

Summer 8-2-2012

Nowhereland

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Nowhereland

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

Matthew Bains

B.A. Flagler College 2007

August 2012

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Do We Have to Eat This Again?

It rained every day in the summers. When Jeff started coming over to see my mom, it was summer, and I was the age when days seemed endless and brief at the same time.

“Simon,” my mom yelled from downstairs. “Come down and say hello.”

I remembered her saying something about dinner with him, but I wasn’t ready. I still had a belly full of onion rings from the Dairy Queen. Mom would always take me there on Wednesday after school. My treat for getting halfway through the week, she’d say. We got so used to it that we did it in the summers, too.

They were both in the kitchen.

“Hey,” I said. “I’m Simon.”

He reached out to shake my hand. His hands were really soft. Really big, but really soft. And he kept grinning. “Hey. I’m Jeff. Your mom won’t quit talking about you.”

“Hmm. I guess that’s good.”

I sat down at the dinner table and picked around at the placemats. They were the old western ones with the wagons and cows.

“Of course, buddy,” Mom said.

I noticed his hair was as long as hers. “How come your hair’s so long?”

“Simon,” Mom snapped.

“What?” I asked, trying to make the wagons and cattle move right off of the table. It seemed like a reasonable question to me. “Only girls have hair that long at my school.”

Mom had planned the dinner. My new friend is coming over for dinner, she said a few days earlier. I hope that's okay. And he's going to cook some food for us. In the summers, I usually just ate a pimento cheese sandwich on the living room floor with Mom. When it rained during the summer, which was almost every afternoon, we'd have supper under the porch's tin roof. I loved how it sounded almost like gunfire. She used to tell me it was loud not because of the tin roof but from God—he was crying especially hard. I always wondered, though, wouldn't that just mean he cried hard over us, over our porch? I don't know about the crying, I'd tell her, and finish my sandwich.

“I hope you like mayonnaise,” I said to Jeff.

“Actually, I don't eat mayonnaise.”

“Jeff is what people call a vegan,” Mom said.

She made the bunny ear motions with her fingers when saying “vegan.” I don't know why she always did that with things. The previous year, we didn't go to a Christmas party because they were all “intellectuals,” and those people would just talk down to us anyways. But I wasn't retarded. I knew what a vegan was. I had one in my 4th grade class the year before, and her friend was a vegan too, or vegetarian. I don't know. I just know their lunches always looked funny. They had all the stuff that other people usually picked out: carrots, broccoli, and most always something that smelled like garlic.

But I asked politely. “What does that mean?”

“Well, buddy,” Jeff started.

Buddy. And so it began. He was already copying her.

“It’s when a person chooses not to eat or drink anything that comes from animals.”

“Well that makes sense,” I played along. “It’s not really *eating* the mayonnaise you have to worry about, though. It’s the smell.”

“The smell?” He looked over to my mom for help. She was sitting at the kitchen table shaking her head.

“Yeah,” I started, “in the afternoons, when it gets hot outside, it makes the house smell like mayonnaise.”

“Simon, do you have to do this?” Mom pleaded.

“How bizarre,” Jeff said, scratching the back of his head and then running his hand down his wiry ponytail. I looked back at the wagons.

“Not really. It’s from the people who lived here before us.”

“Simon.” She had stood up by this point.

“They loved the stuff. They used it to paint the walls.”

“Simon, what did I say?”

I wasn’t looking up, but I knew she was looking right at me, or actually, through me. You can feel that stare from moms in general, and when it comes you don’t want to move, speak or do anything that could upset them. I actually believed that, if I *were* to do something wrong in a moment like that, like yell back, roll my eyes or stick my tongue out, the world would start to implode on itself. Volcanoes would erupt, high-powered winds would knock down the mountains, all the animals would run to holes and caves to hide, people would jump off of buildings, the apocalypse, the whole deal.

Before Jeff came over to the house, she told me, don't start telling lies or crazy stories to scare him off, please. You hear me, buddy? Please. I was tempted to tell all kinds of made-up stories so that it could be her and me, nobody else. I wanted to tell him that sea snakes live in the toilets, so you have to look before you sit. Or, there used to be a crazy old lady that lived here years ago and killed all of her children and grandchildren and they still haunt the house. Or, how on some nights, you can hear the married couple next-door yelling things at each other, and other nights they yell other weird noises. But that was actually true, and who knows, maybe he wouldn't care about that.

But, it was the way she had said *please*, kneeling down to my height and holding both of my hands in hers, and me looking up and seeing her eyes. Eyes so clear and deep, like they went on for a million miles behind her, and at the very back of them I could see a tiny version of her, crouched, hoping for this one to work. She really wanted this one. Not like any of the other times with the other guys. This time, her eyes were saying, I really like this guy. Simon, please. Please. But the mayonnaise story really was true.

"Well, it's true, Mom. Look at the walls—they look and smell like dried mayonnaise."

"He has an imagination, doesn't he?" she said, smiling at Jeff. "Would you like some iced tea, Jeff?"

"I think it's a neat story," he said, pacing around the kitchen and running his hands over the walls.

"Would you cut it out?" Mom whispered to me.

“I’m guessing it had something to do with the eggs in the mayonnaise?” he asked, looking for an answer inside the cracks and ridges and spots of plaster on the kitchen walls.

“Yeah. It’s the eggs in the mayonnaise that’s good for the walls. It makes them stronger. Right, Mom?”

“Right, buddy.”

Jeff continued to run his palms over the walls, one time even putting his nose up to it, taking a few quick sniffs.

“See, what’s that smell?” I asked.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” he said, face planted to the wall.

“No. I mean, what’s cooking?”

The whole kitchen had started to smell different in the few minutes I had been sitting with the wagon train. There was a large pot already on the stove. Some old beige-colored thing I don’t think Mom had ever used. And there were all these vegetables on the counter, big leafy greens, carrots, onions, potatoes, and spices and herbs.

“Jeff is cooking a curry dish for us tonight.”

“Curry? That doesn’t sound nice. Sounds kind of mean.”

But it smelled both sweet and musky. It was nothing I had smelled before. For a moment, I could actually smell the spice of everything, the heat it could possibly make in my mouth. But what about what we had always eaten, I thought. I wondered if we’d do this all the time, have these exotic meals. I wondered if he’d have the creativity to keep it up, or if he’d care. Maybe this was just a one-time thing.

“But, Mom. We just ate an hour ago. We had onion rings, remember?”

“You did. I had a Coke.”

“It’s okay,” Jeff said. “It’s going to take a while to cook. Maybe you’ll be hungry later.”

There was no getting out of it. So, I said okay and told them I was going upstairs until dinner was ready.

He was at the house when I got home from my second day of school.

“Hey, buddy. How was your day?” he yelled over the noise of washing the dishes. I guess I was loud getting inside the house. I really needed to learn how to be quieter.

“Fine,” I yelled back, throwing down my backpack at the coat rack. “Why are you here?”

“Learn anything cool?”

“Not really. It was the second day.” I walked around to the kitchen. I was starving and went straight for a vanilla pudding cup from the fridge.

“I’m helping clean some stuff for your mom. So, nothing neat happened?” he asked again.

“Well, there was this cool thing Mr. Bradley said.”

“Yeah?”

“About giant water bugs.”

He was still washing some dishes, so it was easier talking to his back.

“The mom bugs, they glue their eggs to the dad’s backs and then the dads fly around with them on their backs for a week or so until they hatch. That way nothing can kill them.”

“Those are some good dads,” Jeff said, washing Mom’s coffee mug from Myrtle Beach, water-colored sailboats passing the same lighthouse, over and over again. I knew he wanted me to agree. Or maybe ask him if he would do that for mom, and he would probably say yes, of course, meaning it or not, who knows. The new guys always said anything to be nice. But I wasn’t done talking about bugs.

“Yeah. I guess so,” I said. “And he also said that scientists found out that cockroaches and honeybees use voting systems to decide where to make their next home. *Everyone* gets to decide.”

“You think they have a president of the colony?”

“That’s silly. They don’t have presidents. They have queens. Don’t you watch the Discovery channel?”

“I guess not enough,” he said and chuckled.

He looked silly standing at the sink with soapsuds all over his hands and jeans. Mom and I never got that messy. We had a system: she did the washing, I held the dish under the water to rinse it, and then I dried it and set it up along the counter on top of the hand towels. It worked just fine. “Jeff?”

He wiped his hands on the floral hand towel hanging from the oven handle.

“Yeah, buddy?”

I didn’t want to look up to him just yet. But I could already hear him sitting down next to me at the table. I grabbed a toy on the table and started playing with it—a yellow

Caterpillar diesel bulldozer my mom got me for my last birthday, when I was really into construction trucks. I still liked them, a little. A year earlier, I told this other guy about all the different types of bulldozers, haulers, drill trucks, and pavers. I remember what he said: you're so smart; I'm glad you're interested in this stuff; I'm going to get you some nice trucks for your room. But that was a year ago, and a lot can happen in a year. A lot of folks just don't really care, and a lot of folks never come through on promises. But now I liked bugs. And so did Jeff. But he didn't want to buy me some ant colony. And that was a good sign, I thought. So I looked up. "Are you still going to be here for the science fair?" I asked.

"Well, when is it?" He fixed his ponytail.

"It's at the end of the year. Right before Christmas break. They were talking about it today all during science class. I really want to do something with the praying mantis. But I don't know where to find one. And I'm kind of scared of picking something wrong by mistake. There's stuff out there than can kill you, you know."

"Yeah," he said. I wasn't sure what he was agreeing on, the killing or the staying. He sat there for a little while not saying anything. It was a pretty simple thing. I didn't know why he wouldn't just give me an answer. "I could help you find one," he finally said.

"Really? But I thought you didn't like being outside?"

He laughed. "Why did you think that?"

"Well, because every time you're over here you have on nice clothes. Clothes that look like they shouldn't get dirty."

"That's just because I come from work. I like being outside."

“Did you know that the lady mantis eats the guy mantis after they’re done having sex?”

“I...did not know that. How did you learn that?” he asked slowly, like I was in trouble.

“National Geographic. They even have a picture of it.”

“Does your mom know about any of this?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Just so you know, I’ll help you find one. But—

“But?”

He sighed, stood up, wiped his hands with the hand towel, folded it, and slid it back into place on the oven handle.

“I don’t know if I’ll be around for the science fair. I just don’t know yet. Your mom and I have only been hanging out for a little while.”

“It’s not that far away. I’d have to start my project soon.”

“I know. But—.”

“And I told you about all that stuff, and you still don’t know? What else are you going to do? Don’t you like us?” I had to admit. I was being a bit dramatic.

“Look, buddy. I’m sorry.”

I started to get up from the table.

He was rushing with his words. “I didn’t mean for it to come out that way. Wait.”

“It’s okay, really. I’m just going upstairs. Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m making tofu stir-fry tonight.”

I had already shut my door when I heard, muffled, “I think you’re really going to like it.”

Friday night. On Fridays, Mom and I always ordered pizza, drank cold Cokes from the can, and watched the old monster movies with sea creatures, snake men, or aliens.

We were halfway through a large double pepperoni pie and *Alligator People* when there was a knock on the door. I already knew who it was. I stayed on the couch but leaned my head around to try and see what was happening. He had brought two bags full of food. Fancy takeout stuff, Mom told me later. Mom was telling him how this was her night with me, how we had always done this, and maybe in the future, but just not tonight. She told him how he couldn’t just show up like this. He said he was sorry a few times in a row. It looked kind of pitiful, actually, seeing him standing there unable to move his arms because of the bags he was holding. He was dressed nicely, but to me it looked like he was naked and alone there in the crook of our front steps.

He said goodnight and Mom came back to the couch with me. We finished the rest of the movie. It was okay. Here’s the rundown. A newlywed couple is riding on a train to somewhere. The husband receives a telegram having to do with what they discovered at “the lab.” He gets off at the next station to make a phone call, and then the train pulls away without him on it, and that’s the last his wife sees of him. For years! I wasn’t buying that part. How hard is it to stop the train and go back? Years later, after a long search, she finally tracks him down. He’s on his family’s Southern estate and some type of failed medical treatment has turned him into an alligator mutant. I thought it was pretty funny at times. The costumes were cheap, so you could see human skin through

some of the rubber. It got to the end of the movie and when the credits came and it was quiet in the room, I noticed Mom was sniffing. I didn't really know what to do, or say. It was so strange. She put the rest of the pizza in the fridge and then put me to bed. When she came to hug me goodnight, I held her a little longer than usual because I knew she'd like that. "It's okay, Mom," I whispered. She shook in my arms for what seemed like forever, but I didn't mind.

A month passed, and some of the kids in my class were already talking about the diagrams they had drawn up for a volcano, a miniature greenhouse, and a model rocket. The last one I laughed at. "You can buy those at the hobby store," I said in class. The teacher then made me sit in the corner for making fun of the kid, which seemed ridiculous to me. You really can buy those at the store.

While I was walking home, I was already planning my project. Step one: acquire praying mantis. Hopefully I could find a male and female. I still needed to figure out how to tell which from which. Step two: place the bugs in a tank and observe them over two months. Hopefully they would have sex. Step three: try to figure out why the female eats the male.

I got to the house and saw Jeff's car. I don't know how, but I had never noticed it before. It was an old navy-blue Jeep. There were no doors on the sides. There was no roof, just some bars with foam padding on them.

He hadn't been around the house since that night Mom sent him away. It wasn't surprising. This was how it usually happened. At first they came, seemed polite, maybe cooked us food, and then asked if I wanted to play catch or toss the football. And they

might even show up a few more times. But then it would be a week, then two, and eventually Mom would sit at the dinner table with me, not touching her food, trying to be quiet so I couldn't hear her cry. One time she got up and turned on the empty dishwasher. Its noise filled the house.

"We have to get stuff for dinner," Jeff said now. Mom was working late that night. "Hope you don't mind riding with the top down." I didn't ask why he was there. I didn't really care.

"That's fine," I said. It was fall, so I grabbed my jacket so I wouldn't be cold.

His Jeep was loud. We headed out on the highway toward the grocery. For a few minutes, neither of us said anything. Then he started talking about how he was sorry he hadn't been around, how he really wanted to but was busy at work with a case, and talked about how he was an environmental lawyer. He kept talking, but it became harder to make out what he was saying with the sound of the engine and the wind. I looked down at the road below us, so close, within reach, zipping by. I looked up at the dashboard. The glove compartment's latch was broken so all of the contents were sitting in the open, so close to flying away. It made me a bit nervous, and I wondered why he hadn't fixed it. Had it been like this for a long time? I could hear him still talking about something. I picked around in the compartment. There were old bills, what looked like a car registration, receipts, gum, and some pencils. And then I saw three matching slips of paper, something green and orange sticking out from everything else. I slid it out and read the top: Atlanta Entomological Society Presents: an Exhibit on the Praying Mantis.

Atlanta was far away from the house, a day's drive I think. Had he really been busy these past few weeks? I asked myself. Was he busy with this? Why was it

crammed beneath everything? When was he going to tell Mom or me about it? I had all these questions, and it still didn't get him off the hook, as far as I was concerned. And if we went, we'd take Mom's car, I thought.

We pulled up to the grocery store. It was packed with people getting stuff for dinner. The late afternoon dinner procrastinators, Mom would say.

One time, I got lost in the grocery store with her. She had continued walking down and around to the sauces aisle and didn't notice that I was still looking at all the different cereals, looking up at the boxes that I couldn't reach. She never let me eat the fun stuff: Captain Crunch, Fruit Loops, Smacks, and Trix. Too much sugar, she always said while grabbing the flax cereal or nasty bran stuff. That's all that our house had ever since Jeff started coming by. Do we have to eat this again? I complained one morning. It's good for you, is all she said. I didn't yet know that sugar was a bad thing. For me, it was a matter of the person I got to eat breakfast with. If I ate the oat-bran, I had it with, well, nobody. Just some grains. There were dozens of characters I never had the chance to eat breakfast with—a sea captain, a toucan, Fred Flintstone, or a chocolate loving vampire. These were characters that could entertain me while I ate. They might have asked me if I wanted to skip school and go on an adventure. They could have told me about their experiences over seas, or living in the jungle, or if those foot-powered cars really worked.

A few minutes passed, and I looked up, and she wasn't there. Being lost in a grocery store was probably the scariest thing that had ever happened to me at that point in my eight years. There was no possibility of finding Mom. Suddenly, she was gone, vanished, and I was thrust into adulthood, under no choice of my own. I'd have to figure

out what to buy and cook for dinner, but I had no money. I'd have to figure out how to get home, but I didn't even know if we were a mile or ten miles from home. The world as a kid is large in the scary way—everything and anything out there is at least double your size, and a stranger. I imagined it was what King Kong felt like when he wasn't in the jungle, lost in the city, searching for that lady. Only the people were small to him. So, come to think of it, he might not have been as scared.

“Let's look at the list,” Jeff said, standing in the front of the store next to the booths set up to advertise sales. Potato Salad \$2.99, Ground Chuck 1.99/lb. A woman at a kiosk was cooking something on a portable gas skillet and handing out samples.

We walked around to the produce section. Jeff picked up an avocado and squeezed it, just slightly, before putting it back down. He did this about ten times before choosing one. That's a keeper, he said. We walked over toward the fruits. I was glad I brought my jacket. We stood before a mountain of Georgia pears, plums, Granny Smith apples, Florida Oranges and things I had never seen before: star fruit, plantains, kiwis. He grabbed a couple of apples. I was still looking at the pineapples, strange fruit that seemed so painful on the outside but held something so nice on the inside. I hadn't noticed that Jeff had walked on to the other aisles. Quick, I thought, don't let this happen again. Find him. He couldn't be too far away. He wasn't in the medical aisle, and he wasn't in the foreign foods aisle. I wondered if other adults would stop to ask if I needed help, or if I should ask for help. They didn't really see me as I walked past the aisles, peering my head around like a turtle's stretching for the sky. I accidentally bumped into a lady's wheeled cart. I said excuse me, and continued walking. A man dressed in white was cutting up pieces of bright, red meat behind a display of sausages, steaks, and

burgers. He drew his cleaver up into the air and came down with such force that I could almost feel it—the bones breaking from his cuts and then the cold pang when the knife hit the steel table. He had a stack of meat to his left he would take from, slide over, cut, slide those pieces into assorted places, grab some more and continue. Slide, chop, slide, chop. I wanted him to stop it, but I could barely even see over the counter, much less convince him to stop.

I was about to give up and scream out Jeff's name when I turned around and saw him staring at a long row of cereals. He didn't know I was watching him. He stood completely still, looking back and forth with his head very slowly, reaching for a box of granola, and then pulling his hand back. He moved around the avocado, the apples, and some spices in his hand carrier to make some room for a box. And then, I saw what he was looking at. It was one of the boxes I had always wanted, Trix, that easily recognizable white bunny on the front reaching toward the lime green, purple, blue, and red cereal. I didn't know which one he would pick, but I didn't really care. As long as it had the characters—friends on the outside, frosted friends, artificially flavored friends, but still friends. I watched him eye it for what felt like a year. I stood quiet, and hoped.

