

Spring 5-17-2013

## We Brighten the Dull Winter Landscape

Ben Shields

*University of New Orleans*, benshields1122@gmail.com

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We Brighten the Dull Winter Landscape

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

Ben Shields

B.A. Louisiana Tech University, 2008

May 2013

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my advising committee: Neal Walsh, Joanna Leake, and Barb Johnson.

Thank you to my friends and readers in the program who carefully read my early drafts. Thanks to my wife, Emily, who supported me through my decision to earn my MFA, and, consequently, supported my decision to never be wealthy.

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### **He Had Vigor**

Honey and I are pregnant, due come warm weather.

I'm ambivalent. My cat, Old Guard, is weak. He may go any day, but Honey's pup won't give him peace.

Here comes my mother aquiver with grandbaby fever, breezing through the front door without a knock. Where's that belly? she asks.

Honey waddles in. Still unaccustomed to the havoc of a body with child, she tips a glass off the table with her stomach.

The glass shatters, and I'm already moving toward the broom as from one woman comes Babe, and from the other comes, Son. In unison the familiar chorus, Could you get that?

\*\*\*

I used to live in a yellow house on a hill away from here. From there I looked down with college friends at our oyster world. We prowled our space like a pride. One of them is in science now, and another tends bar down the road. The rest are scattered. I'm a horticulturalist in a small town where everyone knows your moves. I live rent free in a small, cinder block house my parents own because it's what we can afford. It's painted lavender and infested in the cold months by ladybugs, enough to crush a body. Don't you spray them, Honey says. Not with the baby on the way.

But still she wants them out.

Scientist, I say over the phone, tell me what to do about it.

He says, It sounds like a mess. Just let it happen.

\*\*\*

Old Guard cries a wretched meow. His eyes are dilated, and he's going blind, can't see me in the full light of the kitchen. He navigates by nose and paw to a saucer of milk with medicine mixed in. I rub his bony back, count his thin ribs and thirty vertebrae until Honey's pup gallops in wanting to toss Old Guard around. I throw open a cabinet door. It pops Pup in the nose, and he whimpers away.

\*\*\*

Ladybugs gather in the ceiling corners like smut in a woken eye. They die in the upturned cups of light fixtures, baked into desiccated piles. I tried to stay up on them this year. From the first sign I swept them from the walls, sucked at them with the vacuum. Once, I cleared every last one from the house, then sealed all the cracks with tape. But they're something from nothing, precious and claustrophobic, wave after wave.

I woke that night choking on one that'd crawled across my lip and gotten sucked down my throat. Honey woke up when my flopping arm fell against her belly.

What is wrong with you? she asked.

I couldn't breathe. She smacked my back, and the ladybug came loose and hit my teeth. I spit it into my hand.

She didn't care. She said, You could have hit the baby and knocked its head in.

I was asleep then choking

We're having a child. You have to be more careful.

I lay down, rolled over, said, Sorry.

Even in sleep.

\*\*\*

The moon is full, and the sky empty but for it. Honey is asleep, and I sneak to the truck, flip open the tool box and get a cigarette.

Since Baby's on the way, Yes, Honey, I've quit. No, those guys I work with smoke.

But I'm grinding my teeth to nubs.

Lawn chair in my back yard and a cooler of beer to the left of me, glowing chemical plant quarter mile to the right of me, short and green winter wheat hemmed not by fence row till way yonder on in front of me. This is the bucolic that's been left to me.

I shiver and sip my beer, wrap my arms around me and smoke my cigarette without moving it from my mouth. Ash falls on my jacket, and when I spit the filter out wind carries embers and gray flecks to my face.

Later on I'm drunk and rolling lonely in the soft wheat. To the moon I say, Listen up. I'm near thirty and masturbate in the shower.

\*\*\*

They used to barely speak to one another, each stuck with issues over the other's expectations. Now you would think they'd played dolls, growing to speak of crushes then this day's husbandian peccadilloes. They shriek over sonograms and bite their tongues over baby names. I used to be a star, only son, only husband, and golden.

\*\*\*

Honey says, God, he's disgusting.

A mood swing, I hope.

I'm cleaning up Old Guard. I wipe the muck that leaks from and dries around his left eye, run a brush and wet rag through the matted hair he can't bathe anymore.

Clean as a white rose when I'm done with him.



He doesn't depress you? she asks.

Of course he does.

You should put him down. It's selfish to keep him like this. He's miserable.

She hasn't said it outright, but I know she's got fingers crossed he'll expire before Baby has to mingle with shed hair and dander that her Pup is genetically engineered against.

I scratch the cat's head, and he pushes against my hand. I tell him, No, buddy, we won't do that.

He lies down slow and rolls to his side so I can rub his chest. He purrs. Life in him yet.

\*\*\*

Bartender, I say, let's have a beer down here.

Just me and him at 3:00 PM after the rain has knocked me off work. Two old college pals, drinking and smoking, and I don't care if I smell like the Pall Mall on fire.

How are you lately? I ask. Doing what you want?

Come and go as I please, he says.

Are you happy?

Relatively, he says. How's your girl and the bundle?

Yeah, I tell him, Old Guard. He's on the way out.

Sad news, he says. He had vigor.

I stare down the neck of my beer. He'd carry those twitching mice with his head high and lay them at our feet.

Later and loose lips after a few. It was no accident, you know. I wanted to wait. Three, four more years. I started checking her pills cause she's going on about baby this and that. She stopped taking them. Kept them on the nightstand and would act like she was swallowing one before bed.

What'd you say?

Nothing. I give her what she wants.

At what cost? he asks.

What? I put a cigarette in my mouth and light it. You wouldn't believe how much I was getting laid.

\*\*\*

They're worse than ever. Their numbers grow. My offense is half-hearted, and Honey stomps the floor. But a plan is hatched. I lie stock still on the couch for hours, and they come to my warmth in droves. I stand slowly, littered with ladybugs, and walk out the front door, hold my arms out to my side and when I shake my body they all leave in a tickle of wind. But in a few hours they'll be back walking the walls, clustering on the window sills, crawling down my throat. Do it once more and again and again and again.

\*\*\*

All nursery this week—the shades, the patterns. Mother and Honey's smiles stretched in polite disagreement. What wood hue will complement best what color walls?

I love them both. I always wanted a navy blue room, I say rubbing the dry wall.

Each turns. Their voices mix in a flurry.

Have you lost your mind?

Navy?

We don't even know what the baby is yet.

That's so dark.

Maybe light blue?

Sure. Light blue. Who says it's not for boys and girls?

But not sky blue.

Never. Maybe periwinkle.

Periwinkle it is.

What are you smiling at?

\*\*\*

I dig a hole in the garden and lay him down. I sit beside him and smoke. Honey stands next to me in a robe, doesn't mention the cigarette. She runs a hand through my hair, hugs her belly to my head, and we're quiet for awhile.

She asks, Do you want to say something?

I stand and clear my throat to get high-flown for a friend. Old Guard, I've loved you and what will I now do that you've passed? I found you once in a litter. You were proud and held your shoulders back. Today I found you in milk and medicine. Nothing new this day could have kept you till tomorrow.

I kneel and place a handful of dirt on him. Honey kisses my head and asks that I brush my teeth when I come back in. She turns to leave. I pull her back and split her robe and hold my face to her bare stomach. Something in me, soon, will be apparent.

### **Labor Day was Yesterday**

Green lizards blow their throats out, provoking. They do pushups at each other on the porch screen fussing over a girl or their own square of mesh wire. Norman has watched them half an hour waiting on them to bust each other, but they won't. Everyone else is busy inside: his momma's cleaning, his granddad, Pop, is dying and Sis is red-tagging inheritance. Norman should be at work.

He spits bloody water into a pail he's been carrying around for four days then puts more water in his mouth, rolls it around, lets it sit while his mouth fills with blood again, then puts the mess in his bucket. He shouldn't be bleeding still from the wisdom teeth surgery. When he tosses the mixture out the door, it's not raining hard enough that the blood, spit, and water all arch from the pail and disappear into the thick downpour like he sees it in his head. Things don't always

happen like he sees them in his head. Instead, the mixture wet-thunks on the dirt and spreads. The blood will soak into the roots of the sycamore tree that a million years ago Pop hung a fire extinguisher on. The tree has grown around it so only half of its dull, red body is left. Like a tumor, it will kill the tree. Because his blood is in the tree, Norman thinks about being stuck in something dead with nothing to do about it. He swallowed a big, runny mouthful of blood on Saturday. His stomach hasn't settled since. He can never do that again.

Norman can't stand anymore because he has trouble seeing blood. He wobbles back and sits down heavy enough in his chair that each of the lizards, still without the spines to make a move toward the other, bends its neck to see Norman's eyes and blinks. He feels like them, he thinks, like he's looking at something that can't do shit.

\*\*\*

Labor Day weekend was the responsible time for the high school science teacher to have his wisdom teeth cut out. It was late in life. He was twenty-five. He had insurance and an 8:00-3:00 schedule. He could be in the dentist's chair by 3:30 on Friday, healed by Sunday with still Monday off to enjoy. Maybe he would clean the garden for Pop, or the gutters. In his third year of teaching Norman knew the drill: don't tell the kids about the surgery. They'll just ask for the pills.

In the classroom Friday before his surgery he backed himself into his U-shaped cubby of floor-to-ceiling shelves behind his podium. Each shelf carried a weight of labeled jars filled with formaldehyde and something dead but not dissolved. He met the blank stares of small town teens looking at him. He sucked the sick smell of chemical behind him. Teaching was only a

temporary occupation to pass the time until he figured on what he wanted to do. But it had been three years and he lived in what amounted to a shed behind some widow's house on the edge of town. There were no highlights, only science projects sans vigor and over-cautious frog dissections, under-cautious frog dissections. A man was about to cut his mouth and pull the bones from his head, and for his year that would be the peak. Often when he spoke to the kids about their possibilities he wanted to say them, I did this because it was easy. With everything spread out before me, I settled like a scared cat in high wind, wide-eyed watching the leaves blow. Now I think I'm stuck.

\*\*\*

Friday evening he didn't wake up on his own accord in his own bed. It was the floral couch in his Pop's living room while his busy little momma fluffed his pillow and adjusted his blankets.

She said, We're glad you're with us, and helped him sit up.

Norman took in the dismay of his dead grandmother's hundred clocks stacked on the walls between pictures and mirrors, all ticking out of sync so that every second became a second with a hundred seconds between its two ends, forming a solid beat of time that stretched out until it was broken by a chime or a whistle or a cuckoo, every minute or so.

Why are we here? he asked.

She straightened his body on the couch, pressed her thin fingers to his shoulders, his forearms and hands, then his head, then gently to his cheeks. How do you feel? she asked.

Groggy.

Do you hurt?

No, ma'am.

He looked at the vacuum tracks in the carpet, the end tables cleared of dust, the wiped down pictures of aunts and cousins that wouldn't come see their dying patriarch, and the thousand mammy trinkets on walls and shelf and cabinets, each rubbed free of fingerprints. Why is it so clean? he asked her.

She told him to hold on just one second and left for the kitchen.

The house had been filthy since Nanny died two years back. Pop thought indoors were useless for a man except for sleeping. He didn't leave the bric-a-brac out of love or remembrance. It just wasn't his to fool with.

Norman worried his momma was death cleaning. It's how she kept herself through loss—buzzing into every corner with a broom, scouring pans, polishing knobs. Grief management was vinegar, newspaper, and clear windows.

Is Pop all right? he called down to her.

She came back with a frosted mason jar of pureed potatoes and cream. She held his jaw and tilted his head. Open up, she said. She fed him like a baby bird.

Sis is on her way, his momma said.

Brilliant, he said.

She tilted his head back one more time, but he stopped her. Can I feed myself?

\*\*\*



The clocks beat a thousand ticks and woke Norman up late on Friday. He turned and tried to sleep again. He pressed one ear to the flowers in the couch and covered the other with a pillow but the pressure hurt his mouth. The living room ceiling was low enough that he had to dodge the fan cords when he stood, but he forgot the series of ornate bird houses hanging from an exposed rafter and sent one swinging with the center of his forehead.

Norman found then opened the door to Pop's room and saw the thin sheet laid across his belly two stutter-step rise and collapse over and over. He went to the old man and tugged the blankets back over his chest. There was a picture of Marilyn Monroe having a laugh on the nightstand. Pop replaced a picture of his wife with this one when she died. They never got along, with each other and most people, and when Pop's mind began slipping away from him not long after she died, Norman wondered if in Pop's confused head he'd been married to the beautiful woman he said goodnight to the last couple of years.

When the garden went to hell in middle summer, they figured Pop wasn't much left for the world. His long time habit was to walk the yard each morning, and each morning he found his garden and tended it. But then tomatoes-uncaged, sprawled on the ground. Pigweed and lamb's quarter and false groundcherry went unbothered and choked down the squash. Pop had been laid up regular three months now, and it galled his ass, Norman was sure, lying in bed with daylight burning.

Even if Pop had never been close with Norman, or close with a single other person in the world, Norman admired the man for his energy and resolve—he wanted to work until he couldn't, and he did. He didn't want people messing with him, so he acted a way that made everybody stop. It still broke Norman's heart a little, the indignity of shitting yourself so that a daughter you never had much to do with had to clean it, the only daughter that would really fool

with you at all. It wasn't exactly sadness Norman felt, more an impatience to see the man quiet in a suit in a box in a church.

Norman found a tinny taste in his mouth while he stood next to Pop's bed. In the bathroom sink he saw the thin blood and bubbles. He washed it down and retired to the porch for air and escape from the thousand ticks of his Nanny's clocks in the small room.

In the full dark he could only see right in front of him. He cracked the screen door and spit. He smelled his sister's cigarette and saw her ember down at the other end in the swing. He couldn't see her. He pictured her. She looked like a weed—a pretty enough face, though mannish, almost a copy of his, but with wild hair and yellow teeth. Her bellow laugh and disregard made strangers and family uncomfortable. And when he was around her while she was around people, the back of Norman's neck tensed. He sat beside her, and she put her head on his shoulder. He knew her mouth was crooked in the dark.

He's almost gone, she said full of pity.

Norman shifted a bit. He wanted to say that she fought like a cat with every relative every time they came down for Sunday dinner back when Nanny was alive, that she never had much to do with Pop at all, that she married a lousy carpenter—wait and see if Pop forgives you that—and that generally when people died she fell to pieces not because there was a bright love between them, but because people would look at her and feel something sweet for her. But he said, I think I'm bleeding.

He took her lighter then rubbed his finger over each of the wounds in his mouth. Because of the flame he saw blood channeled in his fingerprints. He cleaned his finger then checked each cut, clearing the blood each time before he moved to his next piece of mouth. Bottom, left.

Sister asked him if he wanted a cigarette.

He did, very much. But he couldn't brush his teeth yet, and his momma would skin him.

\*\*\*

Saturday morning was when Norman couldn't talk for the hands in his teeth.

What? his momma asked. She took her fingers, her head, and her whole body out his mouth and clicked off her flash light.

Your hands taste like Pine-Sol a little.

She frowned at him. You're still bleeding on the left side, and now it looks like you're starting to ooze a little on the right.

She came back at him with gauze. She pulled his jaw down by his chin and gently swabbed his nasty wounds. She said, And you're so pale now.

He closed his eyes and listened to the white noise of the million clocks. Nanny used to click her dentures together. She couldn't get used to the horsey, artificial things. All day long, in the kitchen, in the yard, a steady rhythm of clicks. Pop told him something not long after she died. It was a rare moment of openness after they'd plowed the garden in the early spring. He had asked for Norman's help, though he never asked anybody for anything. Norman worked his ass off. Norman thought Pop seemed to notice that his grandson was getting to be a grown ass man, that he wasn't just the grandboy that was catered to by the women because he was the first grandboy. Pop drank water under a pear tree and said that the clocks haunted him—their million clicks, Nanny's million clicks. Instead of taking the clocks down he plugged his ears when inside, as if she lived in her clocks and he could spoil her fun.

Pop wants you to have the house, his momma said as she dabbed his cuts.

Norman moved his eyebrows around and tried to look down at her.

