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Building Bonfires

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Building Bonfires

A Thesis

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

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

by

Michael Haines

B.A. Pennsylvania State University, 2009

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Heroics Vol. 1: Origins

Found a kid wearing just Underoos in the middle of my store, and what did I do about it? I listened to him talk about Moon Knight while I drove him home. Who did I tell? Nobody. When Cindy asked me, after I moved to the city, if I heard about the little missing boy, Cody, who they were then guessing had gotten lost in the woods before being eaten by coyotes, I said no. I didn't even think about it. Didn't even cross my mind that maybe I was the last person to see this kid, or that after I saw him I moved immediately out of town. I dropped him off and saw him hug the dog in the front yard of the house where he said he wanted to go. I sat in the car and thought maybe I should knock on the door and say hello. Say, Hey, maybe you should keep an eye on your kid, huh? But after I watched him hug the mange-covered dog and sit down and pull the package of beef jerky I gave him as a snack out of his Underoos, all I did was think, Well, it's good to go out on a good deed. And since I was set to move anyway and all of my stuff was already gone, that's exactly what I did.

I walked into my closed down, smashed-windowed grocery store to find a kid wearing only Spider-Man Underoos who would only talk about Moon Knight, and what I did was take him to where he said he lived and leave town without mentioning it to anyone.

Now, Cindy follows up about the boy: "They found an arm in the woods, Stanley," she said. "It's decomposed, like it's been out there since before the cold snap, and pretty torn up, but they think they might be able to pull a print off of the hand to match to the Identikit that he did at the library day camp." I nod, and after a little while Cindy walks away to take a phone call. Once

she's gone, what I want to do is scream as loud as I can, but we're living in her childhood home, and even if her kid sister's out, it seems as if her parents—who, like Cindy and the rest of the family, are so understanding and happy to help, so happy to let me wander and not pay bills and whatever else—never leave. We're here mostly because I've spectacularly blown it for about three years in a row and succeeded in turning fifty years of my family's black ink into a foreclosure and a drawn out Chapter 7. So I just sit there for a minute, the internalized scream throbbing around the loose, toxic scree that's been my head since news started coming to me about Cody.

I push out through the front door. It's only seven o'clock, early enough to get to Atomic City to grab the new *Moon Knight* before they close. The sun is only just starting to set, so the streets are still friendly. Even the fish stink of Washington Avenue is bearable, the wave of heat of the last week having driven the vendors back into their storefronts and off of the street.

A trendy young mother, out pushing a baby carriage, sweat gathering and staining the back of her shirt, asks the drunks outside of a bodega where the best phở is. I don't get the response as I quick-step by. It's slurred and probably indecipherable even to the young woman, but I catch a wave of smoke and hot breath. I see one of the men grab at his crotch and thrust his pelvis at her while he leans back on his heels against the bodega's window, and I smell a rush of lilac and melon as she swishes past me, tilting the stroller up quickly and with the muscle memory of someone who pushes a carriage on the streets often enough to know better than to talk to a squad of early evening street-dunks.

I cross at the light at Eighth and walk past the Friendly Lounge, where the academics out slumming will gladly yell at you about Proust, Satie, or Tarkovsky, but it's just as likely that the old man sitting by himself at the bar, nearly planted, rooted, would bend on about Harry

Callahan, Charlie Bronson, or Travis Bickle. “Clean up these fucking streets,” he said to me one late night after the bartender locked the doors and shut off the exterior lights. I could only assume that he was talking to me as he had been looking straight ahead, at the rows of bottles, all night. “Know what this neighborhood used to be like? Working class. Irish. Italian. Travis Bickle wouldn’t stand for all this shit.” He spat onto the floor.

The bartender, who had been sweeping up cigarette butts and bottle caps, probably waiting for us to get out and hoping that the old man would leave her a tip, leaned on her broom and said, “Get out, Ed. Go home and get some sleep.”

He knocked over the stool getting up and pushed out into the dark, Budweiser long-neck dangling loosely from one hand, the other hand out of view but almost surely shoved in his pocket, fingering the knife he showed me earlier that night.

I shrugged at the bartender, but she just looked at me and said, “You too, Stanley. You’re the one that got him all riled up.” And as I went out into the cool night, I half expected to find the old man heaving, knife in hand as he stood astride a prone, rapidly exsanguinating body, but the night was quiet, and the only movement that I could see in any direction was the old man bumbling his way north. I knew he didn’t get *Taxi Driver*, that maybe he was one of those people that thought *The Graduate* had a happy ending too, but I thought that my complicity in Cody’s death, disappearance, his mutilation by animals, murder, kidnapping or whatever other possibilities there were, would allow me to look the other way if I saw him down the street playing at vigilantism. I wouldn’t help, but I would look the other way and silently root for the old man.