Holloway Ranch

Maybe it's best I tell the good parts first. I had been reading to Mr. Roy Holloway for a few weeks when we started this game with the pills—turning them into treats scattered throughout the day like bits of candy. It gave both of us something to do when he got tired of hearing me read, which was usually after seven minutes.

“So what did we say this one is?” I asked, pointing to a pill in his tray. “Cotton candy?”

“No. I sure have a lot to teach you,” he murmured, moving his arm over the pills like a crane. It was clear out and eighty-two degrees, outside and inside. Roy kept the inside of his house “warm,” because at one point in time one of his doctors said a warm house can help keep heart attacks away. He had had three of those already.

“That one is blueberry,” he said, smirking at me. “See how it's blue?”

“Well I got six blue ones here, how am I supposed to keep track?”

“Trust me, son. These are all I got. I know it's blueberry.”

We played this game for a while, almost two weeks, but eventually, the pills turned into something he dreaded. Vomiting, nausea, inflammation of his gut, loss of hair, weight loss—they caused all these things. Eventually, I ended up watching nurse Janice administer 23 pills to Roy Holloway in the course of one day. In the morning he took certain ones to help with his chemo, others for the pain. He repeated those mid-day, when the afternoon sun started to heat up his over-sized ranch home. In the evening, when he usually woke up from shitting himself, she gave him a few more drops of morphine and waited in one of his living rooms while I sat and read to him from a story

or a book. But the shitting stopped and the medicine was tolerable, for a while. But the pills, blue and red and yellow ones, and some that had writing and numbers on them, and ones that looked like they couldn't even fit into his body, as though they were so big they just became a part of his lungs, kidneys, or liver, whatever they were trying to mend.

For a while, we had games.

The first time I saw him, I thought he was already dead. He rested on a king-sized sleigh bed surrounded by medical equipment—monitors, IV stands, and a resuscitator. His eyes were closed, and because the beeps on the machine were muted, he looked dead. His chest wasn't even moving up and down. Even if the machines weren't muted, the sounds from the woods surrounding his ranch house would have drowned them. Bullfrogs in heat croaked and moaned. Hundreds of crickets still hanging around from summer rubbed their wings together. And every now and then a coyote would yelp. Nothing majestic like a wolf's howl, though. Just a distant cry, and somehow, from that call, you knew that it was alone out there.

"Smart ass," the nurse said when she walked into the room. "Always tries to fake me out." She put her hand on her hip and smirked at Mr. Holloway. "I know you ain't dead, hun. So quit faking."

She pulled up his shirt and placed a stethoscope on his chest. The cold metal jolted him.

"It's called a depo-port," the nurse told me. "It's a catheter that goes straight into the big veins and arteries." I was staring at the hole in his chest. Every few mornings, she

drove him to the clinic in Montgomery, and he got different injections—cisplatin, etoposide, and different platinums. I saw the list of them on a paper on a later visit.

He used to joke, when he had the strength, saying, “At least I’m finally rich enough to afford platinum.”

As part of a class, I needed to volunteer for community service and write a paper. I remember, later, hearing about the other students’ assignments. The two girls that sat in front of me with the bouncy, ash-blond ponytails picked a soup kitchen job. Jessie, the girl that actually studied for tests and would eventually leave Marineland, worked at an after-school program at a city school downtown. The boys who grew up on the farms outside of town further inland grabbed park cleanup and restoration. The one who sat next to me leaned over his armrest one morning after the first week of volunteering. He smelled of dirt, cigarettes and manure from the horses and cows he had to feed before the 8 a.m. class. He snorted his nose and then cleared his throat loud enough that everyone could hear. “We don’t even do nothing during the week,” he had said. “It’s all on the weekend.”

We were taught about community care and growth, and having a “good heart” about your neighbor, and some other nonsense I don’t remember. But our teacher didn’t teach us what to do if we didn’t like watching injections, being around rounds of pills, or the sound of two rotted lungs trying to cough up years of soot. Oh, and then there’s the vomiting and diarrhea. I realize now, months later, I probably should have signed up for a soup kitchen or something. But on the day we picked assignments, I was hung over, and I missed class. Reading to a terminally ill man was the last choice available, not

surprisingly. For most of it, anyone with two peas for a brain could do it—show up, read, he falls asleep, go home, mark down the hours for class. The nurse had the tougher job, for sure.

Roy Holloway was a cattle farmer before he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He had a ranch out in Putnam County, about thirty minutes west of the coast near Palatka. Most of the land out near there had turned to commercial farmers in the past decade. Roy still had his own cattle he butchered himself.

I showed up at the house listed on the directions and walked toward the gray, one-story ranch. There were five different cars in the driveway, three covered in oak leaves and the other two sitting under an awning. The siding on the house had peeled in parts, and ivy and kudzu snaked the brick around the bottom.

That's all I knew about him before seeing him. He was some man with cancer who needed reading to. I didn't know, then, that he liked listening to the same Hank Williams album in the late afternoons. I didn't know he had always been an asshole to his friends, not just strangers coming to read to him. I didn't yet know how much he loved his cattle, but not so much his wife.

I knocked, and a nurse opened the door.

"Oh yeah. They called about you. Come on." I walked through some different, low-ceiling rooms until I got to his bed in the living room. His salt and pepper beard showed spots and holes where hair had started to fall out, and he sported a camouflage baseball cap to cover his head. He wore his camel, button-up Carhartt field-shirt and scrubs as pants. If the nurse would let him, he'd probably wear his Wranglers, too.

“Hey. I’m Cole. I’m supposed to read to you or something.”

“Come on then,” he grumbled.

“Ornery as hell,” the nurse said. “All morning, kept trying to put on his work boots.”

“Oh,” I said. “Does he still work?”

The nurse stopped folding a blanket and looked me up and down. She wore all scrubs, teal-colored. Her nails matched the scrubs. She was a bit heavy, and it looked as though she bought the scrubs years ago, before she had gained some weight.

“What do you think?” She stood a few feet away from me. She creaked her head forward and sniffed around my chest, then up to my neck and head. “You been drinking?”

“No, no.” I looked around the room. “Where’s the book? Is there a book?”

“You can’t show up here like that.” She took out three different pill bottles and started putting pills into cups labeled M, T, W, TH, F, S, S. She looked at the blue, white, red and yellow pills. “I’ll let it pass. You didn’t know.”

“So is there a book here or something?”

“We don’t have no book. I think you were supposed to bring your own. There might be something over in that stack of stuff by the coffee table. Now I’m going to go make him his dinner. Just don’t touch any of the equipment, okay?”

I nodded.

“I’m Janice, by the way. Nice to meet you.”

The radio on the dresser ached a little song that told the story of what the room felt like—some wan bluegrass thing that was all blues and no grass. I walked over to the coffee table and shifted through different magazines and books.

“Anything you interested in listening to?”

“Well hell, we already got music.”

“I know, but I have to read to you. It’s for school.”

He mumbled something under his breath, but I couldn’t make out what it was. I could only find a handful of Reader’s Digest collections. I thumbed through one and read aloud the titles of the different stories: The Trapeze Artist, Walking Jenny, Falling for You.

“You kidding? You think I want to hear about a love story? Does it look like that would help right now?”

So, not that. We decided on a story about a man and his two pet dogs. It was hard to read, not because of the story, but because every other sentence Roy would let out these coughs, the kind that get inside your spine. After a couple pages and an absence of coughs I looked up and saw that his eyes were closed, his mouth wide open.

Janice walked over and put a sandwich on the table next to the bed.

“Guess he’ll eat it later,” she said. “You doing okay?” she asked me, stepping back from me a little bit.

“I’ve never been around sick people, not to mention a dying man.” I wiped some sweat from my forehead. “And it’s hot as hell in here.”

“Honey, we’re never dying. We live and we die.” She wiped her hands on her scrubs. “There ain’t any middle ground. It’s easier the quicker you start looking at it that way.”

A burst of gas let out from Roy.

“Shit. Oh, Jesus. Where’s the bathroom?”

“Yeah, gotta get used to that. Ooh that one stinks, too. Down the hall on the right. And wash those hands. It’s got to be sanitized around him.”

“She’s poisoning me,” he said one night while I tried reading *Huck Finn* to him. It was one of those children versions.

“All these god damned pills.” He said this in a whisper, worried she’d hear him. “It ain’t natural, you know? Putting all that stuff in me. I swear, there’s probably nothing but these powders in my blood. That’s it. No blood. Just pills and shit, bumping along.”

I didn’t answer him. I looked down at the book, flipping the pages as if the wind had blown them and I’d lost my spot.

“Like I’m already embalmed. One less thing to worry about.”

“Where did we stop? You remember?”

“My bones are wilting away. It eats the marrow, this stuff.” He grabbed my forearm. “Life ain’t short. It’s long, dammit.”

I could see how his muscles worked all along his arm, how animal he looked, and his skin barely keeping everything inside. His eyes looked scared. That night I went home, started drinking bourbon and tried to think of what to start writing for my paper on Roy.

* * *

The next day, I showed up at Roy's house some time around early afternoon. I felt bad; I had said I'd be there in the morning.

"About time," he called out when I opened the door.

"Sorry. Had a late night. Drank a bit too much."

"Let me guess," he started. "At a bar with friends. Ya'll drank some, met some girls, maybe danced, or just watched them dance. Am I right so far?" He held some pictures in his lap. "Then they were tired, so you had to sit down. Had some more drinks. Then maybe went to someone's farm. And you got lucky with some hussy and kissed somewhere, didn't you?" He smiled in a way I had never seen before, in a way I didn't want to see. "And it got loud, and when the cops came to tell you to shut up you didn't care one bit, because you didn't have to." And then he stopped and looked at me, with almost no emotion in his face. "Because you're young, because you're immortal, and because you can do anything."

"No," I said after a while. "Just a night at home. Nothing special."

He looked disappointed.

"Well, it isn't the first time I've been wrong."

He took the pictures and placed them facedown on the bedside table.

It was dusk out, almost sunset. The saw grass out back had dew on it, making it look inviting instead of painful. The dishwasher ran quietly in the kitchen, turning the suds over and over the plates and knives, the only things in there because the nurse used them to cut up his fried bologna sandwiches, the only thing she could get him to eat.

Dusk was when Roy would feed his cows.

“A little something extra in their feed,” he told me that day, “some bacon. I know, I know. It’s probably bad for them, seeing how they’re veggies,” he said, looking out for them. “But hell, I’d like it if I were them.”

Later that afternoon, near early evening, the cows came up to the house. Dozens of them walked up and stared in at us through the windows lining the back wall. I was halfway through reading him a book about a crime detective in Los Angeles.

“Look at them,” he whispered, “the little sweethearts.”

I wondered what he thought of them, if he loved them more than he loved his wife when she was still alive. I had only seen one picture of her in the house. I prayed he didn’t start talking to them now. I wondered, when he would go outside to feed them, if he would ignore her calls when she tried to find him. I wondered if he whispered things into their ears, and if they whispered back. There had to be something that kept him so amazed with them. Maybe it was the guilt of killing them. Watching over them, taking care of them, and then sending them off to be slaughtered. That kept him attached to them, in a way. Or maybe they really did whisper back.

“I can cook up some bacon if you want—”

“Nah,” he said, dismissing me with a thrown hand. “I’m fine just looking now.”

There was a type of accepted sadness in his voice, as though he said to himself, All right, I’ll just let it go. He kept staring at these cows, by now sitting up in his bed. I considered maybe he had suddenly developed Alzheimer’s and was starting to wonder what he was doing on this farm land, with cows coming up to beg from him, and some half-drunk kid standing next to him offering to cook bacon. He looked at the cows and

then off to the grass and wheat. It seemed like they were the only objects his brain could recognize, the splotches of black and brown on the cows, and the swaying fields of auburn wheat and chest high saw grass. But even then, his eyes looked confused.

“Where’d these fields come from?”

Christ, I thought, he really doesn’t know. “They’re yours. They’ve always been yours.”

“Really?” He let out a long sigh as though to say, man, ain’t that something. At least, that’s what I pictured him saying. “I think I want a cigarette.”

Aside from the obvious reasons as to why this was a bad idea, I had no cigarettes—only dip. I told him so.

“Open up that drawer there.” He pointed to the bedside table next to him.

I pulled out a dusty soft-pack of Basics.

“Just let me hold it, now,” he said, near whispering.

So I handed him the cigarette and watched as he put it, unlit, to his mouth. He crooked his head and looked at another part of the field, as if it were all new to him. He let out heavy breaths, one after another, not saying anything as a few minutes passed. He smiled at the cows by the window.

“Don’t suppose you want me to read to you?”

“Hope I don’t get you a bad grade, son.”

“I don’t know. I just have to write a paper on it. So I guess I could put whatever I want.”

“How about we just sit here and have a smoke for a while.”

I said that sounded like a good plan, and we blew imaginary smoke rings and gazed at the cows in the fading dusk.

Later, when I opened the front door to Roy's house, I heard Janice from the kitchen.

"He's in some mood tonight."

"Hun," I heard him say from his bed behind me. "Is that you?"

I said nothing at first. He looked right at me, and in his eyes I could tell that he thought I was someone else, someone he cared for.

"Well speak up, Hun. Where've you been? Probably out dancing again," he muttered more to himself than directly to his imaginary wife.

"Yeah, it's me," I played along. I figured the nurse had him flying high on morphine because his eyes barely hung in their lids and his head was planted so hard on his pillow that it looked as though it weighed as much as one of his cows.

"All right, will you make sure the ladies are locked up? Llewellyn said he saw them roaming around his property the other day. Damn things, keep trying to get away."

"Yep."

"You," he paused for a few seconds, looked up at me, "you look nice."

"Thanks. Sorry I can't say the same for you."

He coughed and laughed at the same time, although it was hard to tell which one hurt him more.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I wish you were here more. You always took such good care of me."

His eyes remained fixed just above my head, on a spot where the ceiling fan would be if he owned one.

I didn't know exactly what to say because I never knew Roy's wife, or anything about them. So I said the best response I could think of. "Well, I guess I tried."

He looked at me and sighed, and I almost took back what I said, because his lower lip started to shake. And all of the grooves and wrinkles and horrible sunspots on his face came alive and moved. Jesus, I thought, this man's on his deathbed, and I've made him cry.

"Sorry," I said.

"You're so silly," he said into his lap. "Don't be sorry, dammit."

"Well—"

"It's not you. You were the thing that held us up. You see? It's me. I'm the stupid one."

Janice walked around us and checked the machines and read something on a piece of paper coming out of one.

"Hey," I whispered to her, "how much did you give him? He thinks I'm his fucking wife. His *dead* wife."

"At least he's talking," she said. "But it ain't the drugs. It's moved to his brain now."

"I was in heaven last night," he started in again. "At least I think I was. It's funny, it didn't look cloudy or nothing. I was at the creek, the one where I used to fish for tadpoles and crawdads as a kid. And Mother was there, and Pop, but I couldn't find you."

“Oh, no? That’s weird,” I said, looking around the room.

“I kept looking around for you, and you weren’t anywhere. But now I found you, and I won’t lose you this time.” He grabbed my hand and held it in his.

“Roy, you should get some rest. You need to save your strength.”

“Evelyn. Strength ain’t nothing. You see?”

I couldn’t pretend any longer.

“It’s Cole, Roy. Evelyn is dead.”

He looked down at my hand in his and turned it over, examining it, noticing how new and young it was. Then, as though it had dawned upon him what he had just been doing, he threw it down. He started shouting for Janice. She appeared next to his bed in seconds and began asking me what I had done. Nothing, I said. His machines beeped from his increased heart rate. He pissed himself, a circle of yellow growing around his crotch. And then he fell fast asleep.

“I think you should go home now, kid,” Janice said.

I tried to apologize and explain. I was just playing along.

“It ain’t always games, honey. Go home.” She told me she’d call me when it would be a good time to come see him again.

On the day my landlord paid some Mexicans fifty bucks to go into the crawlspace under the house and clean up all the trash, rats, old clothes, and probably a couple of cats, I got a call. It was a couple weeks since I’d last seen Roy, around late November. I could hear the men yelling something back and forth in Spanish, sometimes laughing at each other. Often, though, only one of them spoke. I could tell, even though it was in a language I

didn't know, that the man talking was saying something that required a response, an answer of some kind. And I could guess by the other guy's silence that he didn't know how to respond, or didn't want to.

It was Janice on the phone.

"Found him sitting outside with all those damn cows around him. Had to shoo 'em away. Can you believe that?"

The men crawled out to throw all the old garbage into the bed of their truck and then they squeezed back underneath the house. Each time they came up, they looked more and more like ghosts. At first, it was armfuls of trash and clothes that had hardened underneath the house from years of weather and dirt. One of the men held out a pair of slacks that fell in a straight, unmoving line from his hand. But eventually I saw some rats, collections of small bones, and one cat that looked mummified, stuck in a curled position the way it would if it sat on its owner's lap.

"Yeah, that's wild," I said into the phone, standing in the living room. It was chilly with the windows open. I stuck my free hand in my armpit, hugging my ribs. In the end, the two Mexicans came to the door, their hands died yellow, green, and brown, and their white T-shirts a pale gray. They stood behind the screen door, apart from each other, likely because of their smell.

"It's like a pet. They go away when they know and curl up some place."

"Yeah, yeah. Hold on a sec, Janice."

I held the phone next to my collarbone and stared at the men. I didn't know what to say. Not because I didn't know their language, really. If they were from Marineland, I

wouldn't have known what to say. They spoke in broken English, "We finish now," they said. "We finish now."

A week later, I went by Roy's house. When I pulled into the driveway, I noticed that Janice's car wasn't there. All of the lights in the house were out. A lump of newspapers scattered the lawn. They were in their plastic bags, still damp from the rain that week. I could see the cows in the pasture out back. The craziest thing. They stood all in a row, watching the house, as though they were waiting for something, or really, for him. And I guess these things just happen. It happens all the time, right? Happens every minute, and it has nothing to do with us. Or maybe it does. But, oh God, I keep hoping it doesn't.

I went back home and finished writing my paper. It's awful, but I tried to think of Roy when I'm writing it, of him feeding his cows and listening to Hank. It might get a bad grade because I never could write real well. But, I figure nobody ever wrote a thing for him, or took the time to give a damn. So at least it's that.

Apalachicola

“I’m starving, cuz,” Julian says to Odell. The boys sit on the back edge of the yellow couch in front of the project’s pond. Julian flicks a stick into the brown water.

“Soon,” Odell says. “I got some business first.”

“The one you been talking about for days?”

“Same one.”

Julian pulls off his cap, rubs his hand through his hair. He’s been meaning to cut it for weeks. “Wish you wouldn’t do that,” he says to Odell, “getting mixed up with those guys.”

“Got to, man. Moving up.” Odell gets up from the couch and paces around Julian. “I do this right I’ll be getting more. Bigger ones, more money for the both of us, for Aunt May. You could tag along. Hang back. Learn the talk.”