He doesn't have a proper will, she said, but I found something he wrote in a drawer.

Norman comma house it says. Your Sister won't like that. His momma sat up a little straighter to look in his eyes. Have you seen those stickers she's starting to put out on the pots and pans? His momma rolled her eyes. I guess it's because you're the oldest grandson. And the only one that ever tried to put in some time with him. You could get out of that shed and set down some real roots here. And I'm just down the road, she said smiling.

The mess of gauze tickled something soft in his throat. He gagged a little, and his momma pulled the wad out. He coughed and coughed. He'd swallowed what seemed to be a quart of blood when he woke up this morning. He thought it might revisit him. Deep in his throat felt sick.

Oh, darling, his momma said. She touched his head and patted his back and rubbed his shoulders. I'm so sorry.

He lay back breathing, and she pulled his legs into her lap and held them. They each were quiet. He didn't like his legs there. It made him feel so small and ten. His joints itched in the sockets to move.

She asked, Do you think you'd want to live here?

Norman wasn't considering that yet. He asked, Do you think Pop liked me at all?

Hard to say, honey. He's a hard man. I guess he may love us all in some way.

He stared at the too short popcorn ceiling, looked over the wood panel walls, and the laminate floors. You think he'd like me staying here? he asked.

He wrote it down for a reason. Do you want to stay here?

Norman sat up, and his momma turned to look at him. He saw the bloody cotton still in her hands. Something riled in the small of his back and quivered through his guts. He put his hand out and turned his head.

He said, No, no, no, no, no.

\*\*\*

Norman had seen the few red stickers early in the day scattered through the house and thought it a matter of course, his sister reconnoitering, marking pieces of interest. Then there they were, all at once it seemed, on Saturday evening as the light waned outside, like a flea market jogged through. Red stickers on eight of the clocks, twelve decorative dinner plates, one hundred and six mammy figurines, one stuffed parrot that parroted back what you said, most of the cookware, and all of a neglected stack of put-up green beans and tomatoes. Sis had industry no one conceived.

Norman asked his momma, Should we tell her those beans have probably gone bad. The lids are rusty.

His momma just flipped her hand and kept cleaning the gutters.

Let me get up there and do that for you, he said.

No, baby. Go lay down. You need to rest.

\*\*\*

I remember exactly where I was standing when Pop told me I could have this, Sister said Sunday morning.

She was hovering over a table saw in the shed making shit up. Norman envied her cigarette. Norman envied that she'd take this saw home to her lazy husband, even though he had one already and Norman could use it to build shelves or something if he'd ever get some drive. He envied the pressure of her want, the way it made a space feel like the air had left. Norman could never see to getting what he wanted. Pop could. Sis must have caught that habit in her makeup. Norman had weak, vague longings, nothing ever clear or solid as a table saw or clock or twelve inch skillet. He couldn't say what was inside of him for fear or manners or sweetness or, really, for not knowing what the hell was there.

All those stickers will make Pop think you're hurrying him, Norman said.

A waxy look of concern coated her face. You don't think he'll think that, do you?

Norman looked at the clean, sharp tools hanging from the rafters. He bent his neck around the corner to look into the yard and see if his momma was there.

Let me have a cigarette.

You'll smell like it, Sis said.

I will anyway standing out here with you.

He took a deep lungful and sat on a bench to wait out the dizzy. He spit a wad of blood into his little pail and touched his tongue to the wet gauze packed behind his teeth.

You should just tell her you smoke, Sister said.

He wanted to say to Sis that she had fucked around more than their poor, old momma could stand; that he was her good one, one that didn't sneak away at night, smoke or drink, etc.

Every one of those things was true about him, but he kept it better hidden. He said, Sis, I don't think that would be a good idea.

Sister walked around the shed touching the shovels and hammers. Under the guise of straightening things Norman watched her make discrete plunder piles.

Just take the damn saw, Norman said.

\*\*\*

Sis was on the roof red-tagging shingles Monday coming into evening. Nimbostratus clouds welled up and grayed the sky behind her, and Norman stood on the top rungs of a ladder, shaking it back and forth, rattling it against the gutters.

It's not fair about the house, she said.

What am I'm going to do when it rains?

Get more shingles I guess.

I haven't decided on staying here yet.

She looked up at him with genuine sweetness. Normy, you need to get out of that shed.

He laughed at her and spit blood through the rungs. I probably do.

She sat down and a quick chunk of wind carried some of her stickers off the grit of the shingles.

You made your point yet? he asked her.

Not all of it.

What else you got?

You need to be a grown up and tell Momma that you smoke. That's the only reason she's letting you get the house is you hide things from her.

Norman nodded. That'd break her heart.

It's not fair that I always have to be the bad one.

Nobody made you that way.

Norman, I've got high stress. I always have.

She did not. So Norman just climbed up next to her and asked for a cigarette. His stomach reeled from the motion and the blood he swallowed the other day. He smoked and watched the big sycamore shake. It looked tired.

Sis said, Momma would stop doting on you so much if you just disappointed her every now and then. She'd treat you like a man instead of her baby. Sis sucked a long drag off her cigarette. Pop would've, too.

Uh huh, Norman said. Where'd you get that insight?

She looked over at him. I think, dummy.

He watched his cigarette glow between his knees. He wanted to say to Sis, Let's burn the place down with him in it. He might like that. But he didn't say it. He swallowed it. Instead, when he heard his momma call out the front door he threw his cigarette in the gutter and asked, Ma'am?

\*\*\*

Labor Day was yesterday. Norman's still on the porch, and the lizards still won't tango. They act tough, but they've got no rigor in their backbones. Norman just watches them. He's



sick of their idiot posture and sick of the blood piling up in his mouth and the pail in his hands that's almost full again. His head is light and can't sit still against the back of his rocking chair. It rolls along the wood, and he's very aware of the knots in his head against the wood.

The rain is thick now, and the wind has picked up. His momma and Sis come outside to watch it. They find him sick pale in his rocking chair, lolling his head around. They rush over and cover his body and face with their hands. They pull on his jaw. He sees their faces hovering behind a flashlight beam, and they're talking about blood and broken clots and doctors and stitches and cigarette smoke. He feels a glut of blood and spit pooling behind his teeth. He tries to lift his bucket, but they push his arms down and keep him still so they can examine him. Norman can't breathe. The blood settles at the back of his closed throat and sits in this intermediary zone waiting to be directed down or out. Norman will not swallow it again.

### **Hoot and Holler**

For weeks his owl scratched around the gray boards of the old tree house carrying his busted wing. Lance babied the bird. It complained about him climbing up there the first few times, flapped its good arm. It ignored the ham Lance left it. After some time, its fussing fell off. It softened.

Lance walks out the front door and the cold wind sings through his bones. Nothing absorbs the chill and bite. The thousands of acres of corn and rice are turned over. In one hand he carries a metal green bean can filled with water, a dead rabbit in the other. He climbs the strips of boards nailed to the oak with his knees and shoulders. He pokes his head through the floor and feels like he did the first time he came through when his father built the tree house over twenty years ago—glad. This time the bird doesn't croak at him. It's not there. He looks around.

Feathers aren't on the floor or ground. He could scream if he wants to let loose over losing his bird. This tree is the only one for two or three miles, his house the only one for further.

From the height of the tree house he sees more of the flat land. He missed it while he lived in the city and wanted to be back here and settled. Forever ago oceans drowned this place, and after they dried out the river washed its silt over the grass and trees. The big water receded, and the levee hedged the river on a decided course. When he moved back this summer past, the wind rattled the rice and corn leaves. Because it reminded him of growing up, the noise helped Lance sleep.

\*\*\*

Before he lost his owl, Lance wiped down the bar and listened to his ex from way back, Elizabeth, because he felt the pull of her familiar face. He served her whiskey and soda. She had left her boyfriend three months ago, but still she sat in front of Lance and dished her man's evil. He knew she never went long between men, that three months was an abnormal stretch. He wondered about this one she was hung up on and the feeling he gave her.

When Lance got back to town and started work at the bar, he rubbed out the grime. A sense of clean invaded the place. Nothing in there was so tacky anymore. People still came because it was the only bar, but they slid off the stools, and it took three days of smoke to get rid of the chemical smells. Lance, his boss told him, thank you, but never do that again.

The hair on his arms caught in the new sticky of the glazed wood when he leaned on it to better listen to Elizabeth. He nodded and understood when he was supposed to. Coward, Lance said. What an ass. He spoke little else, but in between fixing drinks for the thin crowd, he came

back to her. Lance noticed her hands, saw that they were gorgeous still. He found her one freckle below the back corner of her left jaw. They both let their hands linger on the passed tumblers.

Lance said, After I close down I've got an owl I'd like to show you.

He watched her headlights in his rearview. On the levee he saw them juke in the dark, and he slowed down. A piece of Lance wanted to stay driving like this in the dark, her behind him lit only as two headlights, because he knew better than to pull into home with her.

They drove far out down his dirt road. His truck and her car settled into sitting still, clicking in the cold. They climbed the steps and sat beside each other along the far edge of the tree house, giving the owl space. Its talons tapped the boards. No clouds in the sky. Under the big moon the owl stood straight, almost two feet tall. It shook its head and made noise in its throat.

He's gorgeous, Elizabeth said.

He is.

How long have you had him?

Over a week. I think his wing is broke.

He's gorgeous, she kept saying.

The wind picked up, and they each tightened their jackets.

She asked, Why are you back in town? She looked at him. I didn't think you'd come back to stay.

He cleared his throat, scratched his head. Dad, I guess. I don't know. Somebody needs to keep the house up. I was tending bar in New Orleans. I can do that here just the same.

She smiled at him. Did you ever think about me?

He raised an eyebrow. You'd like me to say, yes, wouldn't you?

She put her head on his shoulder. Tell me you're going to stay awhile.

\*\*\*

Lance's father had years before started measuring his life by the landmark of fucking his back up. There was before and after. Before he fucked his back up, he ran fifty miles a week up and down the dirt roads and turnrows that divided the fields around his home. He loved it. When Lance was young his father would come in hot like a foaming horse and chase his laughing son and wife through the clean house, threatening them with his sweat. Before he fucked his back, he and his son would hunt together, quiet in the trees. Every time, right before he or Lance pulled a trigger, he would lean in and whisper to his son, Men used to do this with sticks. Whenever they skinned and quartered a deer he would step back and say, Men used to do this with rocks. These sentences made Lance's blood bloom.

The moment joy left Lance's father—he slipped a foot on the roof. He slid down the shingles, passed over the gutters, and landed on his heels. Deep pain shimmied up his bones and settled in his vertebrae. He was alone when it happened in the middle of all that space around him. He told Lance that he sat against the brick wall for five hours and watched the sun move. Rabbits skirted the edges of the fields and tore out in a full run for no reason, for what seemed like only the pleasure of speed. When he stood, he was bent, and he'd been bent ever since.

Before he lost his owl, Lance visited his father in his shitty, first-floor apartment in town. He had moved there because he couldn't handle the scope of his brick home and the taunting dirt roads. He'd grown fat.

You should kill it, his father said. It's devastated.

You're breaking my heart, Dad.

\*\*\*

Lance had grown tired of the cocky, aloof shifts he served drinks to, tired of the city's wrecked streets and its statement of decay that once charmed him. When he thought of a home he thought clean empty where you could stretch out and take off.

When he got to town he found his father a more bitter mess than ever and the house a wreck. His mother had kept the place up, but her new life with a new man was already hard set. Lance couldn't get his head around her, how she quit a life so thoroughly.

He split the piled up wood for fires, fixed the sagging roof over the porch. He swept the gritty floors. He stood in the midst of the home's clean. It felt old and lived-in and pure, and for a little time it felt almost like it did in youth.

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Lance quick-killed the rabbits that stood still. He'd send one shot through their heads. He would bring their limp and warm bodies to his owl. He wouldn't watch the owl eat. He would come back later and sweep up the pellets of undissolved fur and bone and bury them in the loose dirt of the fields.

Coming into evening once, Lance sat with his owl to keep it company. Down the dirt road he saw a plume of dust lifting through the cold air.

We've got company, he told the bird.

It shook its neck feathers.

I expect you to behave.

Lance looked down at Elizabeth from the tree house. Thought you'd just drop by? he asked her.

She smiled up at him and shielded her eyes with a delicate hand. Yeah, she said.

You want to come look at this owl with me?

You're obsessed, she told him.

I think it likes the company.

I think you like it more.

When she sat next to him she said, You need to keep company with people instead.

Like you? he asked, and he pushed his shoulder into hers.

She smiled at him.

Lance got caught up thinking about falling into something easy and familiar, about how sweet that would be here. He didn't say anything at all until he said, The vet in town won't touch it. Said she doesn't do birds.

They watched the owl settle in for the night. It leaned over, sat low on its feet.

You don't think it's sweet, me taking care of it? he asked.

She turned to him and put one of her hands on his face. It felt almost like it did a long time ago when the tip of her first finger would rest right outside the corner of his eye. They covered themselves in their coats and hid in what was fast becoming dark.

After they finished, he said, Look. He clicked on his flashlight and drew it across the empty fields. They found twenty sets of glowing deer eyes watching them.

\*\*\*

Two weeks into caring for his owl, Lance visited his father again. The old man sat alone watching television in his messy place. He winced at that light that flooded through the opened door. They didn't greet each other. Lance started picking up empty chip bags and paper plates and carrying them to the kitchen.

Lance's father asked from his chair, You still got that owl?

Lance put the cereal boxes back in the cabinet. I do, he said.

I told you to get rid of it.

While he stared at cans of sardines and potted meat Lance said, Too bad I'm grown.

His father just nodded his head.

I was thinking about making a room for him, Lance said just for the hell of it.

His father kept nodding.

One of the old bedrooms, I guess. Might would need to get the carpet out of there, don't you think?

His father flipped through the channels, landed on the news.

Lance loaded the dishwasher and tied up the trash. I've been seeing Elizabeth.

His father muted his program. He looked at Lance.

Don't say anything. That was a long time ago, Lance said.

She ran you out of town.

No. College ran me out of town. Lance came over to the couch and sat.

His father turned and studied him. Be careful with her.

I will.

I mean it.



Un-mute it, Lance said pointing at the television. It was the weather. More cold coming.  
Move back to the house, he said.

Why?

I got it nice again.

His father stared at the television for what felt like a long while. Then he looked around his shitty place. Two things, he said. Keep that owl out of there and maybe. And it won't ever feel like home again. Know that.

Lance smiled at him.

\*\*\*

The owl's claws couldn't pierce Lance's leather sleeve. He felt the pressure of its grip while it strained to balance. He stood in the tree house and looked down at his bent father and new-old girl, his friend pacing his arm.

You look so pleased, Elizabeth said.

You wouldn't believe it, Lance said.

You know what I think, his father said looking at every creature present.

The owl lifted its bad wing slightly off its body and hooted.

\*\*\*

I didn't bring you out here so I could baby you, Lance said to his father on the couch. Already spent sweets wrappers floated off the coffee table with the wind of someone passing. Lance picked up the scattered plastic and crunched it into a ball in his hand.

His father made an odd face. He said, That's how my hips sound in the mornings.

Well, it's afternoon now.

I don't know exactly what you want me to do.

I want you to get off your ass. Rake the yard, take out the trash.

His father held his hands out. How do you expect me to? I can barely walk. Your momma isn't here anymore.

Lance looked at the ceiling. You're slow, but you can get around fine. You just gave up on it. Then he leaned forward and said to his father, And she's not here anymore, is she?

His father was quiet and settled firmer into the couch, crossed his arms. I don't like that girl spending so much time out here.

What does that have to do with anything?

His father put his hands up. I'm just saying.

Lance shook his head. He picked up his rifle beside the door so he could go kill another rabbit. You could hunt with your son sometime. Not a lot of walking when you're sitting in a deer stand.

His father looked from the television to Lance. Hey, since you're up you want to put another stick on the fire for me?

\*\*\*

Lance made dinner. His father slung the potatoes into a pile on his plate. Elizabeth showed up late, hair messy, lipstick smeared beyond her lips.

Lance's father said, You're late, and you're messy.

Damn it, Dad, Lance said, We get it.

I'm just saying.

