consulted the rangefinder. The snowcock was the color of sidewalk with some brown as well, and it indeed looked like a gray chicken. It stood motionless, watching for danger while the others fed on the rocky slope below.

“Which one are you fixed on?” Lionel asked.

“The highest.”

Lionel peered back into the rangefinder. “Okay,” he said. “Got it.”

“How far?” I asked. “Six hundred?”

“Seven hundred three.”

“Damn.”

“This is gonna seem easy,” said Lionel. “So I should tell you a few things so you’ll know just how impressive me and this weapon are.” I looked over and saw him put down the rangefinder and push his cowboy hat back. He grabbed hold of the Barrett’s pistol grip with his trigger hand, and then with his left thumb he flipped up the covers on the scope before settling his cheek down against the stock. He spoke to me as began searching for the snowcock. “At the distance we’re looking at here my bullet is gonna drop about a hundred-and-fifty inches, and though the thin air up here will flatten things out just a tad, what that means is that I’m gonna be more or less placing this bullet on top of that fucking snowcock.”

“Gotcha.”

“And uphill no less.” Lionel clicked the safety off. “You watching?”

I raised the spotting scope back. The snowcock was staring straight up at the blue sky. Looking out for hawks, I figured. Eagles. “Yeah,” I said. “I’m watching.”

“Don’t blink.”

There was a quick puff of feathers, a pneumatic sound from the Barrett like a nail gun punching, the booming whip crack of the bullet. Something—a spent cartridge, I realized—had bounced off the side of my spotting scope.

I began to search for the remaining snowcock, and then suddenly I saw one. A lone snowcock moving up the mountain, confused and desperate, scrambling for the refuge of the opposite slope. Lionel fired again but at some other bird, and I watched as this one, the one that I was watching, ran like all hell up and then over the top of that mountain.

That afternoon we broke camp and stowed Lionel's gear back into the Willys. In the sunlight I expected the ride down to the highway to be terrifying, but once we got moving I found myself relaxing. Lionel obviously knew what he was doing. I figured he would be able to get us out of the mountains all right and he did.

The sun was setting by the time we turned off I-80 in Battle Mountain, and the first thing I did after we parked in front of Lionel's shed was jog over to check on Sam. When I let him out of his kennel he jumped up on me like I'd been gone a year, and so I knelt down and rubbed at his ears. After a few seconds of that he was the old Sam again, calm and collected, and when I finally quit to go help Lionel unload the Willys he tagged lazily along like I'd never even been gone.

Lionel had the shed open, and the Willys was parked back in its spot. It was early on a Sunday night, but there were already a rig sitting in the gravel lot behind Rhonda's Ranch. Lionel was waiting at the entrance to the shed, watching me and Sam approach. He saw me looking at the rig and laughed. "Truckers," he said. "Their dicks get hard when they hit the state line."

The light was on in the shed, and I followed Lionel inside. He handed me a Coors from the icebox, then grabbed two for himself. We settled into a couple of old lawn chairs, and Lionel

emptied his first beer in three long pulls. He opened the second can. "So you still leaving tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "But I appreciate you taking me in, showing me around."

"I'm glad you looked me up." Lionel aimed a finger at me. "Be sure and keep in touch."

"I'll do that."

Lionel stood up slowly. "Sit tight," he said. "I gotta go grab something out the trailer."

After he jogged off I looked around and realized that Sam had gone missing. I whistled but he didn't show, and since it was getting darker and darker I figured I'd better hunt him down. The lion dogs had quieted, and I stepped outside the shed and saw that Sam was back over by the kennels, touching noses one by one with each of the caged hounds like he was telling them all goodbye. It made me sad, watching that, and I didn't have it in me to break it up, call him over. Sam has even less friends than I do, and I couldn't shake the thought that he would like it just fine if I left him there forever.

I was still watching Sam when Lionel came up beside me. He had a pistol in his hand, a little black automatic. The thought flashed in my head that for some natural law reason Lionel was about to shoot me, but instead he racked the slide to show me the pistol was unloaded, then grabbed it by the barrel and held it out to me. "Here," he said. "That's for you, little brother."

I looked from Lionel to the pistol and then back again.

"Go on," he said.

Finally I reached out and took the pistol from him. Lionel turned and walked back toward the shed. I whistled at Sam, and he hesitated but then came. We went into the shed, and I sat down across from Lionel in one of the lawn chairs. He kept quiet as I studied the pistol in the

light. I didn't recognize the make or model, but according to the markings on the barrel, it was a Walther PPK in 32 Auto.

Lionel spoke. "That's the same as James Bond used," he said. "At least when Connery played him."

"Cool. But why are you showing it to me?"

"I'm not just showing it to you—I'm giving it to you." He removed his hat and then hooked it over his knee. His hair was all down in his face now, and between that and his horseshoe moustache he looked like a tired sheepdog. "Ahab gave that to me," he said.

"You're kidding."

"It's true." Lionel pulled a rubber band off his wrist and tied his hair back. "We'd always play some or another gag on the new guys." He grinned. "The fellas told Ahab the newest dog had to buy the oldest dog a present, that it was Team 3 tradition."

My brother the worm. I closed the slide on the Walther. "Tommy bought you this?"

Lionel nodded. "Couldn't have been cheap, and so I felt like shit when he gave it to me. I told him we were just fucking with him, but he wouldn't take it back." Lionel pointed up at the ceiling of the shed. "I win, Ahab."

I set the pistol down atop the ice chest. "I can't," I said.

"What? How come?"

"If Tommy wanted you to have it, then I think it should stay with you."

"You think too much."

"There's more to it than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm a felon," I said. "That's why I can't."

Lionel looked at me. “Yeah?”

“I got into some trouble when I was young. There was this—”

He put up his hands. “It’s not any of my concern. You’ve done seen that I kick the chalk off the sidelines myself.”

I picked the Walther back up. It was against the law for me to be holding a gun in my hand, but this was something different.

“Fuck em,” said Lionel.

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you.”

“I might have some rounds for it somewhere.”

“That’s all right.”

Lionel started to speak, stopped, but then started again. “Now you listen,” he said. “I wrestled over whether to give that to you cause I think you’re a little bit unglued. I don’t want you doing anything bold, hurting yourself.”

I shook my head. “You don’t need to worry about that.”

“Well, I do,” said Lionel. “But at the same time I wanted to give you something that meant something your brother. Don’t make a jackass out of me.”

He stood up, and it was a moment before I realized that he was asking me to shake on it. I stood up myself, and Lionel grabbed my hand in an arm-wrestling grip, like I was stumbling and he was there catching me, steadying me. After that we stayed awake a little later and talked some more, but not about anything important, not about anything I can remember now. We drank Coors until we were drunk and then we called it a night. I thanked Lionel again for all his hospitality, and he told me to keep careful, that a crowded and fucked up city like San Francisco

was no place to be. The last thing Lionel Purcell said to me was, I think maybe I'll call *you* Orion. Happy hunting, Orion. I hope you find whatever it is that you're searching for.

The next morning I rode out of Battle Mountain with the rising sun, and though I think probably Lionel heard me and Sam leaving, he didn't emerge from his bedroom to see us off. I guess he figured it was better that way—the cowboy way, the so long, I hope someday our paths cross again way. I found a pen and scrawled out a note of thanks on a paper towel, then I put down my phone number and my email address in case Lionel ever wanted to reach me.

I was less than five hundred miles from San Francisco, leaving what might be the ugliest city in America for what some call the prettiest. This would be the last stretch of the pioneer trail, the crossing of the Sierras. What once took months, took me half a day. That same afternoon I walked across a beach with Sam and touched my fingers to the ice-cold Pacific. I was waiting for my meeting with Corey the Keymaster. He drove a tricked-out Civic with tinted windows and a tailfin, and when he put the key in my hand he told me no parties, then squealed his fat tires as he went racing away.

In the end I'd left the Walther lying with all the paperbacks and field guides on Lionel's coffee table. I don't doubt that Tommy would have wanted me to have that pistol, but the law is the law, and if I got caught with it I'd be looking at prison. Despite my occasional bullshit swagger the truth is that my no-luck life has made me a good slave, that when push comes to shove I'm afraid of my own shadow.

SATURDAY

Since about noon I've been sitting alone in the woods, watching for Jenny. No luck so far today, but by now I've already seen her a few times from afar, even followed her to her high school one morning from a distance. She lives with Nancy in a small house about a mile and a half from my apartment in the Outer Richmond. Take 32nd Avenue due north up the hill, and then their place is just off to the left, down a little pocket street called Marvel Court. It's a yellow, porch-above-the-garage wood frame that sits wedged between two ugly stuccos, maybe fifty yards from where Marvel Court dead-ends at a park called Lincoln Park.

Since I had the address, on Monday, my first day in San Francisco—before I even picked up my key to Julie Yang's apartment, in fact—I went creeping down Marvel Court in the LeBaron. That afternoon I eased past the little yellow house, then turned around in the cul-de-sac where the road ends at the park. Not thirty seconds later I drove by again on my way out—only now a girl was sitting on the steps leading up to the porch. She was wearing red sweatpants and a sweatshirt. There was a book in her lap, and her head was bowed. A curtain of brown hair hid her face, but I leaned back in my seat in case she happened to look up. I didn't want her to recognize me if and when we met. That would spook her for sure—knowing that I had been spying on her, I mean.

And yet after that one glimpse I wanted another. The LeBaron wouldn't start on Tuesday, and so I left Sam at the apartment and hoofed it up 32nd Avenue alone. Lincoln Park is in large part a golf course, and bushwhacking my way through the trees and the scrub that hem the eastern portion of the course took me to a steep and wooded hill that looked down on Marvel Court. This is place that I'm holed up now. From here I can see the house where Jenny and Nancy live—it's just the two of them, as far as I can tell—and I've found that the best time to catch Jenny is later in the afternoon once school has let out. The clocks don't get set back until this Sunday, and so the days are still long. Sure, I can't ever see her very well from here, but it's nice to watch her all the same. One of the first things I ever learned for certain about Jenny is that she really likes to read in the sun.

And yesterday I finally saw Nancy as well. She drives a green Subaru Outback, and I got a little glimpse of her as she came pulling out of the garage. I couldn't really see her face, but she did have the same close-cropped platinum hair as in her internet picture. On Wednesday I found a collection of her poems at a bookstore in the city, and from reading some of *Salted Waters* and putting two and two together it soon became apparent that she's a lesbian. I suspected as much already, but I have to admit that some small part of me was disappointed she wasn't younger, straighter. I had once hoped that all Jenny was missing in her life was a father—Nancy, a husband. That the woman who bore my brother's daughter was thirty-something and stunning. That she would come to love me and maybe even take my name. That a man with no one but a dog might suddenly wake up with a family he didn't have to buy.

After three hours of nothing I give up and go.

At six o'clock Viktor calls me from his car to confirm that I'm still coming to dinner to meet Marina. I have an hour and a half before he's expecting me, and so I take Sam over to the park to run around before dark.

This is my first time in the park since Friday morning when I heard about the stabbing on the news—or *stabblings*, if the cop rumors that Viktor has been sharing are indeed true—but Sam needs his exercise, and sniffing around Julie Yang's backyard doesn't cut it. There's the beach, of course, but these grim happenings in the park have got me a little interested. I kind of want to look around.

We go to the archery range. There's a sign warning that you're not supposed to have a dog out here, but since it's late and nobody is out launching arrows, I can't imagine that anyone will hassle me. Besides, I've never seen any police out on this side of the park—and though I thought they might be stepping up their patrols on account of that Thursday morning killing, there's been no increased cop activity that I can tell. That speaks volumes about the stature of this man who died. That clearly he wasn't a doctor or some such. That he was an outcast like me.

The archery range is a large grass field bordered by thick myrtle bushes on three sides. The three or four times I've been here I typically let Sam make a big loop, then we go to the back corner and I throw a ball for him. I scan the distant field edges for skunks and feral cats, but all's

clear—and I'm about to unclip Sam's leash when something makes me stop. One of those sixth sense feelings. I turn around and make out an extremely tall man in very dark clothes standing within the myrtles about fifty yards off. He has a bent arm held up away from his side, and there's a large bird perched on his wrist. A falcon or maybe a hawk of some sort. So this, I realize, must be Viktor's *sokolnik*.

In the dim light I can't see the falconer's face, but it's clear enough that he's watching me. It can't be legal for him to be doing what he's doing, hunting in the park, and since I've got Sam on the archery range I guess that makes both of us criminals. I give a little half wave, and then for some reason Sam rears up on his hind legs like a horse and falls. The falconer emerges from the myrtles and starts moving away from us at a quick pace, headed for the street. He's not at all wide, but I swear he must be close to seven feet tall.

Very, very odd. It feels like bad luck just to see something like that. I watch the falconer leave, and once I'm certain that we're alone I cut Sam loose. He bolts, and I walk along after him. There's a hill at the far end of the field. It runs the width of the range and serves as a backstop for the archers. On Wednesday I hid a tennis ball hidden between the hay bales of one of the targets, and I take it out when Sam comes hustling back to me. He starts spinning when he sees that ball in my hand. "Sit," I say to him.

Sam lowers his ass, and I tell him to stay. I throw the tennis ball up the hill and make him wait a bit. He's steady watching the spot where the ball bounced last, and I can see the muscles in his shoulders trembling under his hide. "Back," I say, and Sam bolts off up the hill to search for the ball. I light just my second Winston of the day and watch him work.

Sam's a duck dog, a purebred yellow lab. In the fall of 2003 I found him wandering loose on the side of the road in Grand Isle. He was a puppy then—just three months old or so—and

since he was the kind of dog that folks might steal, I figured that I had better grab him out of the mud puddle he was splashing around in before somebody else did. He wasn't wearing a collar, and so I kept my eye out for flyers on telephone poles, then finally tacked a note of my own onto the bulletin board at the grocery store. They don't have a pound in Grand Isle, but I even stopped by the police station to tell the chief that I had someone's puppy. Believe it or not, I'm the only registered sex offender among the fifteen hundred residents of Grand Isle, and so the chief knows me pretty well, always makes a point of frowning when we cross paths. The last thing I needed was to get slapped with a puppy theft.

Still, despite all my efforts, nothing. A week passed without anybody calling to claim their puppy, and then the time came for me to go back offshore. Jack Hebert said he'd watch Sam for me—for some reason I'd begun calling him that—and as the crew boat left the dock I changed my cell phone message to say, Hey, if you're calling about a lost lab my neighbor's got him. Try this number and he'll help you out. It was quite a hassle, all of it—but then while I was offshore I found myself hoping that Sam would be waiting for me when I got back. And he was. We've been together ever since.

But it's not fair to Sam, really, being stuck with me for a master. Like I said, he's a duck dog. He's not meant to chase tennis balls. He's meant to spend cold and rainy mornings in a blind in the marsh, retrieving shotgunned teal and widgeon and gray duck. I once liked to hunt myself. In fact, growing up it was maybe my favorite thing to do. I still do a little bowhunting for deer, but it will be at least another five years before the law allows me to own a firearm again. Every time I throw a ball for Sam I am reminded of that, and it makes me feel like half a man—that I can't even take my hunting dog hunting. Man, everything about my existence is so fucking castrated. I try not to feel sorry for myself. Yes, I did a really bad thing, and I swear to God that I

do know that—but still sometimes I think the world won't be happy until they have my balls in a jar. Thank you for these, Mr. Joseph, here are a couple of tennis balls we'll let you play with for now.

I throw my damn tennis ball about twenty times before Sam starts getting a little lazy. That hill is a workout for him. He disappears into the myrtles to squat, and that's good because now I don't have to pick up after him. When he returns I make him do a few more retrieves, then I hide the ball back between the hay bales. He sits down next to me, and I snap his leash on. The sun has set, and it's mostly dark now. I head home so I can wash up for dinner, and on the way back we pass alongside a black sedan stopped by the entrance to the park. At first I'm thinking, finally, a cop—but then I see that there's just an old guy sitting behind the wheel. He smiles at me, and a little ways later I look back and grandpa begins flashing the dome light of his Buick. I see a smiling pervert and then nothing, a smiling pervert and then nothing, blinking in time with the red lights of Sutro Tower in the far distance. I shake my head and keep on.

At my apartment I scoop out some food for Sam from his ice chest, then top off his other bowl with water. Once he's all set I take a quick shower, comb my wet hair straight back and trim my beard, put on clean blue jeans and a collared shirt.

I've known Viktor for almost a week now, but this will be my first time inside his house. From what I understand, he drives some rich guy from Sea Cliff over to his office in the Financial District before dawn every morning. And then in the early afternoon—after the markets have closed in New York, I guess—Viktor heads back downtown in one of his Mercedes to pick the man up. Viktor also has the three limos, but I don't think he ever drives those himself. “I have people,” he said to me the other day. So there you go. The guy must be doing something right. In a city with so many renters he manages to own his own place.

Viktor's avocado house is about nine blocks from my apartment, at the corner of 37th and Cabrillo. There's a little driveway that falls into a garage, and off to the side is a series of steps that lead to his front door. I'm a few minutes early so I linger awhile on the sidewalk. I'm still standing there when I see Marina turn the corner. She's wearing a puffy pink coat, and the hood is trimmed with synthetic gray fur that I think is meant to be wolf. I wait for her at the bottom of the steps. She's tall, almost as tall as me, and her hair is long and parted at the top, but short along the sides and back.

“Hello,” I say to her. “I’m Roy.”

She smiles, and up close like this I can see that her reddish pixie hair is brown at the roots. And there are some slight wrinkles around her eyes. Viktor had told me that she was thirty, but I’m wondering now whether she might actually be a few years or so older than that. She shakes my hand. “I am Marina,” she says. “I am sorry for yesterday.”

Her accent is very strong, and she does, in fact, sound a lot like a movie spy, a Bond girl. “It’s fine,” I tell her. “Viktor told me that you got held up at work.”

Marina presses her hands against her face, and for a moment I think she might scream. “The parents know nothing,” she says. “And that baby is a little Satan.”

I laugh but she doesn’t. She seems to mean it just like she said—that the child she cares for might be the devil. “Must be rough,” I say.

“Rough?”

“Hard,” I say. “No fun. Difficult.”

“Oh.” Marina nods three times very quickly. “Yes,” she says. “Rough. It is very rough.”

And just then the front door opens. I look up and see Viktor grinning at us from the top of the steps. No tracksuit tonight. He’s in his work uniform—black pants and a black tie, a white shirt like mine, but with the sleeves rolled up on his big forearms. He calls down to us. “Come,” he says. “Come, come.”

Marina heads up the steps and I follow. She’s wearing closefitting white Levi’s, and I try not to focus on her ass. Her black boots slap one-two, one-two against the concrete, and I realize that they’re the same ones she was wearing the first time I ever saw her. They’re clean now—shiny, even—and I like seeing that she takes care of her things.

Viktor's home is warm and smells like a good restaurant. The front door opens into a white-walled living room with a black leather couch, two matching easy chairs and a coffee table (also black). On one wall hangs an enormous flat-screen TV and—resting on the snow-white carpet beneath it—a stereo, a DVD player, and a digital-cable box. On the opposite wall there's a cross-shaped mirror big enough to crucify an elf on.

At the door Viktor kisses Marina on both cheeks and then crushes my hand. I see that Marina is taking off her boots, and that makes me wonder if she's been here before. "Sorry," says Viktor. "This stupid white carpet. No shoes, no cigarettes even."

I shed my worn boat shoes and am allowed inside. There are DVD cases scattered across the coffee table, and I see that the flat-screen has been paused during some video about killer whales. An orca has launched its entire domino body clear of the sea and is frozen in midair. The whale matches the white carpet, the black leather. Same with Viktor. I point at his tie. "Working on a Saturday?" I ask.