Julian shrugs. He always knew someday his cousin would get into dealing. Odell can’t sit still. Julian just never thought it would be this soon, the both of them in junior high.

“Nah, I’ll wait here,” Julian says. “When you get back you’re buying my lunch, you hear?”

Odell nods and smiles. He lights a thin cigar and walks down the road.

“Hey,” Julian calls out to him. “Watch your back, cuz.”

Odell laughs. “I’m golden, baby,” he says. “Golden.”

“I know,” Julian says to himself. “Just scared is all.”

* * *

The day Aunt May dug the pond, the whole neighborhood came and watched.

“It’s for all of us,” she had said. “Make it a little nicer around here.” She said this while directing her nephews to dig deeper into the ground so some fish could make a home there. Julian and Odell could both lie down in the pond, but that was about it. It was no bigger than Aunt May’s Cutlass that sat in front of her duplex. They lined it with garbage bags so that the water would sit right.

Over the next few months, people from the neighborhood would come to the pond to relax. Sit and drink, sit and talk, sit and smoke. One day, a man pulled his truck into the courtyard, right up to the pond, and dropped off an old couch, some yellow, ratty thing he didn’t want anymore. People donated their goldfish, pouring them straight from their tanks into the water. Men would throw in bass and crappie they caught from the river. But then winter came, and everyone stopped. Styrofoam cups, wrappers, cigarette butts, bottles, and crack vials replaced the fish. The green grass around the edges wore down to a flat, muddy surface.

A few weeks before today, Aunt May had asked Julian and Odell to fish a dead cat out of the pond. Said she could smell it from her window, though neither of the boys noticed the stench.

Julian found it. He stood in the pond up to his thighs in dark water, holding a limp Tabby in his hands. He wondered who the hell would throw their cat in a pond. Or maybe the cat went in the water on its own, he thought, just plain tired. Odell sat on the sofa smoking a cigar and talking while Julian waded out of the water.

“Remember that guy with the cat?” Odell asked him.

Julian nodded. “Anton, right?” He asked Odell what that had to do with the cat in his hands.

“That’s the thing right there,” he said. “It was a week back, a bad day. Anton’s little bro got ambushed, beat to hell; kid was just twelve. Nothing he could do. Nothing anybody can do when you got five against one. So Anton couldn’t deal,” Odell said. “I was the one that had to tell him. And he didn’t want to take it out on me, so he looked over at his cat and took it out on it. Used just his hands, too.”

“Jesus, man.” Julian looked at the cat. Its front legs went off in strange directions, like right angles bending backward, and its head was almost completely turned around. He could understand Anton taking his anger out on something. But why not a pillow? Why this fucking cat?

“Yeah,” Odell said, “creepy shit is, ever since, Anton swears he can’t get the smell off his hands. It ain’t blood or death or nothing. You see, that cat was just a baby, a baby, man. Says he can’t get the kitten smell off. It’s funny. Figure most people would love that smell. Like puppies or something.”

“You got a cat?” Julian asked.

“You know I don’t. Hate the fuckers. Just funny is all.”

“That ain’t funny, cuz.”

“Yeah, maybe not. It’s something, though.”

Odell paused for a moment. “But that shit wouldn’t happen if I were King,” he said. “And that’s what I’m gonna be someday. King, man. King. And I can take you with me, all the way to the top.”

Julian shrugged. “Man, we’re not going up anywhere. We’re just kids. If anything, we should get outta here.”

Julian placed the cat in a black trash bag and set the bag by the couch. He joined Odell, and they both stared down into the water. Julian’s jeans dripped and soaked the couch. A car drove by, slow, and they looked to see who it might be. Neither could see inside the tinted windows. It stopped for a few seconds in front of the boys and then continued down the road.

“That for you?” Julian asked.

“That’s not for you to worry about,” Odell said. He watched the car, leaning forward and stretching his neck until it was out of sight.

“I always wanted to live out on the beach somewhere,” Julian said.

“Yeah I see that. Chilling with some sunscreen on your nose.”

“No, really. Some place nice, with good sand. Not this shit,” he said, throwing out his hand toward the mud and clay that encompassed his whole neighborhood, all of this stretch of hot earth in Florida’s panhandle. “I read in Aunt May’s magazines about these beaches just west a little, over by the gulf. I liked the name of one—Apalachicola. They got sand that hurts your eyes it’s so white, like it’s got diamonds in it. And water so clear and blue you can spot a starfish a block away, just scooting along the bottom.”

Julian stared at a dried up trout on the pond’s edge, full and bloated.

“Don’t know what a starfish is,” Odell said, “but sounds like something nice. Never seen an ocean.”

“Me neither. Figure it’d be nice, though.”

The boys stopped talking. They both looked at the pond and then out around the project. Julian wondered if the grass around the pond would ever be green again, maybe in the spring, when things normally start to change.

“Whatever,” Odell said and stood up from the couch. “Ain’t no use in all that talk. Rather not hear about the nice. What’s the point? Makes the shittier that much shittier.”

“Yeah,” Julian said, “but sometimes you got to, cuz. Sometimes you just got to.”

Julian wonders what’s taking Odell so long. Been nearly an hour. The stuff he’d done in the past was small time, usually deliveries for the older guys. But Odell had talked about some bigger job he’s doing today, something that could move him up. That’s all he said about it. Julian just hopes he’ll get back soon. He looks down at the pond to see the trout still beached on the shore. Shit, he thinks, nobody’s clean that up yet. Been there for weeks. Its head reaches out of the water toward the grass, as though it swam right up to the shore not realizing what would happen next, forgetting how to swim, or never really learning in the first place, some misplaced fish thrown into a hole with a garbage bag lining. He’s not sure why, but he kneels and tries to place it back into the water, reminding its gills how to work, but it stays limp in his hands—a skeletal mass, only bits of scales left on the bones. Julian looks at his watch and then down the road for Odell. He’s never late. Always said so himself. Looking back at the pond, Julian sees some grass starting to green around the edge. But maybe not even grass. Nah. Just weeds. He tries to keep some of the things Odell had said out of his mind—ain’t no use, what’s the point. It’s hard, though.

He tries not to think of everything ending. He tries not to look at the trout, the weeds. All he can think about is Odell, where he is right now, what he's having to do, and how much he might not want to do it. Instead, standing there, Julian remembers the pond when Aunt May first made it. Some flimsy trees she scrounged up surrounded it, all gone now of course. Grass grew so fast they had to cut it every week to keep it below the shins. And the sky—he had forgotten how it once looked just months ago. There weren't the darkened skies of the neighborhood today. There was only blue, every day, it seemed. And the water mirrored it, a shining cobalt blue. On days after a storm, he could see a dozen different shades of colors, blending with the sun. Aunt May had to drag him inside for dinner.

Julian looks down at his watch. He has to remember this time. He has to remember something better. If Odell were around, he'd remind him of it, and he'd probably ask him, "Look, cuz, can you see it? You can hold it in your hands. You can hold all that blue." A blue, he imagines, he'd see at a beach.

Ginnie Springs

Your old friend Gavin picks you up from the Jacksonville airport with a plastic Florida Gators tumbler of rum and Coke in one cup holder, a coffee mug of cigarette butts in the other, and his teenage sister Nat in the backseat. She's wearing jean cut-offs and a Kelly green bikini top. A few minutes into the ride, after he's done saying how *crazy* it is to see you, how he worried the whole time you were deployed, Gavin asks if you have your guns with you. If they let people bring them back home.

You go, "Really?"

"Just shitting you," John responds. Says he figures that's a bad idea on a plane. "Shame though, man," he says. "Sure would be fun to hunt with some of that big artillery."

"Maybe with a sniper," you say, ready to spout off the distance capabilities of an M-40. Decide against it because, after thinking about it for a second, you could never stand the snipers anyways. Creepy bunch that got off toppling down guys from far away. And besides, nobody likes to hear a showoff.

Nat asks if you shot people.

You're as honest as she needs to hear. You say we all did. Or shot *at*.

"I saw that movie about those bomb fixers," she starts. "You know, the one that the lady directed with the really hot guy? Did you see it?"

You turn around to face her, and she's leaning forward in the center of the backseat. Your faces nearly touch, and for a moment you think of Lucy, just a thing she used to do in the mornings when she'd be getting ready for work when you lived together

after high school. Nothing important really, just a glance she'd give you while waiting for the coffee pot to brew or digging through her purse. As far as memorable things go, but for some reason it stuck after three years in service.

"I haven't seen it," you say.

"Shit, dude, you should. It's heavy." She takes out a cigarette. You start to roll down your window to vent the smoke. "Roll that back up. Fucks up my hair." She pulls out her ponytail elastic and makes a new one.

You look out the window. A man on the side of the road sits at a boiled peanut stand painted pink and yellow. A sign sits next to him but you've passed him by the time you think to wonder what it says. "Where we going?" you ask Gavin.

"Our folks' place. Grab some food then head out to see the gang by the springs."

"I'm not that hungry."

"Sure you are. Look at you. Skinny as fuck."

The springs. Ginnie Springs. The two of you used to sneak out of class in high school to go swimming there, even in the winter when it was a little cold but never too cold for a winter in northern Florida. Sometimes you'd fish there. Often, though, it was just to get away. The water in the springs is so clear you can see all the way to the bottom. Once you get to the Ichetucknee the water gets darker, surrounded by thick mangrove trees. When you and Gavin were on the cross-country team together in high school, you'd run to the springs instead of the routes Coach Bird asked you to run. Bud's Bait Shop sits along the springs, and a short run from there was a rope swing. Took twenty minutes to run there, which left twenty to swim and then the twenty to run back. You hoped that by the time you returned you'd be dry, but every time you'd show up at

the track in damp clothes in front of your coach, Mary Birdwell, a tiny woman in her seventies. She'd always just shake her head and tell you to do your stretches. She knew you two were never going to be the best runners on the team, so she'd looked the other way. Other days you'd take the side roads into town to stop by Ruth's Pretzels, eat one, and then head back. Some days you wouldn't even map out a route. Those were your favorite. You and Gavin turned down roads on a whim, talking while running. You can't exactly remember about what. Probably girls. Probably Lucy.

Gavin turns down the dirt road that takes you to his house. It's the house he grew up in, a one-story ranch. One of those storage sheds that look like a miniature barn sits in the back yard, just visible from the driveway. He leads you into the front of the house. It's empty besides you three. Nat heads toward her room.

"Eggs, bacon?" he asks.

"Sure," you say.

He gathers the eggs from the fridge as you sit down. The metal chair whimpers. Neither of you say anything while he cracks eggs into a bowl, whisks them, and heats up an iron skillet. He bangs the skillet on the burner, and the pop of the iron startles you and takes you to a place away from the kitchen.

You're stationed outside a village. It was just a year ago. An old, stray Arab was out walking by himself. He walked right up to your tents, cupping his hands for food, the poor bastard. You try to remember what happened to him, because he was one like so many others that you saw or passed by. You remember a Sergeant taking care of it, but that didn't always mean feeding.

"Hungry?" Gavin asks.

“Yeah, you bet,” you say, but you aren’t, really.

“My eggs are going to kick the shit out of whatever they made you over there. I guarantee it.”

Gavin always had a way of attracting attention. In high school, you’d walk down the hall together and not five seconds would go by without him being pulled away by someone else, often girls. When it was track season, all the girls on the team would stretch by him and run their cool-downs and barefoot sprints in the football field, back and forth in front of him. He’s bigger now. There’s a beard starting to grow in that looks like it’s taken him two months to acquire.

“Your sis is all grown up now,” you say.

“Yeah, it’s weird. Seventeen.”

“Where you working now?” you ask.

“With my old man. It’s shitty work, painting. But we’re always inside when it’s balls ugly hot outside.”

“I bet,” you say and think about the heat you used to feel through a forty-pound pack and full gear.

“We had a bitch of a job the other day. Lady wanted five different shades done on one wall, in all these patterns. Pain in the ass, right?”

“Sounds like it.”

You think about the conflicts Gavin’s gone through while you’ve been away. You figure he’s probably gone through ten different girls, because he was always on the hunt. You guess he’s drinking more now that he’s of age and booze is easier to get. He walks around the kitchen with his plastic cup of rum and Coke. You imagine conflict

being so specific for Gavin. Small problems with customers. Running out of booze or cigarettes. To you, it's a term that's lost meaning right now in this small kitchen.

Conflict. You could always pinpoint wherever it was, and how to handle it. Before, you shared his same small problems. Sometimes things with Lucy, like when she asked you to do a load of laundry while she was at work and you left the clothes in the washer, collecting a sour stink over the whole day. You had just moved in together. But it was a minor problem. All it took was an apology.

Nat comes in and sits next to you at the table. "So you're going to the springs, huh?"

"Yep," Gavin says, dividing the eggs onto plates.

"I'm coming too, right?"

"I don't know, Sis," Gavin says. "The crew's getting a little tired of your ass,"

"Bullshit they are." She throws the plastic saltshaker at him but he doesn't turn around.

"You want me to come, don't you, John?"

"Of course. Wouldn't be fun without you."

Gavin chuckles at the stove.

"See, Gav. I'm coming. It's decided."

He serves the food. You eat it, but it doesn't really taste like anything. You walk over and pick up the saltshaker from the floor and shake it over the eggs. Nat leaves the table to change into her bathing suit.

Gavin puts his napkin on his plate and looks at you. All heavy and shit. "So I gotta ask."

“Yeah?”

“What’s it like? You see any action?”

You think about what to tell him. Of course you did. But not all of it sticks. It gets shuffled into different categories. Stuff you don’t care to remember because it was, frankly, boring. Random shots fired that ended up being nothing. Days of walking patrols. You know he wants the good stuff, because he’s been stuck inside painting houses.

“There’s this one thing,” you start. You tell him about a patrol you were on, you and five other guys scouting some villages just east of Baghdad. It was near sundown, and you were still far from base, so you stopped in some nameless villages to sleep in one of the local’s homes. You checked over the house first, searching all of the rooms for weapons. Then checked the neighboring houses. All looked clear. So you and four of the five guys on patrol crowded into this one tiny room and slept on cots. The family in the place was nice. Your buddy—Petey they called him, although that wasn’t his real name—had to sleep in the next room once he was relieved of his night watch when you took over. You tell him how you all went to sleep pretty fast, even though it was never really a full sleep. And then you woke up to a sound you knew to fear, were trained to know, the faint pinging of a metal pin hitting concrete.

“If it was a real grenade,” you say, “we’d have all been dead.” A local had thrown a flash grenade underneath Petey’s cot minutes after he’d fallen asleep. Usually they don’t do a ton of damage. They can blind you if you look right at them. But it was inches from Petey, right underneath the cot. When the smoke cleared and you found him, his whole side was missing, like a spoon scooped it out.

“Damn,” Gavin says. “He live?”

“No. He died that night. That’s why I got a messed up back now. I can’t sleep on beds anymore. Too much room for shit to get underneath you.”

“Does it hurt?” he asks you. “Your back?”

“It hurts,” you say. “But what’s new?”

“Damn, bro. Damn.”

Gavin’s phone vibrates in his pocket. He pulls it out, looks at it for a couple seconds, and then puts it back into his jeans. He gives you a look that’s meant to say, ‘Nothing. No big deal.’

“You know if Lucy’s going to be there today?”

“At the springs? Of course. The whole gang.”

This comforts you and discourages you, because you don’t know who the gang consists of anymore. You don’t know if Tommy Casternot is still running petty thefts. You wonder if George Drunden ever got his G.E.D. You never thought of him as smart, so it wouldn’t surprise you if he never did. And then you think about Lucy. Other guys in your company carried the token wallet photos of their girls back home. Wives, girlfriends. Petey carried around this picture of a woman he’d never met. Said it was the woman he wished he’d be with someday. You never had a picture of Lucy. You never took pictures of each other. Instead, you’d do this routine where you’d put up your hands like those cheesy directors, two L’s forming a box, and make a click sound between your cheeks. It was fun at the time. A shot at the springs on the first day of summer with her in a tube top and shorts. A shot at Dot’s Diner of you trying to fit a whole burger into your mouth. But damn, it would have been good to have one to keep in your boot when

the images faded, changed into the different clicks all around you. Mags, triggers, chambers. Snaps on helmets. Distances on topographical maps.

“So how is she?” you ask.

“She’s good. Different, though.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“I mean. What do you expect? It’s been a while. She’s...different.” He pauses for a moment before continuing. “And she never heard from you.”

You’re interrupted when Nat comes into the kitchen, tote bag in hand, one of those clear mesh ones they started making everyone use back in high school because of a knifing your senior year. “Let’s go, lazy asses,” she says. She’s wearing this tiny yellow bikini top, the kind that ties around her neck and back.

“You two are sitting in the back,” Gavin says. “I can fit more shit up in the front seat.”

Nat smiles at you and nudges you in the side.

It’s only a ten-minute drive to the springs. Gavin takes all the back roads, which means dirt, which means bumpy. They’re barely wide enough for one car. He hits a big hole and Nat bounces up, almost falling into your lap. She giggles.

“Oh,” she says, holding onto your left shoulder, “sorry,” though, you know by the length she takes to get off your lap and the smile on her face that she’s not really sorry. You pass by different houses scattered along the back road, some exactly the same as you remember them from days you’d run these trails, others ravaged by three years of different hurricanes. A mutt wanders down the side of the road, sniffing at weeds. It

looks up at you as Gavin drives by, and you wonder if it has a home but figure it doesn't. It looks like it hasn't eaten in days.

Three different trucks sit outside Bud's Bait Shop. You recognize one as Tommy's—a bright red Bronco with the top cut off. Three different men stand by the water not far past the bait shop.

Gavin tells you to give him a hand with the beer and rods. You grab a case of beer.

"I gotta get some tackle," he says. "Lost my box last year." He heads in the direction of the bait shop.

You walk toward the water where the men stand. You recognize Tommy. He's a big guy, hard to miss. It looks like one of the other two is holding something in his arm, moving his other arm toward it in a distinct back and forth motion you know: loading shells.

You say hey to the guys before getting up on them, announcing your presence so as not to startle the man with the gun. Tommy's the only one you know. He gives you a bear hug, says he can't believe he's seeing you right now, welcome home hero, the whole stupid deal. But you nod, say it's good to see him, too, pat him on the back. He introduces the other two guys, two coworkers from the landscaping company. You recognize the type of guys they are. You've seen a lot of them in the past three years—solid, tough, stand-up guys, but babies once they crack.

"What's with the street sweeper?" you ask, pointing to the shotgun.

"Getting our bait," one of the brutes says.

You look back at the bait shop and then back at him.

“Bud ain’t got good stuff,” he tells you. “They really bite on the turtle meat. Waiting for one to show up.” He looks over at the water. “Best thing about this water, you don’t have to wait for them to pop their heads up. Can see ‘em clear as day.”

You try not to say anything more to this guy and think about how much better turtle meat really could be for fishing but decide it’s probably bullshit. They’re just bored. The gun looks like it’s never been cleaned. The wooden pump has a crack in it going down alongside the barrel.