Elizabeth looked at the father and forced a smile, then looked Lance's direction. Sorry, babe. She kissed Lance's cheek. I got caught up with work.

Lance noticed she smelled like wine and cigarettes, that she made too much a deal over the gorgeous dinner, that she looked at his chin or hair rather than his eyes. Then he chose to ignore it, because it was too soon for that, too early for the coming together of his home life to falter.

Lance's father sat down on the couch. Lance said, Nope. Get in here and eat at the table.

I'm already settled, he said flipping the channels.

Lance stood up, grabbed his chair and plate. He turned to Elizabeth nodded toward the living room, and she followed hesitantly.

Lance sat directly in front of the television. His father said, Aw, come on, now.

Elizabeth just looked at Lance. He smiled, said, Sit. She did.

His father watched them both, said, You're as bad as your mother.

Lance ignored him. Isn't this nice? he asked. What a nice family dinner. He reached and put his hand on Elizabeth's knee.

His father said, This is not a family dinner.

Now don't say that. I might run out and get my bird, bring him in. He's getting his strength up. Things are starting to feel real good around here, aren't they?

Elizabeth smiled a weak smile. His father said, This is not a family dinner.

\*\*\*

Now that he's lost his owl, Lance flips channels alongside his father who says, I'm real sorry for you, bud. That bird got the chance to get back to where it was. I don't blame it a bit.

Lance watches somebody try to sell him something.

His father asks, Where's Elizabeth? Why don't you get her over here?

Quit trying to be nice, Lance says. He throws the remote on the coffee table. She didn't answer the phone. Hasn't for a couple days.

Try again, son. We can play cards or something.

Lance looks over at his father. She may be running around on me.

His father slaps him on the leg with the back of his hand. Now, you're just saying that because of your bird.

No. I've thought it for a week or so. Feels the same way it did last time. She won't look at me. She's really not good at hiding it.

Hell with her, then, his father says flipping a hand in the air. He puts his arm around Lance's shoulder, groaning because it stretches his back. Who needs her? It can be the two of us. Unless you want her around. There's room for three.

I think I'm going to go see Mom.

His father sits back, crosses his arms. He doesn't say anything for a minute. Then says, I'm trying.

I know, Dad. You're doing fine. I just haven't seen her in a couple of weeks.

Well, he pauses, tell her I'm dead.

Outside, Lance walks around the tree again looking for any sign of disarray, hoping that the bird did fly off rather than tangle with a possum. Its wing had been getting better. Lance knows he should have been better prepared.

He drives out the dirt road and onto the levee. The river is hidden behind a line of black willow and locust trees. The tree line is thinner than it was before. Barges have a habit of tying off to the trees and leaving before cutting loose. Down in the flat between the levee and the water, cows stand still in the brown grass. He drives into his town then crosses the river into the next. He passes through it and finds his mother's new neighborhood on the outskirts, clean yards and new construction. There is only one car in the driveway, thankfully his mother's.

Everything is new in the house—lamps and shades, the clothes she greets him in and the coffee cups. It smells like lavender and cleaning agents. They sit on the glassed-in back porch. Lance crosses his legs and uncrosses them. The sun is too bright coming through the too clean windows. He burns his tongue on the coffee and sets it down.

How's Mr. Greg? he asks.

Honey, he'd much prefer you call him Greg. She puts her cup and saucer on a small table covered with flowery cloth. He's fine, though. Work, work, work.

Lance nods. Dad says to tell you he's dead.

She laughs loud. It's the sound of someone completely unaffected. Well, that's like him. He's still a mess I gather?

He's back in the house with me. Doing better, I think.

Good for him, she says. Now, I hear you're seeing somebody.

Was. I don't know. Elizabeth. You remember her?

His mother looks worried. That girl from high school?

Lance doesn't say anything. His mother just looks at him.

What are you thinking, son?

He picks up his coffee and swirls it around his cup, looks around the room. You don't ever think about the way it was back at the house?

She says, No, son. I don't. It was very nice early on, but that ended so long back. Your father just wasn't the same person after he hurt himself.

I dwell on how easy it was when we were all together.

Now, I don't know if you know how I feel about dwelling, but I'm firmly against it.

Lance clears his throat, puts his cup down and leans his elbows on his knees. How do you manage that? he asks.

It doesn't do to think about it. There's a number of possibilities everywhere. Not just the ones you're used to.

Out the glassed room Lance sees a thin, oak sapling in the yard, so young that it looks shitty and awkward. Everyone will be dead before it's even a quarter grown. Lance asks, So, Mr. Greg is good?

He'd much prefer you call him Greg.

I don't think I'm going to do that ever.

\*\*\*

Lance pushes hooks through the hide, between the tendon and leg bones of a doe he shot alone an hour ago sitting quiet in a stand in the woods way out beyond the house as the sun came

up. Bullet struck, and the doe still ran a hundred yards, tearing through limbs and brush. He throws a rope over a low limb next to the tree house and pulls the deer up with his truck. She hangs upside down and twists in the wind. His breath fogs in the cold.

He runs his knife down her belly and opens the tight flaps of skin. He pulls her guts into a bucket. The mess sits there, sick colored, and steaming in the cold. He sees the doe's heart in several wrecked pieces. The bullet had hit it directly, and it must have been nothing but adrenaline that kept her moving after she was shot. He gets the hose and washes his hands. As he sprays out the doe's hollow body and bloody water washes over her hair, he hears the crunch of tires on the dirt road. Elizabeth parks next to the house and walks over to him.

You've been scarce, he says.

She looks at the ground. I know.

He scratches the dirt with his feet. He watches her. How about you look at me, he says.

She won't, so he says it again. Look at me.

Then she does, and she's not crying but there is a kind of sadness and sorry set in the creases around her eyes.

Lance clears his throat. Is it your ex?

She looks at the tree house. She asks him, Where's your owl?

Lance looks up there, too. He got better and flew off.

Shit, man.

Lance nods. It's awful. Are you getting back with him? he asks.

She kicks dirt. Lance, she says moving her hair. No.

Is that what you wanted to tell me?

She shakes her head.

Well?

I like it out here with you, she says.

Lance laughs. Glad to accommodate.

I mean it.

You just can't make up your mind. Is that it?

No. I want you. I just messed up, and I'm sorry.

Lance drops his head backwards and looks up at the cold sky. He makes a noise in his throat. We've been here before, haven't we? A couple times, right?

He had not noticed that his father had come outside. Lance hears him shout, She's nice. Lance sees him moving slowly their way.

Then the three of them stand there and watch the deer swing. His father says to Elizabeth, You ever cleaned a deer?

She looks at his shoulder and says, No.

They used to do it with rocks, he says and winks at Lance. I guess we could show you.

Lance understands what his father is doing. He says, Dad, I don't think we have to do that.

No. Let's. You're sticking around awhile, aren't you, Liz?

Before she answers Lance's father takes the knife. He groans when he lifts his arms and takes short breaths. He makes circle cuts around the deer's ankles and slides the knife down the shins then grips a flap of skin on one of the legs and jerks. The hide comes down by inches, leaves meat and silverskin showing, Lance's father wincing with each yank. He keeps going, starts on the other side. Lance helps, and they bring the whole hide down until it hangs like a cape over the deer's head.



They stand back. Lance's father says, Well, that wore me out. He looks over at Elizabeth. He says, She's not green at all.

They are all quiet. Lance feels like he should speak, but he doesn't think he has a thing worth saying.

His father asks Lance, Hey, did you yell in her yet?

No.

Elizabeth speaks. What's he talking about?

They both look at her. Lance says, When I was a kid and I killed a deer he'd pick me up and fly me around like I was a superhero. He'd stick my head inside the deer after we'd cleaned it, and I'd scream.

Why? she asks.

Blessing the meat, his father says. Saying thanks. It's a good yelling. Primal. You do it, Elizabeth. Yeah. You'll eat some of this animal.

Dad, Lance says. No. I think she'd rather not.

Come on. You won't get dirty, I promise, he says to her.

Dad, Lance says.

It won't hurt.

Lance looks at him. Everybody shuts up.

Lance takes the knife from his father. He spits on the ground and walks to the deer to start butchering it. His father comes around behind the deer to act like he's helping. He whispers, She needs to go.

Lance doesn't say anything. He watches his father look at the dirt, then the deer and Elizabeth. His father leans against the tree and says, Well, go on and get your head in there.

Lance puts his hands at his waist. He scratches the ground with his foot. No.

His father says, Come on. It'll be like being a kid again. Do it.

Lance stands there. He sees how the old-as-weather wind moves Elizabeth's hair to her face. His father slaps the animal's back and says, Isn't this your whole deal? I'm trying here. It's the best I got.

Fine.

Lance goes to the deer and spreads it open. Inside the hollow cage, the doe isn't cold yet. He doesn't scream. He keeps his head inside, feeling the dying warmth leaving the deer's body.

### **Ren Threw Things from Trucks**

Timothy wants to get back to his old self. He drives too fast down the sunk and butchered New Orleans street that's pocked with holes. The windows are rolled down. When he gets home he'll mop the filthy floors his wife won't touch. He tells himself he does not care. The asphalt dissolves beneath his tires, tiny pebbles and baseball-size chunks sloughing off their foundation. His tires chirp, wheeling into the driveway.

Married four years and still his wife waits for him on the porch, and that is a sweet thing. But before he gathers himself from the truck, she's at his door and punching his arm. She says, Slow your ass down.

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Timothy remembers when he was dangerous. It was high school summer back in his home town. He shifted gears in a work truck, tearing ass down a rutty turn row between two cotton fields in late summer with stick-thin Ren. Ren's limbs seemed barely held together by clothes, and he was always doing the wrong thing. They both walked the cotton looking for worms and thrips. They did this for money. It was hot, and the fields stretched out miles, colored monotony green. Ahead of them, not very far away, rose a five foot hill with a steep grade built over a culvert. Ren was especially low for no specific reason.

Ren fell subject to a meek mother who spoke little and a fat father that hand-loaded bullets and traveled the state for paintball tournaments. Ren had a seemingly endless brain. His father was scared of the boy's head, and the mother just said nothing about anything. None of the three matched well as a whole or in any variation. Ren was bored and largely ignored.

That morning Ren had lined his drug powder on the arm rest. Timothy rolled down the window. It spun a narcotic tornado. Timothy did it because it was the only thing he could, because a thousand times asking had not dented Ren's habit. But Ren forgave Timothy. He said that Timothy did good things more often than most others.

What am I going to do with myself? Ren asked. The windows were down, and the wind whipped crazy in the truck. He asked this often. Despite his smarts, he would be quite stuck in their rural, shit town if something outstanding didn't happen soon because some people are too gifted for their own good or habitat.

We'll figure something out for you, Timothy said, and that was exactly what he wanted for his friend then.

I don't think it'll work out that way. I can't do much besides fuck up.

The hill stood right in front of them now, and they had not slowed down a bit. Sweat streaked the dust on Ren's face.

Timothy said, We've got to put those rocks back on the moon.

Ren turned and smiled. What does that even mean?

Timothy asked like a father to a son, Are you ready for an adventure, buddy? Are you ready to feel like you beat the hell out of something and you're capable?

As long as it helps.

They buckled their seat belts and were soon in the air. When the dirt settled, the truck was turned onto its driver's side. This wreck was not supposed to happen, but they were safe save scratches.

Ren didn't say anything. He unbuckled and struggled not to fall into Timothy. He kicked the windshield until it cracked. He kept kicking and started laughing. It was quiet at first, just air passing in quick breaths. When the windshield shattered he was crazy. When he crawled out through the busted glass, Timothy watched him roll like a dog in the dirt, kick his skinny legs and laugh his ass off.

\*\*\*

Timothy is in his house on his wrecked street that just as well could split fields as be lined with oaks in the city. Just back from a thirty mile bike ride on the paved levee path, he lifts weights around the empty space over his head. He's getting back to fitness. Three months he's been at it. He looks more fit and trim like he did before. No one notices. Why does no one notice? He puts the dumbbells down and palms a tight chunk of his shoulder.

And you can't tell? he asks his wife who flips through a decorating magazine on the bed amidst her something like thirty throw pillows.

She doesn't even look up, just says, You've transformed your body. I won't say it again. But she flicks her magazine like she doesn't believe. She hasn't admired the tone of his stomach once.

Timothy eyes his gut in the mirror. He showers and dresses for work. He says, I want supper cooked when I get home.

She only shows him her middle finger. She's always giving him the business.

Timothy was once country-come-to-town charming. Women were all over him. His wife was no different. He tells himself this because he's lately lost it in the fracas of forty-hour weeks and un-wowed wife.

He picks her up and swings her around. She laughs and kicks her feet. Stop it, she says, but he knows she doesn't mean it.

Timothy sets her down and kisses her head, slips a hand down her shirt and holds her breast. He says, And why don't you clean the house while I'm gone. He's joking, but he means it. Do something for god's sake. He's sick of picking up messes.

Yeah, yeah, she says at him, and bites his wrist.

He pulls away. She grabs his arm, says, You're good to me.

She's not so bad even though she won't pick up on a Saturday without a single thing to do. He'll power through it in no time when he gets back because he started off spoiling her and now she's accustomed. She'd let everything pile around her, pondering curtains and throws.

Her fingers are long and slim, but she's complained enough about her knotty knees that he believes it and can barely see her in shorts anymore. Her slender shoulders are cool to the

touch, and she has long, brown hair. He loves her, though lately it's some trouble with resentment bubbling like something wretched, his wish for love that doesn't require much.

But often she makes it easy. It's her eyes, and she looks at him now, and it's off to work and have a good day and can't wait to see you and let me know you're safe. By God, he will.

He wants to walk out the door, but he bumps against her loose bundle of decorative twigs tied with twine standing in the corner holding on to all the dust and shedding twiggy shit on the floor everyday of his entire life. How many times has he knocked it down? How many times has he wished to cook kill over its embers? But it's not a home without twigs tied with twine. This corner, this house, this life would be so bare without it. And what else can he do if not right the decoration, say nothing of what wrecks him, walk out to his truck and bang down the mottled street?

Nothing.

\*\*\*

Ren dated a damaging red-head in college. Every time she gave Ren hell, Timothy was there to say, It'll be fine, friend. Timothy and Ren stared at the popcorn ceiling in Timothy's room and drank rum until they passed out the time Ren and his girl broke off for what appeared to be good.

A year later she drove from three hours away to the house Timothy and Ren shared with some other guys. The boys had just gotten back for their second year of college after a summer at home. No one would let her in because she was crazy then. So she kicked the door until the knob ripped out of the old wood, and she and Ren were rekindled by force. It scared Timothy, but not

for his physical self. Ren had found a capturing, bruising love, something on a level Timothy had not seen and could never get near. He shrank away from that kind of romance forever.

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When he gets home, to his surprise, dinner is ready, and the house is clean, but only because his sister-in-law is there. The girls admire the picture frames and candles. Timothy kicks the shit out of the dishes, cleans the mess his lady made, while the girls visit. A thankless job. In the bedroom he stretches on his stomach crawling under the bed to pull his weights out because they'd absolutely ruin any flow if they were in the open. He bumps his head on a cross bar and yells.

He hears his wife ask, Babe, from the other room, but he ignores it.

Two hundred pushups, shoulder presses, tricep work. He can barely get through. His muscles are shot. Timothy lays out on the floor and watches the ceiling fan shaking to its roots. He walks to the mirror and picks at the fat around his belly and shakes his head.

He finishes up and puts on his shirt. There is nothing to do. He hears them in the other room, the girls giggling on wine. He sits down in front of the bundle of twigs. It does not one useful thing. He reaches over and tugs a twig from the top. Carefully, he works it out. It's a thin, little whiff of a thing. There must be a million of them.

\*\*\*



Ren threw things from trucks. In the summers when they worked he'd pick up whatever laid loose around the shop. From the driver's seat and going fifty he could lob a tube of axle grease off-handed with his spindly arm over the truck and dead-center a speed limit sign. It would thud and pop and stain the whole thing black. Sometimes the boys were out of line.

Timothy was driving the levee like a demon going from one farm to the next. It was one week before they went back for their second year of college and two weeks before the door would get kicked in by Ren's girl. There was a man on a bike up ahead. Ren was back to drugs after a few good weeks and acting shitty.