He nods. "I had to drive Mr. Witherspoon and his wife to Sausalito. I am just getting back only now."

"I was in the park earlier. I saw that falconer guy."

"The *sokolnik*?"

"Yep."

"He is tall, no?"

"Yeah," I say. "Very."

Viktor hollers something in Russian, and his wife Sonya comes out from the kitchen to meet me. She's wearing a black velvet outfit, has a head of thick silver hair and nice smooth skin. She's heavy but she's adorable. I kiss her cheeks as Viktor did Marina and then suddenly

Sonya and Viktor and Marina begin talking in Russian. I'm feeling ignored until Dina the saluki comes slinking out from some back room and bumps at me with her head. And I guess she's wondering about Sam, because then I think she starts hunting for him. I watch Dina check all around the living room before she finally gives up and disappears back down the hall.

Viktor takes Marina's coat, and I see that underneath she's wearing a red chiffon top that shimmers when she moves. She's brought color to this black-and-white room, and she looks beautiful for it. Sonya catches me staring at Marina and smiles. "Welcome to our home," she says.

"Thank you," I tell her. "Whatever you are cooking smells delicious."

"*Pelmeni*," says Sonya. "This is our favorite." Viktor is next to her beaming. I see him rub his stomach and then wink at her.

Sonya pulls Marina with her into the kitchen—they know one another already, it seems—and Viktor and I lower ourselves into the overstuffed chairs that flank either side of the couch. "Put your feet up," he says. "It is nice."

I tell Viktor I'm fine, but he won't take no. I pull the lever and get thrown back horizontal. My legs are stretched out in front of me, and I notice that I've got a small hole in the toe of my gray sock.

"See," says Viktor. "I told you."

I give a thumbs-up and Viktor releases a contented sigh. Soon Sonya comes along with a half-liter bottle of Baltika beer and pair of small glasses. She pours one glass for me and one for her husband. I tell her thanks and she goes on back to the kitchen. Viktor raises his glass, and I do the same.

"Did you read the newspaper today?" Viktor asks.

“No, why?”

“My police friends were not lying—there have been other killings in the park.” Viktor throws up his own leg rest and gets himself settled. “Two other homeless people were stabbed this past year.”

“So that guy who got killed was definitely homeless?”

“Yes,” says Viktor. “Definitely.”

I start to ask him about what all the article said, but just then he taps a button on the huge remote control resting on the arm of his chair. There is a sound like thunder as the orca comes crashing back to the sea. The black beer trembles in my glass.

“Christ,” I say. I look around me and see little speakers screwed into every corner of the room.

Viktor is smiling at me. He turns the volume down, but not by much. “It’s a theater system,” he shouts.

I give him a second thumbs up. Up on the TV I see that the orca has paired with another just off some coastline. A man with an English accent is narrating. He tells us that those are sea lions that we see spread out there on the beach, that the two orcas are hunting.

“Watch,” says Viktor.

A group of the sea lions stray too far out into the water and the orcas come surging in on a big wave, their dorsal fins cutting through the water like blades. They catch a sea lion apiece and then head back out for deeper water. The orcas begin tossing the crippled sea lions into the air, torturing them. It looks like the playing whales are about to come out of the wall and land on me. “Damn,” I say.

“HD!” says Viktor. “It is the finest!”

*

That Russian dinner is the best food I've had in a long time. Turns out that a *pelmeni* is like a little meat-stuffed dumpling. Sonya serves them with mashed potatoes and a salad made from cucumbers and vinegar.

Marina is quiet at first, but then Viktor opens a second bottle of red wine and she gets more talkative. Viktor and Sonya are arguing over something in Russian when she asks me about my finger. I've kept my left hand in my lap, but Marina either saw it or Viktor told her already.

"Show me," she says.

I hesitate but then set my hand down on the table. So many cracks and scars and calluses—it would be an ugly hand even with all five fingers.

"You must work very hard," says Marina.

"I guess," I say. I probably should be doing more to sell her on the idea of a life with me as her husband, and so I mention that I won't be working offshore anymore, that I have enough money saved up to retire, more or less. She doesn't seem surprised to hear any of this, and of course I already laid all that out in that essay Viktor made me write for him.

Marina pats my knee and says that I should see myself as lucky, that my injuries could have been much worse. "It is something but it is also nothing," she says. "You understand what I am saying?"

She has dark, dark eyes. Black, almost. I don't think that I've ever seen eyes that color. I put my hand back in my lap. "Yes," I say. "I think so."

"Good," says Marina, and I wonder if that means that she's decided to marry me—though I'm also worried that the next topic of conversation will be my criminal record.

"You're from Moscow originally, correct?"

“Yes,” says Marina.

“So how long have you been in America?”

“Only four months.”

“And you’ve been working for that family the whole time?”

“Yes.”

“Your English is very good.”

“Thank you.”

“Is that something you studied in school?”

“Some. Yes.”

She looks bored, and I try to think of something else to say. Nothing is coming to mind. For the moment at least she seems to be through with my questions as well, and so we both go back to eating. When everyone has finished Sonya and her stand to clear the dishes. I am alone with Viktor now. There’s a bottle of vodka on the table, and he pours two shots. “*Zuh vahs,*” he says. “To you.”

We touch glasses and drink the vodka down. I can hear Sonya and Marina in the kitchen, and I wonder if they might be talking about me. Viktor pours two more shots. “To you,” I say.

Again we drink. Viktor caps the bottle and wipes his mouth.

“Do you like her?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “I like her a lot.”

I start to say more when the television in the living room explodes back to life. Viktor jumps up from his chair, and I follow him into the living room. Marina has left the kitchen and is now sitting on the floor with Dina. Her white jeans match perfectly with the new carpet, and this

makes it look like she is melting—like all that has saved her from disappearing is her shimmering red top.

Marina has the remote control beside her, and though I can tell that this is bothering Viktor a great deal, he motions for me to join her. He leaves us for the kitchen, and I sit down on the leather couch to watch more of the seal hunting. Dina comes over to me, and Marina seems impressed. She drops the volume down low. “Dina does not like me,” she says.

I scratch the saluki’s ears. “I doubt that’s true,” I tell her.

Marina smiles, and I’m thinking I’ll ask her if she’d like to go outside for a smoke when I hear muffled techno music. She pulls out her cell phone, and I listen as she says a few words in Russian. She snaps the phone shut. “I have to go,” she says. “My friend is here to pick me up now.”

Shit. “Where are you going?” I ask.

Marina shrugs. “This I do not know,” she says. “It was very nice to meet you.” She puts on her pink coat and comes across the room. I stand and we do the quick cheek-kissing thing before she heads for the kitchen. A minute or so passes, and then Viktor comes swooping in and grabs the remote off the floor. A horn honks and Marina goes outside to put on her boots. I watch the door close behind her, and Viktor slaps me on the leg.

“She is pretty, yes?”

“Yes,” I say.

“So then you would like to have a real date with her? She very much wants to see you again.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course,” says Viktor. He has the remote pointed at the flat-screen and the volume is slowly rising.

“Then yeah,” I shout. “But how do you know she really wants that?”

Viktor laughs. “I know because this is what she tells me,” he yells.

Before I left for the apartment Viktor told me that he thinks my next date with Marina will be on Tuesday night. That's a ways off, and so again he asks if I'm interested in meeting the other two women—and again I tell him that I would like to concentrate on getting to know Marina for the time being. I don't know, there's just something about her that makes me think that her life hasn't been all that easier than mine, and that has cast something of a spell over me.

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2007

POLICE SEE PARALLELS IN 3 STABBING DEATHS

IN OR AROUND GOLDEN GATE PARK

SUNDAY

Today the clocks dropped back an hour, and so when I wake up it feels later to me than it actually is. Around nine o'clock I lock Sam inside the apartment and go for a walk alone. I won't admit it to myself, but I know that in a half hour or so my walk will take me where it always takes me—uphill to Lincoln Park and Marvel Court, that is, sneaking through those golf course woods in the hope that I might see something of Jenny.

It's a pretty day—sunny and all that, jeans and a T-shirt weather—but like every Sunday I'm feeling a little beaten down. I think most people are the same way, and that on Sundays we all slog through something darker and deeper than can be explained by seeing the weekend draw to a close. I once heard a scientist on TV argue that evolution accounts for why people have irrational fears of things like spiders and snakes. My caveman ancestors had the good sense to run from all things slithery, and that explains Roy Joseph hating water moccasins, the invention of dragons and the serpent that comes calling for Eve. And so maybe a similar thing is going on with Sundays. Maybe generation after generation of spending holy days feeling guilty, beating ourselves up, has somehow developed into a heritable quirk. Maybe science explains that emptiness I have in my chest when I wake up on the Lord's day—even though it's been a long time since I've believed that there's really a God who cares at all what we do.

*

On my way I stop for coffee at a place across the street from Lincoln Park named the Sun Café. I've been to the Sun a couple of times over the past week, and I've gotten to know the owner a little bit. Melody is a nice Korean woman, and she looks thrilled to see me. "Hello," she says, when I open her door. "You come again."

"Hey," I tell her. "Good morning."

Melody smiles and says, "Good morning, Bill"—but that's probably not her fault because I'm sure my accent is strange to her, plus sometimes I mumble.

The Sun Café is empty even though it's a Saturday. Far as I can tell, it's always empty in here. On Thursday I had nowhere to go, and so Melody and I spent about an hour talking off and on while I sipped at my coffee. She said she'd been open since March, and now I can't quite figure out her circumstances—like how she stays in business without ever any customers. Melody told me she was born in Seoul and came to California in her twenties. She's around forty now, and I wonder what all she did in those two decades between coming to America and opening the Sun Café—if she really knows just how big America is. I picture her in the kitchen of a shitty suburban townhouse that you can see from the interstate. A two-bedroom with thin walls and Chihuahua yard. Bills are spread out in stacks on one side of a Lucite counter, mortgage statements are collected on the other.

I fill a paper coffee cup from one of Melody's push-top thermoses, but then before I can pay her, a fat teenage boy in skintight jeans ducks inside and beats me to the cash register. I get behind him and listen as he starts asking Melody if she sells fair-trade coffee. He's talking really fast, and I can tell she's getting frustrated. I kind of horn in—I mean, it's not like Melody knocked on his door trying to sell him coffee. "Are you gonna buy something?" I ask him. "I'm waiting here."

I'm no bully—hell, I run from any fight I can—but I come across as lowbred and menacing to a lot of folks, and that can sometimes be to my advantage. The kid gives me a fuck-off look, but then he leaves. Melody frowns as he walks out the door, that's a potential customer gone, in her mind. "Thank you, Bill," she says—though she doesn't sound all that pleased with me, Bill.

"Sure." I set down my coffee, dig out my wallet.

"Anything else for you?" she asks.

"That's all."

Melody punches at the cash register, and I hand her three dollars from my wallet. She tries to give me some coins back, but I wave her hand away. "Keep them," I tell her. She does a slow bow that I think might be sarcastic.

And then a few minutes later a dumb luck thing happens. I'd ducked into the bathroom, and as I'm coming out I hear the bells on the front door jangle. Melody looks up from the sleeves of coins she's breaking into the cash register, and I follow her gaze. A teenage girl walks in. Long brown hair, tall, very pretty. She's wearing jeans and a hooded white sweatshirt freckled with pastel eye-chart letters. It's Jenny, I realize. I recognize her and that sweatshirt right away. She only lives about two blocks away from the Sun Café, so I'm not saying that it's a miracle for her to be standing in here right now. But still, you have to wonder sometimes about how the world works. The tricks it plays on you, I mean.

Jenny has no doubt studied plenty on my sex offender profile, and so I'm panicking now. I grab a seat at a table way back by the bathroom and sort of hide my face behind my coffee cup, watching as she puts her order in with Melody. She's too far away for me to really hear her, but I can see her face better than I ever could before. She looks enough like Tommy Joseph (and Roy

Joseph as well, I suppose) for me to stop wondering forever if we really do share blood. More than anything, though, she resembles my mother—not the woman who raised me so much—but the farm girl I see in old wedding photos. The young bride who married my father. She has Mama's same high cheekbones and button nose. That same shiny brown hair, of course. If time eases pain it's only because you forget things, details—and so here I am staring at my niece, but mourning my mother. I watch her pay for her coffee, and when she walks out the door I find myself following.

I lag back about a block, and Jenny takes me north up 32nd Avenue. At first I think she's likely heading home with her coffee, but then she keeps on going past Marvel Court. She walks a few more blocks, and when 32nd Avenue dead-ends she breaks east. This is right where Sea Cliff—that rich neighborhood, that home of Robin Williams—begins, and these Sea Cliff mansions smirk at me as I pass, their lawns all glowing the same nuclear green. A man in jogging shorts and a bicycle helmet overtakes me in one of those Segway deals. He goes purring on down the sidewalk, a tank-topped emperor on his electric chariot, gliding toward Jenny. A road sign says: TOUR BUSES AND VANS PROHIBITED.

I'm a slow walker myself, but Jenny is even more of a stroller. She's coltish, has the body of a ballet dancer or a swimmer, maybe. I watch her as she eases through Sea Cliff like she's on a nature hike, touching flowers and whatnot. I do what I can to keep the distance between us, but she's not making that easy on me at all.

After ten or fifteen minutes Jenny has finally waltzed her way through Sea Cliff and entered the dark, cool forest of the Presidio. We've been steadily going downhill, and I can feel that we are closing in on the shoreline even before I see the sign for some place called Baker Beach. So this is where she is going. I follow Jenny through the forest like some fairy tale wolf, down a narrow blacktop road that leads to a parking lot. She's tosses her coffee cup into a trash

can before moving on, and a few minutes later I come along and do the same. We're flat level with a long stretch of beach now. A few men in chest waders are surf fishing the bay, and the brown beach is littered with sunbathers. Off to the west I can see that flat expanse of the Pacific, off to the east—the crayon-red cables, towers, and piers of the Golden Gate Bridge.

A few days after this day, holed up in Jenny Yang's apartment, I will read a poem of Nancy's in *Salted Waters* that is set here. A poem about a shark attack. The second-to-last poem in her book. It's called "Baker Beach, 1959," but there are also clues and references starting out that help make the date clear. Nancy mentions the day the music died, the debut of the Barbie doll, terrified monkeys being rocketed into space, that sort of thing. But me reading that poem would come later. On this day I still know nothing of the place. I'm blissfully ignorant, as they say.

Jenny has already taken off her shoes and walked out onto the beach. I hang back in the parking lot and watch her. Her sweatshirt is tied around her waist now, and she stops at the water's edge. It's as if coming into contact with me in the Sun Café has set her off on a migration and now she's run out of landscape. I imagine her walking right into the water without ever knowing why.

But instead she just sits down in the sand. She's in a red tank top, and suddenly it doesn't feel at all right for me to be standing her eyeballing her like this. It's time for me to leave her alone for the day, part ways. I situate myself at the bottom of some concrete steps that lead from the parking lot to the beach, then take off my boots and cuff my jeans up past my calves. The sand is warm on my feet. I get about ten yards from Jenny—can see the curving ridge of her spine, even—before I angle off to the right, making my way to the hard sand that runs along the tide line.

I feel almost certain that Jenny is watching me as I walk away from her, and I wonder if she's sensing anything familiar in how this stranger walks, in how this stranger carries himself. The Golden Gate Bridge is far up ahead of me, and I squint my eyes against the bright sun, putting my focus there as I march on and on and on. By the time I finally look back at Jenny she's just a distant blur of red, and so I stop for a moment to collect my thoughts. I'd been so distracted by the thought of her watching me for once that it's only now that I realize that the few sunbathers at this end of the beach are naked, that I've wandered onto a nude beach. They're all men—all except for this one drunk woman sipping from a brown-bagged bottle and glaring at me. Her whole body is tattoos, and her head is shaved. The woman's tits are laced with ink spider-webs; her areolas, I think, are meant to be spiders. I'm staring at her, and this sends her into a fit. "Eat some shit," she screams. "No gawkers."

Big men are laid out on either side of her, and one of them sits up and looks at me. "Yeah," he says. "Go away, breeder." His shiny skin is as orange as fresh rust.

Soon other men are calling out at me, sticking up for this woman, misunderstanding my intentions. It's all so goddamn ridiculous that I can't help but crack up, and my laughing silences the whole naked beach as they try to figure what to make of me. To hell with them. Who's staring now? My thoughts flash to the Walther—how if I had that pistol with me I'd maybe pull it out and watch them scatter—but since I don't I instead throw down my Red Wings and unbuckle my belt, strip off my jeans and my T-shirt and my boxers until I'm naked myself save for my dirt necklace. The water is cold as all hell, but I go splashing into the surf, still laughing, but also gasping, maybe even crying just a little. I'm the only swimmer on a mile of beach, and the tattooed woman is cheering me now. She has her hands held up over her head and is clapping

them. I won't be able stand the cold water long, but for now I must say that this feels nice, proving all of them wrong about me.

Come late afternoon a light fog rolls into my neighborhood, and the warm pretty day turns gray and cold. I throw my sweatshirt on and go to take Sam for a walk.

We're leaving the apartment when I see an old man in a beige windbreaker stapling a flyer to the telephone pole out front. The man is small and hunched, and I don't really pay him any mind until I realize that the flyer isn't just for a garage sale or a lost cat or some such.

The top of the flyer screams \$10,000 REWARD, and then below that is a big black-and-white photo of a hollow-cheeked young guy. He's leaned back in an easy chair and grinning at the camera, an unwrapped present is resting on his lap. I take a step closer and then stop so that I can read the rest of it. In smaller font beneath the photo there's a phone number with an area code that I don't recognize—as well as a small, tight brick of words:

\$10,000 will be awarded for any information leading to the arrest and conviction of the person that murdered Mark Sorensen near the corner of 47th Avenue and Fulton Street on November 1, 2007.

Collect calls will be accepted. Confidentiality is guaranteed.

That same phone number is handwritten vertically over and over again along the bottom of the flyer, and the spaces between each scrawled set of digits have been cut with scissors to create fifteen or so tear slips.

The old man's hands are trembling pretty badly, and so it takes him a while to get the final corner of the flyer stapled down. Next he rips off a couple of the phone number tassels and slips them in the pocket of his windbreaker. I almost smile at that, but it's probably not a dumb move. In my experience people hate to be the first to do anything—and in that respect I don't see why assisting a manhunt would be any different than buying a sofa or taking guitar lessons.

Once the old man has everything situated like he wants it, he turns around and sees Sam and me standing there. A sheaf of flyers is stuffed down the front of his brown pants, and that big stapler gun sits in his hand like a Colt. He can't be a day shy of eighty.

"Hey, son," he says. "Now there's a pretty dog." His accent is from the Midwest somewhere, and he sounds almost cheerful. A gray warship is anchored across the front of the dark blue ball cap that he's wearing, and gold stitching above and below the warship reads:

USS CECIL J. DOYLE

DE-368

"Hey," I say. "Thank you very much."

"You a Southerner?" he asks.

"Yessir."

"I like Southerners." The man pats at the flyer on the telephone pole with his empty hand.

"That's my grandson there," he says. "Mark."

Oh, fuck me. This poor guy. "I'm sorry to hear that," I say. "Really sorry."

His hand is still sort of caressing the flyer. "This is from Christmas three years ago," he says. "Mark left St. Paul a few weeks later, and after that we didn't much hear from him."

"You came here from Minnesota?"

“All us done flew out,” he says. “Me, Margaret, Ronnie, Cindy, Alan, Ben, Bonnie, Tammy, Brenda. The police don’t seem to have any ideas, and we thought we could maybe help a little.”

The image of a family of grieving Minnesotans sitting cross-legged on the floor of a hotel room, scissor-cutting slits into the bottom of flyers—that’ll be in my stupid head for the rest of my life. I forget sometimes that we all get to spend time in the wringer.