You look back for Gavin and see him walking out of the shop with Nat, and then you see one more person. It’s a face that you thought had disappeared, or worried had. But it’s not quite the same. Her hair is long now, and she’s put on weight. It looks like she hasn’t bought new clothes, so her shorts ride tight on her thighs. They look like the same orange hot pants she used to wear years ago, but you can’t say for sure. She hasn’t seen you yet. Gavin walks her down a set of four stairs and places his hand on her lower back, and then lower.

You turn around before either of them can see you. Look back at the guys with their busted up gun. One of them calls out, saying he sees a good one, a snapper turtle. You hear the shifting clicks of the pump action. You bend down, pick up a pebble, and skip it into the springs.

“You scared it off!” the guy yells out. He looks over at you and scowls.

Gavin’s coming behind you, saying, “Look who.”

You turn around to face them. Gavin separates from Lucy and walks toward Tommy.

“Hey, you,” Lucy says.

“Hey, you back,” you say.

She’s fidgeting with the top of a beer bottle in her hand and looking over at Gavin, Tommy, the other guys. “You look good. You really do.”

“Thanks,” you say. “They kept us on a strict moisturizing regimen.”

She laughs, tips her bottle slightly, and spills a few drops of her beer. She looks straight at you, and you think that it didn’t matter even if you had a real photo or not. Her eyes are the same, but everything around them has gained ten years instead of three. She pulls out a cigarette.

“Since when did you smoke?” you ask.

“Since you left, more or less. It’s gross, I know.”

“No, I just didn’t know is all. Never would have pegged you for it.”

“Well, so it goes, huh?” She laughs slightly. She always used to say that line from one of her favorite books. She tried to get you to read it, but you always made excuses. You wish you had at some point in time. It would help right now. “A bunch of us are going out later. Get some drinks. You should come.”

“Who all is going?” you ask.

“Oh, everybody.”

“Gavin going? He didn’t mention it earlier.”

“Yeah, of course he’s going.”

Of course he’s going. You hear it and know that you don’t want to hear anymore, don’t want to see anymore. Lucy looks past your shoulder. You turn to see Gavin blowing her a kiss in the air with his mouth.

You think about turning around but instead look straight toward the water. “I think I’m going to head home,” you say. “Haven’t gone by there yet.”

“No, no,” she says. “Come out with us. Besides, I don’t think they’re gonna catch anything today. They might not be that long.”

You turn around to answer and see her smiling back at you, and for some dumb reason, figure why not, sure.

You’re drinking a second beer at The Red Crow, the town’s one main watering hole. Everybody from the springs is there, most of them up at the bar ordering shots. Gavin sits with you at a small table with two chairs but room for three or four if you cram.

“It’s good you’re back, man. Damn, I missed you.”

“Really?” you ask.

“Well, shit yeah,” he says and slams the rest of his beer. “You were always my partner in crime, *mi amigo*.” He laughs at himself and makes a cackling hoot not unlike something you’d hear on the streets of Mexico, or on the streets of Florida that someone thinks is Mexico, all *andale*, *arriba*, and *sombreros*.

One of the locals goes to the jukebox and plays a song you don’t know but know you don’t like, one of those country-rock, alt-country songs.

“Come on, man, let’s grab another round,” Gavin tells you.

“I don’t know,” you say. “I should be getting home.”

The whole time you talk to Gavin you’re talking to him but not really looking at him. Lucy is up at the bar. She went up with Tommy to get a drink twenty minutes ago, and now she’s having shots with what seems like everyone she talks to. First Tommy,

then the bartender, then these two guys who looked like they just got off a farm. She stands at the bar, but every now and then tries to prop up on a high barstool, fumbling but never really getting on it.

“She always like this?” you ask Gavin.

“What you mean, man? It’s Luce.”

He says it like it’s common knowledge now, that this is how she is. Before, she didn’t even like going into bars. Looking at her now, though, it’s hard to picture her anywhere else.

“Come on, how about that round,” Gavin says. “Shots on me.”

“No, thanks,” you tell him. “I’m gonna get some air.” You pat him on the shoulder and walk outside the bar. You know Gavin means well; he can just be a dumb motherfucker sometimes.

It’s nice outside with a little bit of a breeze in the air. You walk away from the bar’s gravel parking lot. You remember there was part of the springs that flowed around here somewhere. You walk across the street and into some shrubbery, following whatever path you can that isn’t covered in briars and sticker bushes. The further you get away from the bar, the less you hear the country music from the juke box and the more you hear sounds of water. The shrubs clear, and you come up to a small turn in the springs, no wider than six feet across. You’re tired and should probably just go home and go to bed, but you worry about what home might be like compared to Lucy. You worry that it’s just as changed, just as unrecognizable. Instead, you sit down by the water and toss some skipping stones along its length. You decide you won’t call Lucy anymore,

won't try to meet up with her after, go to the diner, or go anywhere. It's better you didn't have a photo, you think. The comparison would be even more drastic.

You sit and place your hands on the ground. It must have not rained for a while because all of the dirt is dry and chalky. You rub the dirt together between your palms. It's a feeling so familiar and comforting. And you know you shouldn't long for wartime, for a time when you didn't have to see what people had become, when they were all hidden from you. When you were with guys that taped pictures of wives in helmets and boots, or a picture of the perfect person, even if it wasn't real.

You wipe your hands on your pants.

You figure at least it was something, and at least it never changed. But really, you're not missing that time, war. You're missing a time before then maybe, for whatever could have been, when you'd run the trails behind your school, find the rope swing, grab hold, and laugh all the way down into the water.

All This Useless Beauty

It's winter, and the sun's just gone down, and we've already started drinking, something that seems celebratory and barbecue-ish in the summer and miserable and fat-Russian in the winter. But who am I kidding? I rarely go to barbecues. Not on purpose, and not sober. They have them all the time here. And thank god it's not as cold as Russia. It's January, and it's Florida, and it's an apartment with adequate heat, and it's a nor'easter, but not a bad one. They're never bad here. My roommate, Aidan, sits next to me in the living room. "And if you want to know why Lauren left," I tell him, "it takes too long to explain." But he really does want to know. Keeps saying I can confide in him, like he's my fucking shrink or something. Which is weird, because he knows my shrink.

We do a shot of tequila. He tugs at my shirtsleeve to get my attention. I hate it when he does this. Instead of asking whatever he was going to ask, Aidan tugs at some part of my clothing. If he's close enough he'll nudge me in the side with his elbow before he starts to talk. I don't know why, but it drives me nuts. He was the first kid I met when I moved here from Scotland.

"You got to let it out, Perry," he says. "Got to, man." He swallows some of his beer. He drinks it sloppy and some drops settle into his light beard. He's been growing a beard for the two months I've known him here in the States, and I can still see through it down to his skin. He has balding blonde hair, and a long skinny coke nose.

"You *really* want to know?" I ask him.

He nods.

“Fuck if I know,” I tell him. “Let’s get high or something. We’re depressing me.”

But really, I don’t want to get high. I don’t want to go to a bar. I don’t want to go to a party out on the beach with the surfers. They always get more annoying when I’m high. Or the film kids’ party down the street. Too many obscure French names that even they mispronounce. Or the party at the tennis players’ house where they all talk in Swedish, or German, or Portuguese. Because a sport, it seems, is the only reason someone from another country would come to this school. I seem to be the only one who doesn’t play sports. They come to this country and stay at their own parties away from the Americans. Some of the guys on the football team, a mix of Brits and some from Ireland, always invite me to parties, but I usually pass. I’d rather find Lauren right now. Say I’m sorry for not paying for it. Say I’m sorry again. Say I’m sorry again. Say I’m sorry again. I think about telling Aidan that Lauren’s pregnant and took off after I didn’t pay for what she wanted. But he doesn’t want to hear that. He’s listening to his new Collective Soul album inside our apartment. He’s been listening to it for three days. He’s concerned about me, maybe. But not really. He just wants to keep his buzz going, and I don’t think bad on him for that. I feel the same.

We’re high in the apartment later, and Aidan won’t change the music. He goes to piss and I put on an R.E.M. album before he gets back. And I think about her. Driving back to Massachusetts, her mom’s, all the way up the coast, stopping at A&Ps along the way, buying cinnamon swirl cakes and Mountain Dew. She always had horrible taste in food.

“We’re out of beer,” I hear Aidan say from the kitchen. “Let’s walk down to Lucky’s.”

Lucky’s. The one dive pub in town. The only pub. But if it’s the only pub in town, is it still considered a dive pub when there’s nothing to compare? “Fuck it,” I say. “Why not.”

The bartender at Lucky’s flirts with me. I don’t get halfway through my pint before she asks if I want another. Aidan tells me I should hit that every time she walks to the cooler to grab a bottle. I tell him she’s all his and get up to take a piss.

All of the light bulbs in the bathroom have been replaced by green ones, which gives it that “I’m about to get abducted” kind of feel instead of the Irish one they were likely going for. The urinal is one of those troughs that horses drink water from. It’s filled with ice instead of using a flusher. There’s guy at the far end of the urinal. His head leans against the wall. The guy mutters something to me. He has a British accent, which is weird because almost everyone in this town seems to have a Southern accent of some kind, the slow drawling kind, the sorority girl kind, the rolling plantation owner kind. For a second, I think maybe it’s not British and just a weird Southern accent. It’s close to some dialect I know from back home in Glasgow.

“What?”

“You know,” he says, “if God wanted us sober, he’d knock the glass over.”

“Yeah, man,” I tell him. “You bet.” Shake my dick, zip my jeans. “Cheers.”

“He’d knock the glass over!” he repeats, facing me now, his pants loose in one hand. “Wait!” He grabs my arm with his free hand. “Son, what are you doing here?”

He must be really drunk. I walk quickly out of the bathroom, find Aidan, and tell him we should go somewhere else. We finish our pints and pay the bartender. She smiles at me and tells me to keep my money. I leave it on the bar and get the fuck out of there.

Aidan wants coke so we drive to his dealer's house, about ten minutes outside of town where the rich people live, suburbs they call it, but it looks like a shitty place to waste money. I've never gone with him to his dealer's place before, so he tells me all about Micah, about the sheet curtains covering every window, about the forts he makes out of pillows that he crawls inside to get high and trip. Micah used to go to school here, top of his class, and now he deals and makes more money than anyone in town. Typical.

We pull up to a large white house with columns. It looks like Arnold Palmer lives here.

"You should probably stay in the car," he tells me, grabbing a wad of crumpled bills from his glove box. "Micah likes to shoot things. Mainly squirrels. But fuck, you never know."

I shake a cigarette out of my pack, find matches, and light it. Don't roll the windows down because it's chilly. Smoke hangs in Aidan's car, rests in the seats. I think of the last time I saw Lauren. We were in her apartment, smoking and watching one of those surgery shows where they get real close and show the guts and tissues. She had just cut her hair, all chopped and spiky. She told me it was true about the test and stood up paced in the house. She went to get a glass of water, filled it up, put it down on some

magazines on the kitchen table without drinking it, and got angry when I asked stupid questions. I told her I'd go to the store get more tests give it another shot we could give it a shot we could try we're not that young but who are we kidding we're tiny versions of adults miniature models playing a role but not anymore and then she said not to worry about it taken care of and I didn't like that we could be okay okay I said okay lets not jump to there it could be a good thing I could get residency and then she said she barely knew me it was a fling it was my accent my clothes everything and then she didn't want to talk anymore and we didn't say anything else and I remember grabbing some whiskey and she went into the bathroom and I remember her crying and hating hearing her cry and the next morning she was packing a duffle bag with a week's worth of clothes and the trashcan in the bathroom was filled with mascara-stained tissues that weren't there the day before and when I tried to say something to her as she packed she kept saying the same thing forget it just forget it.

Aidan opens the car door and breathes heavy as he sits in the driver's seat. He doesn't say anything for a few seconds. His collar on his button-up is disheveled and uneven.

"We're going to this party on the beach," he says. "I have to make back some money."

The party has already been going for a while by the time we get there. The surfers make up at least ten percent of the kids at school, and they all have endless amounts of money. The condo is right on the beach. I find the keg and fill up a beer. The shy, blonde kid from music appreciation class is trashed and showing everyone his dick. The girls make

repulsed faces and look right at it. The guys make the same face and turn. Except for a few, just two. A Pink Floyd song comes on the stereo. Lauren's favorite band. *Hello. Is there anybody in there? Just nod if you can hear me. Is there anyone home?*

I shake out a cigarette from my soft pack and light it. I talk to the bartender from Lucky's at the keg while I sip a beer and she swigs Scotch. Find out her name is Libbie. Doesn't look like a Libbie. I notice she's heavier now that I see the rest of her that was hidden by the bar. I put my cigarette out in an empty bottle that's on top of a speaker and shake it. Pretend I'm going to take a piss. Find Aidan taking off his shirt, kissing some soccer chick sitting on a pool table corner pocket. Get another beer. Find someone to actually talk to. See Aidan again but kissing Ronald now, the school's unofficial slut for all the bi kids. Go outside. Feel the wind coming off of the water. Lauren and I used to go to a spot a mile down the beach, past the condos and houses, and fool around in the ocean. Sometimes during the day. Sometimes at night. And sometimes just to swim, bodysurfing the waves into the shore.

In winter in northern Florida, trees lose their leaves, go dead, but only the hardwoods; the palm trees hang around, still green, the same color of the hills back home in summer. Winters here are just like summers, green with loud seagulls waking you up every morning. I walk with Libbie away from the party down to the beach. The sand is cold on my feet. I need to buy new socks. People in Florida never wear socks in the winter. They wear sandals and then complain about not ever getting warm during the day. I remember when Lauren stopped wearing shoes, the week before she left. Said they were strangling her. I drank a lot then. More now.

Some hippies play an acoustic guitar and sing by the water. Loud-mouthed drunks yell back near the condo. Libbie grabs my hand and leads me closer to the water. We sit down next to each other. She rubs my jeans with her hand.

“Who are you, mystery man?” she asks.

“Nobody special.”

“Aren’t you a senior? Where are you from?”

“Freshman,” I say. “Across the pond.”

“Really? I thought I’d seen you around a lot.”

“Nope. Freshman.”

I look for my beer I had just put in the sand, but it’s too dark to see anything past our feet.

The wind blows hard, and she wraps her arms around herself. “What are you studying?” she asks.

“I don’t know yet. You?”

“I don’t go to school.”

“Oh.”

I’m glad Lauren and I never had conversations like this: stale, depressing. I think about her and what she used to talk about. We wouldn’t always talk when we were together. Sometimes we’d just walk around the campus or the town, which are basically the same thing, and speak only every few minutes. She’d usually be the first to point something out.

“That’s beautiful,” she said one day a few months ago, holding this dead leaf that had a purple beetle crawling across its veins.

“Yeah, beautiful,” I said. I didn’t know what she was really talking about, whether the bug was beautiful—its color and shape—or the leaf. It was always like this with her. I rarely knew. Something would always get lost in the translation between us. She’d look at something, like an old couple crossing the street, and say how lovely it looked. She’d ask if I noticed how green the spinach was in the cafeteria. So fucking green. After sex, she’d make carefully detailed ruffles in her sheets. I’d toss them up and she’d get mad, saying it was perfect. She said this while smiling. She didn’t like to sleep in my bed. She said it was too small and that sleeping together didn’t really matter in the end. I agreed.

Libbie is looking out at the water, but it’s a new moon, and it’s hard to see anything at all. “It’s so beautiful out,” she says. I nod, although I realize how dumb this is when she can’t see me do it. I wish I could say it’s beautiful. But it’s not, really. The sand is cold. The ocean reeks of dead fish for some reason. Who says it’s beautiful when you can’t see anything? Was the darkness beautiful? But maybe she’s right, and I’m the one not looking hard enough at things. Maybe. Or maybe she’s just tripping. But she smells nice, and she keeps rubbing my thigh with her hand. Fuck it, I think. I kiss her, and we start making out. She’s all over the place, kissing my neck, my earlobe. I smell her hair, kiss it. A hair gets stuck in my mouth, and I try to ignore it swapping between our lips. I can hear the hippies playing the acoustic guitar down by the water. It’s a Nirvana song, but I can’t tell which one. It could have been good, but they fuck up the chorus by going into a three-minute jam session with no words and sporadic strumming. She grabs my crotch, and I feel bad because I’m not even hard. She whispers something into my ear, and I whisper something back into hers. It doesn’t feel right. She’s like an

animal, grabbing my chest and rubbing at my shirt and out of breath. I grab her breasts and they're too big to fit into my hands. Something's not right. I wish I had the coke with Aidan back at Micah's. It might have helped. Or maybe not. Likely not.

Libbie pulls away and keeps repeating the same word. "Shit. Shit. Shit." There are no other words, no warning, unless you count "fucker." I'm pushed down to my side and getting yelled at. Sand flies up around me. I see a huge monster of a guy. Knew guys like him back home, rugby fuckers. His boots are bigger than my head. And now Libbie runs behind him, telling him she didn't mean it. "He's nothing, just a tourist," she says. Really? Some muscle-brimmed jock? That's her guy? He's so much bigger than I am that I don't try anything. I appreciate her calling me a tourist, thinking it might help the situation.

"We didn't fuck," I tell him.

But this only makes him more angry—I don't know why—and now he's kicking me hard then harder to my ribs my shoulder my face his adrenaline pushing him like a bull that just had its balls slapped and I can taste blood in my mouth metallic and warm and Libbie is yelling at him to stop and all I can think about is Lauren and how she'd never be with some loser like this meathead, or like me.

Libbie sits next to me. The meathead must have become so angry he needed to go punch something else because by the time I get my bearings and look up he's gone, and Libbie is crouched, asking me if I'm okay. She dabs my cheek with her shirt, but sand is in the shirt, and it just fucking hurts. I flinch and throw my arms back. I accidentally knock her with my arm, just lightly. She slides back in the sand.

“Sorry,” she says. “Didn’t mean to.”

I don’t say anything but make a face as though to say, “It’s cool. Me too.”

And then I think about how childish all of it is. I’m just so fucking tired of it all. The parties, the people. The parties with a theme but not really any point at all. Toga parties that would make Socrates cry, or hell, maybe smile. Eighties parties that play a mix CD of ten songs then switch to rap once everyone is trashed. All of it seems like a con or something. I lie down in the sand, looking up at the sky.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

I had forgotten she was there. “Yeah,” I tell her, “fine.”

“I think I’m going to go.”

“That’s fine,” I say, and it really is.

She says goodbye, and I wish for my beer I lost. Blood in my mouth and nose. I think about running into the ocean to wash it all off. Swimming all the way back home, maybe. I sit up and look around for my shoes. I don’t know where Lauren is, and I wish I did. I imagine her sitting next to me, like she’s been here the whole night, like she’s been telling me about how the tide can sparkle under the moon. It would be so much better, like she’s right here. I imagine touching my ribs to see how bad they hurt. I wince. Lauren kisses my bloody lips, like she doesn’t even fucking care. I say I’m sorry. Sorry for—. She puts her index finger on my lips. She tells me about the beach house we could build together. Look, she says. She points to its lime green porch. It’s beautiful. She’s leaning back on her elbows now and smoking a cigarette. The hippies have stopped playing, or were never even there, and when a song I know rings out from

the house stereo I sing the words, soft, a tune I remember from home, and I turn to her,
quiet now, smiling, hanging onto her hand resting on her stomach.