You've been talking to her? Timothy asked.

She calls.

Don't answer. She'll suck you in. She culls the light from the world.

Ren said, I don't think you understand what it's like to have someone love you like this.

They were getting up on the man on the bike. Ren had only a half-empty water bottle. He rolled his window down.

Don't you dare, Timothy said.

Ren didn't say anything. Timothy swerved to the other side of the road. The bottle still pegged the man in the back of the neck. He wobbled on his bike and tumbled down the levee.

Timothy slammed on the brakes and pulled over.

He shut the truck off and tried to undo his seat belt. You could've killed him.

Ren grabbed Timothy's arm. I could get arrested, he said.

You damn well should. I told you not to. Timothy quit moving to get out. He put his head on the steering wheel and left it there.

Ren then rolled his window up. Drive, he said.

Timothy kept still. Ren reached over and turned the ignition on.

Timothy said, Let me help you fix this.

I don't want that. Drive. That's what I want you to do right now.

Timothy felt like, for a second, he'd never done a right thing. The green tops of a tree line to his right shook in the wind. He watched them and said, You can't help but get into unnecessary shit. She does this to you. She makes you bitter.

Ren didn't say anything, just looked ahead at the road. Timothy drove them off, and they were never complicit in anything ever again because Ren wanted too much awful shit and threat in his life.

Ren's things left the house over a two month span after he got back with his girl. First some clothes and toiletries, then books, his computer. Eventually there was nothing left of him. There weren't farewell songs. It was a gradual falling off. He was only down the street, just a few blocks over, just across town.

\*\*\*

Timothy drives home real sweet to his house in the city, and the knots and holes in the street are only worse from riding slow. He studies each divot and crack with his tires. He'll skip the workout tonight. He's been at it too hard. His body is mush. He wants to walk into the kitchen where his wife is humming and working supper. He can smell it. Better or worse, she's never a red-head, even if the meal is canned carrots and frozen chicken and macaroni from the box. It's goddamn fine, isn't it, that he's a housecat now?

He can't get back there to her like he wants because he's staring down at the tipped over bundle of sticks that's blocking his way. Did he even touch it, or is it mindful and this its language? I got to go, it says to Timothy amidst its mess of shed shit. Chuck me outside. I want to rot in the dirt, and there's nothing you can do about it.

Babe, Timothy says.

His wife walks into the hall.

Never taking his eyes off the bundle, he says, I'm throwing this damn thing out. I can't live like this.

She walks closer to him, drying her hands on a rag. She looks at it, too. Well, she says. That's fine.

He nods. Buoyed. He says, I'm not doing the dishes either. He lifts his head up and sets his shoulders.

She looks at him, then steps over the bundle, puts her hand on his cheek and kisses his head. Go rest, doll.

\*\*\*

This is the danger Timothy allows himself. He rides his bike on the levee trail. Lately, the river is high, and it passes through the water trees at its natural bank, fills up the flat and laps at the levee base right where it begins to rise. He takes a break and watches the water modulate, catching his breath. There isn't a stiff current. The water just eases. He looks around and sees that no one is on the trail this morning. Timothy checks his helmet and tilts his front wheel over the edge and sets the bike rolling down the hill. He bounces over knots in the turf and yelps the

whole way down until he finds the river at the bottom. He holds on and rides out until the bike stops in water over his knees, and he falls over underwater. If there were people out this morning, running or walking their dogs, they'd see him rise up howling.

### **Kitten in the Highway**

There's a kitten in the highway screaming at a grain truck that will press its fur into the hot asphalt seconds from now. Llewellyn's in the ditch in front of his house and ten years old. He could reach through the vervain growing in the rocky strip where the road crumbles into dirt and almost touch the animal. His step-mother, there to care for him, stands in front of their shit-small concrete house adjacent to yard litter and three barking dogs, waving a cigarette in the air yelling, get it, get it, smoke passing through her crooked teeth, because animal lives are important.

Something burns behind the house—his dad setting fire to the cut wheat fields. He hauls ass on a four-wheeler, soot in his hair, dragging a burning tire through the short, brown stalks. He has thousands of acres to scorch, and when he's done he'll find another mindless job to clear his lonely, clouded head.

The horses in the barn down the turnrow from the house scare Llewellyn half-dead. In his electric wheelchair, Mr. Charles told Lew not to worry about the animals. Charles scooted, legless, through the pasture's bumps and shit, saying, Ay-ee, and the horses came and nuzzled his neck. Llewellyn stood on the chair's wheelie bars, hanging on and hunkering down with horses nipping his shirt sleeves, but he was laughing.

His real mom was sweet. The day she passed he ate a dripping pear and she said, over the sink, babe, and touched his head. Llewellyn is cautious with overripe fruit.

When Llewellyn turns twelve, he will be in a phase—a trick his dad said he did. He will steal chrome valve stem caps from parked trucks between ball games he plays with a borrowed bat and glove. He will keep the silver pieces wrapped in a handkerchief in a drawer for no real reason, a pattern taking shape.

Mr. Charles told him the chair would go twenty-five on the open road—not a man alive can run that fast, damn thing's got a seat belt. Mr. Charles couldn't pick Lew up and put him on a horse, and Lew's daddy was never around to help. Mr. Charles dragged himself to the shade of a box elder tree and told Lew how to strap into the chair, how to turn it up to full power and ease his way around to get used to it, and to calm down now, you won't fall out, keep your eyes open, you'll get used to it, baby, once you get on that road you're a bird, there's nothing to drag you down.

The hum of the semi's tires covers up any other noise. The kitten is looking to Llewellyn for an answer. It's too small to fend for itself. Its mother dropped it in the road when she saw the truck. There is nothing in Llewellyn that can watch the thing die so close to him. The truck blasts its horn. If he would just reach out and save it.

## **We Brighten the Dull Winter Landscape—A Novella in Pieces**

### **Chapter 1**

Hibiscus flowers bloomed in the wallpaper. The air conditioner was shot, and the windows were wide open, letting in wet air. The soon-a-nursery room was damp as underground.

From across the state and back home, Lily said over the phone, Somebody taught him to say copacetic so he's on a kick now for using it. He got a B on his last math test. He can name all the books of the Bible. He and his granddad caught white perch. He weighs this much. He's this tall.

This was the fourth time I'd called her in as many months. From what I'd heard, my five year-old boy hadn't changed physically much, if at all since I'd been calling, but I itched for every ounce and inch. I couldn't picture him. I stared at the ceiling and tried to remember Lily,

thinking I could form an aggregate child from our combined features. But nothing was there—not her face, or the veins in her hand, or whether one of her shoulders hung lower than the other.

My head laid back, and I wanted to shift my weight, but my cat was sleeping on my feet.

Lily never would say my boy's name, or even, your son, but I grinned the whole time. I asked again, very carefully, so she wouldn't know I was very drunk, if I could talk to him.

No, Jerry, you cannot.

I looked at my gin sweating. He didn't know me. I'd never seen him. I told her she should expect some money soon.

Thank you, but really, we're fine. How are you?

No, I told her.

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Cora wanted my money for a minute when we first met in the airport bar because it was her profession. I was just back from overseas. She was a pearl, lonely on a bar stool, eyeing all the suits passing by. I wasn't wearing a suit. I did not look like the man she was after. I sat beside her, and she ignored me. I offered a drink, and she ignored me. When I opened my billfold to grab some dollars she stared at all the money inside and turned my way. She put a cool hand on mine, asked me what it was I said just one second ago. She wanted to know my name, where I was from and coming from, and her thin ankles rubbed my leg all along. I told her all about me and left out what I wanted to.

She gave me a smile and said it's time to go. I asked how much it'd cost for the night, and she said she liked me.

I was nouveau riche. I could do anything.



\*\*\*

I was an eighteen-year-old kid with my parents dead and gone when Lily got pregnant with my boy, and I split. I know she's fine now and him, too, but for a few years I didn't.

We'd found a dirt road out in the middle of all that North Louisiana farm land some time after graduation, and she'd told me about what we'd made together and how it lived in her. I pretended with her that we'd have a place on the lake and chickens in their run, and a nursery on the east side of the house so the early sun would pass through limbs, and sheer curtains in the morning when we stirred our child, and it would light this pretty picture of a family we made.

Then I was in the car shop. I inherited it when my family passed two years before in their wreck. My dad had taught me everything, and as far as I knew I'd make my way there. Lily was four months. My hands were dirty and in an engine when it washed over me that this town I was in of two gas stations, a post office, a small bank, seven churches, and one school for all the grades, surrounded by thousands of acres of soybeans and cotton, that this town would die and shrink away, and I'd lose everything eventually because all the cars would leave with their people. This was where I'd be saddled with a wife and a child, not from some woman I held marvelous affection for but from a woman I got well enough along with and who was just the last one I'd laid down with, and that there and under those circumstances was how I'd die with oil in my fingernails. I dropped the wrench I had a hold of and left.

I came to the city and hustled a job as a contracted civilian mechanic for the Army. They sent me to Afghanistan. They paid me like they thought I was gifted. I stayed a few years, always

signing my re-up, more cash every time. When I came back I was dick deep in money. I bought a house and had plenty left over.

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It's a solid offer, I said to Cora.

I was talking about our child. She was unintentionally pregnant and had every intention of not having it. But I'd pay her along, I told her. Take care of the bills, see her through after it was all done. She would live downstairs in my house. I wouldn't even have a key, so she could be private as she wanted and have her own life.

I don't want it, she said.

That's why I'll take care of it. You have this baby, and it'll be mine, I told her.

She tapped her food, twirled her straw. She studied her nails, picked one and chewed. She asked, Where does that leave me when this is over?

I don't know. With money and a place. But it leaves me with the kid. I need this from you. It's such a happy thing. This is my chance to do better.

I don't know.

I got up and paced her living room. I said, I've helped you out, Cora. You don't have to sip Mai-Tais in the lounge waiting on your john.

She crossed her arms and looked at the wall. She said it very calmly. I don't owe you shit, Jerry.

I kept walking back and forth over the rug. Then I sat down next to her. I put my hands on her. I know you love me, I said.

She looked at me in the eyes. You've never shown that you love me. You're more of a prick than anything else.

What do you want me to say?

Say you won't leave me as soon as this kid is weaned.

You'll be its mother. If you want to be. And you can play whatever role you want. I don't want to lie to you and say what exactly will happen to us.

\*\*\*

You're over the fun of the working girls in Dubai and horsing around with the fellows, and you've spent your full day in the hot, close belly of tanks tinkering with the thick metal that holds them together. You've already thrown some weights around, and you're tired and still smeared with grease. That's when you can't read the book in front of you because you're caught up in how much a coward you've been and how what you really want is to have never left home in the first place. You understand how scared you are that there's something across the world irrevocably of your blood.

\*\*\*

The nursery windows were open, and the wind quaked the palms outside. I could smell rain coming in the air. I was giddy as shit hoping for a boy. I had a thousand colors of paint for the hibiscus wallpaper. I could close my eyes, and it'd feel like an island in there, and it was hot enough to match. Everything was slick to the touch. The walls nearly dripped. The cat was

flipping out because all the little bits outside were scattering. He was jumping floor to window, window to balcony and back with wild eyes.

I had unbelievable money.

I picked Mattie up that afternoon, saved him from the bald sun of an intersection. I wanted help painting the flowery room. He was young man, disheveled and sweating, alone on the dead grass, standing next to a spaniel-terrier mutt. Mattie had a sign that said he was sober, hungry, and ugly. Something about his bearing said he wasn't begging some respect before you passed him spare nickels. These were complaints laid bare. He was saying it straight, and I needed a man like that around. So I told him I had gin and a meal if he'd help me paint a room. He stood there and considered and scratched his beard. Then he looked at his sign and tapped the word ugly.

I'll buy you a suit. That's all I can do for you. You're not so bad looking, besides.

He nodded, picked up the dog and walked nimbly around the car.

No dog, I said.

I have to bring the dog.

What a voice this man had. Rich and deep, it slid through my ears like velvet. I was struck silly but managed to say, No dog. I've got a cat inside.

Have to, he said.

I looked at the ratty creature, matted fur, thin legs, but good spirits still. I said, The dog's not coming in the house.

I had Mattie cleaned up. He was scared shitless over cats. I tied his mutt to the fence. It just barked and barked. I got drunk and honest. I was shouting nonsense and rolling my head, watching him paint over the wallpaper from my easy chair. He maybe would've robbed me blind

come morning, but I didn't care. I laughed and swung my drink through the air, and he laughed right with me. All this money was brilliant to enjoy. How wonderful to help people!

The cat backed Mattie into a corner. It sat on its back legs and stared at my new quivering friend. I swept the animal into my arms, said, Don't worry about this kitty.

The curtains shook in the breeze. The dog kept yelping in the wind.

I said, Make it a beach, Mattie. I want sandcastles and umbrellas.

I can't draw, Boss.

Do your best. It's all we can do.

The walls are wet, he told me. The paint will peel.

I waved him off.

He did his best. The curly back of his head concentrated and shapes appeared on the wall—a family in the distance on the east end under the sun slapping at biting flies, on the west some kids leaving plastic tools, heading for the water, crabs tatting across the shore. I laid my head back and swam through the waves Mattie worked into the wall. I asked him where he came from. I wanted to know his story, but he didn't pay attention to me. Thunder then sent shivers through the house. That dog of Mattie's hollered outside.

He said, My pet is scared of the weather.

He'll be fine, I said. Paint. Talk to me.

He asked where my old lady was, and I didn't pay attention to him. Take a break, I told him.

He pulled a chair next to mine, and we sipped our drinks. The breeze tickled my skin. We listened to the shifting palms outside.

You got any kids, Mattie?

He just shrugged me off.

Come on, now. Tell me. Let me hear that voice of yours.

He mumbled and sipped his drink. He watched the cat sleep in my lap from the corner of his eye.

It was quiet in the room until thunder clapped. Mattie sat up straight in his chair. He got up and walked to the window then looked out at the yard. He's scared to death, he said.

Surely not.

He's curled up in a little ball, Boss.

I sighed. Sit down. We'll keep an eye on him.

He came and stood in front of me. Can I please bring him in?

Damn it. Sit down, man. I'm paying you to listen to my nonsense as much as paint. Maybe in five minutes we'll see about him.

He pulled up his chair, finally, and sat there nervous, jumping knees, busy hands.

I said, I abandoned my first born, Mattie. His mother won't tell me his name. I don't think she understands how nuts it drives me that my boy is only a pronoun.

Why did I say it all to him? Because I had my new kid on the way. I had to shed myself of some guilt, I thought, or at least let someone in the world know what I'd done. I had to be weighed and measured by an objective outsider and see where I came up.

That's a bummer, he said looking toward the window.

I hear he's copacetic, though. I sat still a beat then had to say this very carefully because my tongue tumbled. Do you get a vibe from me, Mattie, that I'm disturbingly forgivable? People seem to forgive me too often.

I don't know, Boss. I guess so. He tapped his foot and scratched his head. It's not such a bad thing.

I ran my hand through my hair. It is, I said. It's like nobody can see the shit I am.

He didn't say anything for some time. We sat and watched the mural try to dry. The weather almost seemed to calm. The dog even eased its whimpering. I just wanted to drift off, and almost could except for the noise of Mattie's excited fingers and scuttling feet. But a crack of thunder shuddered the house beams, and Mattie's dog quailed.

I didn't even open my eyes. I said, The dog can't come in.

Mattie didn't say anything. I heard him walk out the room and down the stairs. I stood up slowly and walked to the window. The wind pushed the rain inside, and it started puddling on the floor. I stood there getting wet while Mattie untied his pup.

Come back in, I yelled down. This is terrible.

He held his soaked mutt, looked up at me then left through the gate.

\*\*\*

I slumped against the wall, and a streetlight bullied unmolested through the windows because there were no shades. The cars and city things outside moaned at each other like whales underwater. I brought the phone close up to my eyes. It was a moving target for my dialing finger, hovering nervous as a hummingbird. I asked it why its motions made no sense to me.

Lily said I was making this more of a habit, calling her up.

I think about my boy every day.