“Drugs,” says the old man.

“Excuse me?”

“Mark and his darn drugs. We’ve been expecting something like this.” He takes out a white handkerchief and blows his nose. At first I think he’s crying, but he’s not. It’s chilly and wet-aired due to the fog, and he just has a runny nose. “Well,” he says, and then he starts to amble off without saying goodbye. He’s moving really slow, and Sam and I watch him. This is a tough old rooster. That generation doesn’t seem to let things get to them like we do. You would ask my two grandfathers about the war, and all they’d tell you was how pretty the women in Germany and France were.

Grandpa Sorensen skips the next telephone pole but then stops at the one after that. He starts fishing out another flier to staple, and all of a sudden he stumbles. The staple gun goes clattering onto the sidewalk, but luckily the telephone catches him—otherwise he’d be laid out on the concrete himself. I jog on over, and Sam prances along beside me on his leash. “Hey,” I say. “Are you all right?”

“You’re back,” he says.

“Yessir.” I pick up the staple gun and give him a second to collect himself. I have no doubt that in his day this short old man was a stocky farm boy who could have whipped my ass

up and down this street, but of course he's not young anymore. He's tired and really shouldn't be out here alone, working like this. I take the flyer that he's holding by its ragged end, then staple it flat to the telephone pole for him.

"Thank you," he says. He holds out his hand and I shake it. "I'm Lawrence Sorensen."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Roy."

Lawrence doesn't have much of a grip, but he's still holding on to my fingers. "Do you know anything about our Mark?" he asks.

"No, sir. I mean, I read a little about what happened, but that's all I know."

Lawrence nods and then lets me loose. "I just thought I'd ask," he says.

"No problem."

"Bet you think it's pretty darn foolish, us coming out here."

"No, sir."

"Well, I'm not so sure I don't—but they all were set on coming and I wasn't going to let them leave me behind."

I look up and down the empty street, but I don't see anyone else out walking in the cold, Sorensens or otherwise. "So where are they right now?" I ask. "Your family, I mean."

Lawrence takes off his hat and slaps it against the side of his leg. "They're all split up in the park and thereabouts, doing what I'm doing. I talked them into letting me take fifty of these signs, covering a few blocks." He shakes his head like he's disappointed in himself. "I just didn't want to slow them down," he says. "But I guess they were right. I guess I should've just stayed back home."

I'm still holding the staple gun, and though I'd rather take Sam to the park, I know what I should do here. "Let me walk with you to the Safeway down the street," I tell him. "You can get a cup of coffee there, and I'll finish this up for you. It won't take me long."

Though I can tell that Lawrence isn't too thrilled by the idea, his body is failing him and he seems to recognize that. I leave him standing there while I run and put Sam in the apartment, but when I come back he's walked down to the telephone pole at the corner of Fulton to post one last flyer by himself. I hurry along past the flyer that I'd put up for him, and I see that he remembered to tear off a couple of the phone slips before moving on. His jacket pocket must be full of paper by now.

When I catch up to Lawrence he hands over the staple gun. He's a soldier surrendering his weapon. "You ready?" I ask.

"I'm ready."

We make our way together down the three blocks to the Safeway, and I sit him down on a bench out front that's protected from the wind. There's a plastic arcade horse plugged in beside him, and an Asian woman is watching her little girl go around and around on it.

Lawrence hasn't spoken since we started our march, but he looks like he wants to tell me something now. He points across the street. A long row of condos blocks our view of the ocean. "I was in San Francisco in 1946," he says. "I was nineteen years old. Only other time. Did you know that all this around here used to be an amusement park? I do remember that much."

"No," I tell him. "I guess I didn't."

"It was called Playland, I think. Funland, maybe."

"Yeah?"

“Yeah. Me and some shipmates got into a fight with some locals right on the darn carrousel.” Lawrence laughs. “Can’t you just see that?” he asks. “Us brawling as that thing spends round and round—all these pretty women and crying children bailing off like it’s a sinking ship.”

“Must have been something.”

Lawrence is staring at the little girl on the plastic horse now. “It was,” he says. “Back then a man could fight another man and not get himself stabbed. People are meaner now.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, there’s no doubt about that.”

I slip the staple gun halfway down the back of my jeans and then point toward the entrance to the Safeway. “Black coffee?” I ask.

“That’s right. Thank you.”

They sell hot coffee over by the deli, and I buy two cups and a big Sunday paper. When I get back outside I see that the plastic horse has been abandoned. Lawrence is sitting there peacefully with his hands folded on his lap, and I set his coffee and then the newspaper down on the bench.

“Thank you again, son,” he says. “What do I owe you?”

“It’s on me,” I tell him. “Wait for me right here and don’t worry, Mr. Lawrence—I’m gonna sprint through these and your family won’t be the wiser.” I wave the thin stack of flyers at him. “Looks like you got through most of them already, anyways. You did real good.”

He grateful but he’s proud, and I see that I have him feeling a little bit like a child. He sighs as he passes me the rest of the flyers.

I walk those three same blocks back up Fulton to 46th Avenue, and then start off across the street from that last flyer that Lawrence posted. I gulp at my coffee and get to stapling. There's only about a dozen flyers left, and I zag-zag through the avenues, bouncing from Fulton to Cabrillo to Fulton until my own pocket is littered with tear slips, and I'm once again in front of the Safeway. I've only been gone maybe a half-hour. Lawrence is still sitting on the bench where I left him, but he hasn't seen me yet. The newspaper I bought for him hasn't been touched, and his coffee is resting on top of it. I see now that he's sleeping. I sit down on the bench, and when I touch him on the shoulder his eyes flutter open.

"Hey there, Mr. Lawrence," I say. "You're all set."

He's groggy and it takes him a second to get his bearings. Finally he looks over at me, "You got both sides of the streets?" he asks. "I forgot to tell you to get both sides."

"Yessir. Both sides."

"I appreciate your kindness," he says.

"Sure," I tell him. "I really hope something comes of this."

"I do too," he says. "But we'll see."

He doesn't sound optimistic, but of course there's no reason why he should. I get it. The Sorensens just needed to do *something*, and this was the best that they could come up with. I set the stapler down between us. "You need me to walk with you somewhere?" I ask. "I don't mind."

"No, no," he says. "I'm supposed to call them when I finish." He then reaches inside his windbreaker and pulls out a big-buttoned cell phone that must be meant for seniors. I suspect that it's not just a phone but also a GPS tracker, and that as Lawrence's mind goes from sharp to

blunted some daughter or son will activate that feature if they haven't already—that this man won't be able to go anywhere without the world being able to find him.

Lawrence is studying the phone like he's seeing it for the first time. I consider asking if he'd like my help with it, but something tells me that he wants me to let him do this one thing for himself. I watch as he starts searching around for some number, and finally he puts the phone to his ear. I can hear it ringing even from where I'm sitting. A woman answers with, Hey, Papa—and Lawrence tells her that he's all finished, You guys can come on over to the supermarket and get me now.

When Lawrence is done he tucks the phone back inside his jacket, and I get the sense that he wants me gone before his family shows. I hold out my hand. "It was nice to have met you," I tell him. "Good luck, Mr. Lawrence. Really." He won't shake hands sitting down, and so we stand up together. The light fog has turned to heavy fog now, and I hope he'll go on inside the store if it gets too cold for him.

"You know," he says, "we should have come out here a long, long time ago and dragged that boy home. He was sick, you see."

Since of course I didn't ever know Mark Sorensen the man I just nod at that. We say our goodbyes, but then instead of heading back to my apartment I go across the street and watch Lawrence. Not too long passes before a minivan pulls up in front of the Safeway. Sorensens start piling out of their rental, and it's such a nice thing to watch—the smile on Lawrence's face as he rises to meet them—that I wish I could have just happened upon this scene, that I didn't have to know the what and the why of it all.

That night, alone in the apartment, I get it into my head that I want to speak with Eliza Anne. The only number I have saved for her on my phone is the one that showed up when she called me about five months earlier—the one belonging to that camp she'd rented in Toledo Bend. That won't do me any good, and so I duck out of the apartment and go to the LeBaron.

The floorboards of the LeBaron are littered with trash, but among the receipts and napkins and empty packs of cigarettes I manage to find the pamphlet from the Louisiana welcome center on which I'd scrawled Eliza Anne's home number, her address on Ball Park Drive. It's wrong of me to ring her house line, but that's exactly what I'm planning to do.

I go back to the apartment. The time is 9 P.M. in Dry Springs—probably too late for anyone to be calling, much less me—but I figure it's coin-flip odds that I'll get Eliza Anne and not her husband. If she answers I'll instruct her to play dumb—hang up and tell Cal it was a wrong number, but then go lock yourself in the bathroom and run the tub. Call me from there on your cell phone and let me talk to you. You won't have to say a word. I just want to say things and know that you're listening. I've never been able to stop thinking about you, Eliza Anne.

This is it. I put Sam in the backyard and make the call. The phone rings three times, and I have my finger on the kill button, ready to bail at the sound of Cal's voice, when instead a little boy answers. "Hayes residence," he says, and I shut off the phone.

And so now I'm sitting there on an ice chest full of dog food, looking at myself in the mirror. I can feel a depressed darkness falling over me when my cell phone starts to vibrate in my hand. It could be Cal on the line, but it might be Eliza Anne. I pick up before the ring even comes. "Hello," I say.

"Who is this?" It's her. "Why are you calling us and hanging up?" she asks.

"Eliza Anne?"

"Yes?"

"This is Roy. Are you alone?"

"What?"

"It's Roy Joseph. Can you talk right now?"

She doesn't say anything. I can hear a TV in the background—a football game, I think. I move over to the bed and sit down. Finally Eliza Anne speaks, but not to me. "It's just my sister, honey," she says. "Her phone cut out. I'm gonna go to the bedroom and talk to her."

"Good," I whisper. "Perfect."

The football game grows quiet and quieter until at last there comes the sound of a door closing, and all I can make out is the sound of Eliza Anne breathing. "Roy?" she says.

I turn off the lights and then lay myself down onto the bed. "I'm still here," I tell her.

"Listen to me," she says. "Don't you ever call this house again."

"I'm sorry. I know. But I had to talk to you, and I didn't have your cell number."

"Stop it, Roy."

"Relax. It's done. Now—"

"Shut up!" she hisses.

"Relax, okay?"

“Stop saying that to me.”

“Come on. We’ll do just like the last time.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about before. Back in June. You know, when *you* called *me*.” I put the phone in my other hand and roll over onto my side. “I want to make you come again,” I tell her. “Please let me do that for you.”

“*Come?* You never made me come. What are you talking about?”

I figure I’ll play along if that’s what she wants. “All right,” I say. “Then let’s see if we can change that.”

“You don’t understand.”

“What don’t I understand?” I’m trying to follow her, but I’m getting impatient myself. “What’s the problem?”

Years ago I helped bring a man back from the dead. We fished him from the Gulf and then someone pushed the water out of his lungs. And that drowned and strangled gasping is as best as I can describe the sound that Eliza Anne is making now. “The way that you were talking that night,” she says between breaths. “All that terrible stuff you were saying you wanted to do with me, to me—oh my God, something is very wrong with you, Roy.”

Apparently this isn’t some tease. Apparently that religion Eliza Anne found has latched itself back onto her. “I’m not your pastor,” I tell her. “We both know that you were into it. I mean, tell me, what’s the real harm?”

“Oh my God,” she says again. “Into it? Into it?” And then she screams into the phone so loud that I can picture Cal flinching. “You had me so gosh afraid that night!” she sobs. “You had me fucking crying!”

TIME

MAY 18, 1959

RELIGION: BAPTISM ON THE BEACH

THE PANTHER MOUND

STATE OF LOUISIANA

OFFICE OF CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

DIVISION OF ARCHEOLOGY

THE INDIAN MOUNDS OF NORTHEAST LOUISIANA

My parents moved onto the farm where I grew up just a few years before Tommy was born. They were young teachers then, fresh out of school at Northwestern in Natchitoches. Both of them were from that part of the state, and taking teaching jobs over in Dry Springs was them making their way out into the world.

Our farm was set off by itself, completely surrounded by a deep, green pine forest owned by a paper company. In the far back corner of one pasture, near the stock pond, the land buckled up a good ten feet. My father dubbed the narrow tube that went snaking into the pinewoods Cemetery Ridge—a miniature version of the place he claimed that the Civil War was lost. (He used to say that Lee had way too much God in him. The man was sickened by the hell at Gettysburg, and decided against all odds that if it was meant to be for the South then they would take that high ground. A faith experiment, Daddy called it.)

So yeah, for years and years Cemetery Ridge was the Joseph's joke name for our thin hill—all the way up until the spring Sunday when I was about ten and a briar-scratched graduate student from LSU came calling. The kid told us that our little Cemetery Ridge was actually a small piece of an ancient Indian mound. For the past month he'd been tromping all through the paper company land on the sly, surveying and taking soil samples, and now he was hoping we'd let him poke around on our farm a bit.

Being a history teacher, at first I think Daddy was a little embarrassed that he didn't know what he'd been sitting on, but in the end his excitement won over, and he threw in with that kid. Me and Tommy and Daddy spent the day with him in our pasture, watching the surveying of Cemetery Ridge, and then about a month later the graduate student came to show us an aerial photo that had the contours of the Indian mound drawn in white grease pencil—a creature flattened out like road kill in the pinewoods, the outline of a giant murder victim.

The mound had four legs and a head, and the end tip of its long and curling tail trespassed onto our property. This was maybe a three-thousand-year-old effigy mound, the kid told us. A very rare thing, especially this far south. In fact, except for a dirt bird over in Poverty Point, he didn't know of another effigy mound in all of the state.

At first I thought I was looking at a weasel, but the kid said he was leaning toward calling it a panther. It might even be a prehistoric depiction of the underwater panther, he claimed—a fierce water monster that many later, post-contact, tribes were documented to have worshipped.

After that, we never heard from the graduate student again, and I imagine he got his PhD and then left Louisiana for a far off place. Hell, he might have died, for all I know. I think that at one point my father was in contact with some folks from the state—but apparently the paper company wasn't willing to give anyone access to their land, and so all of that withered on the vine until eventually the panther mound was forgotten.

But even after Tommy died my father would spend a good portion of the years that he himself had left on this earth studying on that effigy mound. He was in love with it from the start—and that June, just before Tommy left home for boot camp, Daddy gave us all a vial of panther mound dirt. This is your home and this is your family, he said to us. We'll all keep these on us to remember that.

And so now one of those vials tumbles along chained to dog tags somewhere in the ocean. Another two lie buried in Ruston. That only leaves one left, and I'll die before I let anyone pull it from my neck.

MONDAY

Monday, November 5, 2007. This is the day that now, looking back, I realize that things really began to go sideways for me.

In three days I'll be leaving San Francisco for good.

In a week I'll be once again living in Grand Isle.

In a month Mr. Donny Lee will be arrested for shooting a Dallas "financier" in the neck, and in two months I'll turn thirty as a poor man.

And in less than a year, tired of always running from storms, I will try to ride out Hurricane Gustav and be wiped out—what Mr. Donny Lee didn't lose, Mother Nature took. Sam is dead, the Airstream and the LeBaron are destroyed. I'll leave the country then and find myself standing where I am standing now, in the Gulf of Guinea, on an oilrig off the coast of Nigeria. At night I stare out at the gas flares of the Lagos refineries, and though sometimes in the distance we think we see pirates in speedboats, to date they have left us alone.

I have certain rituals and rhythms that I try to abide by whenever I'm not offshore. Living alone it doesn't make good sense for me to cook every night, and so on Mondays I like to make a big pot of something that I can eat off of for the rest of the week. This morning I walked down to the Safeway, and I've got a roast and some vegetables in the oven now. They're simmering away in one of Julie Yang's immaculate pots.

For most of the night I was up thinking about Eliza Anne. I'm not buying what she said to me, and I decide that I'm through with her for real this time. If she can't be counted on to be the same person from one phone call to the next, then best I stay away from her. And so now my thoughts have turned to Marina. It's as if with Eliza Anne gone from my life for good I need some other woman to take her place. Suddenly it's Marina I can't get out of my head. Viktor promised he would be setting up a date between us, but all of yesterday went by without me hearing from him and so now I'm feeling impatient.

I already know from Viktor that pretty much every day around ten o'clock Marina loads up the baby and drives her bosses' car down to the park to shoot the breeze with her friends. It's half past nine now, and I figure it wouldn't be too strange if I happened to pass by with Sam. I can't stay gone too long with a pot in the oven, but what can I say? These past few days I've been feeling more restless than, well, ever. The old me would have been perfectly content to sit

on this couch from dawn till dusk, and as I'm leaving out their door I feel like a buck deer—an eight-point that lives wily and nocturnal all year only to lose his cleverness during the rut, chasing does in the daytime till a bullet drills him in the heart.

*

The nannies are already pondside when I arrive with Sam. We're following the blacktop path that runs along the shoreline. The cool water of the pond is warming in the sun, and I watch steam rise from its surface to mingle with the smoke from the nannies' cigarettes. At first I don't see Marina, but then a woman waves at me and I realize that it's her.

Sometime since our Saturday night at Viktor's house Marina has dyed her pixie-cut hair from red to the color of shiny oil. I wave back at her, and all of the Russians are staring at me now. I hear Marina say something quick to the women in their language, and then she pushes her stroller a few feet closer to them, sets the brake and comes over to me. She's wearing a corduroy skirt that stops just above her knees and that same pink coat she had on at Viktor's. Sam is watching her approach with his head cocked. I ease forward and Marina lowers herself into a squat. Her Reeboks are as white as cotton.

"Hey," I say. "Small world."

But if she's surprised to see me, she's not showing it at all. "So this is your Sam?" she asks.

"That's him."

"Let him free."

I drop the leash and Sam goes wiggling up to her. Marina puts her cigarette between her lips and starts smoothing out his yellow hide with both of her hands.

"I like your hair," I tell her.

Marina stands and slaps her hands together before she pulls the cigarette from her lips.

“Thank you,” she says.

“It’s like Elizabeth Taylor’s. You know, when she played Cleopatra.”

It seems that this is the best thing I ever could have said to her. She smiles and the corners of her dark eyes crinkle. “Do you come here looking for me?” she asks.

I scratch at my beard, and it makes a crackling sound. “Maybe,” I say.

“Maybe or yes? Viktor knows that I come here. He told you this, no?”

She crouches again and grinds her cigarette out on the blacktop. When she rises I hold open one of Sam’s plastic bags I’d brought along for Sam, and she drops the butt into it. “Yes,” I say. “I’m here looking for you.”

Marina nods and seems satisfied. “You should always say what you mean,” she tells me. “This is *your* language after all.”

“Deal.”

“At least with me this is how you should be.”

“I meant what I said about your hair.”

“I know. I could tell that.”

I point over in the direction of her left-behind stroller. “Is that the devil child?”

Marina opens her eyes very wide and gives a slow nod. “Stay here,” she orders.

The other nannies are still staring quietly at me, and I wait with Sam while she goes back in among them. Marina speaks to them in Russian and then retrieves her charge. The stroller is a Cadillac, looks like something you’d pull behind a mule. She rolls it over to us, and I peer inside at a sleeping one-year-old. I contemplate the little white baby. “He seems calm enough,” I say.

“For now,” says Marina.

“Wanna walk with me? I’ll push.”

Marina hesitates but then makes an all yours gesture. She takes Sam’s leash from me, and I situate myself behind the stroller.

“So where to?” I ask.

She points to the east, and off we go. We keep mostly quiet as we walk, but things don’t feel awkward. I like this about her—how she doesn’t come at me with question after question.