Learning Not to Flinch

We're sitting in the four-man tent I borrowed from Aiden, looking at a list of what we're allowed to wear in the Windy Oaks nudist campground in Okeechobee State Park. One towel, large. One bottle of sunscreen. One pair of sunglasses. Optional socks and shoes permitted. One hand towel. I look over a map of the campgrounds. There are walking trails, a field with a clearing for a bonfire pit, and a beach by a manmade lake within a ten-minute walk. Lauren unpacks our bags in the tent, places her things on her side, hands me mine, and places some booze between us.

"We're not going out there tonight, are we?" she asks, eyeing the bottle of wine.

"I guess not. It's already dark."

We open the bottle and pour each other wine into individual plastic cups we brought from home. It's Friday night. The park ranger told us on the way into the campground that most of the activities happen on Saturday. Family beach day by the lake. Community bonfire at sundown. He told us this while sitting on his ATV in nothing but boots, grinning at us while mentioning we're the youngest couples he's seen around here in a while. He looked high, but I think of his job and don't judge him for being high while riding naked on a four-wheeler.

We finish the bottle of wine and go to sleep on separate sides of the tent.

A week before the trip, we sat on the couch sharing a pizza and watching Talk Sex with Dr. Sue. We started watching it on the recommendation of Aide ,mn. "That old broad has all the answers, bro," he said one day. When Lauren got back from visiting her

parents in Massachusetts, we decided we wouldn't do any counseling, friends or professional. No self-help books on dealing with the loss of a child. I thought those would be tricky anyways because it wasn't even a baby yet. We'd try it on our own. It had been months since we'd had sex, so Aiden's suggestion didn't seem too far-fetched, although I questioned taking sex counsel from an elderly Canadian woman. Most of the advice from Dr. Sue referenced problems people had with their bodies more so than their relationships. There were exceptions, but they seemed few.

On the night we sat on the couch, a caller said he wanted to have sex with the eye socket of a decapitated head. He asked what he should do, saying it was killing him inside. I reached for the clicker, thinking there could be something better on than a confession from a sociopath when Lauren grabbed my hand and stopped me. She asked if it was even possible.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah," she said. "I mean, how would the head be kept still without a body to brace it? And the brain would get in the way." She stared at the screen.

How were these the first things she thought of while I contemplated whether or not to eat another slice of pizza, how many full wine glasses were left in our open bottle of five-dollar merlot?

"At least he wants to do it while she's dead," she said. "She doesn't have to feel it."

But I knew what she meant. A severed head remembers nothing. Its one eye can't see what's happening to the socket where the other eye used to be. It doesn't have to see what it lost the next day, feel where it used to be.

We needed to get out of town, away from the college bar we didn't go to anymore, from the beach parties and bonfires, away from our shitty couch and TV set with nights of delivery pizza and cheap wine. It was a couple of callers later on the show that Dr. Sue recommended a nudist camp to a repressed couple that lacked excitement and freshness in their love life. It would bring them back to their basic selves, she had said, back to how they were before they ever met one another. Before the show was over, Lauren was packing a bag full of suntan lotion and towels.

The shore is rocky and hard, a mix of stones and oysters washed in decades ago by storms. There are about two-dozen people lining the beach of the lake. They're mostly all overweight, or obese. I can never tell at what point it stops becoming one and turns into the other. I set up our towels. Lauren puts lotion on her arms, legs, and chest. She lies down on her towel so I can get her back. The lotion is cold in my hands so I warm it up first. I rub it across her back. She moans softly while I do this. Down the beach someone has set up a radio that plays an old Eagles song. A couple that looks to be in their 60s wade up to their waists in the water, moving their palms across the top of the water in slow circular motions. A woman runs down the beach in front of us, and I think of a clip of a movie I saw when I was a kid with the bowling ball hitting a large man in the gut in slow motion, the fat moving in ripples like water. I continue to put lotion on Lauren, moving down toward her ass.

"Hey hey, Mr. Fresh," she says.

"Figured you couldn't get that part."

“Did you? Do I have T-Rex arms? Of course I can get that,” she says, smacking her ass.

She smiles at me for a second, but just a half smile, the left corner of her lips inching upward.

We lie on our towels and don’t talk for a while. After a few minutes, she rolls on her side to face me, her young breasts not even falling toward the ground. “Why’d we come here, babe?”

“You wanted to, right?”

“Yeah, but why do *you* think we came?” she asks.

I tell her a list of things that sound like they’re out of a counselor’s guideline for how to fix a relationship. To relax. To have fun again. To try something new. To try something exciting. She waves her hand at me, tells me “Of course.”

“To remember us?” I ask. “What we were?”

“Oh that’s even worse,” she says. “You’re straight out of a chick flick today.”

“I guess I don’t know how to say it. Why we’re here.”

“That’s okay,” she says. “I don’t know how to say it either. I just wanted to see.”

This hippy-looking guy interrupts us, maybe in his 50s with a potbelly and skinny arms. He’s all smiles and grins. I know we’re the youngest people here by at least fifteen years, but his face makes him look as though he’s seen a miracle in looking at us, like we’re Adam and Eve. He asks us our names, where we’re from, and then offers us some pot. Lauren and I pass it with the man. He tells us his name—Pierre. I forget to put on sunscreen. Pierre says it was nice meeting us and walks off down the beach.

Lauren says she's going to cool off in the water. I nod and lie back on my towel, covering my face from the sun with my hand towel.

I wake from my half-sleep to the sound of her giggling. She's standing knee high in the shore of the lake talking to three other men. The tide flows up past their knees and then down to their ankles. They're all older looking men, two with gray hair and one mostly bald. And she's standing there with her hands on her hips, not crossing her arms or covering her chest or saying I have to get back to my boyfriend or saying thank you for the flattery but I have to get going but standing there and giggling, placing her hand on the bald man's shoulder every now and then, shaking all of their hands, like it's a dinner party or something, but all of the mystery and intrigue that everyone has at a party, undressing someone with your eyes and imagining what they look like naked, is all gone. Everyone here gets a free show.

She waves and motions for me to come over to her. I tiptoe around the rocks on the beach to her and the men. They're all grinning like crazy. I meet all of them. They seem harmless enough. One, an accountant, does this every other weekend. Another is an entrepreneur out of Georgia. The only one that worries me is this guy with long gray hair in a ponytail. He's staring right at Lauren. When I ask him what he does, he says something about construction and mumbles the rest of his sentence at her breasts. And then the worst part hits. Something I hadn't thought of up to this point. For the most part, I figured arousal wouldn't be something to worry about with these men, mainly because of their age. Also, I thought it was kind of an understood thing that it's generally frowned upon in places like this. You don't just walk around with a hard-on in front of

people. But I glance down and see the construction worker standing upright and staring at Lauren with a full hard-on.

“I’m going back to the towel,” I tell her. “You want to come?”

“No I’m good. I’m going to stay in the water for a bit. It’s nice and cold.”

I’m not about to make an ass of myself by dragging her back with me. The whole point of this trip was to get us to relax more, at least that’s what I think it was for. It’s hard to say now. As I walk back, I hear construction guy talk to her. He’s asking her what she’s doing tonight. Says there’s a bonfire. Then he asks what she’s doing tomorrow. I can hear him say something about taking her out to a shooting range. Says he can show her his gun. He laughs at this.

I lie down on the towel and wish to be back in the tent where I didn’t have to worry about burning parts of my body that have never seen sun, where I didn’t have to see other men ogling Lauren. I wonder if the pot is making me paranoid about the construction gun-happy guy. Fuck it, I think, and fall to sleep on the beach.

It’s about a half mile walk back to our tent from the beach.

“I tried to wake you,” Lauren says. “We played badminton.”

“I guess I was pretty out of it.”

The park ranger rides by us on his ATV. He’s wearing Timberlands and white tube socks. He says howdy as he rides past us. His entire back is covered in sweat. He’s probably the only person on the campground close to our age, and we can’t even talk to him. By the time he has a chance to say his one word, or just a wave, he’s gone. I wonder if he ever visited here as a tourist, a camper, before working here. If he may have

once had a girlfriend he took here, and if he also got nervous around longhaired construction workers. Or maybe he's always been a loner, has always come here by himself and got offered a job because he was here all the time anyways, riding his ATV up and down the trails. Might as well make it official and put a park ranger sticker on his four-wheeler, that way people trust him more. He's not just a younger guy riding around naked and looking at all the campers.

Lauren grabs my hand as we walk. "You want to go to the bonfire later?"

"Sure," I say. "Everybody's going I guess?"

"Yeah. Tim said he's going."

"Tim?"

"You know. Tim. You met him at the lake. Long hair. Works in construction."

"Oh Tim. Hard-on Tim."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means he was really happy to hang out with you."

She takes her hand out of mine and lets them sway beside her. "Well, what do you expect? He's like fifty and I'm twenty-five. I don't blame him. Even if it's a little sad."

But none of it seems sad to me, just creepy and unfair. This guy gets a free show at something that took me two months to see when we first started dating.

"I didn't mean to say that," I tell her. "I'm sure he's sad."

She doesn't say anything else to me for the rest of the walk. It's about ninety degrees outside, and the sun is still pretty high up. My sandals squeak with the water that's left inside them.

We sit around the bonfire in the middle of a field clearing. RV's circle around us. Their owners have set up Christmas lights and patio chairs outside their camper doors. Hoses connect to the vehicles for water supply and generators hum all around us. One of the residents has hooked up a stereo outside his RV. It plays hits from the 60s, Joan Baez, Grateful Dead, hippy music.

Lauren and I place our towels on a log near the edge of the fire and sit down. The light from the fire illuminates everyone around us. Even in the dark of night we're not able to escape the sights of our bodies. Before leaving the tent, I grabbed stuff to make smores.

"You want to make one?" I ask her.

"I guess so." She looks over at a group of people that have started to dance aimlessly to the music.

Making smores while clothed is not the easiest task. It's even worse while nude. There's a constant fear of dripping hot marshmallow onto bare skin. Burning coat hangers and naked bodies should never be combined.

I make her a smore. It drips out the sides so I place my palm underneath it so nothing drops on her. "It's good," she mumbles through a mouth full of graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallow. I make myself one while she eats hers. A lot of the people at this point have gotten up and moved around, passing different bottles of booze. It all reminds me of my own college parties. They start off awkwardly calm, so to break the ice people find ways to conceal the fact that they're downing drinks. Turn it into a game

or a challenge. A circle of shots. A keg stand. A funnel. They don't have those here, but they might as well.

I look over to my left and notice a much older couple that hasn't gotten up yet. They're sitting next to each other, holding hands and looking up at the sky, and every now and then looking back down at each other. I nudge Lauren, and she looks over at them. She turns and smiles at me. I smile back. If this is the whole point of the trip, then I'm fine with it, as silly as it may be, looking at some naked retirees gazing off into space. I think, maybe, we needed to see how to sit and be still, and see how people can do that without booze.

It's also their bodies. They're not pleasing to look at in an aesthetic sense. But their bodies are so honest and simple. They can tell each other how to fix a washed up relationship in the wrinkles and creases in their sides, and in that spot just below the side of a woman's breast never seems to age. In the dimples above their asses. In the scars that come from loving someone for more than a decade. I just wish it didn't take two more decades to figure it all out. I wish for a fast track program to completely getting your lover, for knowing what to say and do without hesitation.

Most of the people around the fire have moved on to dancing around the light. The music has changed from reminiscent songs from the 60s to modern day rock and rap. I'm about a quarter of the way into a fifth of whiskey I brought with me to the fire. Lauren is bouncing around the place, talking to different couples and people, coming back to me for a drink every now and then. I'm fine sitting by the fire. It's cool outside, and the chill of the breeze while sitting next to the warmth of the fire soothes me.

“Come dance, babe,” she says from across the fire. A group of people has gathered around the stereo, dancing to some rap song I don’t recognize. She’s dancing next to the construction guy. I wave her off. I can’t really tell if I’m not in the mood or if it’s because I’m too drunk to dance. Either way, I watch them through the fire. I take another pull from the bottle. I can see her getting closer to one of the guys. I can’t tell which one it is. Their bodies are all flushed pink from booze and the heat from the fire. I stand up and decide to make my way over to the dancers, just figuring, well, why not?

At first, I’m having a good time. I would normally be weirded out by the nakedness of the dancing, seeing every body part move and bounce a fraction of a beat later than the dancer’s hips, throwing me off, but I’m already seeing double by this point, so I don’t mind. I move by Lauren, and she smiles at me, grabs my hand and sways it back and forth alongside the motion of her body. One song goes by, and then a couple more. We dance together the whole time, everything from the twist to our own shitty attempt at dancing to rap. “This is great,” she says during a Run DMC song.

I walk back to the log to grab the bottle, a shot for me and one for Lauren. It’s hard for my hands to grasp the bottle with the sweat, the booze, and maybe even the excitement of enjoying myself with her, not worrying about anybody else, just enjoying her company. I walk back toward the fire and see Lauren dancing with construction guy again, but this time it’s not dancing next to or dancing near. He’s behind her, grabbing her hips and moving his body in unison with hers, up and down. I go up to her, shake the bottle to see if she wants any. She shakes her head no. I say we should call it a night, go back to the tent. She brushes it off like it’s a ridiculous idea and keeps dancing with him, and at this point I’m seeing two copies of them, one right next to the other. I know it’s

not real, it's just the booze, but I'm seeing the Lauren who would rather dance with me, walking up to me when I bring the bottle and grabbing my hand to dance. And then I see the one that's really there: her grinding her naked ass into this man.

"Hey, dude," I say to him, "I'm cutting in." I go to grab Lauren but reach and end up grabbing his arm instead, shoving it out of the way. I don't know why I do it, or if I'm meaning to do it.

"Relax, man. Just wait until the song's over."

"No, no, no. I'm cutting in," I mumble and push him away again.

Lauren says I should not worry about anything. They're just dancing.

"Yeah, man," construction guy says. "Let her enjoy herself. Let her have a good time."

And before I can control it I'm cursing at him. Nothing extraordinary, just your typical drunken shouts. Slowly he and Lauren stop their dancing and he's placing his hand on my chest, saying cool it, cool it, it's all good. I slap it away, tell him to fuck off, she's my girl, she's always been my girl. But then I look over at her and I can tell she's annoyed. While I just wanted her to dance with me, I didn't realize she just wanted to dance, which, really, is fine. I mumble a sorry, take a swig from the bottle, and stumble back to the tent.

I wake to the sound of the zipper for the mesh liner on the tent's door. I can smell her. It's a mix of suntan lotion, lake water, dirt, sand, and sweat. When she lies down next to me, I smell smoke from the bonfire in her hair. A hiss of air escapes from the blow up mattress beneath us.

“Hey babe,” she whispers.

“Hey.”

I think about the men she was around when I left the bonfire, whether she did anything with them. A horrible loop plays in my head of some cheesy seventies porno reel, the older men spouting some lines to her with body part puns, members, Johnsons, the whole deal, and I can't get it out of my head. One of the men is suddenly wearing a pizza delivery outfit, another a plumber, and she invites them over to her side of the fire, says, yeah, you can come in and fix my plumbing. It's fucking awful in my head. This half-drunken half-asleep scenario.

But then it stops. And I think about the reality of those men likely going back to their wives and girlfriends sitting around the fire. How they're not here right now. I remember Lauren stifling a giggle whenever these men twenty years her senior wanted to talk to her. I remember the parts I chose not to think about: her telling me how sad it was to be around them, and also flattering. Like she was helping them in some way. The way a newborn makes anyone smile, no matter how old they are. Something so fresh and new. A body that hasn't already drooped and changed. Like she was a reminder to them of what they were. At least, that's what I tell myself.

Maybe she did do something with one of them. Maybe she didn't. I don't care anymore. I reach behind me and pull Lauren's hand over my side, placing it on my chest. She feels so young and smooth, like she was just born. Outside the music by the bonfire has stopped, and beyond the hum of generators the crickets rub their wings together in echoing cadence. We sleep through the night, without moving, our bare bodies wrapped together.

Off Morris Avenue

It started with a wrist. She was reaching down through the crack of her opened front door in that first week she moved into our building, picking up a stack of mail—packets of coupons for 2-litre Coke, milk, and country fried steaks, a sewage bill from the city. I was on my way up to the fifth floor to see Mr. Vadner. He was moving out in a month for a job at the new mall in the suburbs, fifteen minutes out of the city and closer to the coast. I have too much shit, he had told me a few days earlier. It was one of the last days of spring, and I was outside on the front steps of our building, reading some book for summer reading before my sophomore year of high school. I can't remember the name of it, but I'm sure I never finished it.

“Come up and take what you want, Nick” he said, throwing black garbage bags in cans by the street, sweaty and wiping his hands on his jeans.

She wore a thin golden chain bracelet with four amulets dangling against her wrist; each one a different figure—a crescent moon, a flower, a sun, and what looked like a cross. They reminded me of charm bracelets, or just the idea of one she might have received years ago as a gift from a grandmother, an aunt, a boyfriend. Something about the plainness of it against her wrist fascinated me, the jewels mingling with the coupons and advertisements, shining in the light from her apartment. The building stopped smelling the same way. The musky cigarette odors from Mrs. Pietrzak that typically saturated the carpet on the third floor hallway, or the whiff of boiled eggs from Mr. Burleson's apartment that always lingered after he made his potato salad every afternoon,

the sun spreading it throughout the whole building, it was all gone. I could only smell her shampoo. Pert, I think it was. Whatever came in those green bottles.

The door closed and, after a moment, I continued up the steps to Mr. Vadner's apartment—502 on the door in worn brass numbers. He lived alone, but his apartment was bigger than most of the others in the building. I'd been to see him a few times, so when I walked in I heard, "That you, Nick?" I said it was, and then he started talking.

"Back in the 70's, I took out this wall. I tell you about that?" He talked as though I were asking him questions. What happened here, Mr. Vadner? Where'd you get those army helmets? Are they from the First World War? For the most part, they were questions to which I already knew all the answers.

"Yep," he said with his hands on his hips. "Added on the other section there. That was a hell of a project." He pointed to his room filled with boxes labeled bedroom, Living Room, and New Yard Stuff in black marker.

He picked up an empty box at his feet and threw it aside. His hands always looked perfect. His nails were always trimmed, never any grit underneath them. But his wrinkles dominated them, folding over his clean knuckles, making them alien and familiar at the same time. It's from the corps, he told me one day. Why I keep them so clean.

I wondered what her other hand looked like? Did she have a matching bracelet for it, or was it bare, hiding behind the door? It probably has something more natural on it, I remember thinking. A linen band, or something handmade. Probably not leather, though.

"Here. Dig through this stuff." He pointed at some boxes yet to be labeled.