She cleared her throat. Jerry.

What?

I'll cut this out. Don't get the wrong idea.

What idea?

That you can work your way into our lives any more than this.

My head fell with steady rhythm against the wall. I shook the glass in my hand. Gin splashed over the rim onto the floor. My hair stuck to the tacky paint that wouldn't dry in the wet air. Picking my head up pulled each hair on its own and in succession rippling my scalp.

Just tell me something about him.

After a second she said, He has nightmares about yellow snakes. I don't know why. Maybe from television. He's never seen a yellow snake around here. He has a nightmare, and he comes and gets in the bed with me. I scratch his head, and he falls asleep.

You're killing me.

What?

That's so sweet, I told her.

Well.

Tell me his name.

No.

Does he ever bring you a flower?

He's brought me a flower.

What's your favorite flower?

No, she told me.

Did you get the check?

I tore it up.



I said to her maybe the second time I called that she shouldn't fool with me, that I wasn't worth it, that I was sorry. She told me not to worry. She said I should at least know his happenings. I don't understand how some people operate.

When I woke up against the wall my hair and back had dried into the paint.

\*\*\*

Some weeks later I flew, perched on the back end of a buggy full of groceries for Cora, speeding through the parking lot. She was behind me saying, Jerry, you're a child. We had fun on the car ride back to her house, and I loved on her belly after I put her cereal away. And we had sex because she was in love with me, and everything seemed so nice for a minute. She charmed me, guarding her belly when we moved. And her poor face was so bright when she thought this moment was something that would last forever. But I was already leaving her behind for someone not even born yet.

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You call your parents from jail the town over when you're sixteen. It's three in the morning, and your mother answers. You explain that you were cutting up with boys, chasing tail, getting in fights, but that everything is fine. She sighs and says, Son. You can see her, almost, the hand on her forehead. Hey, Mom, it's no problem, you tell her. This is a problem, she says. You smile and you hope she can feel it or sense it all the way through the phone. You say, Hey, Mom, I'm just a kid. You hear her laugh even though she doesn't want to, and you feel better. You hear

her rouse your father from his sleep. You can see him, almost, tossing sheets, caught off guard. Jerry's in jail is what you hear. Jail? He says he's just a kid. She sighs again, says, We're on our way. You say, Mom, tell me you love me. She says, We both do, and you never hear or see them again because they fly off the road at the peak of a curve trying to miss a deer or possum maybe.

\*\*\*

Early on with me and Cora, before the baby, back when she wanted to know everything, we'd made love, and it was just like a movie where she had her head on my chest and there was a midday breeze catching the curtains.

I didn't have parents to answer to, I said. I was eighteen. I had a little money.

She said back to me, I don't blame you.

We didn't talk for a minute.

Really? I asked her.

No. I'd have done the same thing. Lots of people would. It's different when you're on your own like that and so young.

I sat there and watched the ceiling open up and light flood in, didn't say shit to ruin it, the feeling of something off a chest being met with understanding. It was a nice minute.

After awhile she said, You don't tell people this ever.

I cleared my throat. Not once since I left.

I could feel where her mouth pressed against my ribs had turned a smile. She brought herself up on an elbow, said, I could forgive you for anything I think.

But this sweet girl said this to me before she knew I marshaled shit and shame.

\*\*\*

I turned the back yard into a dense jungle. I didn't want Mattie to help me. What I wanted for my child was a place I'd made. I fought to keep the hydrangeas blue with coffee grounds and rusty nails, but their pink heads nodded defiantly at me from the shade. Jasmine covered the shed, and bananas watched the whole thing from a corner. A live oak spread a ceiling over the place and its resurrection fern greened with the rains. I had elephant ears above my head and wandering Jew crawling in the dirt. It was a place for my boy to wander. I did it all myself. Even the bananas made fruit.

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My baby's 3D head was on the sonogram screen. Cora wouldn't look at it really. The lights were out in there, and she shifted on the rubber bed, crinkling her paper gown.

By now she knew the deal—that I liked her well enough but no matter what she had for me nothing would best the first breath of my new baby. It'd become clear as I spent all my time working my house to better fit my child. What Cora and I did together was only doctor visits and grocery shopping so I could be sure she fed the kid well inside her.

I rubbed my hands over my face and slapped the side of my chair. Goddamn, man.

Sonogram lady smiled and asked if we wanted to know the sex. Cora did not at all, but I pushed for it. She looked me dead in the eye and said, No.

Sonogram lady said that some people like a surprise. We both looked at her. It was such a smile on her face. She loved her job here.

Cora, doll, I said. Let's find out.

Goddamn it, Cora told us, and everybody clammed up.

I wanted to reach over and touch her stomach, but thinking of that jelly stopped me. I wanted to calm her down. If it weren't for that oil slick I would've.

In the car with the windows down, the wind carried Cora's hair around. I said it wouldn't hurt to know.

What could possibly hurt you? she asked me.

The hell does that mean?

She looked over at me. Have you thought about what this is like for me?

I wormed in my seat and watched the palms out the window and the crumbling parking lots scoot by. I was honest with her despite the shitty behind it. I stay too busy, with the nursery and whatever.

She cradled her stomach and dropped her head on the window. This is ruining me, Jerry.

I didn't even think. I said, That's shit. I'm taking care of you and will keep doing it.

She socked my arm. You dumb fucking animal. She hit me again. I'm selling you a child like fucking goods.

What does that even mean?

I don't give a shit about whatever you give me, Jerry. I just want you. I'm having this damn child to be near you. And of course I'm growing attached to the thing now. Did you never think that would happen? That I could just give it up without a thought? I'm still not ready to be a mother, but Jesus Christ.

She put her hands over her belly and sat back. Hitting and screaming seemed to make her feel better. But I was still without a brain about it. I told her that this was something she agreed to herself. That she was getting a fair shake. That she could be whatever amount of mother she wanted, but that I wanted the kid. I was ready for it.

When I pulled into our driveway she climbed out. She walked to her door, and I followed her. She looked through her purse for her keys. She had trouble and instead of throwing the bag across the yard and scattering its guts, she set it down on the concrete step and set herself down next to it and put her face in her hands. I picked it up and looked as gently as I could, but there were no keys. There was no telling where they could be, and I couldn't pull together the air to ask her after seeing the derelict silence that settled on her face in the car. I went around to the back of the house and broke a window. I'd buy her a new one. It was the only thing I could do for her then.

When I opened the door for her, she brushed past me. She said, Fix the fucking air conditioning.

\*\*\*

Where was Mattie? I couldn't find him. I drove around hours looking for him, calling his name out the window. I wanted to say, and now look what I've done, I've ruined this girl. I wanted to know if he could forgive me. I was left with no one saying it was all right.

I found him under an overpass leaned against a pillar in the hot night balancing a bottle of gin on his leg like magic. Other derelicts were scattered in piles.

Buddy, I said.

He looked indifferent, as if I were an expected guest here in his home who he could care less about.

You ran out before I could pay you, I said.

Oh, yes, well.

Where's your pup?

He looked off away from me and said, He ran off.

Damn. How'd that happen?

Mattie shrugged. He usually sleeps up with me. After helping you out, he seemed miffed about the weather thing.

Damn. I'm real sorry about that, Mattie.

He kept looking off.

Hey, I said. Do you want to come over? Come stay the night?

He scratched his beard, straightened his clothes. No, no thank you. I think I'm through with painting.

I don't want you to paint. Just come over. We'll get a drink. I'll take care of you.

I've got an appointment tomorrow. It's on this side of town. I really have to be there.

Mattie, you don't have shit.

He stood up, and when he did he spilt and busted his bottle of booze. Shit.

I'll buy you some more. We can go to the pound, too. Get you a new pup.

He toed the bits of glass, scratched a shard across the concrete. What do you want from me? he asked.

Just some company, man.

Are you upset about something?

Yeah.

What? he asked.

I told him about Cora, the baby, what I was doing to her. He took it in, nodding. And then I was done, and he just stood there.

Tell me something, I said.

Why do you think this matters to me?

I don't know.

He looked around. The cars boomed overhead when they raced across the joints in the road. He said, I'm not who you need to talk to.

I went to his pillar, leaned against it and sank to the ground and stared up. I said, I'm real sorry about your dog.

Mattie nodded.

Do you forgive me? I asked.

Not really, no.

Will you later?

\*\*\*

When you're young your father sets posts and builds something elaborate for you in the trees behind your home. Shaded in all that deep green you study veins in magnolia leaves. Your mother strings lights through the tree house, and at night you watch through the open roof as the moon moves through the limbs.

\*\*\*

Lily said, It's two in the morning. You can't call this late.

I went out on the porch and watched the wind blow. I know. I'm very sorry.

What do you want?

I'm having a baby.

She was quiet. I couldn't even hear her breathing. She just wouldn't say anything for a long time.

I paced back and forth on the porch. I said, I'm not running away from it this time. I'm going to raise it and be its father.

You don't know if it's a boy or girl?

Not yet. The mother doesn't want to know.

After a minute she asked, Why are you telling me?

I don't know, Lily. I think I made a mess.

Imagine.

Really, I said and told her about Cora and the cold shit I'd done. I can't be in my own child's life. And now I've got this chance to do it over, and I wanted to do it alone. Isn't that selfish?

It is, she said. Especially considering she never wanted a child to begin with.

I drummed my fingers on the balcony rail, watched a car roll down my street bouncing in and out of pot holes. Do you think I can make it all right?

I think you're a kid is what I think. I think you got cut loose on the world too soon before your blood had settled down, not that you could help it. But you're not hopeless.

Is that why you talk to me?



It is.

I didn't say anything for a second, then, Thank you.

She said nothing.

I asked, What am I supposed to do?

You shouldn't be talking to me about this.

I keep getting told that.

Well.

Can I still call?

Not so damn late, no.

Can I know my boy's name?

She didn't even hesitate. Ralph, she said.

I smiled and sat down heavy in my chair. That's not a family name for you, is it?

No. It's just a name.

Can I come see him one day?

That's enough.

## **Chapter 2**

A trailer next to the gas station was the only salon. It was just me and another girl cutting hair for the whole, tiny town. I had let myself stay stuck in that town because I hadn't known what better to do with myself and my child. This other girl stayed busy, but I could go three or four hours twirling in my chair without seeing a split end drift to the floor. This wasn't entirely about money or about the women that got desperate enough to sit in my chair when the other girl was booked. They'd have her tell me how they liked their hair and say very little to me. There were a few kind ones, though. Some women asked about my five-year-old, Ralph. One had given me a candle the Christmas before. It smelled too sweet and made Ralph sneeze. He explained to me that one of the scent compounds in the candle inflamed something inside his head and that sneezing was his body trying to flush it out.

The other girl closed down the register, and I swept clippings from around her chair just to have something to do. I cleaned up for her, wrapped cords around blow dryers and hot irons.

Lily, hon, she said. Don't worry about that.

The window unit sputtered, fighting the heat. It pushed the chemical smells of dye and hairspray around. I pretended that I didn't hear her. Then she stood next to me and held out fifty dollars. Jerry, my ex, tried this once in a while. He'd mail a check in, but I'd tear it up. My boyfriend, Jude, often offered to take care of my rent. No matter how sweet this girl or Jude was, I told them every time, No, thank you.

Outside, it was dry, and the wind rushed past carrying my hair to my face and pulling my hem so that I had to hold my dress down. Across the dirt parking lot, inside the gas station, four old farmers sat at a table watching the sky through the windows. Fat, dark clouds bunched up, and the old men were nervous. Every church service for two months had ended with, Amen, and pray for rain.

Jude was a farmer, like every other man there, and his and his father's crops were withering in the dirt, but it was hard for Jude to pay attention to that. We were leaving in three days. Jude's uncle had a job waiting for him in New Orleans, and Jude was taking me with him. He said he would take care of me and get me and Ralph out of this town. He was coming over to help me finish packing. I loved him, and not just because he didn't worry over what some of the people around town still said about me, that I was trouble because I had my son not long after high school and without nuptials. Jude was solid and sweet in a head down way. He loved Ralph and me.

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Jerry was the whole town's baby because, growing up, he was charming and good looking. But when his parents both died the same night when he was sixteen and every soul here could give him their good will and casseroles, he was golden. It didn't matter that his parents had wrecked their car coming to bail him out of jail for fighting boys the town over. They said he was just a spirited kid. It didn't matter when two years later he got me pregnant. I smoked cigarettes then and used to drink a few beers at bonfires in pastures. The child was my carelessness, and Jerry abandoning me before Ralph was even born surely had to do with my attitude. A boy like that leaving dries a place this size up. Even I didn't blame Jerry after a while. You cut a young man loose with no one to answer to and scare him with the threat of something permanent before he's ready. It didn't shock me, him leaving. And I always felt something in him capable of being worth a damn. That's why I answered his phone calls lately, after years of hearing nothing from him, and why I kept him up on Ralph. What I hoped for, really, was that this new child Jerry had on the way would bring some good out in him. Then maybe I could give in to what he wanted so bad, to let him see Ralph in person, or at least hear his voice.

Jerry was in New Orleans. He didn't know I was moving down, and Jude didn't know I talked to Jerry at all. Ralph didn't know Jerry existed, just that his father was gone and it was only the two of us. Jude would think I was silly for fooling with Jerry. Jerry would think I was moving down for him so he could be a part of Ralph's life, no matter what I told him different. Ralph, I don't know what he would have thought.

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The drive to my house was rough over a badly paved road lined with trees. All their leaves had been covered by a film of dust for a month, but the wind was finally strong enough that it shook them clean again. There were cotton and beans dying in the stretched out fields. The entire town and the outlying farms and everybody around just sagged in the nasty heat.

I had Ralph in the car with me. How was school? I asked him.

Auspicious, he said slowly, concentrating on the word.

I smiled and turned to him. Was it really auspicious?

He nodded and looked out the window.

Where did you learn that word?

He shrugged.

I'd been renting a little place on the bayou, a dirty finger of water that connected the two lakes out there. There were sycamores and the hill leading down to the water was wrapped up in vines. It must have galled those farmers, seeing this water glinting in the sun and no way for them to pull it up to their fields.

My azaleas wilted by the front door, but the nut grass in the flower beds was wholly unaffected by the drought. When Ralph and I pulled up there were white birds above the trees fighting the wind and getting nowhere. Their pure colored bodies stood stark against the grey sky. Inside, the house was bare as everything was packed away in boxes.

Later, I looked out the window when I heard Jude's truck crunching gravel in the drive. I watched him pull a blue tarp from his truck bed and drag it to my car. I walked out to meet him and the wind was enough that despite the summer heat there was almost a chill.

He said, Weather's calling for hail.

Jude draped my car with the tarp and tied it down. The wind picked up its edges and threw them up and back against my car leaving pieces exposed. Thunder mumbled far off. Jude walked toward me. I expected a hug or kiss or any affection, but when he came nearer and I saw how his face was troubled, I couldn't tell if it was anger or disappointment or what. He walked to me and forced a smile and moved on. I turned and we went toward the house together.

What's your dad going to say about this rain? I asked watching the sky.

God's good. Same thing as everyone else.

After I shut the door behind us, I hugged him. Are you all right?

Yeah, he said. I'm fine.

Sweet of you to cover my car.

He kissed my cheek. Yeah, yeah.

In the kitchen Ralph sat at the table drawing. He looked up at Jude and bent his finger at him. Come here.

Jude stood over him and looked at Ralph's picture. He said, You're getting good at that.

Ralph nodded and pointed out the window. The weather today is turbulent, he said.

Jude smiled, put his hand on Ralph's head and said, What kind of mind do you have?

Ralph didn't answer, just bent back over his picture.

Jude pointed at something on the paper. He asked Ralph, Who's that?

\*\*\*

I used to have to doctor Jude's split lips. He would come across other men running their mouths or saying what their girlfriends and wives and mommas thought of me. I'd wake up to

him tapping my window instead of ringing the bell and waking up Ralph. When the door opened he'd smile at me from the less abused side of his face. He'd sit on a stool, and I'd wrap ice in a rag and hold it on him.

It wasn't my fault this time, he'd say.

Are you sure about that?

Absolutely.