We take a path that follows the road. A few cars pass by, and I realize that anyone taking us in would think that me and Marina and Stranger Baby are a family out strolling with their dog. For the first time it hits me that this woman might actually be wife one day—that one day she might even ask me to make her a mother. I look down at Stranger Baby, but I don’t feel a thing. Eucalyptus trees loom over us, and the salt breeze blowing in steadily from the ocean is rustling their thin leaves in a white noise sort of way. The park’s iron lampposts don’t look all that different than the ones in downtown Vicksburg, and I see a Mark Sorensen flyer taped to most every one that we pass.

Stranger Baby is still sleeping when we come up on the buffalo pen. Eleven shaggy buffalo are grazing at the far end of about ten high-fenced acres. I’ve been by here before, and in a park full of strange things this is one of the strangest. I glance over at Marina. She has her head turned away from the wind, and for the first time I notice that she has a small red heart tattooed in the cleft at the base of her neck, right below her purple-black hairline. I start to ask after it but stop myself.

And then for some reason I instead tell her what I’ve always heard about the old-time market hunters. How they would come upon a sea of buffalo and situate themselves on a distant rise, picking the buffalo off one by one with their Sharps rifles without ever spooking the herd.

“To the buffalo,” I tell her, “all that shooting didn’t sound any different than thunder.” And of course I’m thinking here of Lionel Purcell too, him and his crazy sniper rifle.

“How do you know what it is that a buffalo believes?” Marina asks. “Are you a buffalo?”

I laugh. “No,” I say. “That’s just what people figure.”

She seems interested, and so I dip back even further and tell her some things taught to me by a Shoshone Indian I met at a bar in Cheyenne. I describe a buffalo jump to Marina. Imagine a great thundering herd being stampeded through a long chute of rock and willow that ends at the edge of a cliff. Imagine the braves waiting below with their tomahawks and spears. They move blood-soaked through the broken-legged and lowing buffalo.

Then came bows, Spanish ponies, rifles.

I finish my history lesson and ask Marina if she’d like to have dinner with me—just me, no orcas or Viktors or Sonyas. At first she is quiet, but then she shrugs and says, Yes, okay. Maybe tomorrow, Mr. Buffalo?

*

I walk with Sam toward home and try to put Marina out of my mind for a while. I’ve come to see happiness as bad luck—as a setup for a fall—and so to find myself cheerful or hopeful about anything tends to leave me worried about what might be waiting around the corner. After agreeing to our date Marina punched her number into my cell phone, and then I told her I had something cooking in the oven, needed to head back. She nodded but stayed where she was—on the rise, watching those city buffalo—until finally she said that she was ready and let me take her back to her friends.

Instead of heating up the day is in fact growing colder. The fog coming in off the ocean looks like smoke, and I try to picture a sequence of events in which my unattended oven sets the

apartment and then the block and then the entire city afire, all because of my lonely wanderings. The most likely scenario I can come up with is a gas leak. Say a little earthquake jostles the Outer Richmond and somehow Julie Yang's kitchenette fills with propane fumes. Yeah, sure, in that situation an open flame could be a bad thing indeed.

Earthquakes. I'd be lying if I said I haven't been giving them a lot of thought lately. I don't know the first thing. Do I run outside or stay indoors? Fill the bathtub? And then there are these signs all through my neighborhood—TSUNAMI EVACUATION ROUTE written across a drawing of a big wave. Fuck. Sea Cliff gets TOUR BUSES AND VANS PROHIBITED, and I get this. I'll take hurricanes hands down over earthquakes and tidal waves. A hurricane lets you know it's coming, gives you fair enough warning, and if you want to risk staying then you stay. That's on you. The Gulf Coast sees hell time and time again, but think about this place—a million people living on a time bomb of rock that juts out into the ocean. America is full of good safe land, but for some reason most of us seem to be drawn to the coasts. We are camped along this country's shores like castaways on some big island, and I wonder if eventually even the last of the inland holdouts will give up and start heading for the beaches.

When I get back to the apartment it smells not of propane but of cooking meat—that plus the faint scent of the Budweiser that the roast and the vegetables are braising in, the Tony Chachere’s from the Winn-Dixie in Ruston that I’d seasoned everything with.

I ring Viktor to let him know about my date with Marina tomorrow, and he seems a little annoyed that I took it upon myself to ask her. “What time?” he asks.

“She said I should pick her up at seven.”

“Okay,” he says. “I will make dinner reservations and speak with you tomorrow.”

I try to tell him that isn’t necessary, but he hangs up on me before I can get the words out. Oh well. I figure I can deal with him later. The roast looks done, and so I boil half a bag of egg noodles and fix myself a big lunch. Sam sleeps while I eat and check my email, but I have no messages of any consequence. You pull one *hey I think I’m your dead brother’s child* email and whatever might come thereafter can’t help but pale. I’m feeling restless again. I’ve got things moving along pretty well with Marina, but I’m stuck in a sort of purgatory when it comes to Jenny. In seven days I’ll be leaving San Francisco. I’m running out of time. I want to introduce myself. I want to talk to her.

Washington High School looks more like a fortress on a hill than a school. It covers at least two city blocks, and around three-fifteen kids come pouring out of the main building. I'm standing on 32nd Avenue, about a block from where it crosses Geary, and just when I'm telling myself that this was a stupid idea—me thinking that I could just show up here and find Jenny among hundreds—I do indeed see her. Jenny in her eye-chart sweatshirt.

Her house is only a few blocks away, yet for some reason she's in a crush of students forcing themselves onto an eastbound 38 Geary. I holler her name but she doesn't hear me, and I jog on over just as she slips inside. The front door closes behind her, and the bus driver wags his finger at me when I slap at the glass. Goddamn it. I'm easing away when I notice that the rear door of the bus is still open. An old man forces his way off, and before the door can close on me I've snuck aboard with all of the school kids. Roy Joseph, train-jumping hobo.

Book bags and teenagers are pressed every which way against me, but I don't even exist to these kids. They just go on about their conversations. *Hella* this and *hecka* that. I'm pushed toward the back, farther away from Jenny, as even more youth of America sneak on board. Up this close I see just how young they really are. A short boy is practically hugging me, and I look down at him until he looks up at me.

“What?” he says, his voice cracking.

City kids. “I’m a cop,” I tell him. “How old are you, son?”

He doesn’t believe me—no cop looks like me—but there’s nowhere for him to escape to, and so he just goes with it. “Fourteen,” he says finally.

“Thanks,” I say. “Just curious.”

The boy can’t get away from me quick enough. He dips his shoulder into a gap between classmates, and they part and absorb him so that suddenly he’s gone and some other baby has taken his place. Fourteen. Good Lord. Is that really what I looked that day? There in the church at Tommy’s memorial service?

We make our way east on Geary, and at each stop we swap teenagers for adults until finally the bus is not quite so crowded or quite so loud. I’m still standing near the back, and Jenny has found a seat up by the driver. When she gets off I’ll follow. I’ll tell her who I am, and then maybe we’ll go and find a quiet place to talk. I sure as hell don’t want to introduce myself to her here—bumping along on a bus, shouting to be heard—and so I’m crouched down low among the other seat-less passengers, stealing a glance over at Jenny at every stop to make sure she isn’t leaving me behind.

It’s no real trick to hide myself from her, as she seems to be making it a point not to look up from the book in her lap. The paperback, the iPod in her ears, the sunglasses, the hood of her sweatshirt thrown over her head—she’s doing everything she can to make herself invisible—no, check that, to make all of *us* invisible. She’s transported herself to some place where kids don’t act so much like kids. Some place where she can ignore the garbage bag of clothes that a homeless man has leaned up against her leg. Some place where she doesn’t have to acknowledge all the stares and glances of these businessmen and blue-collars who—even though she’s buried within that sweatshirt and has a plaid book bag between her feet—have somehow recognized her

for the beautiful young woman that she is. It's as if she's found herself stuck in high school due to some clerical error, that she's patiently waiting for someone to realize the mistake and clear all this up.

Watching Jenny I get some sense of what it must be like to be prey, to have to spend every second of your life with your guard up, accounting for predators. The pages of her book are turning, but I can't help but wonder if she's just pretending to be reading. If instead she's keeping tabs on us all from behind those sunglasses she's wearing—hoping that the mechanic to her left and the suit to her right will stop rubbing their thighs against hers, that the homeless guy now leering down at her won't ever get around to asking her whatever question it is that seems to be forming on his lips, that the nine-fingered sex offender who was the brother to her dead Louisiana father will have a good explanation as to why he's been shadowing her.

*

We're in some shitty section of downtown—the Tenderloin, I believe—when Jenny stashes her book and then tugs at the stop cord. The homeless man's belongings are still blocking the aisle, but Jenny eases them aside with her foot as she stands and shoulders her book bag. I turn away from her as she waits for the rear door of the bus to open. We stop and the door opens, and then Jenny hops down onto the sidewalk and I follow. I'm a few steps behind her, about to tap her on her shoulder when I decide, no, I'll tag along just a little bit longer. Let's find out what this crazy girl is up to, coming all the way out here to a neighborhood like this. Drugs, it can only be drugs. If I catch somebody dealing to Jenny I think I might kill the bastard. I'll kill him and then I'll run—

Cuba. Me and Sam and my money will fly there from Mexico. I'll tell Castro's boys that I'm a comrade in search of asylum and make my home in a small village on the beach like some

aging gunfighter. My mornings will be spent casting for bonefish in pristine flats, and then I'll drink banana daiquiris and smoke black cigars as I wait for the day to cool again. Escape fantasies, I've got them by the hundreds.

It's not as cold here as it was out by the ocean, but it's not warm either. Jenny goes hurrying down the sidewalk, and I give her some slack, letting her pull about a half block ahead of me before I kick into gear myself. This is a ghetto, and so it's a gauntlet we're running. Junkies and hookers stagger by, while from the street corners dealers and pimps look on. A police cruiser goes rolling past, and the young cop in the passenger seat shakes his head at me. I can tell that, like the boy on the bus, he has me pegged as a pervert. This can only happen so many times in one day before you start to ask yourself, Jesus, is that really how I come across to the world?

After four blocks Jenny stops in front of a narrow, decrepit building that's about ten stories high. Crooked fire escapes lattice each floor, and a neon sign on the second floor is blinking WET ASIAN MASSAGE. I start to run. This ends now—I'm not letting her walk inside that building on my watch. She's only about a block away, but she has a key in her hand and is opening a tall and graffitied door. I won't be able to reach her in time, and so I call her name. I scream it twice, yet each time the honk of a cab horn drowns out my voice.

The door shuts behind her just as I reach it, but I keep on with my screaming. Even thick as that locked door is, I'm certain that Jenny must hear something—the thump of my fist against the metal, my muffled and incoherent voice. She hears it, but of course the door stays closed, locked. After all, what sane young woman, listening to an unknown madman attack a locked door in a neighborhood like this, would put her delicate hand on the knob and open it?

And then I see that just off to my left, bolted against the side of the building, there's a small black intercom. Some asshole has molded pink chewing gum over the button, and I punch at the hardened glob with the back of my wrist. There's a long moment of nothing before a woman's voice comes on. "Yeah, yeah," she says. "Who's there?" She sounds faraway and scratchy, like she's speaking to me from a space pod that's orbiting the earth.

I bring my mouth closer to the intercom. It smells like stomach bile. "I'm looking for someone," I tell her. "A girl. Jenny."

"What?" the voice asks.

"I'm looking for someone," I say again. "Jenny Hammons."

"What? Speak."

"Can you hear me?"

"Fuck," says the woman. "Hold up. I think this piece of crap is broken again."

The intercom goes silent, and I stand there, nervous and waiting. Two or three minutes tick by, and then finally the door flies open. I see an enormous woman dressed in purple. She's not fat, just large—a true giant of a white woman. She starts pulling at her curly hair like some frustrated cartoon character. I don't know what role in life this gal plays, but I'm guessing that she works as some sort of gatekeeper at this private hell, that she's a minion of a slumlord.

The woman scans up and down the sidewalk before turning her attention back to me. She has a round and blotchy face, eyes as blue as toothpaste. I see now that of all things it's an LSU getup she's wearing—a purple T-shirt and purple sweatpants. There's a gold tiger head over her heart and one more on her tree trunk of a thigh. Since Katrina and Rita we're everywhere, scattered to the far corners of the earth like some lost tribe.

"Well," she says, "whataya want?"

The woman has a strong Yat accent that tells me she's originally from New Orleans or thereabouts, and I can picture her on a parade route no problem, gnawing on a drumstick while she dances drunk and happy to a high school marching band, chanting *Who dat!* when a float rolls by carrying a couple of second-string Saints.

"I saw my niece come in here," I tell her. "I think maybe she's in trouble."

"Come in here?"

"Yeah, here," I say. "Into this building."

From the way she's looking at me it's obvious that she doesn't believe what I'm telling her. "No," she says. "You're wrong."

The Yat makes to slam the door shut, and without really thinking I catch it with my foot and then try to spin past her like a pass-rushing defensive end. I'm expecting her to grab at me, but instead she throws my aside and then goes loping down the long hallway. She disappears into a room, and I'm left standing there alone.

The inside of this building is as dim and dirty as I had feared—no place for anyone, much less Jenny. The floor is carpeted, but a tear runs dead center all the way down the length of it like a wound showing concrete flesh. On either side of me unmarked doors lead into what could only be tiny rooms. I don't see an elevator, but a stairwell rises up at the far end of the hall. Fuck. Jenny could be anywhere.

I see the Yat emerge from the room up ahead. She's holding what looks to be an aluminum fish bat now—a sort of club that sports use to bash the brains of gaffed tuna and whatnot. "Leave, cocksucker, leave," she says. "Leave, leave, leave, leave, leave."

She breaks toward me in an easy jog, grasping the fish bat midway in her massive hand like it's a track baton. She's so relaxed, smiling even, that it takes me a moment before I realize

that this giant is coming to beat me, maybe even kill me. The only place for me to go is out, and I'm making for the door when I think of Jenny, hidden in one of these filthy rooms, in way over her head, a victim of bad judgment, doing God knows what with God knows who. Perhaps the only reason fate has brought me out here to California—perhaps the only reason I was ever even born—was to be here in this miserable building on this day to try and save her from herself and from the world. She has a curse in her blood. The Josephs are not lucky people, and no matter what she calls herself, Jenny is a Joseph.

I turn around to face the Yat. My back is pressed up against the door, and she has me cornered. That mean little fish bat is in both hands, and she's squared up, ready to unload. Her face is almost pretty, mostly due to those blue, blue eyes.

“Stop!” I holler. “Just hear me out.”

The Yat wipes her mouth on the shoulder of her T-shirt. “Get out!” she screams back. Her cheeks are so red it's as if someone has slapped them. I don't think I've ever seen anyone this mad. It makes me think that this has quit being about me. It makes me think that one day some lowlife must have come into this place uninvited and did something very bad to this woman. She fakes a swing at me, and I flinch.

“Christ, lady. Just listen,” I tell her. “I'm from Louisiana too. Grand Isle, Dry Springs before that.”

“And I'm from Chalmette,” says the Yat. “So the fuck what?”

She swings, and I lift up my arm. The fish bat catches the wall and that saves me, weakening the blow into just a light tap to the elbow. Still, if not for that wall, she would have broken my goddamn wing. It seems as though, with the finger gone, God wants that whole left arm now. He's trying to kill me slowly, piece by piece.

The Yat lifts the fish bat again, but this time up over her head, and she's about to hammer me in the skull like I'm a swordfish when without really thinking I kick out with all I've got. My boot nails her square in the knee, and she falls, the fish bat coming down at me while she topples. I throw myself off to the side as she goes crashing to the carpet.

"You made me do that," I tell her. "Shit. Are you okay?"

But if she was mad before, she's a hornet now. She's got her big knee in her big hands and is howling—and though I know that I should open the front door and escape this place—instead I leap over her and head for the stairwell. This has a video game feel to it. On Level One Roy Joseph bested the Yat—now, on to Level Two and whatever other ogres might be waiting for him there.

I go charging up in the stairs, and I pause at each floor and shout Jenny's name as loud as I can manage. So far nobody has come out to greet me, and the only reply I get is the sound of bolts slapping shut as folks wait for the madman to pass them on by. It's not long before I'm winded, and but still I push on. I can hear the Yat coming up after me now, swearing that she's going to kill me. Her callings echo up the stairwell like the wailings of some ghost.

On the sixth floor I fall back against the wall and try to catch my breath. "I'm coming," croons the Yat, almost like she's singing a song. "Yeah you know I'm coming."

I yell Jenny's once more. Nothing. I'm desperate now. I look around and do the only thing I can think to do. On the wall there's a paint-splashed fire alarm, and I reach out and pull it. Just as the alarm handle comes down, a door opens all the way at the end of the hall. I see Jenny, and I feel myself cringe—maybe because I am waiting for the shriek of the alarm—or maybe because my niece is standing there on bare brown legs, wearing nothing but her sweatshirt. The

alarm never comes. There is no siren, and even the Yat has quieted. The only sound I hear is Jenny's voice. "What's going on out here?" she says.

I sprint down the hall toward her, and she moves halfway back into the room. She's afraid, and I stop a few steps away to give her some space. "I need to talk to you," I tell her. "Will you let me in?"

Jenny grabs at the bottom of the sweatshirt, pulling it down so that it covers more of her. "Who are you?" she asks.

There's a window behind Jenny, and I can see an ocean of dust drifting through the gray light. I still don't hear the Yat, but I know she must be on her way. "Please," I say. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

"There's no way I'm letting you in here," says Jenny.

I'm wondering whether I should carry her inside or just escape this place alone. All I know for certain is that if I stay her in the hall I'm going to be maimed. "Please," I say again. "We don't have much time, Jenny."

And then her jaw drops a bit. She's staring at my face and touching her own. "No," she says. She sort of stumbles back and the door swings all the way open. Inside I see a young guy struggling into a pair of torn jeans.

"Jenny," he says, "who is this dude?"

"I think it might be him," she says.

"Who?"

"That man I wrote."

"That's right," I say.

"You mean—"

“Yes,” says Jenny. “Him.”

The kid’s maybe a little older than Jenny, but not by too much, I don’t guess. He’s straw-haired, good-looking. His shirt is off, and I see that he’s skinny but strong. I’m studying him—suddenly I’m fascinated more by this kid than by Jenny for some reason—when a hand grabs me by the shoulder and spins me around. It’s the Yat, of course. She’s exhausted, injured, pissed—and I’m waiting for her to fish bat me when the kid steps in between us. “Mother,” he says.

“Wait. I think we know him.”

The kid's name is Daniel, and I gather that the big purple gal he calls Mother is not actually his mother, just some woman who serves as the super for the building. I don't have much luck calming her down until I give her all the money out of my wallet—a hundred and twenty bucks—in exchange for bruising her knee. I feel horrible watching her limp over to take the cash from me, but I really do believe that she aimed to kill me earlier, that in that moment it was either her or me.

Jenny is sitting on a small and sagging bed. She's wearing jeans now, Daniel a shirt. He stands off to the side of me, holding a claw hammer that he grabbed from a big leather tool belt lying over in the corner—right next to a pair of Red Wings just like mine—and I'm thinking that he just got off of work. Mother still has her fish bat, and she gets the idea to pat me down for weapons of any sort. She puts her hands on me, and I feel like I am being prepped for an interrogation, that I've become the prisoner of Mother and these two barefoot teenagers. Jenny just sits there and watches me. I think she might be in shock.

Mother is sliding her hand up my thigh. “Well,” I say to Jenny. “I'm sorry this is the way you had to meet me.”

“Shut up,” says Mother. “Do you want me to call the police, Daniel?”

“I don't know,” he says. “Jenny?”