Inside the old apartment, I saw his years of collected items stuffed into these boxes—workshop tools, records, miniature ceramic figures of Jesus, his dozens of maps usually spread out on the walls displaying everything from the topography of Norway to the city streets of Guadalajara now rolled into long cylindrical tubes. He really did have some neat stuff. I picked out a few baseball cards, some Joni Mitchell records, and an old wooden clock. It looked as though someone carved it out of a solid piece of oak. It was square shaped and measured about a foot in each direction. A mirror bordered the bottom half of it just underneath the hands, and etched on the mirror was a stencil of a football helmet I recognized from the University of Florida's team—bright orange with “gators” written in royal blue. The mirror needed some polishing, and probably some work on the gears. I held the clock in my lap and spun the hands backward. I wondered if they were brass or gold.

I wanted to ask him about her. Mr. Vadner knew about everyone who lived in the building. Mom once told me that he was one of the first renters, dating back to the 40s. I only had her. My dad left before I could even know what a dad meant. Mom worked two jobs and usually worked on the weekends. On Saturdays I'd go up and see Mr. Vadner, and he'd tell me stories of the different renters who had lived in the building. As long as I knew him, though, he lived alone. One time he mentioned a woman that I assumed was, at some point in time, his wife. I think I was complaining about another girl at school. “My old gal,” he said one day, staring out his window at the beaches off in the distance. “She loved the water. She was a fish in it.” His voice sounded tired. That day, he told me he needed to get some work done around the apartment and kept to himself the rest of the afternoon.

When I walked out into Mr. Vadner's hallway, I could hear music starting up from behind his door. I wasn't sure exactly who it was, but it sounded like some kind of waltz music, the rhythm of the horns and strings beating behind wood. Up, up, down. Up, up, down.

"Hey," I said to him, "you know who just moved in? In 309?"

"Sure do," he said. "What's it to ya?"

"Oh nothing, nothing. Just curious." I spun the hands on the clock.

"Pretty sure they're only staying for the summer. Only paid 'til August. From Charlotte. I hear the dad works at an office branch. Accounting or something."

That year, I watched family after family leave town and head out to the suburbs, weird gated things built so big they became their own towns. More jobs, safer for the kids, they'd say. I've always lived here in our small town in inland Florida, about an hour from Daytona.

"Got a cute one about your age," Mr. Vadner told me. "But I'm guessing you already know that."

"Oh really?" I asked.

"Think so. Hey, I tell you about my John Deere coming in this week?"

"I don't think so. Is she working here somewhere?"

"Somewheres outside of town. In the parts where the money's at," Mr. Vadner said quickly. "It's a beauty," he went on about his lawnmower. "Twelve horsepower. Six levels for cutting. Could cut a whole damn football field in under an hour on this baby. Shoot."

“Do you know her name? And why do you need one of those? We don’t have any grass here.”

“For where I’m going!” his eyes widened. “It’s one of those small garden homes, but it’s got a back yard and everything. I can finally set up my garden.” He looked away and breathed in heavily, as though he stood in his future garden, smelling the herbs and produce. Mr. Vadner tried to build a garden in our courtyard one year, but the soil wasn’t rich enough, still too much sand in the ground even this far inland. His tomato plants died within a month. “Some lines of okra, greens, and peppers. Yes, sir.”

“Yeah, so do you know her name?”

“Oh. Sure don’t. Sorry.”

I decided to write her a letter. It had been two days since I first saw her. I sat down at the kitchen table, dug around Mom’s stack of bills on the corner, found a pen and began. I ended up deciding against writing anything about seeing her in the hallway. Just heard about you from Mr. Vadner, I remember thinking. That’s all. Even that, though, seemed odd for some reason. Maybe I just sensed she had moved here? I looked down at the paper and scanned over what I had written.

Hi. You don’t know me, but I live in apartment 208. ~~Mr. Vadner told me your family just moved here.~~ I heard you’re new in town and was wondering if you want to go grab some food ~~to eat~~ or maybe catch a movie some time? What kind of movies do you like?
Affectionately

Sincerely

Nick Pearson

I read it back to myself. I sounded like a robot. I wanted to tell her how I'd been thinking about her for the past two days. I wanted to ask about North Carolina, about mountains. I wanted to ask if she'd ever been to the train tracks at night and stood near the freight trains as they went by, the wind of it almost lifting you off your feet. I wanted to ask if she'd go to the top of the tallest building in town, sneak by the guards, and look outward, all of the dots of orange, yellow and red humming, alive in the middle of the night yet so quiet. We could find our building, with its few lights still on, and map a constellation out of our lives, form the city into whatever we wanted—a woman on a sailboat, a deep sea monster, or a man climbing a tree that rose out of downtown, up out of the bank buildings and boarded-up stores, reaching toward heaven. The pieces were all there for us; we needed only to trace along the dots with our fingers.

I got out a fresh piece of paper and copied the fixed parts. When I slid the note underneath her door, I couldn't see any light in the crack. It was probably better that way, I thought.

She didn't write back until three days later. Everywhere I went, I saw pieces of her. Mom was working doubles, so she left it to me to clean up the apartment during the day. Sears catalogs, JC Penney ads, all highlighting their Memorial Day sales—ONE DAY ONLY—scattered the coffee table, flung open to pages of rings and bracelets, hand models mocking me every time I went to the kitchen to make a sandwich. I tried the TV. A show about the dwindling panther population left in the south, a group of them moving

north from Florida into the Appalachians. Next. A close up of a surgeon's hands fixing a carotid artery. Next. A commercial for salons—manicures, pedicures, perms; we got 'em! I turned it off and lay down on the couch. Staring at the ceiling, I tried to locate her apartment in my mind. She was on the third floor, just above me, but was she right above me or over a little bit? I couldn't figure the particulars. Was I looking at her floor right then? Was she walking above me, filling a glass of water? Or maybe she was sitting in a chair, looking down at me.

When I got up to work on the clock, I saw it. I don't know how long her letter had been sitting there, my name written in ink on the outside the envelope. I slid my thumb through the seal.

It's nice to meet you. I was beginning to wonder if
anyone else lived in this building! I'd love to get food some
time. I have a bad habit of falling asleep during movies.

Tomorrow afternoon? 5:00?

Cordially,

Forrest

I ran out of the apartment, up the stairs, past her door and up to 502.

"She wrote back!"

Mr. Vadner was sitting on his floor, arranging dozens of garden tools and packets of seeds in rows.

"Yeah, you can come in."

"Sorry."

"Now what's going on here?"

“The girl on the third floor. She wrote me back!”

“Back? Back from what?” He kept staring at his rows of seeds. I could hear him whispering to himself: “snow peas, squash, cabbage.”

“Oh. I might have written her a letter and slid it under her door. Guess I was too nervous to see her or something.”

“Well, damn.” He rotated around from where he sat. “Ain’t you something?”

“So that wasn’t a stupid thing to do?”

“Hell no. So what next? What’d she say?”

“We’re supposed to get some lunch or dinner...food tomorrow.”

“You got a good shirt? You need a good shirt.” He stood up and gestured for me to follow him toward his bathroom. “You can’t fit into mine, but I will give you some of this here pomade.”

I had never used pomade or a gel of any kind for my hair. I didn’t think it would even make a difference. My hair was under an inch long then.

“You sure?”

“Of course. You know what, keep it.” He handed me over the tin can: Murray’s Pomade curved around the edge. He talked for a while about tips for girls. “Ask them questions. Loads of questions. Open the door for her everywhere. The restaurant, the car.”

I reminded him I didn’t have a car, or a license.

“Oh yeah, well scoot her chair back at the table. And if she gets up for the toilet stand up when she leaves.”

“Really? What’s the point of that?”

“You know, I don’t really know. But just do it anyways. Won’t hurt.”

“Thanks,” I said, trying to remember what he had told me.

“Big day tomorrow. The John Deere’s coming in. I’ll be putting it together in the afternoon. You should come out, lend me a hand.”

I didn’t answer right away.

“What am I thinking? You’re gonna be getting yourself primped up. Don’t worry about it.”

I thanked him for everything, but it all had overwhelmed me a good bit.

I planned on taking her to The Social Grill. It wasn’t far from the block, so we could walk there. They had the best burgers in town. I walked up the stairs to her apartment. The pomade was heavy on my head. I had to get a new shirt that day. As I walked, I smoothed the horizontal creases from the packaging, running my hands down my belly.

“Nick?”

Shit. I had already messed up. Make sure you pick her up on time. “Yeah,” I staggered. “Forrest?”

I remember what she wore that day—a sundress, light blue with a red ribbon around the waist. And her hair. I don’t know why I never expected her to have red hair. It fell down her back, the ends slightly frayed.

“Shall we?” I said and offered her my arm. Her whole face laughed. Her bracelet was cold against me.

On the way out of the building we saw Mr. Vadner tinkering with his lawnmower. Forrest wasn't really looking at him. She dug into her purse and jiggled what sounded like tic-tacs. He winked at me and continued tightening some bolts.

It was abnormally cool that night. Weatherman said it got down to the 50s.

"So I figured we could go to The Social."

"What's that?"

"It's this restaurant not far from here. It's a great place. On some nights they have live music."

"Sure. That's fine."

We talked about the things we had to talk about in those first five minutes: where we were from, where we went to school, what our parents did. I talked about my mom, and then she asked about my dad.

"I don't know what he does," I said.

Forrest giggled and touched my arm with her other hand, and I wondered why. "Oh my god, me neither! My dad never talks about his work. I have no clue what he really does!"

"Yeah. Um, I guess what I meant to say was 'I don't know what he does because I never really knew him.'"

Forrest took her hand back and covered her mouth with the tips of her fingers. I know she didn't mean anything by it. And it really didn't bother me that much, but she was so quiet after that. We stepped around broken-up bricks in the sidewalk. It was probably half a block before we started talking again.

We turned the corner, and I could see The Social.

“There it is,” I pointed across the street.

“That place? But the lights are out.”

I looked at my watch. 5:14.

We looked inside. The white tablecloths were cleared of dishes and utensils. I knocked on the door.

“Here. Look.” She nudged my arm. “It says they close at five o’clock. What do you want to do?”

I forgot that they cut back hours. Most other places away from the coast were either closing down or close to it. Everybody just hit up the touristy places out by the beach. Not many people ventured away from there. I tried to think of other restaurants where we could go. Pete’s was close, but I remembered they only served lunch. Al’s was open, but it was way down county road 30-A and would take us an hour to walk there. The only thing I could think of was this new place in the bottom of the Marriot, and I had never been there. I wasn’t sure of the street.

I looked at my watch again. 5:16. The sun hadn’t even gone down below the tops of the buildings. I looked at the sign on the window again. Open 11:00-5:00.

“So, what do you want to do?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

I looked down the street. I knew there wasn’t anything within sight, but I thought if I looked like I was searching it might help.

Forrest started to bite her nails. The little chomps reminded me of the sound rats made when they got into our walls a few years earlier. They woke up at night and would roam around in the walls from my room into Mom’s and scratch behind her headboard.

They never got into the apartment. It wasn't bad until the walls started to smell, like a hot whiff you get when you're in a car and you pass by some road kill, except it wasn't gone after a few seconds. Mr. Vadner came down to help. He stuck his face to the walls, walking back and forth between the two rooms, trying to determine the source. He stuck his finger on a spot on Mom's wall. Said he needed to get his tools. He pried open the wall with the back end of a hammer. "Jesus," I remember him saying. He reached inside with one arm and pulled out a handful of limp squirrels. "They're just babies."

"Hello? What are we doing?"

"Oh, sorry," I said.

"Well." She let out a long sigh. "I'm getting bored. I think we should just go back or do something else. It's creepy down here."

"Okay," I said. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

When we got back home, Mr. Vadner was sitting on top of his lawnmower. He gleamed when he saw me.

"Nick! Just in time for the first start up."

Forrest crossed her arms. As we walked up to the building I thought I heard her whisper something to me. It sounded like, "Who is this guy?" I could have been wrong, though.

"Here we go."

He turned the key. The engine stuttered for a second and then turned over. He was clapping and bouncing in his seat.

He jiggled the levers for the gears and the height of the blade until he popped it into first gear and scooted out onto the street. He laughed and did circles in the middle of the road.

“Ain’t she something?” he cheered.

He took a sharp turn in one direction, and I heard something in the beast clack, something metal.

“Uh oh,” he said as he stopped in the street. The engine still ran. “Wonder what that was?”

“It’s still running,” I told him. “Can’t be anything serious.”

He hopped out of his seat and stood aside the mower, eyeing it up and down.

“You hear that?” he asked, crouching down with his body. “It’s still clicking. Sounds like I left my damn wrench in there.”

Forrest moved close to me. “I think I might head inside,” she whispered. I told her it wouldn’t be long. Not to worry.

“Now if I could just.” He lay down on his stomach, a few feet away from the mower, peering at the where he thought the noise was coming from.

“Shouldn’t you turn that motor off?” I asked him.

“I don’t have the blade on. I’m not that dumb.”

“You sure?”

“I think I’m just going to go,” Forrest said.

“Yep. It’s down in there. I can hear it.”

Mr. Vadner reached his hand toward the mower. The next thing I remember was his reaction, his recoil. He snapped his hand back away from the mower and held it with

his other. I ran over to him to help. It hadn't got him bad as I thought, but it looked like he'd probably lose a finger.

Forrest screamed, "Oh my god! Oh my god! Call 911!"

"Nonsense," he said he back. "You know how much those ambulance rides cost?"

The clatter of the mower, Forrest's yelling, Mr. Vadner's grunting (more in annoyance with himself than pain)—they were all muffled, like someone had plugged my ears.

Mr. Vadner asked me to help him wrap his hand and then take him to the hospital. I did the best I could with his hand.

"Just wrap it in your shirt," he said.

"I guess I'll see you later?" I heard Forrest say behind me as I wrapped his hand.

"Crap. Yeah, I'm sorry," I said. "Later."

By the time I looked back, she was already inside the front door and racing up the steps.

I'm so damned hot, and I'm starving, so I walk down to Loveman's clothing store—they have a diner inside where you can order burgers, sandwiches, and floats. There's only one man working. He's the waiter and cook. His plastic nametag says Rick. It dangles a bit, barely hanging on its own pin. It's the end of the summer, and aside from my one "date" with Forrest I've only seen her a couple times in the past two months.

"You're first one I've got all day."

I look at my watch. 2:30. I'm not sure what to say. I tell him I'm sorry for that.

I order a burger, fries, and a cherry Coke with some money Mom left me for lunch.

“Oh we’re getting used to it here,” he says, shuffling around the grill. “About to shut the place down.”

I tell him how sad that is, how I got all my clothes here when I was little, how pretty soon I’ll have to take the bus if I want a button-up, or even an undershirt. He tells me what the store used to be like, from its staircases that were constantly being polished and cleaned by hand, to the men and women in hats that poured through the revolving doors to shop during their lunch breaks, or just to sit on one of the hand carved wooden benches, take out a paper or magazine, and let the world flow over them.

“It used to be *the* place,” Rick tells me. “And now, well. Everyone’s headed out. To the coast or bigger cities. Orlando, Daytona.”

He turns back to the grill to plate my burger and fries.

I wonder if it would have made a difference if we had gone here on our date. The clothes displayed in the men’s and women’s sections around the diner are covered in a light film of dust from never being touched. The north staircase that leads to the jewelry section is blocked off because the stairs are falling apart. There’s one woman working both of the clothing sections. She’s applying a coat of lacquer to her nails. I swear I can hear the bristles on her brush with each slow stroke she makes. She hasn’t looked up since I’ve been inside.

In between bites, I ask Rick how long he’s worked here.

“Going on thirty years,” he tells me.

“What are you going to do if they close?”

“I got a job lined up. That new Shoney’s off the turnpike. It’s something, I guess.”

He polishes the counter as though it’s a piece of treasure he’s been entrusted to keep clean. Not to keep, but to keep it nice and untouched. His hands are immaculate. I make a mental note to go check on Mr. Vadner. He’s pretty much healed up, but always forgets to put on ointment to make sure he doesn’t get an infection. I tell myself I’ll give him his stuff back—the clock, the records, the cards, everything. If it stayed with me it would probably end up getting lost or in a garbage dump on the north side of the city, waiting, for nothing in particular, nothing spectacular, just to be found. And we can figure out a way to find better dirt around the building to plant some tomatoes or peppers. I think he’d like that.

Rick tells me he’s closing up soon. It’s close to three o’clock. I finish my fries, pay him and walk out onto 4th avenue, heading south. It looks like it’s going to rain, but just one of those summer showers that lasts a minute or two and then opens up to clear skies and heat beating down on the streets with a wetness that covers your whole body, turning the pits of your elbows and knees into sticky traps. It forces everybody inside, or to a local pool so they can stay in that wetness.

There’s nobody else on the street. A small group of pigeons scatters and moves to sit under the ledge of a roof, sensing the storm. I wonder about Forrest—where she is right now, in her Dad’s car riding back to North Carolina, back to those mountains. They seem so far away.

Mr. Vadner sits on the front stoop when I get back home. He’s picking at his hand. I go over to him, kneel down, and inspect it. His new skin is taking a while to

grow back. He lost most of the index finger. He wasn't going to lose it, but it got infected. Where it used to be is now a stub below the first knuckle. There are spots of yellow puss that still look infected. "Doc's got me on different antibiotics and steroids," he tells me. He touches it with his other index finger and winces.

"Maybe if you stopped picking at it," I tell him.

"Yeah, yeah," he says and continues to touch it. He tells me about those gloves with the fingers cut out, how they'll work just fine for him.

The wind picks up. The clouds move above us—a straight line of dark in the bright heat.

"I need to go inside to get some more ointment," I tell him.

He tells me he's going to stay out on the steps. "Got to love that sky before a good storm," he says. He's looking up beyond the tops of the apartments around us, and then out eastward, toward the coast.

I nod and pat him on the back. "I'll bring out those plant seeds, too," I say and walk inside our building.

Something Better to Do

It was Friday night in Palatka, Florida, and I stood looking up at an abandoned silo with a girl I barely knew. I didn't know what the tower used to store but guessed it likely held some type of grain or corn. The surrounding field had all but withered to weeds and dust, and the nearest barn looked as though it hadn't been used in over a century—the frame split in two from a hurricane, or tornado, or maybe just neglect. Along with Kim's car, a handful of trucks scattered the field. We should go inside, she insisted, where everyone was waiting, where there was booze.

When Kim called to ask if I wanted to go to a party inside an old silo outside of town, I was in the middle of watching *Rear Window* in my college dorm room. Because it was my first year in college, both my workload for classes and number of friends made were very small; I seized every opportunity to get to know someone better or experience something new. On the phone with her, I looked down at my notepad in my lap that held notes on the movie. Over the past month, I had been on a Hitchcock binge, snatching up every one of his movies, letting *Vertigo* and *Rear Window* stand in as the engaging teacher I had yet to experience with college. I'd stop them halfway through and propose my own theories about possible endings or scenarios. If I had had cable, these movies would have most likely been exchanged for something more modern: *Law and Order* for *Rear Window*, *CSI* for *Vertigo*. She asked me again if I wanted to come, prodding me, saying I wasn't doing anything more exciting. I read the three descriptions I'd written on my pad: If the husband really *did* kill his wife in his apartment, then how did he cut her

up with just a knife? Bone density vs. human strength; who is this maid of Jimmy Stewart's *really*, and could she have a motive?; is Grace Kelly in on it?...