Do you think this just bowls me over? That I want to fall at your feet every time you get the snot kicked out of you?

He wrapped an arm around the small of my back and pulled me close. The other guy doesn't look this good.

Well.

\*\*\*

Most of the house was already packed in labeled cardboard boxes. As the last day got closer I'd pared us down to the essentials. I had barely shut up about moving until then, wondering out loud where we'd live, if Ralph would end up in a better funded school. I was finally getting some kind of adventure, my own first step into a different world.

Jude removed the last few pictures from the walls and wrapped them in newspaper. I took the kitchen down to a few plates and forks and knives. I couldn't wait to see this place empty and the house and the whole town shrinking in the rearview.

Ralph sat quietly at the table still drawing picture after picture. I looked up to watch Jude every so often. He'd stay busy a few minutes, but then he'd stare at a wall or out the window, not moving, just lost looking.

I asked across the room, Are you sure you're fine?

He turned to me, smiled weakly, nodded, and went back to his work. Concerned over the weather, whether or not the rain would come was what I figured.

\*\*\*

Jerry had no sense of a clock. Ten at night, or two in the morning, or somewhere between there the phone would ring.

Pretty Lily, he said once.

No.

What is it?

You know better than calling me that.

How is he?

He skinned his knees on the playground. I asked him if it hurt, and he said No, that it would probably heal nicely and leave only an inconspicuous scar. I don't know where he's getting these words.

Jerry laughed for a long while. As it faded I heard it turn to sniffing. He cleared his throat.

He's smart, isn't he?

I think so.

He cleared his throat again and took a breath. He must get it from you.

Depends on how you judge smarts, I said. I worry about him in school here. There's not enough computers, and the books are ratty.



Bring him down here. I'll get him straightened out.

Jerry, I will hang up.

Please don't.

How far along is Cora now? Have you two settled on a name?

\*\*\*

The phone rang. I felt something clutch up in me, hoping this wasn't Jerry. The cordless was stranded on an end table. When I answered I heard a gruff man's voice.

Lily, this man hollered.

It was Jude's father, half-deaf. Hi, I shouted.

Jude there?

This man was not much for conversation with me. A lot like Jude, he didn't care for what anyone said about me. His issue was me being a woman and not knowing farming which was all he was good to talk on. His wife was a different animal, though. She couldn't stand me. She asked Jude once if I had any diseases from sleeping around.

He is. I'll get him.

Hey, the old man said.

Yes?

How's Ralph?

He's fine, I said. It looks like rain.

He was quiet for a second. Lily, don't curse it by talking about it.

Jude had walked over to me already. I raised my eyebrows. It's your father, I said.

I know, he told me and took the phone.

Why is he calling you here?

Jude kissed my forehead and took the phone to another room without answering me.

\*\*\*

While Jude was off on the phone I went over to Ralph. I looked out the window in front of him. The weather had picked up. There still was no rain, but the skies were almost dark enough for night. A lawn chair quivered in the wind before falling over. I studied Ralph's picture—crooked line figures of fanged monkeys in a tree, a boy stranded and hanging by his hands from a high branch, a man climbing the limbless trunk of the tree.

You're good at this, I told him.

He held the picture up in front of him, bunched his mouth up in one corner. Proficient, he said.

You're making me look bad.

He looked at me. How?

I don't know as many words as you do.

Mom.

Yes?

It's not so hard.

I said, For some it's not. I bent down and kissed his head. I asked, Where do you learn them?

In books.

Do the teachers show them to you?

No.

I pointed to the boy on the tree. Is that you?

Yes.

Why are the monkeys after you?

He shrugged.

Who's the man?

My dad.

I asked, Who do you think your dad is, son?

He looked at me. Is it going to rain finally?

I looked out again. The fallen over lawn chair had moved five feet across the yard dragged by the wind. I think it might.

Jude will like that, he said.

\*\*\*

Jude was always a sorry cook, but once before he'd insisted on making something. Distracted by Ralph, chasing him around the yard, he had burnt meat black on the grill. He stood over his pitiful mess and said, Sorry.

Looking down at the charred hamburgers, I asked, Should we say a few words?

Ralph, he called across the yard. Come over here, please.

We stood there, our little family, and held hands, the fire still reaching up to the dry meat, all the juices already pushed out and scorched in the fire. Ralph stood on his toes and peeked over the edge of the grill. He turned his nose up at the acrid smell of it.

Lord in heaven, Jude started. We thank you for this meal we're about to eat.

Ralph squirmed at my side. I watched him lift his head to the grill again and eye the remains.

Jude kept on. We looked forward to this beautiful spread you've provided us. I know its vitamins will help our young man, Ralph, grow healthy and strong.

Ralph tugged my hand. I looked down. He shook his head. Shh, I told him.

Jude said, Though it may be a bitter, burnt dinner, though I know I've not been a good steward of this blessing you've laid upon us, I hope that with enough ketchup and mustard we'll all, especially Ralph, eat this meal with joy in our hearts.

Then Ralph dropped my hand and took off across the yard. We watched him, both laughing.

Jude called out, I was only joking.

Ralph stopped at the edge of the hill that led down to the water. He turned to us and sat down in the grass.

Buddy, Jude said. Come back.

Ralph shook his head.

I said, He was just kidding, Ralph.

Ralph watched us. I said, You'll have to do something drastic now.

Jude picked up a stiff, shriveled hamburger and tossed it back and forth between his hands until it cooled. He walked across to Ralph and knelt next to him. I couldn't hear them

talk, but I saw Jude making gestures and Ralph shaking his head. Then Jude took a bite of the hamburger. He chewed and made faces. Ralph smiled. Jude rolled in the dirt playacting like the food was killing him. Ralph joined him, both acting poisoned. They broke the patty into pieces and took turns throwing hunks of burnt up meat in the water seeing who could throw farther, Jude letting Ralph win each time.

\*\*\*

Jude looked beat down when he came back in the living room.

He asked, Can we step outside?

I followed him to the back porch. The clouds were fat and welling up.

Is this about what's been troubling you all day?

He nodded and sat down on the swing. Dad just talked to my uncle. That's why he was calling here.

I held onto the chain that carried the swing. Oh.

He rubbed his hands over his face and said, The job fell through. Somebody came in with more experience. They had to give it to him.

I looked out at the brown, dead grass in the yard. I wondered how many days it would take for everything to green again after the rain, if it came. I didn't want to be there for it. With my eyes closed, I took a breath and asked, Does this mean we're not going?

Jude spoke carefully, nodding his head forward at the end of every sentence. No. It just means not right now. My uncle said they could still use me. They've got a man planning to retire

next year and will need somebody to take his place. He said he's sure he can have me on top of their list of candidates.

We sat there quietly. The wind blew from behind me, and my hair flew out around my face on every side, blocking out my view of everything other than the patio table straight ahead of me. The wind chimes hanging from the rafters moved violently, and I worried they might rip from their hooks and scatter across the yard.

I don't want to wait a year on a maybe, Jude.

He picked my hand up and held it in his. I know.

Is there nothing else to do? Is there not another job you could look for?

Not that I know of.

Then we should go ahead and move anyway, I said. We can get down there and look together.

Lily, neither of us has enough money saved to move down blind. We don't have enough for more than a month or two's rent. What happens after that if we're still looking?

\*\*\*

When Ralph was almost four, Jude took me on my first date. The girl at the salon babysat for me, and she fixed my hair. Jude took me to dinner the town half-an-hour over to the only decent restaurant anywhere close to home. I wore a yellow dress and a silver necklace and perfume for the first time since high school. He opened the door for me each time he had the chance. On a dirt road between two corn fields we looked at the dark sky and listened to the wind move through the dry stalks. Not once was he forward. When I told him I had to be home for the

babysitter he said he didn't want to go yet, but okay, and he smiled at me. On the drive home he held my hand, letting go only when he had to shift gears in his old truck. It smelled like work trucks do, of exhaust and sweat and dirt. He held my hand when he walked me to the door, and we said good night, and he turned to leave. I stopped him and asked if he was sure he didn't mind me having a child. He said he couldn't wait to meet him. After that, sometimes, I would sit in his truck and breathe. Not to relive a good moment because it was one of so few, but because I felt that night that my life might turn and that feeling stayed with me, and at first I couldn't believe it or trust it, but after a while it felt as real as it could, and then after a while longer I almost grew numb to it because I'd been living with it, so I sat in the truck to remind me what Jude gave me.

\*\*\*

Baby, we'll just have to gut it out a little longer. Something will come up.

I don't want to gut it out any more, Jude. I don't want to waste any more of myself here. I can't stand the thought of struggling to make rent the rest of my life in this slummy little town. I never got the chance to leave here and do college or just do a single thing with my life because it's what I decided. I pulled the hair off the back of my neck, looked at the floor and almost like something tacked on, almost like an excuse I said, And poor Ralph can't get a decent education in these schools anyway.

Jude held the seat of the swing with both hands. He lowered his head and looked down at his knees. He said, Babe, you have to know I'm not going anywhere by now and that I'm going

to take care of you and Ralph no matter what. We just need some more time so we can get through this together. That's what I want.

I turned my head and looked through the sliding glass door back into the house where Ralph was still drawing away.

Jude said, We can take extra time every night with Ralph. He doesn't just have to do the work they give him for class. I'll buy him some more books and a computer and anything else he needs.

I've already got half the house packed, I said. I couldn't bear having to put a single picture back on the wall.

\*\*\*

When I set Ralph in bed he asked, Are we still moving?

Why would you think we're not?

I heard you and Jude outside some.

How much did you hear, honey?

He shrugged.

I asked, Do you want to move no matter what?

It might be fun.

What about Jude? I asked.

He said, If you really want to move, it's not—He stopped, stared at the ceiling then closed his eyes struggling for the word. Imperative that he comes, he said.



I reached down and kissed his head. He rolled over on his side, and I rubbed his back for a few minutes as he fell off. Then he took a long breath and asked with sleep in his voice, Is New Orleans a big city?

I said, It is.

He barely said before he fell asleep, I bet with all those people my dad might be there.

\*\*\*

I lay next to Jude and neither of us said anything. We'd exhausted ourselves trying to figure some way out together, but there really wasn't anything to do. He reached for my hand and before he drifted off brought it to his face and kissed it. I lay there next to his sleeping body and watched the light chains on the ceiling fan move back and forth in the light that came through the curtainless windows.

I took the phone with me just in case and walked around the house, running my hands over the empty walls feeling for open nail holes that needed patching. I looked through the empty cabinets and imagined filling them all again, signing my lease again.

The phone rang in the quiet dark. Only then did I notice the weather had calmed outside, only when the silence was broken by the phone. I answered it and hoped it hadn't woken up Ralph or Jude in the back of the house.

Pretty Lily, Jerry said.

I opened the sliding door to walk onto the porch and stepped out. The wind had died down to a slow breeze. It moved the warm air rather than cooled it. The wind chimes barely tinkled.

It's late, Jerry.

Sorry, sorry. How are you?

I've been better, I said. I walked out into the yard and looked up. I could see stars and that nothing was hidden by the clouds.

Let's talk about it.

No.

How's the weather?

I reached down and touched the grass. It was dry, and when I dug my fingers into the topsoil it was dry, too. Arid, Jerry. It was supposed to rain, but it didn't. Everything is dead here.

That's a shame, Lil. Are all the farmers up there cursing the Lord, their God?

I don't know what they're saying.

I kneeled down in the yard and ran my hand over the top of the dried out thatch with no chance of living through the season without the rain. It was going to break Jude's heart in the morning to wake up and see everything as dry as the day before.

How's my Ralph?

Jerry, I said. You're a selfish punk, aren't you?

Whoa.

I pulled up dead grass in handfuls and let it drop out of my hand. I said, I'm not fussing.

Then what are you doing? he asked.

I don't know. You just always have been. You've directed your life by what you want for the most part. Poorly, I think. But I've never gotten to do that at all.

He waited a few seconds before he said, I'm sorry, Lil.

I think I know that. I hope I do at least if I'm going to keep up talking to you.

Do you forgive me enough to let me talk to Ralph?

Doubtful, I said.

Hey, now. Don't doubt. You two could come for a visit.

\*\*\*

Something I remember from home is the winters when they stop clipping the pastures and the only things left standing are patches of two-foot tall broom sedge. The cold turns their green to dazzling orange, and the wind shuffles the stalks like chased fire licking empty space waiting for some sign that it's okay to cut loose and run.

### **Chapter 3**

On the bus, I found two hundred, three thousand, seven hundred and forty-four dollars in a bag, mostly in big bills, sheaths of five grand. I counted it, careful to make it look like I rummaged the bag for nothing important. There was a plastic, dirty smell of public transit and exhaust fumes to deal with. My nose itched, somewhere near my brain it felt like. Underneath all the money was a tag with an address, no name, saying the bag belonged a little north of and west of the Baptist seminary in a quiet neighborhood. That's where I was taking it back to, no matter me needing money.

I sat near the back of the bus and watched midday New Orleans move around outside. They wouldn't let me drive anymore. What happened was a wreck. A month before, I'd paused at a stop sign. On the corner was a child about to cross the perpendicular street. He looked just

like Samuel, my and Cora's son. The same age it seemed, right around seven. This kid was slew-footed, even. But he wasn't either of my boys. My first was with Lily here in town somewhere. For staring at the kid, I didn't notice that my foot slipped off the brake and the car reached into the intersection. I was bent over sweeping the broken glass into my palm when the officer realized I was very drunk.

Last time I talked to Cora, she was leaving for her parents and taking Samuel with her. This was right before I couldn't drive anymore. I was, desperate and saying, Tell me an address. Tell me where to go.

She climbed in her car with all her things and wouldn't look at me. Cora buckled her seat belt, but she pulled the strap away from her chest and throat and breathed. Jerry, she said, just go somewhere else.

Samuel looked up at me from the backseat. I put my hand to the window.

Buddy, I said.

Cora started the car.

Roll down the window, I told her.

Then she put it in drive, and I yelled, Roll down the window, Cora, while she pulled away.

\*\*\*

I was out of money when I found that stash on the bus. There had been a house in New Orleans for me and Samuel. His toys were scattered over the floors and yard. My hands used to be stained with military motor oil and Afghanistan sand, but I hadn't worked in years. Then,

when your son is taken, you see that your money pile has been dwindling away. A month or so later what was left was drank away.

We lived in a double raised a few feet off the ground with Cora downstairs and me up. I saved her from the working life, way I saw it. Her bearing me a child was the best thing that could happen to her, way I saw it. She was fielding johns at the airport, and I set her up in that house, made her a mother instead, even though she was hesitant early on. I kept her comfortable and made it so she didn't have to worry about money because she did me a gorgeous favor in giving me Samuel. He stayed with me, but he could run down and see Cora when he wanted, or she could ring me if she wanted him.

\*\*\*

Samuel was a superhero with strange powers. Amazing to me, what he would do with my back turned. He'd come in the house, smeared with dirt, leaves in his hair, and find me sipping a drink. Once he held up five grey stones to me.

Where did you find these? I asked.

Under the house.

Good job, buddy.

I made them.

I stacked them on the mantle. Under the house? I asked.

I crawled under there and look around when Cora had him out in the park. The world he made—red Christmas lights strung from the floor beams, rusted coffee cans filled up with old shells, ancient nails, and shards of colored glass. He'd mounded dirt around the edges of his little cove to keep out the rain water. His books were stacked in the middle. I picked through his

canned collections and belly-squirmed all over, under the water pipes and gas lines. His secret spot to hide from what?

\*\*\*

A week before I lost Samuel I sat on the back porch and watched the night rain and said to Lily over the phone, I think I've got to go back to work.

You're out of money, finally?

I swirled the gin around my glass. Getting there, I said. We've been living cheap. We should be fine another few months if we're frugal.

Does Cora want to keep Samuel by herself?

I don't know. She loves the kid, but she's big on coming and going as she pleases. I'd be overseas six months at least. That might stretch her limit.

What about her parents?

I watched the puddles bubble and pop, said, I don't want to think about it anymore, really. Very sad over this.

Get a job around here, dummy.

I don't want to mechanic for some greasy man and make nothing for it. If I put in six months with the military that'll do me for two years if I budget. I don't want to talk about it. How's Ralph?