I see Daniel glance over at her, but she doesn't say anything. From the back of a plastic chair hangs a peach-colored bra, and the room reeks of sex and pot. A faint cloud of smoke hovers above all of us like a ghost. Daniel has cracked the window open, but still the pot smoke just hangs there. The street below is loud, and on the sidewalk someone is yelling nonsense words. It's as though Jenny stole my fantasy about Marina—the one set in that seedy room in Moscow—and decided to live it with a teenage construction worker in San Francisco.

I keep talking. "It's not—"

"Quiet," says Mother. All three of us are looking over at Jenny now, and finally she shakes her head.

"You sure?" asks Mother.

"Yes," she whispers.

Mother pokes at my stomach with the fish bat. "You need to leave right now."

Daniel has taken a step closer to me, and he looks almost apologetic. If I have anything like an ally in this room, it's this kid. Jenny won't even look at me. In her entire life she will never forget this day. "Now wait," I say. "Just let me try and explain."

"You heard me," says Mother. "Leave or I'm calling the cops whether she wants me to or not." And then I guess she gets tired of waiting because she grabs me by the front of the jeans and leads me out into the hall. I don't fight her. "I'm getting high now," she says. "Don't still be here when I come out." The door closes and then locks behind me.

I'm alone, and without options I turn and make for the stairwell. I'm at the end of the hall when I hear someone call out. It's the kid—Daniel—he's come out of the room and is walking toward me. He's left the hammer behind. "Can I talk to you?" he asks.

"Please," I say.

I sit down on the stairs, trying to make myself small, harmless. Daniel keeps coming, but then instead of squaring up he slides down next to me. He sighs. “This has me completely freaked out, dude. I don’t know what I should be doing.”

He says this almost like he’s asking for advice. I don’t know what to tell him. There’s nothing I can say that might make either of them feel better about all of this. I mean, I was fucking *following* the poor girl. I dropped this grenade, and I suppose it’s up to me to fall on it. Jenny can’t live her life wondering if I’m about to tap her on the shoulder. “How about this,” I say. “Why don’t you go ask her if she wants me to call her mom? I’ll tell her everything, let her do what she wants with me.”

“No,” says Daniel. “Please no. You do that and me and Jenny will be through.”

“What? Why?”

“That woman hates me. She called me a dropout, said it right to my face, dude. She can’t know that Jenny comes here.”

I’m studying on his thick wrists, the cuts and scars on his hands and forearms. Behind all his California cool he looks fixed to attack me should I say the wrong thing, and I find myself liking the kid. He’s no good for Jenny, of course. But that’s not his fault. Hell, I’m no good for her either. “Look,” I tell him. “I went about this in a messed up way, but I just want her to know a little bit about who my brother was.” It’s sort of a lie, but not completely.

“I’d kill you if you ever hurt her.”

He seems almost embarrassed to say that. “You won’t have to kill me,” I tell him. “I promise.”

“All right. Good.”

“Could you give her something?”

“What?”

I open my wallet and take out a picture of Tommy. It’s one of those Olan Mills photographs everyone has to suffer through in school. I found an envelope full of them after my parents died, and I always keep one on me. When the one in my wallet fades out, I swap it for a fresh one from the envelope. I’d call them good luck charms, though I can’t say they’ve brought me any. “This was him as a senior in high school,” I tell him. “Just like Jenny, right?”

“She’s a junior,” says Daniel.

I hand him the picture, and he studies it for a long while. In the shot Tommy’s wearing a blue cap and gown. His hair has just been buzzed; no bangs peek out. On his birthday that June he will drive alone to the recruiting office in Monroe and enlist in the Navy.

“Now I’m gonna go,” I say. “But tell Jenny she’ll be getting an email from me tonight—just one. I don’t want to leave things like this. I want to try and tell her my side of this, and then that’ll be it forever, okay?”

“I guess.”

“You take care of her.”

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I treat her like a princess.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I stand up, and as I’m leaving I come close to telling him that he should be the one worrying, not me. That eventually Jenny will grow bored of him and set a course for whatever her real destiny is. That one day he’ll barely register in the memory of the pretty girl locked in that room. That right now he can still work as hard as he does and be beautiful to her, but in ten, fifteen years this life will have taken its toll. I can see what you really are, Daniel—what you

always will be. Soon you'll have a bad back and a half-assed beard, stained teeth from all the coffee and cigarettes. Your knuckles will always be scabbed. Your nails will always be dirty. Maybe a circular saw will jitterbug across you hand. You will be broken. Look at yourself. Look at where you live. It's already starting to happen. That woman—the one you call Mother—I'm sorry but she *is* your mother. Yours and mine both, kid. Yours and mine both.

I've never put as much work into anything as I did with the email I wrote to Jenny that night. It was long, at least a thousand words, I bet. My best shot at easing the fears of a sixteen-year-old girl I'd made go catatonic, my best shot at keeping her from having nightmares for the rest of her life.

And so in this email I try to explain what I'm doing out in San Francisco (a lie—visiting my new girlfriend); how I found her (though I don't mention all the time spent staring at her house from above Marvel Court, following her); why I had busted in on her and Daniel (the truth—I followed you after school, hoping we could talk, and when I saw you go into that building I thought you might be in danger).

This is the last time you'll ever hear from me if that's what you want. I'll be going home to Louisiana in just a few days.

I close by giving her the name and number for the chief of police in Grand Isle.

From here on out, if I ever do the slightest thing to upset you, you just give that man a call. And then I left it at that.

TUESDAY

All through the night I'm up every hour or so checking the computer, but then morning finally comes and Jenny still hasn't written me back. I have a very bad feeling now. I imagine forces descending, switches being flipped somewhere, big steel-toothed gears preparing to grind me. Warrants are being issued. A strike team is assembling in the parking lot of the Safeway. Sam will wind up in a San Francisco pound while *The People of the State of California v. Roy Joseph* plays itself out. I'm up on charges for assault and battery, trespassing—maybe some stalking law that the shiny people in Hollywood lobbied to get on the books.

There's no dodging the police for long, but I start making preparations for a quick escape anyway, should that become necessary. I have my date with Marina tonight, and depending on how that goes—and whether Jenny ever writes—tomorrow I might take a hard look at leaving this place. If the law wants me it will find me, but at least I'll have some time on the open road before that bell tolls.

And so the first thing I need to do is hit an auto parts store to get my getaway car up and running again—if for no other reason than I need some means of picking Marina up at seven. The LeBaron is nothing beautiful anymore, just a '94 model with over two hundred thousand miles on the odometer. My parents bought it for me used in the spring of '97, right after I made the Dean's List my freshman year at LSU. That was a big deal to them, buying me that car, sort

of their way of saying we're proud of you, son. You've been through a lot, but you've managed to turn out okay. In 2004 I'd replaced the transmission, and I hadn't had any real trouble with her since—just your expected wear-and-tear issues for the most part—but it was only a matter of time before she gave up the ghost. The frame was all rusted due to the salt of Grand Isle, and there was a big gray patch on the center of the hood where her maroon paint had burned away from the primer coat. I had my fingers crossed the whole way out to California, but somehow she held together fine. It wasn't until after we made it here to San Francisco that things went south. On my third day in the city I'd parked over on Fulton, but then when I went to take a drive the next morning the battery was dead. I hadn't left the lights on or anything goofy like that, and so I checked the cables and took a wire brush to the posts. Still no luck. Viktor let me hook up to one of his Mercedes for a boost, but though we got the engine to turn over the battery wouldn't hold a charge.

But there was no need to panic yet, I convinced myself. The battery had four or five years on it, and I supposed it could be time for a new one. A bad battery—at least I was hoping that's all it was, because of course that car did mean a whole lot to me. I felt like I was in a war movie. You can't die on me, old friend. Not here, not like this. I'm not gonna let you.

The parking lot lies atop a cliff in the far northwest corner of the city, looking down on high at the channel that joins the bay and the ocean. The fog from earlier has finally baked off, and the day is sunny and pleasant now. I'm surrounded by a thick forest, and across the channel begin the tan hills of what I think might be Marin County.

To my right from the bench where I'm sitting, I can see the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance—to my left, the endless grease of the Pacific. This is the last piece of lofty ground before San Francisco falls down into the ocean. I'm alone except for the occasional tourist and jogger. To me, this place feels like the end of the world.

I guess at one time all of this land—the parking lot, the acres of forest—was an Army reservation called Fort Miley, and I wonder what it would have been like to be stationed here during World War II, on the lookout for submarines and U-boats, Japanese fire balloons. Seems like this would have been a good billet to draw. Punch a few weeks staring out at the ocean, then head into town on leave to hit the dance halls and bars, have an affair with some overseas hero's wife. A life not so different than the rig hand life. Beats the hell out of storming beaches, I imagine.

Until a little while ago Jenny had been sitting beside me on this edge-of-the-cliff bench, but now it's just me—me and the car battery resting between my feet. I'd just taken the bus to an

auto parts store on Geary, when she rang my cell phone, asked me to meet her here. I was thinking that she should be in school, but that's not for me to worry about. I caught a bus west, and then I lugged that goddamn battery another few blocks to this magnificent parking lot.

Jenny was waiting on this same bench when I arrived, a mountain bike crumbled at her feet. I'd figured that this could very well be some type of sting operation, and I scanned the forest for police—or at least for Daniel with his hammer—but nothing appeared out of sorts. She really did seem to be alone.

I came up behind her, scuffing my Red Wings on the blacktop so she would hear me approaching. She glanced over her shoulder. Her hair was done up in a loose bun, and she resembled a soccer mom than a teenager, maybe a model waiting to be made up and dressed. Her eyes went to the car battery and stayed there. I realized then that me carrying a fucking samurai sword wouldn't be much less spooky than this, that I looked like a serial killer to her Kate Moss-in-the-make-up-room. The Car Battery Killer. The Electric Assassin.

I came around the bench and set the heavy DieHard down near her bike. "It's for my car," I explained. "You caught me in the middle of some chores."

"Oh," said Jenny.

I didn't ask, but all I could figure was that Daniel didn't know she was here. I couldn't imagine that he would go for that. She had on jeans same as me, but whereas I was wearing my gray sweatshirt, she was sporting a oversized Dickies work shirt that likely belonged to him. Clear skin, full lips, straight white teeth. Yes, she would be a gorgeous woman one day. There was no doubt about that.

"Thanks for calling," I told her. "I'm really sorry about yesterday. That was a disaster."

She gave a few quick nods, her head down, but then she took in a deep breath through her nose, lifting her chin as she drew in the air, inflating herself until she was sitting up straight and looking at me. “I’ve decided not to be afraid of you,” she said. “I can’t handle it.”

Whatever had been pressing against my chest fell away. This was the type of reckless decision that I should have counted on from a relative of mine. “I’m glad to hear that,” I said. “You don’t need to be afraid. I swear.”

“I believe you.”

I sat down on the other end of the bench. “It’s good to finally meet up. The right way, I mean.”

She swept her head to the side like a blind person. “Is this bizarre or what?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “This is bizarre.” She had a sleepy way of talking that I really liked, and it was funny to think that if she would’ve grown up in north Louisiana she’d sound something like me instead. I took out my cigarettes and held the pack out to her. “Want one?” I asked.

“Okay,” she said. “Thanks.” I lit her cigarette and then mine. She took a quick drag and exhaled. I can tell then that she didn’t really smoke. “Thanks,” she said again.

“Try not to get hooked. I only go through a couple a day myself.”

I don’t think she even heard me. She was looking at my hand. “What happened to your finger?” she asked.

“I work offshore,” I told her. “On oilrigs. I don’t know if you know that or not.”

She nodded.

“Well,” I said, “that’s where it happened. A cable grabbed it.”

She put her own hand against her face. The cigarette was smoldering between her fingers, and I was scared she was going to catch her beautiful brown hair afire. “Fuck,” she said.

“It wasn’t so bad,” I said.

“Do you really have a girlfriend out here?”

“Sort of. She’s a friend of a friend, so nothing too serious. Not yet, at least.”

“And when do you go home?”

“Monday.”

Just then an old school bus that I recognized from the park pulled into the lot. Some hippies had converted it into a sort of camper. The bus stopped at the edge of the forest, and I heard the engine kill. The figure behind the wheel rose and then went into the back.

I looked back at Jenny. “So where do we start?” I asked.

“I’m not really sure.”

She reached into her shirt pocket and pulled out the picture of Tommy that I’d given Daniel yesterday. “Thank you for this,” she said. “Everything changed when I saw it. All of a sudden he felt real to me. Does that make sense?”

“Sure,” I said.

“I do look like him. We both just have the one dimple.” She held the photo up next to her face, forced a smile and then pointed at her cheek. “Right here on the left.”

I hadn’t noticed that, but she was right. It was only her green eyes that didn’t synch up at all. Those didn’t come from any Joseph I ever knew. I have plain brown eyes, all of us did.

“You know,” she said, “Except for the beard, I can sort of see him in you.”

“I used to get that a lot.”

She put the photo back in her pocket, and then we both pulled on our cigarettes.

“I guess you probably want to know how he died.” I said this to Jenny even though I didn’t really know myself.

“No.”

“No?”

“Not yet. I want to hear more about who he was first.”

I think I was seeing Jenny’s mother in her then, the soul of a half-poet. Tommy didn’t have patience like that. I decided that I’d better remind her of something. “I was younger than you are now when he died,” I said. “So there’s a pretty low ceiling when it comes to what I remember about him. I’ve been more years without him than with him.”

“I just want to tell me as much as I can,” she said.

“Like what, though?”

She slipped a small notebook out from under her thigh. “I have some questions written down,” she said. “I found them online. It’s a list of things that a kid might want to learn about her birth parents. They’re sort of lame, but would that be okay?”

I feel like I’m on a game show now. “Why not,” I said. “Fire away.”

“Well,” said Jenny, “what were some of his favorite foods?”

“Fried fish. That and fried chicken. Just about anything fried, really.”

Jenny had a pen in her hand now, and she jotted down my answer. I guess somewhere in the world there exists a notebook that contains the words: *Fried fish. That and fried chicken. Just about anything fried, really.*

She finished writing and looked up at me. “What about movies?” she asked.

I thought for a second. “*Red Dawn*, I guess. Russians invade America and these high school kids are fighting them.”

Jenny frowned. “I don’t know that one.”

I didn’t feel like going on and on about *Red Dawn*, and so I just shrugged.

“How about novels?” she asked. “Authors?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Something he had to read for school?”

Nothing was coming to mind, but it was obvious that Jenny wanted to hear something.

“Maybe *Where the Red Fern Grows*,” I said. That’s a grade-school book, but it was all I could think of.

“The book about raccoon hunting?”

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s the one. I mean, it’s more about the dogs than coon hunting. The hounds and the boy. Like *Old Yeller*, but with two dogs instead of just one.”

“What about music? What did he listen to?”

“Bands?”

“Right.”

“Def Leppard, I suppose. Black Sabbath, Mötley Crüe, Guns N’ Roses. Anything loud, to be honest.”

Jenny wrote that down as well. “Do you remember his favorite color?” she asked.

“Blue.”

Jenny kept on asking her questions, and I tried my best to give her answers—some were true, but some were just guesses (blue?). Hell, some were out-and-out lies.

I believe Tommy’s first world was Mama. I don’t think he took any longer than usual to start walking—but maybe he did, I wasn’t born yet. His eyesight was fine, perhaps even a little better than average. He was into baseball and football a little bit. He hated basketball. He could swim really well. He liked to hunt and fish. He was right handed. His favorite subject was math. He drove a ’72 Volkswagen Beetle that he bought and kept running with money he made

working at a plant nursery during the summers. He didn't have any nicknames until the Navy. The other SEALs called him Ahab because he was always spotting whales when they were out training.

This continued for a long while. Question after question after question. It was only when Jenny was out of prepared questions—when the notebook had been closed and put away—that I realized she hadn't written down a single thing about me. I wasn't the one she wanted to know. I'd forgotten that.

She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Did he always want to be in the Navy?" she asked.

"Tommy? Oh, Christ no." I eased into things by explaining that he was always sort of a hell-raiser—that Tommy and his buddies spent most of their time listening to music in the hayloft of our barn, smoking pot, drying and sorting the mushrooms they'd collect from the cow pastures and sell at the high school. "But he had a temper too," I told her. "He wasn't all that big of a guy—about my size, more or less—but he was always getting into fights."

"Was he like a jock or something?"

"Not at all. I mean, he liked sports okay, but he stopped playing them himself in junior high. After that, I never saw him join anything until he signed up with the Navy."

"Then why did he?"

That's what I was trying to get to. I never really understood myself. I tried to come up with the best place to begin. "All right," I said at last. "Tommy's senior year he had this girl pierce his ear with a safety pin, and so now he was the only guy in Dry Springs with an earring. Every morning he would drive me to the grade school, and one time—I was in fifth grade then, I guess—he went a few miles out of the way to pick up cigarettes from this little store on the side

of the highway. He bought me a candy bar or something, and we were walking back out to that little Bug of his when an older guy standing over by the gas pumps called him a faggot—because of that earring, you know? That and the car. He called Tommy a faggot and so Tommy told me to go on in the car and not get out no matter what. I was only about ten, so I did what he said.”

“Yikes. What happened?”

“The guy beat the piss out of him. Ripped his earring out and didn’t stop hitting him until I ran over there crying.”

“God,” said Jenny.

“He was a big guy.”

I finished by telling her how that afternoon when Tommy picked me up from school with his purple eye and split ear he told me that he’d reached a decision. I’m gonna graduate and go be a Navy SEAL, he said to me then. You watch, Roy.

“Just like that?” Jenny asked.

“Just like that. He cleaned himself up and did like he said he would.” I shook my head.

“Tommy was a completely different person after that guy kicked his ass.”

Jenny sat there quiet, and I started to think that maybe I’d made a mistake by telling her about that rough part of Tommy so early on. Truth is, he was also probably the most sensitive guy I’ve ever known, was always either running hot or running cold. She tossed her cigarette, and I did the same. She was smiling at me—not her fake grin from earlier, but a real one this time.

“What?” I asked.

“That’s a great story,” she said. “I mean, it’s really awful and really great at the same time.”

“You think?”

“Absolutely.” She started to reach over like she was going to touch my arm, but then she pulled her hand away. “See,” she said. “Thank you. You’ve told me all sorts of things about him I never would have known.”

“I guess.” There was something that I’d been curious about, so I figured I’d just go ahead and ask. “Has it always been just you and your mom?”

“Yeah,” said Jenny. “Just us.” She pulled her Adidas up on the bench, hugging her knees like she was about to roll herself forward, bounce a few times, and then cannonball down onto the shoreline rocks below. “I need to ask a favor from you.”

Damn, I was thinking. Lionel was right after all. She was going to say that she needed my kidney or some such. I came out here hoping I might be able to connect with some family, and they’ve gone and cut a notch in my ear, held a brand to my ass. I looked down at the battery. This was nothing but a bait and switch. They wanted me for parts.

“Go on,” I said.

“Here’s the deal,” said Jenny. “Mom’s always been a bit of a wreck.” She tapped the side of her head. “A bit of a wreck up here. I want for us to keep in touch, but we can’t let her know. Not for a while, at least.”

“You really think that’s best?”

“Yes. Absolutely.” Jenny flipped her hands in my direction, a spider-girl shooting dual webs. “She can get very anxious.”

“Everybody gets anxious.”

“But it’s bad with her,” said Jenny. “There are days when she can’t leave the house. She’s tried all these medications, but none of them have helped much.” Her voice is low, like she’s telling me a secret. “And then with all that stuff she found out about you.”

She doesn’t go on, and I don’t really know what to say. “That was a long time ago,” I tell her. “I was a kid myself.”

“I know,” said Jenny. Her chin was resting between her knees now. “But then there was that New Orleans thing too.”

“Wait. What?”

She filled her cheeks with air, then pushed it slowly between her lips. A whistle without sound. “New Orleans,” she said. “Didn’t you also get in some trouble there once?”