I told Kim, sure. I could always come back to the movie. I needed to get out more, I thought.

On the drive out to the farm, Kim told me how much of an experience this would be. She used the word "experience" repeatedly. "It's just going to be such an amazing experience; I'm so glad you're going to experience this. What a stellar experience for a college freshman!" I wondered if she was building up my expectations because the party would be dull.

When we climbed through the bottom doors to the silo, it was hard to see how many people were really there. Someone had brought a battery-powered lantern and set it in the middle of the room. Faces floated in and out of its cone of light. The silo couldn't have been more than twenty feet in diameter from one side to the other, but as we meandered I counted ten, then fifteen, then twenty heads. The walls of the silo were concrete. A rusted staircase led to the very top where steel panels arched to shape a hemisphere. The center had a hole the size of a soccer ball where light from the moon glimmered. Kim went up and hugged some people she knew, calling most all of them *dude*, no matter their sex. She introduced me to a guy that I assumed was her boyfriend; instead of a hug, she kissed him, holding both of his cheeks in her palms. August, he said his name was. He offered me a beer upon meeting him, handing me a can of something tasteless.

"When's the damn music getting here?" Kim asked one of her friends. She started to walk around the silo. August followed behind her. I was on my own. I began

to wonder whether it was a good idea to have come at all. The crowd was cliquish—everyone, even in the tight and cramped space, sat in crowds of four or five and didn't mingle or chat. If I were back at home, I would be enjoying my movie, organizing my predictions for possible endings. I tried to come up with own my guesses at what the people at the party might be doing later, or what had brought them together.

But the crowd was so mixed that it was hard to tell—there were boys that wore overalls, two girls with neon colored hair, a couple of surfers in board shorts. It was a shoddy lineup—too jumbled, with no prominent clues. I sipped my beer and tried to look occupied, examining the walls of the silo.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. “Want some?” August held out a plastic bottle of tequila.

“So there's music coming?” I asked him. We passed the bottle once between each other.

“Sort of. Just a guy with a boom box.”

A boy walked around, stopping by each person with his hand outstretched. People began picking tablets out of his hand and placing them gently on their tongues. He got to me. A few dozen multi-colored pills dotted his hand. I told him I was okay and shook my head. August and I talked for a few minutes, asking where each person was from, what we did, how we knew Kim.

Eventually, I found the cooler that held the beer and visited it at least four times in the course of an hour. The chatter inside the silo grew. Groups sitting near each other were now on top of laps, running hands down jeans and shorts. I lost Kim in the mix of the people in the dark.

The guy with the boombox showed up. About fucking time, someone yelled in the dark. He turned on the stereo and everyone erupted with the blast from the speakers. They all started to dance to the beats of the techno, electronic, fake-European music. Some danced by themselves, gyrating in one spot, and others grabbed partners—not letting any space of air fit between them. The song ended and another sounding exactly the same started. I started to see flesh. We were already wearing shorts and T-shirts in the heat of the summer. Added to the bare legs and arms, I saw a belly, then a back. With each new song, more clothing started coming off. After the fourth song I started seeing breasts, and then someone’s ass. I wondered where the cameras were. I expected, suddenly, everyone in that cylinder of concrete and steel to stop, turn and call out “Gotcha!” I stood there, the can of beer sweating in my hand, wondering if each second were true. I watched tops fly off and boxers kicked aside. The metallic smell of the silo, with its lingering corn dust, began to blend with a smell that can only be described as what it was—two dozen undressed bodies, sweating and rubbing in the heat of late Florida summer.

The floor moved in flesh, in fumbling arms and legs wrapped around each other. Some still stood, but most by this point had found their way to the floor. The only way to differentiate the bodies was to separate the hairy legs and asses from the bare. The speakers on the boombox shook to the near point of bursting, the electronic and techno mixes reverberating in the walls. Come on guys, I thought. Techno, pills? It’s just so cliché. I noticed that I was the only person still wearing clothes, but being only half-drunk and deciding I could only part with half of my clothes, I took off my shirt. How does this work? I thought to myself. Do I jump right in? Are there rules for rolling

around naked in a sea of bodies? I tip-toed around an ass, stepped over a leg, and then felt a hand on my leg. Kim pulled me down to the ground by my shorts and started sliding her hand over my chest, arms and head. She smelled like coconut lotion and cigarettes. It was then that I noticed that most of the people on the ground weren't actually having sex, at least not yet. They felt each other, a sea of hands pushing against breasts and crotches, holding tightly as if the world were pulling them apart.

"Doesn't this feel amazing?" she whispered into my ear just before kissing it. She must have assumed I'd taken the ecstasy.

"Yeah," I whispered back, "amazing." If it weren't for everyone else in the silo, I maybe would have been turned on. She grabbed my thigh and slid her hands up my shorts, but there wasn't enough room to move. My back pressed against someone else's, and I didn't want to take off my shorts. There was nowhere to move except to another body. I was so hot, and I needed some air.

I stood up and fumbled through the piles of clothes scattered on the floor for my shirt. When I looked back, I caught a glimpse of Kim. She had already moved on to someone else. A boy sat perched on the bottom steps of the rusted stairs, she on his lap, and another boy on top of hers. They all moved in one sweaty motion, their arms holding onto each other, grasping on top or beneath and pulling together with each thrust. They were all naked, and in a pillar of light from the hole at the top of the silo, I could see Kim's face moan as she stroked the boy on top of her. She held him in her hand so precisely, and each move up and down looked as though it could have been a bow singing on that cello of a boy, making him sigh and moan a melody that soared over the blaring beats all around us.

I had guessed I was the only one who had not taken the pills until I saw August sitting outside smoking a cigarette and staring up at the stars. He waved me over with his hand, and I sat next to him perched on a log resting in the shin-high grass.

Every now and then screams would echo from the silo, soaring out in *Oh, Christ, yes, yes!* and *Come here, come here and feel this!*

He chuckled and shook his head after the last one. “We’re not dating, you know,” he told me. He took a swig of the tequila bottle, winced, and let out a heavy breath of air. It couldn’t have been colder than seventy degrees that night, but because of the humidity I could see his breath.

“Oh,” I said.

“Most people think we are, but that’s because she loves everything. Give her a week and she’ll be kissing all over you probably.”

“I probably shouldn’t. I mean, I barely know her...” I sounded as though I was trying to excuse myself for the moment I shared with her.

He waved his hand and told me not to worry about it. He asked me whether I had been to a party like this before. “No,” I said, “sure haven’t.”

He rarely went to them anymore, he told me. “I’m in my thirties for Christ’s sake. But you should go to ’em. At least once. Everyone should at least once.”

We sat outside the silo for the rest of the night, sharing tequila and telling stories. Every so often I’d ask him what he thought was going on inside there. Isn’t it obvious? he’d reply, telling me to listen, just listen. At one point in time, a train screeched behind us, its wheels grinding on the track. “Runs right by my house,” he said, looking back

over his shoulder. “I love listening to it, especially this late at night when everything seems to come alive. It’s haunting almost.”

A little later, Kim came out of the silo, walked plainly to me, and said, “Let’s go home.” I probably should have asked her more of the details, what the other people were doing, whether they were really her friends, how often she did this, but instead I wondered to myself what possibly happened in there after I left. Passing by fields in her car and driving back toward the lights of the city, I imagined how awkward it must have been once the drugs wore off, and everyone stood up, found their clothes, and said goodnight. It would have been better if they had stopped halfway through the night and held that tension. Sometimes the world needs that mystery, I thought.

When I got back to the school, the only lights still on were those in the lobby of my dorm, bright fluorescents that hurt my eyes during the day as much as they did at 5 a.m. I stumbled into my room, still dazed on tequila and smelling like sex. I threw my shorts in the corner of the room, lay in bed and turned on my television to see the movie paused on an image of Jimmy Stewart. He sat in his wheelchair, reaching for his binoculars he’d been using to spy on his neighbors. What was he going to see next, I wondered. I thought of how humbling it might have been that he couldn’t leave his apartment—what he had in front of him was fine, and, consequently, equally as thrilling. I pushed play and watched him flirt with Grace Kelly, watching her from his wheelchair. I closed my eyes, and listened.

Tracing the Coast

When I first saw my parents having sex, I promised myself I would never do it. I was twelve, and I made my then best friend, Lena, also promise never to do it. We assumed we were both years away from sex coming into our lives, so we agreed to the deal. She asked me about it for weeks. What did it look like, where were they (it was in the kitchen), what did it sound like, were they on the floor or the table (table), did they see me? I told her they looked like two, hairless polar bears that were in pain together. And yes, my Ma was looking right at me, her eyes shining greener in that lifetime of a second than they ever had before. After that, Lena stopped asking. Ma attempted to explain what I had seen. Alicia, it's only natural, she'd said. After a couple days, my parents never talked about it again.

By the time Lena's and my deal even entered my thoughts again I was seventeen with Davy Towns in the backseat of his Honda Accord. If Pops were alive to see Davy pick me up in the car, my dad wouldn't have even let me go. Pops was a child of Detroit, of cars that looked like they could fly even though they weighed more than a ton. We moved to Daytona Beach before I can remember, but he was always a Detroit guy.

It was fall, the first cold night of fall where it dips down into the fifties here and you can feel the winds coming off of the Atlantic. Davy's windows were cracked, and I could feel the breeze. I wished I had brought my sweatshirt. He brought me to the park by the water, down the beach from the lighthouse where Lena lived with her dad. When we first parked, I asked if we could walk down the beach to the lighthouse. We could go see Lena, I told him. He shook his head. We had been seeing each other for a few weeks

by that point, and I think he had worn tired of me always wanting to do things in groups, mainly with Lena. He wanted me alone.

“That girl’s weird. How could you live in a lighthouse?”

“She’s my friend,” I told him. “And it’s not that different from any other house.”

He shrugged his shoulders and turned on the radio.

So we sat there, which would have been fine if that was all we ended up doing. He draped his arm over the passenger seat, which was awkward because the headrest got in the way. I hated his car. He left take-out cups filled with dip spit in the cup holders. Two-week old gym clothes littered the back seat. He placed his hand on my thigh, rubbed it, gently at first and then a coarser back and forth. He kissed all over my neck and ear. I could hear Lena in my head. What are you doing with this douche? Let’s get out of here, she’d say. He told me we should move to the backseat. Navigating my body through an economy-sized Japanese car was no easy task. Our elbows knocked and knees bent.

We kissed for a while, but it wasn’t anything extraordinary. And then I started to hear this noise. I couldn’t tell exactly where it was coming from. It was the sound of an animal of some kind, crying out. It’s a sound that you can’t say how, but when you hear it, you know it’s an animal dying. I tried to stop Davy, but he kept slobbering on my cheek.

“Do you hear that?”

“Mmmmm...”

“Jesus, stop for a second,” I said, pushing his shirtless body off of mine. He kept his head buried in my chest, but at least all of his weight wasn’t on me anymore.

The cries continued for another minute or so, and then there was a gunshot. And then silence. I asked him to take me home.

My parents died when I was fourteen. Ma from a car crash and Pops a year later from heartache, at least that's what his sisters always said. I lived with them, my aunts, after my parents died. They were from Queens, a place I had heard of before but never really knew anything about. Queens always came in combination with Aunt Joan and Bessie when Pops would talk about them. My aunts from Queens, my aunts from that cold city, and his sisters he never understood. He'd say, "You won't believe how expensive bread is up there for those two," Pops would say. "Really. I should ship them some and have them sell it. It's a goldmine!"

Pops was always trying different schemes in order to make money. He had a friend of his from childhood that he tried to sell a Chrysler Lebaron. His friend was blind and would ride in the passenger seats of other men's cars, telling them to roll the windows down, the top back, speeding around small county roads outside of Daytona. Pops tried convincing him the Lebaron was a Cadillac. "The gentleman's car," Pops would tell me. "But my girl could pull off driving it." I always liked that. And he would have convinced his blind friend, but his buddy felt all over the car. He said he wanted to see it. His hands came to the hood and felt for the Cadillac crest that wasn't there and instead found a Chrysler star that fell from the car after a second of jiggling.

Pops ended up keeping the Lebaron. In the summers, we'd drive out past the city limits with the top down that he had had custom made. We drove past the power grids

and pretended they were space stations or whole cities with nocturnal people that worked while the rest of us slept.

The aunts moved in a week after Pops died. They wore too much makeup. They had bad skin and poofed hair that never looked washed, just done up. They had a way of making me feel like their moving to Daytona to take care of me was a burden, but they said I'd been through enough and shouldn't have to move in with them. "Where am I?" was a common phrase. "I go to get my nails done and they take a hacksaw to my fingers and cover me in clear varnish. Do I look like I want these girls in clear coat? No. Do they listen? No."

Variations of these annoyances happened daily. It was usually about the food or the salons or beauty parlors. Because I had always eaten whatever my parents made me and had never stepped foot inside a parlor, I nodded and pretended to agree with them. They took all of Ma's old clothes and made them worse, somehow. They turned three blouses into a dress. They sewed shoulder pads into shirts that were smart enough not to have them to begin with. All of our possessions were fair game. Pops's coffee kettle from Greece? Paperweight for the stack of *People*. Ma's broaches handmade from her favorite art gallery downtown? Earrings that don't match. Because of these moments, I started spending a lot of time at Lena's lighthouse. It was as though I discovered a different world just a few miles from my house. I found a retreat in the lighthouse. A house of spiraling stairs and crooked-angled walls and ceilings and tiny compartments for storage and giant stones surrounding it all that met the crashing waves just outside.

The main reason I couldn't stand the aunts was because they weren't Pops. He had it lucky. He got out of there. He got out before having to live with his sisters again.

He got out before most of the factories shut down. He got out before getting to see me eventually drop out of college. He got out before cousin Johnny wasted all of Aunt Joan's money on a pyramid scam. He got out before the draining of bank accounts and the jacking up of credit cards. Before I'd eventually leave all of my pictures of him behind except the one of us sitting on the hood of the Lebaron at the Fourth of July picnic when I was 12. Before the aunts were forced to sell the house and move into an old folks home in Palm Coast. Before I had a chance to really talk to him. He got out before the Cold War ended, before missile shields and global warming. He got out before I had to lie to Lena about Davy Towns, though she wouldn't have cared either way.

When I pulled up to lighthouse, Lena was standing at the door, waving.

"Nice ride, girly," she said as I walked up to her.

She'd ridden in the Lebaron at least a dozen times but still said this every time she saw me in it.

"Thanks," I said.

"Let's go down by the water," she said.

I hadn't seen her in months. Lena wouldn't always come to school. I was surprised at myself for being so excited to see her. A lot of her traits would turn most people off. She smelled like smoke, if you got close, but I had missed it still. I forgot what she smelled like, what she felt like when I hugged her, her body so thin and tiny in my arms. How I felt when I was around her, like we could do anything and I'd enjoy it.

Her fingers were yellowed from tobacco and calloused from guitar strings. But her face gave off this endless display of freckles. There was something appealing in her

color combination, the ginger snaps floating in the milk-white skin, the gold highlights in the strawberry hair. Nothing like the black frizz I had inherited from Pops. It was like autumn, looking at her. It was like driving up north to see the colors.

“Hey,” she snapped at my face. “Space cadet.”

I hadn’t realized I was staring at her. “Oh, sorry,” I told her.

“Whatever, weirdo. So what do you want to do?”

“Doesn’t matter to me.”

“We could watch my dad get drunk.”

“Okay. Whatever you want.”

I didn’t mean to be so open to anything she said. It just came out.

She lit her cigarette, and we passed it between each other. I coughed in the salty air from the ocean.

She exhaled a large cloud of smoke. “So how was the boy?”

I told her about his small car. And how he asked a lot of questions.

“He asked about my parents,” I told her.

I told Lena that I told him how the guy who hit my mother fell asleep at the wheel after a double shift at the dock. And about Pops the year after, his pacing around the house, slowly, like he had lost his car keys and kept checking every spot where they could have been. And how when he got tired from walking he’d sit in the living room, unlace his tennis shoes, clean dust and dirt from them, and lace them back.

“And then all Davy said was ‘Fucked up.’” Lena handed me the cigarette. It contained barely any tobacco, but I smoked it anyways, tolerating the taste of burnt filter.

We stood looking out at the water. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. I wanted to wrap mine around her. I turned my body toward hers.

“Why do you hang out with that guy?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

She lit another cigarette and didn’t say anything.

“I mean, he’s fine for company I guess. But I think he wants it to be more serious.”

“Have you guys done it?”

I didn’t really want to talk about it. I thought of the handful of times he had tugged at my bra and panties, trying to take them off but never being able to. I thought about the times when he’d get drunk on some booze he stole from his older brother and win me with lines like, “I want to be in you.” I thought about all of this and then tried not to think about it and shrugged my shoulders at Lena.

“You whore, you did!”

We laughed at each other. She grabbed my arms, either to brace herself or rouse me. She always called me a whore, even if I just called a guy or had coffee with someone. She’d done it for years, maybe because we made a promise when we were kids that we knew we couldn’t keep. We laughed harder, breathing the cold air in gulps, and I started to cough because my lungs were still hurting from the filter.

“Well,” she said, “from what I’ve seen of him, he seems like a real son of a bitch.”

I loved when Lena talked that way. She always had a power in her words that I was never able to find in my own. I don’t think she knew how commanding she was.

She would cuss out a boy at school for calling her a tomboy or a slut, and I'd ask her how she could do that. "Do what?" Do what, like it was no big deal. It was as though she never even knew who she was. Never knew the Lena I saw.

"It's cold," I said. "Let's go in."

"Let me finish this cig."

I could always watch her for hours, but this time it was different. At school, she was popular and not, at the same time. Kids turned their heads to watch her walk in the halls, but she didn't give a flip about any of them. Standing by the ocean, she seemed so much smaller. She was by herself. Some shrubs next to her had all but wilted from being planted so close to the water. She looked over at me, smiled and laughed.

"What, Leese?"

"Nothing," I said. "You're just finally quiet is all."

She gave me a light punch in the arm, more like a tap. We stood there for another minute or so while she finished her cigarette, neither of us speaking, until she said, "This is nice." It was as though I was witnessing her own self-discovery.

She flicked her butt into the sand, stomped it out, and walked toward the lighthouse.