Ralph is fine. He's got pimples now, and they're ruining his life if you ask him.

Can you believe I've got a teenager I know so much about and have never spoken to?

Quit it.

You should've let me see him a long time ago.

Jerry, don't you dare tell me what I should have done with my son.

I've been better for years now. You should give me some credit.

It'd make for too many questions. And you're a drunk anyway.

Well, I said. Looking out over the yard, I noted that the banana trees needed some attention. I said to Lily, You keep him.

Excuse me.

Keep Samuel if I go back overseas. He'd love it with you.

Jerry, you have lost it.

Lily, I said.

No.

Pretty Lily, come on.

She changed the subject, started in with, Ralph wants a cell phone. The boy can't drive yet, but he thinks he's on the go.

I want him with you. You're such a mother. Cora is like an aunt or something.

\*\*\*

On the bus, and that bag heavy in my lap. I read the address over to myself. I dug through the money again and pilfered the pockets seeing if there was anything else of use in there. Out beyond the marsh and swampland the sun pulled down behind certain tall buildings. Street lights came on, and traffic seemed to ease.



I stepped off at the next stop, right outside a gas station, to wait for the next bus to send me to the far reaches of town. Outside it was cold already, a freak snap blown through. Not two months ago we were swimming. I peeled off twenty from a stack in the bag and bought some gin. I'd been so drunk so long. There was no need stopping, and who could fault a man a small finder's fee on an errand as generous as this?

\*\*\*

When Lily moved down, I didn't know anything about it. She wasn't answering at her place back home, but one day she called me.

First words: It's me. We moved to New Orleans.

I had to take a seat. I don't believe that, I don't think.

Well, it's the truth.

I had a drink in my hand and took a mighty swig. Where? What's your address?

I'm not going to tell you, Jerry.

I shook my head at nobody. I've got the number on my ID. I'll look at the address it belongs to.

She said, It's a cell phone. You won't find us in the phone book.

I kept shaking my head. Just tell me then.

She sighed. Jerry, we didn't move down here for you. This is for us. Nothing has changed.

But you're here. You could have gone anywhere.

Lily ignored me. How much longer till Samuel is born?

Then three years ago we were still keeping up. I had my little boy with me at a grocery. He was four then, walking on his own, or holding my hand, I'm not sure. I turned a corner, and Lily stood in the middle of the aisle. Goddamn, my stomach flipped. I just watched her for a solid half-minute, struck still. Pretty, like way back when, but a woman now, a mother's look about her. Her long, dark hair reached for her middle back as it had. She was alone.

Then I noticed my little man tugging me, pointing at something he wanted. I put my hand on his head, leaned down and said, Hey, bud. Listen. Daddy just saw an old friend. We're going to talk to her.

I swear, the way the boy could look at me as if he saw the electricity firing in my skull and could decode everything I'd ever seen or thought. He didn't say anything, just turned toward Lily thirty feet away as if he knew her like I did and pulled me along.

All the steps on the way quivered something through my gut. We came to her, and the dress she wore left her shoulders bare, so that's where I put my hand. Lily, I said.

She turned to me, startled by the touch. Seeing my face, she put a hand over her mouth and breathed. She stared a moment then put her hand on my chest and tapped.

Is that you? she asked.

I took her arm and put it behind my neck, pulled her to me, and we hugged each other.

Pretty Lily, I said.

Jerry, I don't have any idea what to say to you right now.

She pulled away from me, and we both stood there, arms down at our sides.

I looked up and down the aisle. Is he here?

She smoothed her dress in the front, said, No, he's not.

I think I just wanted to sit down a second, or lie back on the tile floor and watch the little birds that always managed a way into the store pop around the rafters. I don't know for sure because what the hell flashes through a mind there? I cleared my throat and just said, I wish he was.

She said, Well. Then she looked to my little man standing sweetly by. Is this your Samuel?

I looked at my boy. I smiled at him because there wasn't anything I had for him but affection. That sick feeling in my stomach left. Whatever frustration and disappointment I had felt was gone. I felt glad right there. It wasn't as if Ralph didn't matter, or that I loved him less, but that I had such a fabulous little man next me, and I could see it as that.

Say hello to Ms. Lily for me, bud.

\*\*\*

Me and Samuel and Cora were dressed for the hot weather, splashing at the public pool. We made a point of doing some things together to knit this family a little tighter. I held my boy's hands while he kicked in the shallow end. Cora tanned in a chair with a book. Samuel was something like five then.

I slid floats on my boy's arms and set him in the kid pool. I came back to my chair and found my cold thermos filled up with gin and soda and ice. After a mouthful I asked Cora, You want any of this?

She kept on with her book, didn't shift her sunglasses and turn her head. No, thank you.

The reason she could be icy was because she used to love me. She had it bad for me before she was pregnant. Even though I acted shitty for a while coming up on and after the birth, so obsessed with what I thought of as my do-over kid, she went on loving me. I would never return it. It wasn't there for me like it was for her. Couldn't be. Then what she had for me slowly faded and didn't turn into hate or disgust, it was more that what quirks and traits she'd found charming had dulled out and become something to bear. When we started together I thought she was so lovely, and regardless that I was marching fast toward feeling for her how she felt for me, I knew, right when I found out about my Samuel, that she'd never compare to him. And she didn't, and that was awful for her.

I shook the bottle at her. She looked at me, pulled the sunglasses up on top of her blond head because I knew how she hated when they felt claustrophobic on the tip of her nose, and just stared.

For a second I returned it, smiling at her. I looked at my boy tossing water. He loved it so much. I looked back at Cora. He'll be a strong little swimmer, I said.

Cora brought her glasses back down, turned to her book. She said, I need some extra this month. The heat has my electric bill up.

I kept looking at her. I did it to goad her, to pick, just to get a rise. Her not adoring me was fair enough, but I just wanted some attention sometimes, an acknowledgement that we owned this son together, something more than our stepping out front doors and passing him off.

I said, My bill is fine.

She said, Bully for you, Jerry.

Defeated, I slugged back gin and looked at the women around me. I watched my champion in the water having the time of his life.

\*\*\*

Back on the bus again I sat in a far back corner and pulled five more twenties from the bag. By then I was toxic drunk. There was no one on the bus to see.

Two or three would get on, and at the next stop we'd be totally cleared. I stayed on a few miles past my final stop where I was supposed to get off and leave this sack of money where it belonged. It just felt good to ride a second more. There were meat markets and gas stations shining dim in the dark, a head shop and tattoo parlor. There were menacing silhouettes under yellow street lamps. With no one left on the bus, I slid the twenties underneath a few seats for whoever, tipped the driver and shuffled down the stairs at the next stop. I wanted the air, to be drunk in the public air, to tempt fate with money in an ill-lit neighborhood.

\*\*\*

Something I never told Samuel was his shit luck. I got the drinking habit when I was alone in the city before Cora came around. I had my big lonely house, and I sloshed around the bare wood floors at night yelling at the light switches. There wasn't a family in there for me. My first son was back home with Lily running wild in the fields and woods for all I knew. But he was doing whatever without me. It shocked me how long I went not feeling one way or the other about taking off. He was most likely born and walking before I found out how sick I was over it.

When that sorrow hit, gin saw me through my rougher patches and stuck around when Samuel was on the way and I was feeling a lot better about life. All through his first teeth and through to when Cora took him, I was often sauced. So drunk some nights that when I woke up

and would hear him wailing across the room, I never knew how long the poor little guy had been at it, minutes or hours, before I so much as kicked a foot from under my blankets. Five times I stumbled while I cradled him in my arms, and through some grace I always rolled to my back, let the floor meet my shoulder blades and take the fall. By the time he started saying his first words, I functioned as anyone else, my body worn into the grooves of my loose balance, my mouth able to speak clear enough sentences without consulting my cloudy head. I'd walk toy dinosaurs clumsily over his shoulders and head and make the most lavish stories, and when I'd have to quit and lie down on the floor because I couldn't possibly sit up anymore, he'd do the same to me. I tried and wanted to quit. I locked myself in the dry house for days while Cora kept him. I'd get clean for a week, or two, or a month. But no matter, I would miss that taste of gin in my mouth, and it would eat me alive. Goddamn, I hope he never knew what I was.

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I felt good walking the dangerous streets, alive and on a goodwill mission. I was going to give it all back, the untraceable thousands in my possession, on my person, even though I needed some money, but out of sweetness I was giving it all back. They wouldn't miss the little I'd taken out. Their hearts would just be glad as hell over getting it back. Cora would read about my magnanimity in the papers, or maybe I'd find a way to call her, and she'd bring my son to me, seeing how sweet a man I was. It may would even work on Lily. It was the truest, kind thing I could do.

It was almost a skip what I was doing walking. That must have kept the baddies away, some dirty man, of course he was very drunk, hopping around with no cares. There couldn't be a

thing of worth in that duffle bag. I tied my tongue up trying to say the street name over and over out loud. Demontluzin. Demontluzin.

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I want to get a job, Cora said. We were on the front porch. There was little traffic on our street. Big oaks lined the road, and Samuel kicked a soccer ball into a net I'd put together for him. When a little wind blew by, little, brown leaves fluttered down over my boy.

No, I told her. You don't have to.

I want to contribute a little. Just to do something. I'm bored, Jerry.

We needed the money, but I said instead, You did enough having Samuel. Get a hobby, read a book.

Things have been too easy.

I looked at her. What does that mean? I asked.

She watched Samuel kick a ball over the net, over the iron fence into the neighbor's yard. He looked up at us.

I said to him, It's all right. Just go get it.

He opened our gate and ran down the sidewalk.

I don't know, Cora said. I'm not very fulfilled.

Raising him isn't enough?

She shrugged. I don't think so, she said. Then she turned to me. And I'm not horrible for saying that, Jerry.

I put my hands in the air. Nobody is saying that, I told her.

Samuel ran back into the yard carrying the ball above his head, smiling. He threw it down hard on the ground, and it bounced into the back of the net.

Good job, honey, Cora said clapping her hands.

We sat there quiet for a second. Then she said, See?

What?

That's not the end all, be all for me. I love him, and I'm proud, you know. But I need a little more.

I couldn't get it exactly, what she was saying. I watched my boy chase that ball around the yard. I nodded my head toward him, said, Nothing's better for me. I turned to her and said, It'd be so sexy if you loved him like I do.

I saw her body tense, saw her lower back twitch against the back of her chair. She rolled her shoulders, and I think she hated me for a second.

What I said to her then was, I don't know what you think I meant. Was that shitty? I really didn't mean to be shitty. I don't know what I meant.

Quit talking, Jerry.

Really. You look like you want to kill me.

Just stop.

The two of us were quiet for twenty minutes except for saying encouragement to Samuel. He loved playing ball. He loved running the yard. I could have watched it forever.

Finally, I said, Listen, about money. I think I've got to head back to Afghanistan for another jot. Things are getting tight.

Jerry, I just said I want to work. If we need money, why the hell would you not let me know?



That's not the arrangement. I provide for you and him. That's my place.

You don't have to go off again like that. Just work here.

It's not like you'll miss me, I told her. You'll be glad I'm out of your hair for a while.

We watched Samuel some more. I pointed to him. He'll miss me, I said.

She looked at me, almost tender for a second. She said, He does love you.

I cleared my throat before I said, I was thinking Lily might keep him some while I'm away.

She laughed a sharp, mean, little laugh. No, you did not. You did not think that for one second.

Just listen.

Jerry, I will not listen. In fact, I'm going inside now so I don't have to hear another word from you.

She stood up turned toward her door.

I stood, too, and said, You just said you don't love him like I do.

She stopped and turned to me. Cora walked over and took my arm and dragged me through her front door before shutting it. She slapped me across the face. One of her fingers curled in, and a fingernail dragged across my cheek.

I did not say anything like that, you asshole. And do not make the mistake of ever saying that out loud again, much less anywhere near my child.

I reached for her and tried to hold her shoulders to sooth her. Cora, I'm not suggesting we change our arrangement at all. I just thought that Lily could keep him so you could still come and go and be fulfilled with other things like you want.

She shrugged my hands off her. You give me no credit, do you?

What do you mean?

You've never thought I loved Samuel. From day one. I wasn't ready for him, but I've always loved him. He is my son. Do you understand that?

Yes, yes. I understand. I swear. But will you please just hear me out? It just seems like—

She stopped me, asked, Are you really still continuing this?

Cora, I said. Please listen.

She grabbed my arm and nodded her head and directed me to the door. She was calm saying this, Get out. Right now. I won't hear anymore. I don't deserve it.

She opened the door and bright day flooded in, and Samuel still played ball in the drifting down leaves. She nudged me over the door step and said, Send Samuel into me now. She shut the door behind me, and the next morning was when she left.

\*\*\*

Ah, shit. She took my boy, Lily.

What happened?

I don't know.

You don't know anything? she asked.

I was already drunk. It must have been like eight in the morning. The sun was still low, and it wasn't hot yet on the porch. The ice in my gin kept firm.

He was just in the yard yesterday, I told her.

Jerry, you've got to concentrate and talk to me like a sober person.

I sat up straight in my chair and said slowly, Cora has taken my son to live with her at her parents. I do not know where her parents live. Maybe Gulf Shores or Biloxi or Mobile. One of those.

She asked me, What did you do to make her do this?

I slumped down in my chair. Why do you assume it was me that made her leave?

Because I know you.

Come on, now.

What did you do? she asked.

I don't know. I told her I had to go overseas.

That can't be all.

I slid down my chair even further until my head was almost at the place where the back meets the seat. I said, I mentioned you keeping Samuel.

Damn it, Jerry.

Was that bad?

Of course it was. First thing, I told you no when you asked me. Other thing is what did you expect? That's her child, too.

But she doesn't love him like I do.

My word, she said.

What?

You just don't have a clue sometimes.

Finally I just slid all the way down and lay on the floor. I know, I said.

She didn't speak for a minute, then said, I really do hate this for you. Despite all, you're not a terrible father.

I let loose a loud groan. What should I do?

I don't know, Jerry.

Will you call her? Try to talk to her?

Absolutely not.

Please.

No. I cannot get involved in this. This is your mess. You can't just let someone swoop in and try to fix this for you. Besides, she said. There's nothing I could say to her. We've never even spoken before, and she's the one that's been living with you all these years. I don't know you besides phone calls, so I can't say anything about you.

Lily, you know me.

I know a little. Probably enough.

I rolled on my side and looked through the porch railing out to the yard. I pulled my legs up to my chest and held them with my spare arm. Will you please tell me what to do, Lily?

I can't tell you what. But do something. And it should probably be drastic.

\*\*\*

I cut a zig-zag path down Demontluzin because I was too far gone to remember which side of the street was for evens and which was for odds. I found the house in the way early morning as the day finally broke the black and bled a little grey and orange. Crouched behind a giant oleander, I watched the house to see if anyone was up and moving yet. I'd ring the doorbell and stand there grinning like a dope. My name would be in the papers, hero of the week, one more chance for my boys. I glided up the walkway and knocked vigorously on the door. I stood

there a beat smiling, but something struck my mind and grabbed a hold of me. I retreated to the big shrub, and the bag bounced in my hand. I slid behind the bush like I was stealing a base and peeked through the leaves. A shirtless, teenage boy, tattooed and muscled up, eased the door open a crack and looked up and down the porch. He walked out and looked around pissy-like, woken from his sleep surely. He said some curse words then was gone.

I opened the bag and looked through all the money in there. I thought then that I was given something, and only taking a chance on it, a last desperate punch in the dark. What if the news never made it to Cora after all this effort? What if, instead, this money was split between two accounts for two fatherless young men? When they came of college age this would be there for them, a windfall, unplanned for, to see them through a while. I saw it all open up in front of me, my Samuel grown and busting ass with a smile in a classroom, a vague Ralph churning out A papers, both on to lovely lives with kids and wives and never worrying. They'll think that some generous person must have understood, finally, that the best thing wasn't sating his selfish want of affection and love and time when really he'd done nothing to deserve anyone's kindness. A stranger having given them this gift.