That fucking investigator. This was all so humiliating. “Yeah,” I said finally. “Kind of. But it was just a restraining order. There weren’t ever any charges or anything.”

“Right. But that on top of the other scared Mom.” And then for some reason Jenny started to rock back and forth on the bench. For a moment I worried that she would indeed tumble away from me. “So Mom’s not ready for this yet,” she said. “Okay?”

There's a dirt path called the Lands End Trail that runs from the parking lot east along the cliff edge, and I decide to hide my battery in the forest and take a walk. Jenny said she had a test coming up during last period that she couldn't skip, and before she strapped on her bike helmet and peddled off she'd asked me if we could meet in front of Daniel's building at four o'clock tomorrow, jaw some more. I just nodded, but then she actually hugged me and I told her all right. That quick hug caught me off guard, and my mouth had slammed up against her helmet. I hike along the trail, spitting threads of pink until the small cut in my lip finally clots.

The more ground I cover the angrier I get about the note we'd left things on. All that New Orleans talk, I mean. If Eliza Anne was the first case of me losing my head, a woman named Haley Maupassant was the second. I'd come to know Haley not long after I was expelled from LSU. At the time I was working a sheetrock job for a guy named Joe—a recovering alcoholic who was willing to hire me in spite of my record. Joe believed in second chances, and in a way I think that I was his project. He was about ten years older, and he took to calling me Kid Roy like I was his son.

Haley was Joe's girlfriend, and one Saturday the three of us all went tubing on the Amite River for some of his good clean fun. We had our three tubes lashed together—plus a fourth one carrying an ice chest full of cold drinks and ham sandwiches—and when Joe wasn't looking

Haley would let her foot slide over mine. She was Joe's age, and to be touched by a woman had me all kinds of excited. I'd rub my foot back across hers whenever the coast was clear, and when we were done with the river Joe left us on a beach while he hitched a ride to his truck parked upstream. I sat side by side with Haley on the ice chest, sipping Cokes and waiting on Joe, and then before long we couldn't help ourselves and we flopped over together onto the sand. She had this amazing body, Haley, and the way she was all wrapped around me is something I can still feel.

Haley and I started to see each other on the sly after that, and by the time Joe got wise there wasn't a whole lot he could do about things besides fire me. Not too long after that Haley accepted a job in New Orleans answering phones for some big law firm in a building near the Superdome, and though I see now that it probably wasn't what she wanted, and for two months every weekend I'd drive down to visit her in the apartment she was renting over by the Fairgrounds. Soon I was talking about moving to New Orleans myself, but—though I made a show of reading the classifieds—my own thinking was that at some point soon I'd say I love you and then just settle on in with her for good.

I'm not sure exactly what happened next, but I believe Joe must have played the only card he had left and given Haley a call about Kid Roy. However it went down, the point is that she found out all those things about me that I'd been putting off telling her. How I was on probation. How I was a sex offender. There I was, lying on Haley's couch, watching her TV, when she came in the room and asked me if I was a child molester. I tried to explain, but she wasn't having it. She threw me out of the apartment, and as I was leaving I told her that I loved her. So what, she said. Get out, get out, get out.

Baton Rouge became my fulltime home again, and those days were probably the worst days I've ever known. Haley wouldn't take my calls, but I kept on ringing her, writing her these letters that I'm embarrassed to think might still be sitting in a case file somewhere. I was drinking my unemployment checks and hardly eating, sleeping only barely. Soon I was driving from Baton Rouge to New Orleans almost every day to follow Haley. I was bidding my time, trying to get my speech to her right in my head, the speech that would convince her to take me back. And I had the words pretty much worked out when a police officer knocked on the door of my apartment.

Haley had this Saints T-shirt that she liked to sleep in, and before she had the lock to her apartment changed I snuck in and stole it. I still keep that shirt with me—it's one of the few things that I'll allow to clutter up my life—and sometimes even now I'll lay it across my pillow at night. I tell myself that the shirt still smells of her, but of course after all these years, it's only me that I'm smelling. Still, that's the closest I'll ever get to sharing a bed with Haley again. There was a hearing, and what was at first just a temporary restraining order then became a permanent restraining order. I was never charged with any crime, but my probation officer was pissed all the same. He told me that I'd leave Haley alone if I knew what was good for me, and since few things scare me more than the thought of cellmates I promised to do what he said.

I still keep track of Haley, though. There's a staff photo of her on a website for The Lagarde Firm, and I've seen her a few times in New Orleans from afar. She's married now, married with a couple of kids. I should say here that I'm happy for her, that I just want her to have a good life. I should say that, but I can't. In truth it kills me that she's out living the life that I wanted for us with someone else. All these years have gone by, but Haley, Eliza Anne, they still come to me in my dreams. And I don't see how my dreams are any else's fucking business.

I don't make it back to the apartment until about six o'clock, and what with the lost hour for daylight savings it's already dark out. The muscles in my neck and shoulders are on fire from hauling that DieHard around, but the good news is that the problem with the LeBaron does seem to have just been the battery—not the alternator or an electric short or whatnot—and she's back among the living again, holding a charge.

I take a shower and am rushing to get ready for my date with Marina when the bell to my apartment sounds. I stumble my way through the garage and can just make out Viktor standing there behind the gate. He's got his work getup on—a black suit, a white shirt—and he's alone, no Dina.

I open the gate, and Viktor squeezes my arm. I'm wearing khakis and a blue button-down. I look something like a frat boy, but that's the best I can do. I haven't been on a proper first date since my sophomore year at LSU.

Viktor glances down at my old boat shoes and then winks at me. "A sailboat man," he says.

"Terrific."

"It is almost time to pick up Marina, no?"

I walk back through the garage to the apartment, and Viktor follows. “I’m headed out right now,” I tell him. “You were gonna make me reservations somewhere?”

“And I did,” says Viktor. “Guess what?”

Sam is lying over by the couch and watching us. It’s like he knows he shouldn’t interrupt. “Yeah?” I say.

Viktor waits until I have closed the door behind us and then leans close to me. “You need to stay away from that *sokolnik*.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because he might be the one killing these homeless.”

“Come on. What makes you say that?”

“One of my police friends told me that they think the stabber is a very tall man.”

“And you told him about the falconer?”

Viktor nods.

“Jesus,” I say, thinking of that night on the archery range. “Are they going to arrest him?”

“Maybe. My friend says that he will have all of the police watching for him—so if you see the *sokolnik* again be careful.”

It’s shallow, but I’m also thinking of the Sorensens and their flyers. “You know,” I say, “if you’re right there might be a reward coming to you.”

“My friend told me this as well.”

“Good luck then. I hope it’s him.”

“*Da*,” says Viktor.

“So I guess I’d better get going.”

“Yes.”

“Will you tell me where I’m taking her?”

“I can do even better,” says Viktor. “I will show you.”

“What?”

Sam has finally wandered over to us, and Viktor squats down on his heels to pet him. Those black pants that Viktor is wearing stretch tight across his thighs and seem close to bursting. “I will be driving you on your date in my Mercedes,” he says. “For free.”

I shake my head. “You don’t need to do that. My car’s working fine now—it just had a bad battery, that’s all.”

Viktor punches at his forehead and laughs. “Good battery. Bad battery. This makes no difference. Russian girls do not come to America to ride in ugly cars.”

“Well, then maybe she’s not the girl for me.”

“The girl for you!” He laughs even harder. “Let us go now,” he says. “I insist. This is how I do things.”

Marina lives with a family in a narrow, four-story mansion that backs up to the far western corner of the Presidio. There's a short driveway, but Viktor parks in front of a hydrant a few doors before her place. We're at least two miles from the pond in Golden Gate Park where she meets her friends in the mornings, and it hits me how lonely she must be to want to make that trip every day.

I doubt Marina's masters like strangers coming around, and so I ring her cell phone to tell her that we're here. The front door begins to open at the same time she answers. "Roy," she says. "Hello."

It's a cool night, and she's wearing silver shoes, a black coat that hangs down to the tops of her bare knees. The coat is buttoned tight around her, and I find myself wondering what kind of outfit she's got on beneath it. The future Mrs. Roy Joseph, perhaps. I'm feeling a bit like the dog that caught the car.

"Ah," says Viktor. "Another beautiful Russian girl."

Marina has her cell phone pressed to her ear. "Hello?" she says again.

"Hey," I say finally. "That's me in the Mercedes down the street. Me and Viktor."

“What?” Marina says something harsh in Russian and then snaps her phone shut. I jump out of the Mercedes, and she waves me toward her. “Come, Roy, come,” she shouts. “I need more time getting ready.”

Viktor shrugs at me through the window, and so I jog up the sidewalk. Marina has stepped back into the house, and I follow her through the open door. She’s waiting for me just inside the parlor, the foyer, the coatroom—whatever it is that very rich people call the first little room in a house full of big rooms.

Marina is standing with her arms folded, and she does not look happy. “Why is he here?” she asks. “You have a car, no?” She slams the front door shut behind me.

“Yeah. An old one, at least.”

“Then why this? Why Viktor?”

“He said it had to be this way.”

Suddenly she smiles, but I’m not sure why. She has a small purse strapped across her body—a purse that looks like it was fashioned from woven sections of tiny, galvanized chain. “Would you rather be with me tonight or with Viktor?” she asks.

“You,” I say. “Definitely you.”

“Then come.” We go outside, and she locks the front door. I’m starting toward the Mercedes when she pulls me with her to the side of the house. Viktor gives a jab at the horn, but Marina ignores him. “Hurry,” she says. “Be quick.”

The house is even bigger than I thought, about three times as deep as it is wide, and security lights flick on one after the other as we make our way down a pea gravel pathway that runs alongside it. The lights have me thinking of Tasers, pepper spray, phone calls to the police,

and Marina must see that I'm leery. "No one is home," she assures me. "The Coleman's are gone for tonight."

"And they took the little one?"

"Do you think I put him in the oven?"

I laugh. "Well?"

"They are at a party," she says. "Some party where people can bring babies."

We turn the corner of the house and the final security light flashes on, illuminating a wide sweep of flagstone patio. There is a bright red Vespa parked there, and Marina points at the scooter.

"They will never know," she tells me.

I watch as Marina wriggles her long coat up around her waist and straddles the leather seat of the Vespa. I can see now that she's wearing a sparkling silver skirt that matches her shoes, her chain purse.

"Get on," she says.

There are two open-faced helmets hanging from the handlebars of the Vespa, a pink one and a blue one. Marina pulls the pink helmet on and then hands me the other. I hold Mr. Coleman's helmet and glance around. The high trees of the Presidio loom above us, corralling the yellow glow of the security lights. "Viktor won't be happy," I say.

Marina coos at me. "Oh," she says. "Are you afraid, Mr. Buffalo?"

"Sort of."

"Then be afraid," she says. "Be afraid and I will go alone." She finds the smallest key on her key chain and starts the Vespa up. "Have your night with Viktor," she tells me, and then she throws up the kickstand and begins to walk the Vespa backwards. She gets lined up like she

wants and then looks over at me. The helmet has pressed the part in her black hair down past her forehead, and all of her right eye is hidden from me now. “Last chance,” she says.

Fuck it then. I slide on the blue helmet, and I’m barely settled on the Vespa when Marina peels off back the way we came. We go sloshing through the pea gravel and then hit the sidewalk. Marina has the headlight off, and we’re on the street before Viktor spots us. He shakes his fist at us as we zip past him. The Mercedes is facing west and we head east. We’re a good four blocks away before I feel my cell phone start to vibrate in my pocket.

*

I endure all those theatrics just to have Marina tell me she has to be back by ten o’clock—that she needs to have the Vespa back before the Coleman’s return home. That’s not much of a night off. Basically I’ve gone and riled up Viktor in exchange for three hours of tooling around on the back of a toy, staring at the little heart tattooed on Marina’s neck. I imagine an APB being sent out to his fleet. Be on the lookout for a red Vespa, a very pretty young woman with short black hair, a nine-fingered man with a beard. Let’s get the cab drivers in on this one. Blue helmet, pink helmet—find them!

I was finally able to convince Marina that I needed to call Viktor, and so now we’re parked near the corner of Geary and 19th Avenue, right in front of a Russian bakery where Marina says that a friend of hers works. I check my phone and see that I have seven missed calls, all from Viktor of course. I start to dial him back, even though I can tell that doesn’t make Marina too pleased. She goes inside the bakery while I guard the two helmets and call him. One ring and he answers. “You fuckers,” he says.

It's noisy where I'm standing, what with the traffic on Geary and the people waiting in line for a table at the pizza place next door. I cover my ear with my free hand. "She kidnapped me," I tell him. "Your Mercedes didn't impress her at all."

Viktor is quiet, but then he laughs. "Okay," he says. "Get to know Marina."

"Really?"

"Yes. You just be safe with her."

"Of course." It moves me to think that this guy actually might trust me. Almost nobody trusts me, even if they say they do.

Marina comes walking out of the bakery just as I'm telling Viktor goodbye. She has her friend with her, a round young woman in an apron. I say hi to the gal, but she just whispers to Marina and they both giggle. I'm pretty sure they're making fun of something about me. They kiss cheeks, and the baker goes back inside without ever actually acknowledging my hello.

"Well," says Marina, "what did Viktor say?"

I shrug. "He says have fun."

"He did?"

"Yeah."

She unzips her purse and takes out her cigarettes—some sort of foreign brand that comes in a thin, flat box—and I take out mine. "So then what do you want to do?" she asks.

I light her import and then my Winston. Her baker friend is watching us from inside. I wiggle my lit cigarette at her—an offering—but she shakes her head and picks up a newspaper. It's a Russian paper. There's a woman in a bikini on the front page.

"We could go eat," I say. "Viktor made reservations for us somewhere. I can call him to find out what restaurant."

Marina tilts her head back and forth, considering the offer. “No,” she says finally. “I am not so hungry yet.”

“Then how about a movie?”

“No.”

“Bar?”

“No.”

“That’s all I’ve got. This isn’t my town either.”

It had been a mistake for me to call Viktor—or at least to have told Marina that he wasn’t hot at us—because now it’s as if the excitement, the life, has been sucked out of her. We smoke our cigarettes as that coming down feeling settles in on both of us, and we see ourselves for what we are—two mismatched people who don’t really know each other, in a city that isn’t theirs. The secret was to keep moving, but then I told her to pull over and now we are sinking.

Marina drops her cigarette and shivers. It’s pretty cold out, and I guess she’s still chilled from that the ride on the scooter. She looks at me and I know what she’s about to say—that she’s about to apologize and tell me that this was stupid. That she’s about to ask if I’d mind if she just took me on home.

And maybe that’s the right move, but now that I’m already feeling blue I’m not so sure my soul can handle Julie Yang’s apartment, beers alone with Sam as I countdown to my meeting with Jenny tomorrow. I swear on my dead family that all I want here is just some fucking conversation, some goddamn human interaction. Marina starts to speak, but I stop her.

“Let’s go,” I tell her. “I think I have an idea.”

I don't have a motorcycle license, but when Marina asks me if I would like to drive the Vespa I tell her that I would. I start down through the avenues, surprised that she hasn't yet demanded to know where it is that I am taking her. It's only when we pull in front of my apartment that I can sense her getting nervous. Her grip is relaxing around my waist, and I'm afraid that soon she will bail off and run. To ease her mind I ask her to wait out front. "I'll be right back," I tell her. "Five minutes. Half a smoke." I remove my helmet, and she takes it from me.

"What are you going?" she asks. "Do you live here?"

"Just wait. Please. You'll see."

Marina sets our helmets down on the sidewalk. "Okay," she says. "I will wait."

I make my way through the gate and the garage, then unlock the front door. Sam wants in the backyard, and so I let him out before kneeling down in front of the computer.

So here's my lame plan. There are signs around San Francisco for something called the 49-Mile Scenic Drive. I asked a bartender about it once. He told me that the drive takes you on a meander through the city, showing off various neighborhoods and landmarks and whatnot. I've tried to follow the signs once or twice, but I think a lot of them must have been carried off by thieves over the years. Each time I lost my way, had to quit—still, right now we've got a scooter

and nothing to do, and so I figure what the hell. I find a map on the internet and print it out. There.

And then, because I can't look at a computer anymore without thinking of Jenny, I do a quick check of my email to make sure she has written. She hasn't, and I take that to mean that we're still on for tomorrow.

I change into a pair of jeans, and then I put on my Red Wings and my gray sweatshirt, the Exxon windbreaker that I'd poached off some rig a long, long time ago. Now—something for Marina. I stare at Julie Yang's locked closet, then go into the kitchenette and find an ice pick. The lock is just one of those cheap hole-in-the-doorknob deals, but for some reason I can't click it open. I actually tried this a few days before without any luck, and I'm not doing any better with it now. Marina is waiting and so I start to get rough, putting all my weight down on that doorknob until finally it cracks off in my hand. I hear the knob on the other side fall clattering onto the tile floor, and then I throw the one that I'm holding over onto the bed. Corey won't be pleased, but it's too late now. I'll worry about him and my damage deposit later.

I'm in a rush, but I still hesitate before I go looking inside that closet. Suddenly I'm convinced I'm going to find something insane in there—though I have no idea what. A Julie Yang or Tommy Joseph mummy, perhaps. Jenny, spying on me for a change. Daniel with his hammer. Maybe a portal to some other world. But then I pull the door open, and of course there is nothing like that. I only see a thick row of clothes, and stacked beneath them all, a pile of shoes and even more clothes—that and all the cans and boxes of food that Julie Yang must have cleaned out from her kitchenette. Her closet looks like a little end-of-the-world bunker. I grab a thick and hooded white sweatshirt and a two pairs of white sweatpants, a long-sleeve T-shirt and some socks, newish Nikes with a pink swoosh.

Sam is bumping at the back door, and so I let him in and then I hurry outside to Marina. She flinches when I come through the gate, I guess not recognizing me at first now that I've changed my outfit. I pass the clothes and then the Nikes over to her. "Those'll keep you warm," I tell her, holding the gate open. "You can leave your things here for now."

"Warm for what?" she asks.

"I was thinking we'd take a long ride, see the city."

I show her the map, and she smiles and seems game. We'll be moving again, and that's all she really wants, I think. She takes the apartment keys from my hand and then closes the gate between us. I guess she does this to make sure I won't follow after her, surprise her while she's changing—and that's all right, I'm not offended. She doesn't know me very well yet, and so that's a smart thing to do. I ask her to lock the front door behind her when she's done, and then I wait out front while she changes. I'm willing those tennis shoes to fit her.

We pick up the 49-Mile Drive in Golden Gate Park, then head south for a good stretch before doubling back along the beach on the Great Highway. The Vespa is brand new, and though it must be one of the bigger models, the four-stroke engine is so quiet that, even with the helmets on, Marina and I have no problem hearing one another as we roll along.

For the first half hour of our tour it's just more of the same small talk between us. But of course just beneath the surface of everything we say—well, for me at least—is the idea that the two of us might soon be husband and wife. Now and again I try to steer our conversation in that direction, but Marina ducks and deflects all my attempts. It's not until we're somewhere in the Presidio—not all that far from Baker Beach, really—that she seems willing to give me an opening. She wants to know how things are going with Viktor, whether I've been on any other dates since coming out to California. “There are a lot of us here,” she says.

“No,” I tell her. “You're the only one.” She doesn't say anything, and so I add, “I've really enjoyed getting to know you.”

“Thank you.”

Marina has her hands on my hips, and that chain purse of hers is pressed hard against the small of my back. She seems through with talking for a while, and I glance down at the map pinned beneath my thighs. We've exited the darkness of the Presidio and are now passing by a

domed and columned Roman-looking building that I'm pretty sure I recognize from some Hitchcock movie that I watched half-asleep one night—*Vertigo*, maybe.

I glance down again. The Palace of Fine Arts, according to the map. “Just so you know,” I tell her, “I’m not looking to make you rush into anything.”