Lena's dad has been overweight for as long as I've known him. He used to be able to climb the stairs and do all of the duties of the lighthouse by himself, but in the past year his knees no longer sustained him, and Lena picked up most of the chores and duties in the house. She was a horrible cleaner, so the place was always littered with crusted plates and forks, tissues thrown into corners or angles around the crooks of the house. Lena

bought the groceries, but her dad had a friend of his deliver him booze weekly. When inside, though, I never wanted to leave. Most of their furniture consisted of pieced together wreckage and debris washed ashore. A large piece of driftwood sat in the middle of their living room. All of her dad's wooden tobacco pipes lay scattered upon it. An old record player from the forties was in one corner and in the other a pinball machine he got Lena on her tenth birthday. If anything came into the lighthouse, it never left. Deer antlers became tie racks. An old sea turtle shell that washed up became an ottoman, and there was a whole corner of the living room devoted to the trash that would show up by the lighthouse. Plastic toys, old buckets, and toothbrushes that no longer had bristles filled glass cups. Across the back wall was a flag for a country I was unsure of, possibly something from one of those small countries in Eastern Europe.

I sat on a large, dark orange chair and said hello to her dad. He was always a nice enough man, but every time I saw him he seemed to have a new health problem. That day, he could only say two words before he'd be breathless, gasp for air, and then exhale the next two in one continuous, painful sound.

We watched TV. Her dad watched TV, so we had to also if we were going to try to score any of his booze. Usually, after an hour or so, we could sneak it from him and he wouldn't notice. In his recliner with his head up toward the ceiling, he couldn't see us when we'd crawl on the floor and carry vodka into Lena's room.

Sometimes Lena seemed ordinary, and I liked that. She was lonely. She drank like I did. She was an outsider, like me. And then sometimes she seemed inhuman, like that lighthouse was inhuman. Comfortable to be in, pleasant, if you ignored the toadstools

growing on the walls, and the little weeds and glowworms in holes by the stairs, and the fact that nobody else in this city lived in a lighthouse. We moved to her room and took turns sipping the vodka while lying on her floor. Our legs just barely touched. Where the wall met the ceiling was an oval-shaped window no bigger than a basketball. I heard her lighter flick next to me.

“I thought he’d get mad about the smoke.”

“Not right now,” she said. “You kidding?”

“You smoke a lot.”

“I know.”

“It’s not that bad, though. The smell.”

“I just wish I were addicted to something else.”

Fog moved past the oval window, shimmering in the moonlight.

“It’s moving fast,” Lena said. “Like we’re moving through time.”

“Backward or forward?” I asked.

“Forward. Definitely forward.”

I watched the fog move faster and imagined traveling back in time, before our parents, then further back, generations and generations, back and back when there were no rules, when I could take Lena down to the beach, the wind rushing in off the water, wrap my coat around her and hold her close to me, tracing our path along the coast, when we were all the same, and boyfriend this or girlfriend that, and when cars weren’t around to crash into mothers and force fathers to their early grave, and boys weren’t around later to say ‘Fucked up.’

“Yeah, me too,” I told her. “It’s got to be good then. Hey,” I paused, “what if Davy and I really did do it?”

“I know you didn’t. I thought you knew that.”

“Yeah, but what if we did? And what if I didn’t want to?”

She sat upright and looked at me more seriously than I’d seen before. She stared right at me for a few seconds before saying anything, like she was trying to figure me out, read my mind.

She said, “I’d kill the bastard.”

I grabbed her hand and held it. It was cold from holding onto the bottle of vodka.

“Thanks,” I told her. “Just, thank you.”

The crash woke us. We must have had dozed off for just a moment. We got up and walked toward the living room.

“Dammit. Probably knocked over his glass,” Lena said.

Pieces of broken glass were on the carpet, and her dad was sprawled out on his back next to them. I could see where the glass initially fell on the hardwood and then the shards of glass scattered outward across the carpet. Lena started to laugh. “God damn drunk.” She said this while slurring her words. “Quick, give me something to poke him with to see if he’s dead.” She laughed some more.

I decided to play along. “Oh, dear,” I said. “It’s such a pity. He had so much life in him.”

She poked at his belly with a chopstick. He let out a low moan and stirred to the left and then the right.

“Here, let’s do a mock funeral. Grab his arms and cross them.”

I picked up his limp arms and folded them over his enormous chest.

“That’s good. That’s good. Anyone want to say a few words? No? Eh, figures.”

I suggested we be the weeping widows, holding onto each other in our own mourning. We cried soap-opera cries over his snores. We held onto each other as though we were going to fall apart. And then I looked down at this man, a heavier, hairier version of Pops. It was the first time in a while that I had thought of him and not missed him. I’ll always miss him, or parts of him like when we’d ride in the Lebaron together to go get ice cream, but he was gone and he couldn’t tell off Davy Towns at the sight of his ratty Honda, couldn’t do anything.

“I should be sad,” I told Lena, “but I’m not.”

“Oh, I know what you mean.”

“Good.”

Outside the tide was high and crashing up against the lighthouse. Every ten seconds or so a wave would crash and splash saltwater against the small egg-shaped windows lining the walls. I decided right then that I wouldn’t go back to the aunts. Maybe not forever, but at least not right then. I looked over at Lena. She was pulling a cigarette out of her pack and motioning with her head for me to come outside with her.

“Let’s go see these waves,” she said.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder. Together we walked down the spiral staircase and out into the night.

Nowhereland

I can't remember which city I'm in anymore. I've been on this tour for what seems like a year, even though the agent said it would only last two months. Maybe that's because I'm getting old, because my knees can't seem to hold me up anymore. Or maybe I really have lost all sense of time. One less thing, I guess.

I walk to the one bar on this town's main strip. I sit down at the barstool on the end, not that it matters though because the place is empty at four in the afternoon. I order a whiskey from the bartender. Slide her a twenty. Her hand touches mine, but then she pulls hers back. I scare her, although I'm not really surprised. I'm at the age where I should probably retire. My body is much more honest than hers. It shows all of its folds and wrinkles up front. Hers is more mysterious—her baggy pants and tight top cover her thin frame, a body so slender it could fit into cracks or in between walls. She reminds me of an old lover I used to have. Not one in particular, but the type of girl a boy falls in love with when he's nineteen. One that makes everything in the world golden, just golden. She must have started her shift—after she makes my drink she shoves some leather gloves into a motorcycle helmet and hides it underneath the bar.

“You ride?” I ask her.

“Yep. You?”

“No. Had a friend that did. Not me.”

She nods and then turns to watch the TV, some show about revamping a house.

I had a buddy in college who used to ride motorcycles. His name was Adam, but everyone called him Admaster. Stupid name, I know, but it's true. In the story that I read to crowds in auditoriums and bookstores, a buddy of ours, Jeff, had just died. We were all just fresh out of college. It hit Adam really bad, got him all messed up in his head for a long time. The night it happened the only thing he knew to do was to drink. He left our house, carrying with him a liter of Jack Daniel's, and drove off on his motorcycle.

He headed toward the beach. About a ten-minute ride with no traffic. He rode out onto the parts where you can drive your cars right up to the shore, but that didn't really matter because they close the beach at night anyway. He's riding along, picking up speed, and then really going fast. I mean flying down the sand. So someone calls the cops. They come, and when they see him they don't know what the fuck to do. He's standing there kicking at his bike, ripping off the exhaust pipe, denting the gas tank with his boots, and throwing chunks of sand. And he's bawling too, just bawling. They take him in to the station and let him sober up. Don't even give him a citation. He tells them all about Jeff. How they would work on the bike together after they got off work around midnight (it was an old thing from the 50s so it always needed some kind of maintenance), setting up a light in the garage, sometimes not even doing upkeep, but sharing some beers and talking. They loved that bike.

He tells them the story about how he and Jeff always planned on doing a cross-country trip on bikes. Nothing but packs on their backs. They had already mapped out the route, heading west through the desert and then up toward Canada. He tells the cops how he died, how it was an accident with the train. It was a game they liked to play, to

cheat at death for a second by running alongside it. He asks them what's the point in it all—why bad shit always happens to good guys. They were quiet this whole time, letting Adam say what he had to say. And then, before they let him go, the fuckers tell him Jeff did a stupid thing doing what he did. His own damn fault. Goddamn cops. They weren't even listening.

I thank the bartender for the drink.

“You betcha,” she says and winks at me. But I know it's a fake wink, one to get a bigger tip out of me. I give her a dollar and head toward the middle school to give my reading.

Later, I'm standing up at this podium, looking at a couple sitting in the front row of the Crescent Hills Middle School auditorium. The woman, dressed in a knee-length green skirt and white blouse, looks at least a decade older than the boy holding her hand. My knees start to hurt; they don't like standing upright for too long anymore. I reach down and rub them with my palms for a few seconds. I look up and see the woman in the skirt whispering to the boy next to her. Then I see them both chuckle together. Not the kind of laugh that looks innocent or sweet. The boy takes out a stick of gum and smacks it loudly as I look over my notes for a story to read.

Jeff dated a different girl every month or so. He wasn't an asshole or anything. The girls always broke it off. He would get “weird” after a while, not knowing now how to communicate to the cool art girl, or the fun surfer girl, or the wild musician that never slept, or even the easily lovable nice girl. Then they'd dump him.

But this one day he was telling me about this girl he had been dating. We were sitting on a bench out at the pier around sundown, when it was actually bearable to be there in a Florida summer. A seagull pecked at some crackers Jeff kept throwing on the ground; he bought a whole box of the things.

“She’s married,” he said, throwing down two saltines.

I didn’t answer.

“And her husband is in prison.” He stuffed a cracker into his mouth, almost choking on it. “On death row.” Some crumbs of the crackers stuck to the thin beard he had started to grow.

“Really?” I asked. “Because that sounds like a soap-opera, man.” I didn’t mean for this to come out harsh or anything, but it was true. Who dates a married woman whose husband is on death row? Jeff was always making dumb decisions when it came to girls, but this one seemed to top the rest. Or maybe he was actually smart. It wasn’t like the guy was getting parole any time soon.

“I know. It just started happening,” he told me. “But, I don’t know what to do now. He’s up for execution.”

“Tell me about the last time you saw her.”

“She’s wearing slacks that look about eight years old,” he said. “Some type of ruffled, silk red top, and holding a glass of chardonnay in her hand. ‘I hope you don’t mind,’ she says, raising her glass. Tells me she’s had a rough day and all. So I try to be nice and ask what was bad about it. ‘He’s up Thursday,’ she tells me. She takes a big sip of that wine. You could call it a gulp. Sitting there, looking at this poor woman who was barely able to hold her glass in her hand without dropping it, spinning her wedding band

around her finger, I could have thought of tons of stuff that could comfort her, you know? I could have pulled out all the easy crap, tell her he's going to a better place, she'll see him in heaven. But you know what I said?" His voice shook a little when he asked me this.

"I fucked up again," Jeff said. "I told her, 'About time. Then you can be good and done with him.' I know, right? The one thing I can't get out of my head is how she looked after that. She gave me the worst look I'd ever gotten. Kind of like a mix between betrayal and hatred. It's like the look cokehead Daniel gave his parents when he found out he was adopted, just staring, not really able to do anything else. I remember looking down because I couldn't keep looking at her. Her knuckles were all white and shit. Now I realize that she was in love with him and only wanted me for a good lay. At least that's what I think. Or maybe she just finally realized how young I was. Hell, she'd probably sit with him in that electric chair if she could have. Right on top of his lap. I know it doesn't seem real."

"Nah," I told him, looking up at the seagulls hovering above our heads, "that's the truest thing I've ever heard." And it was.

That was the last time I remember Jeff. Actually, it's the last moment I like to remember him. I try not to remember him running alongside the train that one night a couple years later. I try not to think of him near the train, just seconds before, smiling as his hands brushed alongside twenty tons of rusted steel. And then the sound of loose gravel giving out beneath sneakers, a muffled yell, and a long screech of the wheels scraping around a corner.

* * *

I've been staying at the La Quinta Inn for this tour. The publishers said they had to cut back after the last book didn't do too well. It's an okay place. They let me smoke inside, which is a rarity these days. Only the shitty places let you do that. Used to be you could smoke at the Ritz, but then everyone got all uppity all of a sudden.

The night before my reading, I woke up at three a.m. and couldn't go back to bed. I was dreaming about Jeff. The whole dream was a little fuzzy, but the part that I remember most clearly, the part that will probably still wake me up for years to come, was after the whole incident happened. Adam and I sat on the gravel on the side of the tracks. There were ambulances and fire trucks around us. A cop had taken us aside individually to ask questions. I had just gotten finished telling him what happened when I looked up to see him talking to Adam. The cop kept asking him questions, but he couldn't respond. He just sat there listening, but not really listening. And then I noticed something else. On Adam's shoulder, against the bright white of his undershirt, was a small piece of Jeff, some unknown piece of flesh just resting there. He didn't brush it off. He left it there, like a goddamn pirate's parrot, and stared out past the cop. In the dream it's glowing, changing from red to blue to green. But even in the dream, I know it's not supposed to do that. I know it'll stay the same color on his shirt and fade to a rusted brown when it dries.

I look down at the papers on the podium. The people in the auditorium have just finished clapping for this thing I wrote about a girl. Not one that I knew or dated, but some writing that I knew they'd like, something about unwanted love, or maybe it was all

really about pure love. Who knows. I only know that they seemed to like it. A note from my agent rests on top of another story in the stack of papers: “You have to read this story. Everyone wants to hear the Atlantic story.”

I used to tell this one story that’s in the Atlantic right now. I’d tell it at parties, always after we’ve all had some drinks.

“I had this dog,” I’d say, “and she was a big old thing; always seemed to weigh a hundred pounds, even when she was a puppy.”

I start reading the typed up version of the story I’d tell and can already hear the typical reactions I usually receive from the crowd. It’s a story about my dog dying when I was in college. So of course, there were a few *aww*’s of sympathy from the crowd. In the story, I was away at college and my fifteen-year-old dog was back home with my parents. I’d been hearing how she was getting ill, so the news wasn’t really surprising. It was my mother who called me to let me know. I told her thanks. We talked for a while longer, but I don’t remember about what. And then I went to my back patio, a six by six foot concrete slab, and had a cigarette. From inside my apartment, a Hank Williams record was making its rounds. “I’m So Lonesome I Could Cry” started to play. But I didn’t cry. Instead I just sat there, listening to his wailing voice, and staring at my cigarette, the ashes slowly falling down to the concrete.

I finish reading the story in front of the middle school crowd. Often, when I read this story, someone will comment on the song I listened to after hearing the news. Usually it’s the same thing: I love that song; it’s just so sad.

I want to tell them, “Wish I could say the same.” But their eyes are so enlarged with excitement, and then wet with oncoming tears, that I can’t. Because that person

really did have a moment where a dog, cat, fish, or something actually important like, say, a parent, died. And instead of sitting motionless staring at a cigarette, they wept. They fell down outside their apartment while hearing the news on their phones. They scrunched up pieces of grass in their fists, wishing it could help somehow. They actually mourned. They tell me they've stopped listening to the song now. Too much baggage. I wish I could agree, but I still listen to it, because it was just a fucking dog, and there's something about hearing a song I know will give me shivers, if just for three minutes.

"You should start listening to new songs," this one woman tells me after I'm done reading and signing some copies in the entryway to the auditorium. The only chair the place has is wooden, and my ass starts to burn. I agree with her, but I also want to tell her to forget the song. It's not about the song. It's not about the dog. It was a ghost story. Forget the cigarette. Forget the porch and the stars outside, because it was all made up. Because I was never at school when my dog died, but instead at home while she played in the back yard. And when I went to check on her, I found her curled in a hole of mud she had dug underneath the magnolia tree. It had rained the previous days and the mud coated her fur in large, matted knots. She was already lifeless, and I had to carry her to the car. I twisted my ankle walking through the yard, and when I got to the vet all the asshole said was, "Yep, she's dead alright." And on the drive back there wasn't any song playing on the radio, just the sound of the engine spurting all the way home.

But, instead, I tell her, "It got me through a lot," knowing that song did more for her than it ever did for me. I can change parts of the story here and there. Adding and subtracting. Because even if it did happen, Jeff was never by the coast or any wan scene of rusted train tracks. At least, that's what I wish. Maybe instead, we could have been in

the Midwest instead of Florida, and there was never any train, it never even came—we just sat on our porch eating peanuts, talking about camping out near the cornfields.

That’s a story I wish I could tell, one I wish I could write.

I’m walking out away from the crowd when I notice this younger girl, looks like she’s in college. She’s standing in the doorway of the auditorium, staring right at me and twirling a piece of her long curly hair. I slow when I walk up to her.

“Hello,” I say.

She stares at me, focusing on me now that I’m closer to her. “I think you knew my mom,” she says.

“Maybe,” I say. “I’ve known a lot of people. Many of whom are now moms.”

“Well she’s not anymore. She passed.”

I try to say I’m sorry for that, but she shakes her head like she’s heard it a thousand times before. She keeps twirling her hair, and it brings a memory of someone I can’t place, maybe because so many people do that.

“Well, would you like a signed copy?”

“Huh?” she asks. “Oh, no. I don’t even have the book. Claudia, Claudia Cosgrive was her name.” She waits for my response, and I have none. “Oh well. Thought I’d see. Toodaloo.”

And then it all comes back, the hair, the name out of a Victorian novel, the goodbye. I hadn’t even thought about it for years because it was so long ago, back when I was still in grade school. It was summer, and I was in love, at least I thought I was, with this girl who went to a school across town. I worked as a cart boy for a golf course at a country club, not even a caddie, just the guy that collects all of the carts, washes

them, fixes them if the mechanic wasn't at work that day. I met her there. Her father shot golf religiously, and she'd stay around the clubhouse and have drinks with her mother. We spent the summer together secretly meeting up at the course after it had closed. We'd fool around on the grass, usually with our clothes on, but when the summer was over and she had to go to school somewhere up north (Princeton I think it was) we ended up finally having sex. I can't honestly say it was fun. It had rained the day before so the grass at the club was wet and cold. The whole thing lasted about a minute. I remember her afterward, sitting crouched while putting all of her clothes back on, not wanting to stand up. We were both so shy then. We went to our cars and I said I'd see her after the semester. She just smiled and said, "Toodaloo." She was so bright at that moment that I could only think that it would be true, that I would see her again, but I never did.

I head over to the bar. That young bartender is still there. She tells me she's just closing up, so I order a shot of whiskey and hurriedly drink a beer. She's not talking to me, doesn't ask me where I'd been the last six hours. Her shirt rides up a little on her back. I imagine small blonde hairs right there, but I can't see well enough to say for sure. There's a tattoo above her crack, something with wings reaching out toward her hips. I think about starting small talk with her, but she probably doesn't want to hear from an old guy like me. The TV is off, and all of the lights inside the bar are on, hurting my eyes. I finish my drink, put some cash on the bar, but look up to see her already gone, somewhere toward the back fridge. I walk outside. The cold hurts my knees. My body wishes for a younger time when it couldn't get hurt, couldn't even be bothered. But who

am I kidding? Shit'll always bother you if you let it. After a while you can't pretend enough to convince yourself any different. I look westward down the road, to somewhere—the coast, a girl twirling her hair, a snow-touched desert in the star-filled night, a long road with streetlights fading into darkness. I take a step.

VITA

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