## Chapter 4

Mattie and I put effort into appearances. Unlike the shabby derelicts street-bound because they're wrong in the head or strung out, we trim our hair and beards with a pocket knife. Mattie looks the best he has in years. I found him again when I found myself out of a home. We watch what we eat to keep lean so customers pity us still. We wear bright, thrift store three-piece suits that fit a little small—because too big looks frumpy—and hats like men in the fifties.

A dandy, an old smiling man once said from his truck as he passed me change.

I tipped my hat and twisted a circle on my heels. Thank you, sir.

But today, Mattie and I aren't chatty in the median. He's upset because I intend to leave him come morning. We're having a send off tonight. He's happy for me, I hope, but his heart is breaking. Mattie is awful with change. It's how he ended up on the streets so long ago. I worry

for him. I love him. We've been in the begging trade awhile, and I've kept close to him. If it weren't for Mattie, I'd have been lost a long time ago, I figure. We fell into a good pattern. But I got word that I can see my Ralph now, so I've got to clean up.

Where we solicit, there's been road work for months. The traffic channels down from three lanes to one on both sides and gives us more face time with the customers. It's good seeing them this way, like we're offering a useful product, the warm heart of charitable giving. It keeps us, at least a little, in the real world we each left behind. It's bad hot here though summer is on the way out. No shade and the heat reflects off the concrete and asphalt. There's not much to look at. It's ugly with gas stations and chicken fast-food. But as long as the construction crews don't chase us off we make out pretty well.

Some of our earnings go into a marketing fund for clean poster board and markers. Mattie's signage is to the heart. He stands next to whatever stray pup of the day, sign saying, I'm Having Trouble Feeding This Dog in neat, wide letters. Mine says, I won't buy liquor with your donation. But I keep gin in my coat pocket and drink when the lights turns green and customers roll away. Used to be that Mattie got a thrill out of the false advertising. I found out his past, a short career as a radio ad man, the voice of dozens of commercials spoken in thick, lustrous tones. That left a residue of salesman about him that's responsible for much of our success after we made friends again and I gave him guidance, mined his talents. He never liked the job, just fell into it. He'd crack up recording commercials when he had to say something smarmy. Not because he got off on trickery. It just struck him funny.

We could have gotten real jobs. We're experienced and gifted. I'm a whiz with vehicles, lawn mowers to M1 Abrams tanks. We could have cleaned up our act, found a temp agency and honest work, called in favors from our past lives. I've got the one person left that talks to me. But

people from back then scare the hell out of Mattie, and after you've run your own business and lived according to your own terms so long, bosses don't play into any plan.

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Some nights I find a payphone. A week ago I stood at the gas station and scratched nonsense into the peeling paint. The halogen light over my head flickered in the wind.

I blocked the number, dialed and said, Pretty Lily.

We talked about Ralph. He's driving now, all over the city, she says, just to go.

To keep up the habit, I said, Describe his ride. Maybe I'll see him around town and flag him down.

She asked after me. I said I'm fixing a leak in the porch roof and retiling the bathroom. Still working in the car shop on Broad.

You sound like you're making it.

About as well as I can.

Lily asked, Is your boss still giving you hell?

Yeah, I said. Five minutes late, and you'd think I salted his lawn.

I'm proud of you for sticking to.

I rubbed my foot over the gravel on the ground. Thanks.

Cora still won't let you see Samuel? she asked.

No. She won't answer the phone.

I could hear her breath deep. She said, She's wrong for that.

Yes. Well.



This next part was a surprise. She said, Ralph asks about you.

It felt like coming down a steep hill fast, the way your stomach moves to your lower back and dissolves. Does he?

I think the older he gets the more important it is to him. I tell him you're well.

Does he know I'm in the city?

No.

I hope you say some good things.

I do. Especially now since you seem to have your life in better order.

With my back on the wall, I slid down to sit. The phone cord was short. I had to lift my neck up to an angle. That's nice of you, Lily.

Would you like to meet him?

That didn't register. I blinked several times, asked, What?

You can meet him now.

I closed my eyes and shook my head back and forth. I was quiet, tried to just breathe right. Why now?

I think Ralph is old enough to handle it.

I sighed. Lily.

You don't want to?

I don't know.

She didn't sound mad when she said, Jerry, you've asked to meet him a thousand times. I don't understand.

This is sudden, Lily. You're catching me off guard. I really thought it'd never come to this no matter what I did or said.

I thought you wanted it.

What I did was look at my shoes in front of me. They sat on a fissure in the concrete and black ants moved over my shoelaces. I looked underneath the payphone. There were all these colors, a spent condom tacked up with bright gum.

Jerry, she said.

Lil, I gotta think about it. I don't know if I'm really ready for this. I've got to think.

That's fine, Jerry. I understand that, I think. You can let me know.

I said, Thank you. Then neither of us said anything for a minute. We were quiet on the phone feeling things.

I said, I gotta go, Lil.

All right, Jerry.

I said, Hey, Lil.

Yeah?

I cleared my throat, said, You've always been real sweet. I mean it.

Well.

If for some reason I never meet Ralph, just tell him I called all the time.

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So we shift our feet and sweat in our suits until a lady in a Mercedes waves at us with a dollar. You should've seen him. Used to Mattie would hustle over, give her his best voice—  
Good morning, Miss. Thank you for investing in the lives of two friends. What a change in him.  
When we hooked up again, when I found him under a bridge in Gentilly, he was the same old

Mattie I knew way back before Samuel was born. Twitching and scared and off-kilter still. I wish I'd have kept up with him, but I stayed too busy with family life and forgot to remember him. Now I've brought him into my love like he was a child of mine, though he can't be more than a few years younger than me. I nurtured his talents, and we built this life of ours.

He doesn't even notice the woman, though. He stares off, so I scoot over to her.

It's nice to see someone try a little harder, she says.

Yes, ma'am. We're just two good men trying to get back on our feet. The economy took that turn, you know.

Well, in that case. She digs through her purse and drops some extra change in my cup.

I walk back to Mattie counting what I've got. I say, Quarterly earnings are down.

He nods and stares off, probably thinking about his wife leaving him or me leaving him. He sees ladies sometimes around the same height as her or bearing a similar shape. Years later and still that's all it takes for him to get glum. Now he sees me and thinks I'm a goner.

You should consider a move soon, I say.

I'll be fine here.

He hasn't looked me in the eye once today, instead over my shoulder or past me or not in my direction at all. I thought we had left things better last night, but now that our time is short I imagine his resolve is shaken.

Profits are down, I say. We've been here long enough that we're common. No one's paying out like before. Winter's coming, and you need to save for a good coat and blankets. It's either revamp or move on.

He gets loud all a sudden, says, Get out of here if you want. There's enough money. We're not saving up for a house or anything.

Mattie drops his sign and walks toward the gas station.

No need to get snitty, I say to his back but not loud enough that he hears.

I sit in the grass. My pants pull up at the cuff and expose my ragged socks falling down at the ankles. Funny I never thought to buy better. I'd die for those silky, thin numbers I wore a long time back. I wait for Mattie until he comes back with a six-pack in a plastic sack. I hand him the paper bag from my gin. He waves it away and sits there drinking openly, and people stare at him like he's your everyday bum.

This is new, I say.

There's a time and a place.

And this is it?

You drink all the time, he says.

Not so publicly, I don't.

Well.

Should I stand on the other side of the street? I ask. Is that what you want?

Drink your gin.

We're quiet for a while until I ask him for a beer. He stares for a second, the first time he's looked in my eyes today. He reaches over and pats the bottle in my jacket. He clears his throat to say something, but stops. He stands up with his beer.

I'm going for a walk, he says.

All right. I'll see you tonight.

He turns and walks away, raises his can in the air. Cheers.

Please, I tell him.

He just waves his can at me.

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The evening before, Mattie and me headed to our bombed out looking neighborhood on the way home for the night. We walked the street lined with jammed up houses and their sagging porches, busted doors, walkways covered in tall weeds. Some were burnt from hobo fires. Old oaks bordered each side of the street and stretched their limbs, casting a net over our heads. They belied the current condition of the place, spoke of a time when there were nice things here like a young husband and wife, or a man and his son. A chorus of locusts cackled their rising, falling refrains hidden in the leaves. We walked into our boarded up and condemned home through the empty door frame out back. There were four rooms, but we kept to one. A high-ceiling joint with candles melted to the floor and windowsills, two junky, thin mattresses with decent blankets, what few personal effects stacked around our beds, and a propane camp-stove. We lit the candles and got it flickering in there.

We chatted about customers and growing the business. Mattie thought we were making enough that we could build more substantial signage from two-by-fours and plywood. He paced the room. We could paint our petition and start a revolution of beggary. Invest in solar lights to add to our billable hours in the short days of winter. Buy coats and hand warmers like hunters use. A new means of getting back on your feet—bigger, better beseeching. More color and flash. A striking lifestyle for the man on the street. Business cards. I smiled and nodded, Indian-style on the floor.

I said, Come see, bud.

Yes. Let's hear your ideas, he said sitting down across from me.

I shook my head. I didn't want to have to baby him into the new circumstances, even if it was what he needed because he had to learn better how to adapt to a changing world. I said in one breath, Lily will let me see Ralph. I've got to get back to real life.

He didn't know what to say and said nothing. Mattie looked at the wall, touched his shoelaces, played with a candle's melting wax.

Do you understand what that means for us? I asked him.

It seems like I'll be sold out, but I'm not sure about the specifics yet.

It's my son. The one I've never met and have been busting ass to know for over a decade. You get that, right?

Mattie didn't cry, fit, or storm as I worried he might. His dirty fingers massaged his temples. He said without looking up at me, I'm happy for you. Truly.

I know you are.

What's the plan for us or you?

I'm going to see him. It means there's some straightening up for me to do.

Of course.

Like getting off the streets.

Of course, he said then sighed. And taking company with the more together population.

No, not that at all. I'm not leaving forever. I'll get back to the real world and try and be a father of some sort to my boy. When I'm on my feet, you'll come stay with me.

I can't do real life anymore. You know it's been too long. I can't grocery shop.

Then we'll figure something else out for you.

He stood up and put his hands on his hips and walked around. No we won't. You know what will happen as well as I do. You'll make good with Lily and Ralph and leave me behind. I

know your story. I figured at least with you being on the street there wasn't a chance of this happening.

I watched the floor. Lily doesn't know I'm on the street.

He flipped his hand and looked off.

I said, Look, now. You mean the world to me. I'm not going to have a life that you don't factor into. But you've got to be a friend through this.

Like I wouldn't be. Don't be a prick.

You're not acting friendly right now.

I'm adjusting, goddamn it. Give me a second. Isn't this what you've been pushing for? Me growing up and behaving?

Mattie went over to his mattress. He laid down and pulled the covers up over him. Blow the candles out, he said.

I walked around the room, visited each little flame. In the dark I stared up at the ceiling and listened to live oaks scratch at the roof.

Mattie asked, Are you going to stop drinking?

Maybe soon.

I worry about your liver. And your son shouldn't see you drunk.

I know that.

Should we have a going away bash or something? he asked.

I reached over to his mattress and squeezed his arm. You want to do that for me?

I guess so.

That's sweet.

You can quit drinking after it.

\*\*\*

Mattie, my boy, he didn't come back to the intersection, so I took a walk. I headed in the general direction of our home, but detoured a few streets over to a nicer block. I stood outside the short gate of my old house. The same old oaks corridorred the way. The place was getting run down. The grass was tall and the gardens weedy. The porch needed sweeping. This wasn't at all the place it used to be, once vivid and littered with toys. I paid cash for the thing. I still owned it, but there I was on the streets because I couldn't bear the crayon marks on the wall and Samuel's little bed still in his room. This was a thing Mattie didn't know about me, that I wasn't homeless at all.

I went in the gate and walked around the house. The house was raised a few feet off the ground. I stripped to skivvies so as not to dirty my suit and crawled under and found my son's cubby hole. The dirt was banked all around it still and his jars and cans of found treasures were all still capped and lidded. When I looked at them, I wondered about all the things his mind did. What passed through it when he picked up a blue shard of glass and dropped it in his can.

We had the same eyes, both small, wrinkling in the corners when we laughed together.

I tried not to think about it because I'd done that enough. I thought about my Mattie. I didn't want this world to fuck him over without me. I knew from the get that he couldn't do loss. I wasn't a shining example for him, but his reactions were startling. He stalked his poor wife after he caught her cheating. She apologized, begged his forgiveness, swore never again. She quit the law office she worked at to get away from the guys she bedded. Mattie lost his voice for weeks from his screaming. He was out of work and ate up with his feelings, so he followed his



wife every day. The third time she caught him, she left. The fifth time, she filed for divorce. The eighth time, she got a restraining order. He dissolved as a functioning person so quickly once there was a police presence.

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Now I sit on a juttied out tree root in front of my and Mattie's place, fanning myself with my hat, and I don't want him to be upset. I don't know what he'll do without me because he can act like such a child. I've tried to help him, and he's better than before it seems, but I worry.

The light gets low, but the street lamps glow, and there's only one locust clicking away in the tree like a Geiger counter. He's doomful sounding without his buddies. I hear some leaves shuffle to my left, and I see Mattie walking my way. His hands are behind his back, and he's hunched over, looking solemn. He stands in front of me, looks down and nods. Mattie brings a clear sack of balloons out from behind his back in one hand, a bottle of gin in the other. He smiles.

Mattie says, We're grown ass men. We should act like it.

Then we're drunk in the floor and laughing. We throw our one hundred colored balloons up, and they drift down to pop over the heat of the candles.

I say, We haven't done this enough. We never just enjoy ourselves. We've been very business forward.

Mattie laughs a second, but it fades, and we both end up quiet. He says, I don't know what to do alone.

What did you used to do?

I don't know. It was so miserable, I don't know.

I'll come visit, I tell him.

I know that, but it won't be as nice.

That's why you should come live with me. I'll find work. I can take care of you. If you want to find a job one day, then great.

He lets his head rock back and forth. No. I don't think so, he says. Mattie pushes himself up, and he holds onto to his knees. Then he tries to stand, but he's far too drunk for that. Back on the ground, he crawls toward my mattress. I'm going to help you pack, he says.

I laugh at him. What do I have to pack? We travel pretty light.

He gathers my few things, a toothbrush and pocket knife, my spare suit and extra shirt, and folds and stacks everything neatly in a pile at the foot of my bed. I turn my head and close my eyes. I say, You're a sweet person, buddy. Then I hear a stream of wet falling on fabric. I turn back to Mattie, and in the candlelight he's making water all over my clothes and bed.

I try to stand up, but I'm too sloppy. What the hell?

He doesn't stop what he's doing. He just looks over his shoulder. He asks, You ever have a dog piss on your luggage when it was sitting by the door, and you were about to put it in the car?

Goddamn no, I haven't.

He nods his head back to front and stares off. They just don't want you to go.

He finished up and stumbles over and sits down next to me. He fans himself with his hat and rocks back and forth. Mattie closes his eyes and very slowly lies down and rolls to his side facing me. He reaches over and puts his hand on my shin and pats a few times. Before he falls asleep he says, That's all I got to say right now. I hope you don't leave me.

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The median is transformed, and Mattie is smiling. We compromised and are now holed up in my home to spend our nights still without electricity and celebrate, each of us, what good there is in our lives. A congressman gave us a couch to sit on and a rainbow colored patio umbrella. He put campaign signs all over it, and we've been on the news.

Lily comes by sometimes now that she knows the story. At first she didn't get it, was brokenhearted to hear, but I told her about my friend that was there for me and who I'll be there for. So she just grins and shakes her head. She says, No, not yet, but soon, maybe.

We have dazzling winter coats. Traffic has freed up, but people go out of their way to give us their change. We're famous. For the spring, Mattie wants a petting zoo with stray dogs and cats. He wants a dunk tank, and he'll be up there, my boy, smiling like crazy, water dripping from his beard and hat, falling in and getting back up. For now, Mattie and me, we brighten the dull winter landscape.

### **Vita**

Ben Shields was born in rural Louisiana and completed his undergraduate in English at Louisiana Tech University, an engineering school in another part of rural Louisiana. From there it was to New Orleans to earn an MFA at the University of New Orleans. Where he ends up next depends largely on the place his law student wife finds a job.