Marina jerks the map out from under me. “You just drive,” she says. “Drive and let me direct you.”

I pull over while she studies the map. Finally she does a little stabbing motion with her hand, and I turn right at the next street, heading east for three blocks and then north again toward the bay. We take a street called Prado and then another called Cervantes before we come to a red light at Marina Boulevard. I point at the street sign. “Your road,” I tell her.

She laughs. “Yes, my road,” she says. “But your map wants for us to go straight.”

There’s no traffic, and so we are clipping along the waterfront at a decent speed, passing sailboat dock after sailboat dock. The cold wind is in my face, and my eyes are watering. It’s hard for me to believe, but I think that seeing all this water and all these boats is making my homesick for Grand Isle. I’m like some shell-shocked ex-con pining for his prison cell, that old comfortable routine. Pathetic.

“Do you miss Russia?” I ask.

“Every day,” says Marina. “Every hour, every minute, every second.” She is quiet for a moment, but then she takes her hands from my hips and locks them around my waist. “I left a man there,” she tells me. “Someone I love.”

I try to convince myself she meant to say *loved* and not *love*. She clinches her arms tighter, hugging me like now I’m this Russian man of hers. Motherfucker. Somehow I’m certain that she’s close to crying.

“Do you want to go back?” I ask. “I can turn around.”

“No,” she says. “Keep going. Please.”

“Then do you want to talk about it?”

Her helmet is clicking up against mine, and I realize that she’s shaking her head. She starts to push the map under my thighs, and her hand brushes against my crotch, and I take the map from her before she wrecks us.

*

Fisherman’s Wharf. North Beach. Chinatown. At Union Square God taunts me. I see a man on one knee of all things; he’s proposing to a woman in a red dress. I start to point them out to Marina, but in the end I don’t. I’m sure she sees them already.

The map takes us west on Geary all the way to Japantown, and then we double back and head downtown again. Addicts are camped out here and there, and at a red light to cut over Market Street a man in fatigues yells at me as he comes wobbling along the crosswalk. “You should be home eating that girl out,” he says. “You hearing me?” I feel Marina tense as the man goes stumbling backwards toward the other side of the street. The curb clips his heel and he falls on his ass.

*

We pass by this big, old-fashioned carousel. The lights are off and it’s closed for the night. I wonder if it could possibly be the same carousel that used to be out by the beach—the one Lawrence Sorensen had his dizzy brawl with the locals on. If I see him again I’ll tell him about it, maybe even bring him over here in the LeBaron and show him myself.

*

We were deep in the run-down Mission District before Marina spoke to me again. She tapped my leg and whispered that she was ready to eat now. I'd only been through the Mission during the day, and what I remembered as a mostly Mexican neighborhood seemed to have been taken over by white kids in plaid shirts and too-small jeans. I stopped at a place that looked well lit and clean—and so now here we are, sitting across from one another at a Lucite table, sipping at cans of watermelon soda and eating the last of our burritos. My favorite food in America is Mexican food, Marina told me. Go figure.

This is the first clear view I've had of her since she changed at the apartment over an hour ago. The hood of the sweatshirt is gathered up against her neck, and she seems much younger dressed like this way, all in white sweats, closer to Jenny's age than mine. She's a TV movie runaway, a lost innocent, and from the cagey way she's been acting toward me, I guess I'm playing the role of the detective who's been hired to retrieve her—*Miles from Moscow*, tonight on Lifetime.

Still, the food does appear to have put some life back in her, and so I decide to risk losing her to her thoughts again. "Tell me about him," I say. "Force yourself."

Marina bites at her straw and then spits it out. "Do not be cruel to me," she says.

"I'm not trying to be cruel. Honest." There are wads of napkins piled like stacked clouds in my plastic tray. I press down on them with the flat of my hand and they crush.

"Nikolai," she says finally.

"That's his name?"

"Yes. But there was also Dmitri."

"Two men?"

"They are brothers."

The restaurant is somehow crowded and dead at the same time. Even a table of drunken white kids seems more or less lifeless, as if they've decided all at once to call it a night, to eat and go home. An old and stooped Mexican man walks by our table selling roses, but Marina waves him away.

"You were in love with them both?" I ask.

"Maybe I was," says Marina. Ah, *was*. I feel myself relaxing when she adds: "But now just with Nikolai. I was engaged to Dmitri."

Son of a bitch. "I'm confused," I tell her.

"It is simple—I broke Dmitri's heart, and then Nikolai broke mine." And then she shrugs like she's admitting that it really isn't all that simple after all. "The three of us grew up together," she says. "In the same building. All my life people said that I will one day be marrying Dmitri, and I just accepted that it would be so." She slowly walks two fingers across her forearm. "Then the night before my wedding, Nikolai, he comes to my family's apartment. He is drunk, and he is telling me that he loves me. He says this right in front of my mother and my father. I knew then that I loved him too."

"What did you do?"

"There was no time to do anything. My father left and came back with Dmitri."

"Big fight?"

"Yes. And no wedding. The next morning Nikolai told both our families that it was all from the drinking, and they believed him, even Dmitri—but I was not drunk, you see. I said what I said and no one forgave Marina."

"And that's why you left Russia?"

Marina nods. "My parents put me out of the apartment. For over a year I had no money. In Moscow everyone calls me the *blyadischa*."

"The what?"

"*Blyadischa*. The whore."

She starts to cry, and I hand her a clean napkin. Her chin is wrinkled like a peach.

"Even my mother and father call me this," she says. "It is a city full of whores, but Marina Katanova is *the* whore."

"And yet you still love this guy?"

She nods and a tear falls from her cheek onto her lap. "He has been sending me emails lately, saying all of these things to me."

"What kinds of things?"

"That he is sorry. That he was afraid. That he still loves me. That he does not care anymore what anyone thinks of him."

"What about you? Do you care?"

Marina dabs at her eyes with the napkin and then smiles. "Why should the Whore of Moscow care?"

"But then why let Viktor tell me about you?"

"It was a friend who brought me to Viktor. At that time I did not know that I would ever hear from Nikolai again."

"When did he first write you?"

"Two weeks ago."

"So why did you go forward with all this? These dates?"

"It is stupid."

“Try me.”

“I was sad,” she says. “I was sad and I did not know what I wanted yet. It was nice to have someone be nice to me, someone who knew nothing about me. You have made me happy.”

I’m fairly certain by now that she must be bipolar. A few seconds tick by, and then I reach my left hand across the table. She keeps still. The rose man is watching us from the other side of the room. “No, that’s not stupid,” I tell her. “You sort of did that for me too.”

Marina has stopped crying, composed herself, and she’s staring with something like pity at the place where my missing finger should be. I catch myself wondering where that pinky is at this very moment. Whether the shards of bone are buried somewhere right now at the bottom of the Gulf, my flesh all rotted away—or whether a snapper or some such darted out from the tangle of steel beneath the rig and inhaled that sliver of me, swallowing it before it could disappear forever. It’s funny how much more depressing one seems to me than the other.

Finally Marina takes my hand, and I think now the old rose man is contemplating whether or not he should give our table another try. “What next then?” I ask. “Are you going back to Russia?”

She nods. “When I have enough money for a plane ticket I will go.”

“Wow.”

“I am very sorry that I have wasted your time.”

I pass her another napkin. “No, it’s okay.” And it is. In truth I’m feeling a little relieved.

“You think that I am a fool,” she says.

“I don’t think that. This Nikolai, yes—but not you.”

“No, you think that I am a fool also. Even if you will not say it, this is what you think.”

“Okay, maybe,” I say to Marina. “I mean, you’re no fool, but yeah, it might be foolish thing for you to trust someone who would treat you that way.”

I see then that the rose man is indeed shuffling back over to us, and before Marina can send him packing again I fish my other hand into the pocket of my jeans. I pull out some crumbled bills, and a couple of Lawrence Sorensen’s forgotten tear slips go fluttering onto the floor.

I pass the rose man a five-dollar bill, but he shakes his head at me. “*Diez, amigo,*” he says. “Ten, ten.” He’s dark skinned. The color of stained wood. The descendant of Aztecs, Mayans.

Another five. Marina gets her rose, and the rose man leaves us. She frowns at the wilted flower. “I should try to forget him,” she says.

“Probably.”

“I know.”

“But you can’t.”

“No, I do not think that I can.” She jiggles my hand like she just now remembered something. “But you should meet the other two girls. I know them. They are nice, pretty.”

“Okay,” I tell her. “Maybe so.”

I feel her hand squirm in mine, and so I let go and take our two trays over to the trashcan. When I come back she’s holding the rose in front of her face like a candle, and I see that the thorns have been sanded from its stem. She blows at the rose and it bends toward me. “You are a good man, Roy,” she says. “A much better man than I thought you would be.”

I realize then that she's talking about *my* past. I'd blocked out the fact that Viktor had told her all about me—that was the only way I could deal with her. I laugh without smiling.

“Thanks,” I say.

“It is true,” she says. “You are a good man.”

I try my best at a Russian accent. “No,” I say. “You think that I am a fool.”

She slaps at my face with the rose and shushes me. A petal tears loose and goes gliding down to the table. I watch it fall, and then Marina stands up holding her helmet and pulls me from my chair. “Then come,” she says. “Come and let the two fools finish with this foolish tour of theirs.”

I wait outside so that Marina can switch into her own clothes again. I want to ride back with her on the Vespa and then catch the bus home, but she insists on going alone. “I will be fine,” she promises. “Do not worry about me.”

“Listen,” I tell her. “You call me if you ever need anything. I’ll do what I can to make sure you get back home.”

Marina nods and says thank you, and though I can tell that she doesn’t believe me, I did mean what I said. She takes my blue helmet and stashes it a compartment under the seat. It’s a little bit before ten o’clock, and our night together ends with me standing alone on the sidewalk and watching her—black coated and silver shoed once again—as she waves and then drives away.

When I go inside I see that the she’s left Julie Yang’s clothes folded atop my sleeping bag. They smell of cigarette smoke and perfume, but I put them back in the closet all the same. And then I see that the Mexican rose I bought for her is now on the table, dying just a little slower in a beer bottle full of water. Sam wants like mad for me to pet him, and so I sit down at the table, scratching his ears as I study the rose.

Marina had kissed me before she went inside to change—kisses on the cheeks and then a real kiss, a kiss that for a second had me thinking that all of this business about a Nikolai and a

Dmitri was just a test of some kind that I had somehow managed to pass. She kissed me with her hands pressed tight against the sides of my head, but then when I tried to bring her closer she pulled away from me, letting her hands linger until her fingernails scratched down across my face. And then as she closed the gate behind her I realized that she was not testing me but herself. That she had tested herself and had passed.

But I see now that there is also this rose, and I would like to think that this is a message—even if her kiss was not. What she is saying with this rose is “almost.” As in, you are a very strange sort of man, but I am a very strange sort of woman—and if circumstances were different you might have had me. So, yes, “almost.” Tonight you were indeed a good man, and I thank you so much for that.

THE MONARCH BEAR GROVE

It turns out that Viktor was more than likely wrong about his *sokolnik*—that or the tall guy got caught without his knife by some other killer—because a few months later (in early February, I think) I was sitting in the Airstream with Sam, half watching this “true crime” news program on TV, when a report came on about the unsolved murders that had taken place in Golden Gate Park over the past year or so. Mark Sorensen and the other two homeless were mentioned—but then they showed a picture of the latest victim, and as they spoke about his life I soon realized that it was indeed him—the falconer. He was young, just twenty-five, and his name was Greer Sinclair.

According to the news program, when Sinclair wasn't wandering the park with his bird, he worked the cash register at an occult bookstore on Haight Street. His body was found on Christmas Day, in a clearing in the park that, apparently, some call the Monarch Bear Grove. I'd stumbled upon that same place once with Sam—a loose ring of mossy stones surrounded by gnarled live oaks—but I had no idea what I was seeing at the time. It's tucked away out near the park's eastern confines, at the end of a short dirt path that leads from the road into the trees. The Monarch Bear Grove was said to be a sacred place for modern-day pagans and druids and other assorted occult bookstore fans, and Sinclair was known to go there to meditate and worship. It was late in the afternoon when the police found him, and he had been dead only a few hours. His falcon was spotted perched within the branches of a nearby oak, but attempts to get help from

someone at the San Francisco Zoo were unsuccessful—and, in fact, at that moment the zoo was in complete chaos. A Siberian tiger named Tatiana had escaped from her enclosure and attacked three young men, killing one of them before she was shot down by police. A raptor specialist finally did arrive at the Monarch Bear Grove, but by then night had long since fallen and the falcon was gone.

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Here's an interesting fact about Greer Sinclair—five years before his death, he stopped speaking completely. This was tolerated by his employer at Raven Books, an old woman who viewed him as “highly enlightened.” The 25th of December, the woman went on to explain to the TV reporter, has been celebrated as a holy day of nature since long before Jesus Christ was born—and though certainly a tragedy, that Sinclair would die on such a day was no doubt “a sign of his elevated spiritual status.”

WEDNESDAY

Viktor is standing outside my gate when I leave with Sam for our morning walk. I see that his cigar has burned down almost to his knuckles, so God knows how long he's been camped here in the cold. He has Dina with him, and I drop the leash so that she and Sam can tussle around on the sidewalk. I'm wondering why Viktor didn't just ring the bell—until it dawns on me that he might very well have been lurking around to see whether Marina had spent the night.

“So?” he says.

When I woke up this morning I made three decisions:

The first. That I'm through with courting the idea of marriage for a while. I'd tricked myself into believing that a wife was something that I might be ready for, but that wasn't even close to being true. All this foolishness with Viktor had just been an excuse for me to hunt down Jenny. That was obvious enough.

The second. That I want to leave San Francisco tomorrow. I'll pack up today, see Jenny tonight, and then hit the road in the morning. I feel like I'm pushing my luck by staying here, that if I stick around any longer all these cracks that I can feel starting to form will develop into something much more tragic.

The third. That I don't feel like explaining any of this to Viktor. I've already paid him the \$250 I owe him for meeting Marina—plus another \$500 for two women I'll never even lay eyes

on—and so I'd say that we're more than square, especially since Marina wasn't really on the market for a husband.

"We had a good time," I tell Viktor now. "I had her home by ten o'clock."

He stops sucking at his cigar. "That is early, no?"

"She had to get back with the scooter."

"Where did she take you?"

"We drove around, looked at the city."

"She liked this?"

"Sure. I think she's in love now."

He laughs like this is the funniest thing he's ever heard. "Did you ask her then?"

"No," I tell him. And in fact I doubt I'll ever see her again in this lifetime—and before too long you might not either. But of course I don't say that. He's giving me a suspicious look, and so I figure I'd better put him at ease. "I've got some things to take care of today—but maybe we could set something up for later in the week?"

Viktor sighs, and I get the feeling that most of his clients are a lot less deliberate than I'm acting. "Okay," he says. "I will speak with her."

"Good deal."

The dogs are bored with the sidewalk and are now sitting side by side, staring up at us, willing us to quit bullshitting and lead them on their walk. Sam has the leash in his mouth, and so I take it from him and start easing toward the park. Viktor and Dina follow, but when we get to the end of the street he asks if we can go west. "I want to see the ocean," he says.

And so rather than crossing Fulton to enter the park, we instead strike out for the Pacific. Marina's secret is safe with me, but it's on the tip of my tongue to tell Viktor that I'll be taking

off tomorrow, that this will be my last full day in town. Yes, tomorrow I'll throw everything in the LeBaron and glide out of town. I'll go back to Grand Isle for a spell, but then that's it. Before long I'll sell the trailer and the lot and head up to Ruston, sort through all my finances once more with Mr. Donny Lee. By the time January rolls around and I hit thirty I'll have a house picked out somewhere—

I'm thinking of trying a place I've never lived before. Maybe one of those small fishing towns along the Gulf Coast that hasn't been ruined by the oil industry like Grand Isle has. Places I remember from summer vacations with my parents. Quiet towns like Fairhope, Alabama. Apalachicola, Florida. My house will be nothing special or flashy, but it will have a big backyard with strong, high fences where Sam will be happy and safe. I'll shave my beard off, cut my hair short. Sure, my new neighbors will get their pervert notifications about me, but this time around I'll be proactive about things. I'll take out an ad in the local newspaper and try to explain my side of the story. I'll tell them I understand that no one is happy to see me pitching my tent here, but if they let me I will do everything I can to prove to them that I'm decent and kind and trustworthy, that I'm a man who is worthy of their forgiveness. On Sundays I'll pretend to worship at a Methodist church, and though I'll probably never believe too strongly in God, that'll be my secret. Cornbread and ice tea and softball. Eventually the congregation will come to embrace me, and since there aren't many single men in church maybe I'll find my wife there—a nice, big-haired Southern girl who wears stiff Sunday dresses in flowery wallpaper prints. A girl who is a few years younger but who wants to mother me all the same. A girl who has no desire or reason to ever leave her hometown. I am like some charity project to her—the closest thing she's ever known to the rebels she lusts after on her soaps. The things we do behind closed doors would shock the town, but that's between a young wife and her husband. Her family will become

my family, and we'll all vacation together in the Smokies, Disneyworld. My right to bear arms will be restored, and I'll hunt and fish with her brothers on the weekends. I'm rich and won't need to work, and so I'll volunteer with the fire department, coach Little League. Eventually even the idea of having kids of my own won't seem so frightening. My wife will insist that we name our son Tommy or Tom or Thomas, and on Christmases and birthdays she'll remind me to send Jenny a card. Here, honey, I picked one out for you at the drugstore. I'll mail these thinking-of-you Hallmarks, and perhaps Jenny will send me some as well—but other than that I'll keep my distance, let her live her life on her coast while I live my life on mine. A life in which I've wrapped myself in layers and layers of family, friends, and possessions, hoping that trinity will be enough—and that all the obligations and responsibilities that come with having people and things to care about won't turn around and bite me on the ass, that I won't lie awake in bed every night, feeling trapped and terrified.

So that's one option—but, thing is, I'm also perfectly situated to live another sort of life. In that life I give Sam away to Lionel Purcell or maybe my old neighbor Jack Hebert and never contact Jenny or her mother again. I never buy a house or marry or have kids, and with no one to please or account for I have nothing to lose. That's an opportunity most folks never have, and I go all in, spend the rest of my days traveling, getting into adventures, seeing the world. Border towns, tramp steamers. Nothing is off the table or impossible. I drive the LeBaron up to the Arctic Circle and then trade it for an old motorcycle. Always moving, always pushing forward. In the Himalayas a monk touches my forehead and calls me a seeker. And then maybe I show up in Russia, track down Marina just to tell her hello, see how she's getting along. Nikolai is out of the picture, and soon she finds herself in love with me—but then one night in bed I tell her that I can't stay. I'm not the man you met in San Francisco. This is who I am now. You can fall in

beside me, but you can't make me linger. I'll die with nothing, but then one day about a hundred years from now some descendant of Jenny's—a boy who has never pumped gas or seen a blue sky—will come across a family tree on which the name Roy Joseph sits suspended off to the side like a hanged man. All those ancestors, all those lives, and yet mine is the only one that seems interesting to him. That boy will daydream about his great-great granduncle, the rollicking time that I surely must have had on this earth.

*

Viktor and I take the dogs to the sidewalk that runs along the beach, then follow the highway uphill to a cliff that looks out over the water. When the wind lies down I can hear sea lions barking from somewhere below. The ocean is calmer than usual, and I imagine Tommy down there, swimming around and around in the Pacific forever, a phantom frogman weaving himself in and out of the rocks with the sea lions and the seals and the sharks and the salmon. He's gone still, but not really.

Farther up the hill there's a diner with big windows and good views, and Viktor offers to buy me a cup of coffee. We tie Sam and Dina by their leashes to the same parking meter, and then we grab a booth inside that we can keep an eye on them from.

The only people in the diner are tourists starting the day. They pause from their breakfasts to take pictures of the ocean, and a Japanese couple is trying to capture a one-handed shot of themselves. Viktor hurries over and grabs the camera from the young man, then situates them both in front of a big glass window and snaps the photo. The couple says, Thank you, thank you—but Viktor makes them go outside with him onto the sidewalk and pose for another. By the time he makes it back to our table the coffee has arrived, and he sits down with a sigh, cradling the warm mug in his hands. "This is nice," he says. "To just sit."

I see a large bird come swooping toward our own window before veering off at the very last moment. “Damn,” I say. “That seagull.”

“What seagull?”

“Nothing,” I tell him. “Forget it.” The door to the diner opens, and a fat man in a green satin *The Waterfalls of Yosemite Park* sweatshirt walks in, glances around, and walks out. The cold air washes over us.

“Idiot,” says Viktor.

Our waitress comes over again. She’s an older woman, and her gray hairdo looks as stiff as a helmet. “You two know what you want?” she asks. She’s got her pen and pad ready like she’s a cop writing out a ticket.

“Coffee’s fine for me,” I tell her.

“For me too,” says Viktor.

We hand her back the menus she had dropped off with our coffee, but she stays put. “Did you hear about that ship?” she asks, her voice real low like she doesn’t want to alarm the tourists.

“What ship?”

She leans closer. “Some big ship hit the Bay Bridge this morning. TV in the kitchen says it might have leaked a whole bunch of oil into the water.”

Viktor takes a sip of his coffee and then licks his lips. I’m not even sure that he’s listening. “How much oil?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” says the waitress. “I’m not sure they do either.”

“Well, that’s no good.”

“No,” she says. “It’s not good at all.”

And with that she finally takes our menus and leaves us. I stare out at the Pacific. The water looks the same as it did yesterday, but I keep on searching for oil.

*

On the walk back down to the beach something seems to be bothering Viktor. He hasn't said a word since we paid for our coffee. His fists are jammed into his pockets, and Dina's leash is snaking out from his tracksuit like an umbilical cord. A kid in surplus military fatigues walks past us with a pit bull clipping along at his heels—but Viktor doesn't so much as glance at the pit. His thoughts are elsewhere. We get level with the Safeway, and though this is the place where we should make to cross the Great Highway, Viktor continues on.

“Hey,” I say. “You lost?”

Viktor looks at me. A swollen blue vein has rose up along the center of his forehead. “Can we keep going?” he asks. “Just for a little farther?”

“All right,” I tell him, even though I'm anxious to get home and start packing. In my mind I'm already on the interstate, windows down, California collecting in my rearview mirror.

And so we walk on. Viktor has gone back to mute, and we amble clear past the park. Off to our left the avenues pick up again, block after treeless block of square stucco homes laid out in a drab, soul-sucking grid pattern that runs for miles.

Where the sidewalk ends and the brown sand dunes begin Viktor stops and coughs. I'm thinking that maybe he's about to give me some new information about the *sokolnik*, but instead he says, “I don't like that you are only meeting Marina. You should meet the others.”

This again. “Maybe,” I say. “But not yet.”

I wait for him to say more, but he doesn't. There is nothing in his expression to suggest that he's onto her. I should change the subject, let this conversation die on the vine, but I can't help but fish.

"Why?" I ask.

Viktor checks the concrete wall that separates the sidewalk from the beach for seagull shit, and then, satisfied, he leans back against it. "Because some Russian women, they can be—" He stirs at the air with his hand, searching for the word.

"Erratic?" I offer.

"Erratic?"

"You know—aimless, unpredictable."

Viktor nods. "Yes," he says. "Like a bumblebee. Thank you. That is exactly what I mean."

"Well," I say, "I'm sort of that way myself at times."

"Obviously," says Viktor.

"Yeah."

"Two little bumblebees." He looks back over his shoulder at the beach and the water, shielding his eyes with his hands as if he's watching his two bees zip off together across the ocean. Sprawled out in the sand between us and the surf is a man dressed in cracked and faded leathers. A post-apocalyptic villain, a road warrior. The guy looks like he just fell out of the clouds—or maybe rose up from hell—and I'm thinking he might be dead when he turns onto his side and scratches his dick. He yells something at us, but the wind twists his words and I can't make out what he's saying. Nothing good, I'm sure.

The lead sky. The dirty sand. The seagull shit. The foaming ocean. The traffic stacking up behind me on the Great Highway. This sandy motherfucker. All I can see is ugliness. I kick at the concrete wall. “How can you live in this place, Viktor?”

“What?” He’s still looking out to the west. I start to repeat myself, but he stops me. “Because it is beautiful,” he says. “California.”

“You really think so?” He doesn’t see any of it.

Viktor pushes himself off the wall. “I do,” he says.

The dogs have stirred, and Dina is tugging against her leash. I stay planted with Sam. “Y’all go on ahead,” I say. “I’m gonna hang back for a bit.”

Viktor says that he will stay as well, but I insist that he move on. I’m afraid that if he spends any more time with me I’ll poison him. He’ll start to see California as I see California, and then everything that he has accomplished in his life will mean nothing to him. “Really,” I tell him. “But thanks for walking with me.”

“Okay then,” says Viktor. He shakes my hand like we’re only just meeting. “Goodbye, Roy. I will speak with Marina about your next date—but then you must let me know what to tell her.”

I nod and say thank you, I understand, so long for now. Viktor walks away, and Dina stares back at Sam as they leave us. Sam whines like he knows the truth of it all—that tomorrow we will quit San Francisco and never see that man or that dog again. Viktor will sometimes ring my cell phone, but I won’t ever answer. In time those calls will stop coming. Hell, after a few years the both of them will have forgotten that they ever knew us.

I'm not up for sitting around with Sam all day while I wait for my meeting with Jenny at four o'clock, and so instead of heading back to the apartment I drive south along the beach highway to do some thinking. It feels nice to fill the LeBaron with gas and go take a ride, a thirty-two ounce fountain Coke sweating between my legs. Perhaps this is a just a quiet, safe hint of that American thing—the supposed pioneer gene—stirring to life inside me after all my years as a hermit. On my way out to California I often found myself pondering some solitary house that I could see from the interstate. A white two-story walled in by cornfields, a trailer sitting atop some Western butte. It's clear to me that the exploring days of most Americans are well behind them now, if they ever even explored at all. More than likely some eccentric great-grandfather was the only true wanderer among them—and now there his ancestors remain like the shy kittens of some legendary alley cat, the Roy Josephs to that brave man's Tommy, wasting away in their own little Airstreams.

Take that signboard I saw in the Red Desert rest stop, the one that spoke of all the Mormons and whatnot who had pushed across that land. It's easy to forget that even then those desperate folks were the exceptions—that the great majority kept on with their lives in the East Coast, drafting contracts or making hats or whatever. You don't hear much about all those butchers and blacksmiths who stayed behind. The trailblazers we celebrate so much, the ones

searching for someplace better, or maybe just quieter, were actually just the outcasts and the outliers of this country—

I picture a young man alone and afoot in the Red Desert. Four months earlier he said goodbye to his parents in Baltimore for the last time. He told his mother and his father about some vague plan to make his fortune, but in truth he has no real interest in money. He has left them and yet he doesn't know why. His horse died in Nebraska but still he walks and he walks.

And I suspect that in two or three generations the majority us will be walking again. I'm talking here of peak oil. The *Mad Max* era I might get to see as an old man. Though at first there might still be mules and horses, eventually in the starving anarchy most of them will be butchered for food. It won't be long before even the last bicycle will be broken and useless, and on that day our feet will be all we have left to take us where we want to go. The dinosaur wine that I've spent the last eight years of my life wrangling is like a fistful of cursed fertilizer that God hid for us here in the earth. Our roots finally tapped into that mother lode, and as a result mankind has exploded so that now we are like the Japanese kudzu that is choking the life out of the Southern pinewoods. Who knows how much of that fertilizer remains? Maybe those who say that there's enough left for a thousand more years of V8s and aircraft carriers are right—but even if they are, I think sometimes that the danger isn't in running out of oil, but in *not* running out of oil. This planet's not getting any larger, any cleaner. How much more of us can it take?

Yes, there will be a reckoning—but that day hasn't come. Not yet. And so right now Sam and I are cruising south on the cliff highway that runs alongside the ocean, burning \$3.59-a-gallon gas for no real reason. Sam's standing up on the bench seat, his head hanging out the window, and it's almost as though he's thinking what I'm thinking—Let's just keep on going and going and going. There's so much to see and time's a-wasting.

We reach a town called Pacifica. There's a fishing pier here, and I leave Sam in the LeBaron as I walk the length of it. At the end of the pier a number of Asian men stand watch over tall fishing poles, and behind the fisherman two pale teenagers are making out. A boy with black fingernails has a chunky and pierced girl pressed up against the filthy railing. He's grinding against the Goth girl, and she's kissing him back with her eyes wide open. Her face is shined with the boy's spit, and the side of her vampire jacket is slimy with bits of cut-bait and squid. She's staring at me like a corpse as the boy pushes and pushes at her.

I go to the very end of the pier and stand between two of the fisherman. I suppose that this is the farthest west I've been yet, and there's a piece of me that wishes I had the courage to dive into that cold, cold ocean and just start swimming toward the warmth of the setting sun, currents and sharks and oil spills be damned.

That afternoon I ate what was left of the roast and egg noodles, and now the dishes are all done and I'm sprawled out on the bed, resting. I call Corey the Keymaster.

Vicemail: *What's up? This is Corey. You know you know the drill, bro.*

I tell him there's been a change of plans—that I need to split town a week earlier than I thought. Can you meet me at, say, noon tomorrow for the key and whatnot?

It takes me less than an hour to get everything packed and squared away, and then—for the sake of my damage deposit—I grab my toolbox out of the LeBaron and fix that broken doorknob well enough for Corey not to notice straight away that I'd forced my way into his cousin's closet. I'm so relieved to be leaving this place I could sing. Sam's feeding off my happiness, and the whole time I've been working, he's been dancing. There's only one thing weighing on me, and of course that's Jenny. I'd already told her that I wouldn't be leaving until Monday, and so now I'll have some explaining to do. Don't read anything into it, I'll tell her. It's not you, it's me. Your uncle is a rolling stone.

I'm stacking the last of my things by the door when a text message arrives from Corey:
cool . . . c u then.

The weather in the Tenderloin is pretty much the same as it was on my end of the city. Overcast. Cold. I see a plane high up in the sky, and I think of Marina surfing the internet for a cheap ticket to Moscow, counting and recounting her cash.

I'm only running a few minutes late, but I feel like this has put Jenny in danger somehow. I imagine her interrupting the transactions of all these junkies and dealers, hookers and pimps, that I'm right now wading my way through. Have you seen a white guy with nine fingers? she's asking. Have you seen a white guy with nine fingers?

But instead I find her waiting patiently for me out on the sidewalk, one leg kicked up against the side of Daniel's building. She's wearing jeans and some kind of buckskin fringe jacket. She sees me and waves.

I wave back at her. "Hey," I say. "Sorry."

"For what?" She kicks herself off the building. Yesterday she'd made it sound like Daniel would be with her, but right now it's just her. Still, I know better than to ask whether she's alone—that wouldn't sound good at all—but she reads my mind all the same. "Daniel couldn't make it," she says. "They're going long at work today—something about a concrete truck showing up late."

I nod. Such is the way with subcontractors the world over, I suppose. “And he’s all right with this?”

Jenny shrugs in a way that tells me that Daniel’s not cool with this at all, that he told her to cancel on me. “I know it’s early,” she says. “But are you hungry by any chance?”

“Sure,” I tell her, because in truth I really could eat.

“Good. They tried to poison us at school today.”

She starts down the sidewalk and I follow. It’s a one-way street. Cars are coming at us and they seem to be flying. At least every half block we pass one of God’s unfortunates. They sit slumped up against the walls of buildings, legs kicked out, taking up half the sidewalk so that we have to tightrope sideways on the curb to avoid them. Suddenly I’m worried that I’ll stumble for no reason at all, go sprawling out onto the street just as a bus comes roaring along. It’s a similar feeling to the one I get in high places. Stand me at the edge of a cliff or even the rail of a balcony, and my legs always go weak. It’s like I don’t trust myself not to jump. It’s like that’s a decision that’s completely out of my control. And if the wind is blowing, forget about it. I can’t even open my eyes.

*

Jenny takes me to a cheap but clean Pakistani restaurant. The place is no bigger than most living rooms, and we grab the last open table. I’m feeling much better now that I’m sitting. Our waiter is a fat man with strips of hair plastered across the top of his bald head. I’ve never had Pakistani food myself, and so Jenny orders for the both of us without ever looking at a menu. She’s a regular, it seems.

Once the waiter is gone Jenny’s focus returns to me. “There was an oil spill in the bay this morning,” she says. “Did you hear about that?”

“I did. Yeah.”

“Mom’s gonna freak.”

“It’s probably not all that bad.”

Jenny gives me a puzzled look, and just then the waiter brings us two ice waters in big glasses. My mouth is dry, and so I drink mine down fast. Jenny takes a sip herself, then dries her lips against the cuff of her Buffalo Bill jacket. “What year did you graduate?” she asks, out of the blue.

“’96.”

“And your brother? ’88, right?”

“Right. And then he died in January of ’91.”

“I was born in ’91.” I’m wondering what she’s getting at when she scrunches her nose. “I’m almost the same age now as he was when—” She makes a jerk-off motion with her hand.

I flinch and look around, but nobody is paying any attention to us. An empty room. A plastic container. God only knows what magazine. This is where the first notion of Jenny originated.

“There could be more of us,” says Jenny.

“Yeah. I suppose that’s true.” The walls of the restaurant are painted burnt orange, and I feel a little like I’m sitting in a fire. “Shit,” I say.

“What’s wrong?”

The kitchen is toward the back of the restaurant, on the other side of a swinging door, and I can hear the constant clatter of plates and silverware, snippets of cooks shouting in Pakistani or some such. “Nothing,” I tell her. “I just meant to bring this photo album I have along, but I forgot.”

“Oh. No worries. Maybe next time.”

“Well, that’s the thing. I’m leaving. I’m heading out tomorrow.”

“What? I thought you were leaving on Monday?”

“That was the plan,” I tell her. “But now there are things I need to take care of back home.”

“Like what?”

“Well, my finances, for one.” That’s all I could come up with on the fly. That money is never too far from my thoughts.

“Your *finances*?”

“I’m gonna be rich soon, believe it or not.”

She laughs. “Oh, yeah?”

“It’s true.” I explain to her about all the money I’ve been saving up over the years, and she seems impressed, surprised. “I’ve been thinking,” I tell her. “I’ve been thinking that I’d like to help you out some with college when that time comes. If you need it, I mean. Maybe you don’t.” I make it sound like I’ve been planning this, but in truth the thought just came to me then, probably because I have no idea how to say goodbye to her.

“You’re kidding.”

I shake my head. “No joke.”

“We’ll see,” says Jenny. “I won’t hold you to that.”

Our food comes. A big bowl of steamed rice and two plates of curried lamb and vegetables, a basket of flat and blistered bread. Jenny ladles rice atop her curry, and I do the same. Everything’s too hot to eat just yet and so we both lean back, waiting for it all to cool.

“Look,” I say. “I know I never got around to telling you a whole lot about Tommy, but we’re gonna stay in touch, you and me.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Fine then,” she says. “But you could still tell me something about him now, you know. This might be your last chance.”

“It won’t be.”

“But you don’t really know that. Pretend that it is. Tell me your favorite memory of him.”

She takes a small bite of her rice, and I shovel a big forkful into my own mouth. She watches me as I eat. What I want to tell her is that there aren’t any favorite memories. That when people die all of your memories of them go sad and depressing.

“Think of it this way,” she continues. “Suppose that there’s a heaven—and that when you die your brother will be waiting for you. What do you see?”

And so I do think on that for a moment. “It’s stupid,” I tell her.

“I doubt that.”

It makes me self-conscious to look into her green eyes, and so I stare off to the side, like I’m talking to someone who isn’t even there. “All right,” I say. “I guess I was twelve years old, and so Tommy was twenty. It was just after he became a SEAL, and he was home visiting for a few weeks. We were fishing our neighbor’s catfish pond when a big spring storm rolled in on us. There was lightning striking pretty much on top of us, and there we were, caught out in the open. I thought we were gonna die. So did Tommy, I think.” I turn my head back and try my best to meet her gaze. “So there’s this big concrete culvert lying in the center of our neighbor’s pasture

like it just got dropped there by God. It'd never been there before, and when I went back a week later it was gone."

And then I tell her how me and Tommy set off running for that culvert, how he's a lot stronger and so he's carrying everything—the tackle box, both our fishing poles, the stringer off gasping channel cats that we'd spent the morning catching. He's twice as fast and twice as big, but he keeps me in front of him, won't let me think he's leaving me behind. Lightning splits a shade oak and two black cows topple. My tennis shoes are caked in mud, and I feel like I'm running in place. The whole time I'm just waiting for the hit, for the moment when some dark cloud is going to put its yellow finger on me and press down.

"That sounds so scary," says Jenny.

"It was more than scary," I tell her. "I can't really do it justice. The storm got even worse, but we just sat there together in that culvert, safe and waiting. The world around us ripping itself to shreds. It was like were about to be flushed down a drainpipe. Two hours of that."

"But you guys were also safe. I bet that's the feeling you remember most."

"Right. Not much of a heaven, but that's what comes to me. I don't know why, but looking back it seems like somehow that was the only time the two of us were ever really alone together. Completely, I mean."

Jenny doesn't say anything. She just sits there patiently, waiting to see if I'm done.

"That's it—that's the whole story," I tell her. "I'm sorry. Like I said, I was only a kid."

After I paid for our food we rode the 38 Geary together all the way back out west, and for most of the trip we were both pretty quiet. I mean, we talked, of course—but it was the kind of talk that leaves you feeling like you haven't said much at all. Words you forget even as you are saying them.

Now we're alone on the bus except for a family of tourists who must be headed out to the beach. We're coming up on Jenny's stop, and from here her house is only a few blocks away. She jerks at the stop cord, and a tourist woman groans. It's already growing dim, and the whole family is acting pissy. The impatient wife is bickering with her frustrated husband; their young daughter is bored. I'm trying to think of what to say to Jenny, but all I can hear is this wife in my head. We're missing the sunset, Harold. This was a wasted trip. I find myself hoping that this oil spill is a billion times worse than I have it imagined. I want this all-American family to make it to the beach only to discover a wasteland. I want them to return to their expensive hotel room reeking of bunker fuel. I want them to catch on fire.

Jenny stands up and I stand up. "I could get off here too," I tell her. "It's a downhill walk for me."

"No," says Jenny. "We better not risk it. Mom, you know? She likes to go jogging in the afternoon."

“Oh. Okay.”

She tilts her head and frowns. “I’m sorry I never got to meet your dog.”

“Well—”

Just then the bus careens into the stop, and when we brake I go stumbling against her. Jenny pushes back against my chest with both of her hands, but then once I’ve caught my balance she hugs me. I still don’t know what to say, and so I just hug her back. The door to the bus opens, and she hops down onto the steps. She has one foot on the bus now, the other on the street. “So we’ll talk soon?” she asks.

“I hope so,” I tell her. “Call me or write me whenever.” But I think speak too late for her to hear me. She’s moved her lingering foot, and the door has slapped shut, sealing me off from her. The light up ahead switches from red to green, and the bus jolts forward. I go to the back as I continue on toward the end of America. I’m staring at Jenny through the rear window. She’s still standing in front of the bus stop, watching me watch her even as she shrinks from my sight.

VITA

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