But today, I just pass the bar. At this hour of the evening the old man wouldn’t be drunk enough for me to glean any courage from him, and that’s what I need, with nothing but a

notebook full of half-baked clues and observations in my back pocket. As I walk up Eighth Street, it transforms gradually from vacant lots to kept-up squats and austere but cared for row homes. Finally, there is vinyl siding, garages, parallel-parked BMWs, houses that are practically confrontational about their comparative wealth. But even with all that space and money, their representation of humanity is just as poor as it is anywhere else in this city. As I pass a small park on Franklin, I see two men walking groomed, leashed dogs, one toy sized and the other a Labrador. The men are screaming at each other, loud and unabashed.

“You motherfucker, why don’t you mind your own business?”

“Why don’t I mind my own business? You’re the one acting like an idiot in my neighborhood—”

“Your neighborhood? I was born and raised here, and I ain’t never seen your ass before.”

The sound of the block had snuck back into the tenor of the conversation. Two men, who would go to work on Monday and say hello to their bosses, without any tinge of accent or street in their voice, are engaged in a dick-measuring contest in front of the entire neighborhood. The dogs, tapped into their owners’ energies, mimic their behavior, straining at their leashes, the Lab growling deeply while the other yips and makes short jumps at its leash, choking itself. As I pass, the men are almost touching at the nose. Spittle is flying. They might as well kiss. They might as well fuck the aggression out of each other.

I can still hear the bitter shouts as I round the corner for the comic book store, and I wonder what they’re fighting about. Is it wrong that I think their position of privilege, really mine too, disqualifies them from this sort of anger? They should regulate or push down emotions, take a hint from the Zen Batman and formulate, plan, examine. Get that guy with the dog back the next time you see him, once you’ve had time to think about it, but never reveal

extreme emotive truth as a matter of course. I don't know. I know it's behavior unfit for the streets. You can't vocalize your hate, spite, ire in front of strangers. You subdue it or you look like a weak asshole.

A little hammer knocks into a dangling bell as I walk into the comic book store, and the man behind the counter looks up at me and nods while still rolling a rhythm out on the counter with his fingertips. "What's up, man?" he says and edges the volume of the stereo down. "Can I find you anything?"

"New *Moon Knight* in?" I say.

"You're the one dude who reads that? You got a pull list? What's your name?"

I introduce myself and shake my head. "No pull list."

"It got cancelled last week, but I'll check it out, Stan." He spins off of his stool, walks to the wall and looks but doesn't find it. "I'll see if we've got the last issue in the basement yet."

While he's downstairs looking for the comic, I walk to the wall and pull down a random Batman trade. I flip to the middle of the book and see him walking across a catwalk and then falling into a vat of something called LSD 2000 that's been mixed with blood, drained from the dead bodies that hang above. By the time the clerk comes back out, Batman is deep into a trip he didn't want to take and basically out of control. I put the book back on the shelf.

"Got every single one of these in the back." He hands it to me. "I don't know why, but nobody likes this guy."

"No movie," I say.

"True, true." He walks back to his stool and skips the song that's playing, and when I put the comic book on the counter he puts up a hand. "Just take it. Call it a consolation prize for the series you like getting cancelled."

I walk down to Willow Street and get a burger. I drink a few beers while I read issue twelve, the last I'll see of Moon Knight for the conceivable future. He started off as simple: a low level superhero on the wrong coast to ever see any of the good action. Drafted into the Avengers as one of their West Coast counterparts, he meets with Spider-Man, Wolverine, and Captain America to discuss a strategy for eliminating the budding crime kingpin of Los Angeles. It starts to become evident that Moon Knight has a dissociative identity disorder. Spider-Man, Wolverine and Captain America are figments of his imagination, and he's been having these conversations with himself. It's not clear that he's actually an Avenger. It's not clear that his powers even exist. In one of the last issues, Wolverine goes berserk and kills the more benign and level-headed personalities. Rather than redemption, or at least a realization that the problem needs some sort of fixing, the book ends with an ellipsis. Moon Knight develops an Iron Man personality. The problems continue. I drink a couple more beers, aware that I shouldn't, and I read it again. But it remains irresolute. While the narrator assures me that Moon Knight will return in "The Age of Ultron," I know that he won't. I drop some money on the bar, roll up the comic book, put it in my back pocket, and walk out into the street.

Compared to the fuss of the bar, the streets are quiet even when I get close to home, and I see five kids on bikes, rolling the wrong way up the one way. As they pull at the door handles of the cars, all I can hear is the quiet, oiled clicking of their freewheels. They notice me as I step up the stoop of Cindy's parents' and they turn around and ride the other way without saying anything to one another. If they hadn't gone, I'm not entirely sure what I would've done. It was best that I paid them no attention and walked right into the house, locking the door and sliding the surface bolt behind me. I could tell Cindy about it, but what good would it do? I could've shouted, shook my fist in the air, and run after them, full of the righteous anger that never does

anyone any good. Inside, with my hand still on the doorknob and on the verge of panting from my quickened heartbeat, I can feel Cindy somewhere behind me. I walk into the living room and drop the comic book onto the coffee table before sitting down next to her.

“Oh,” she says. “This is the new one? How was it?” She picks it up and flips through the pages looking at the pictures.

“Fine,” I say. “But the guy at the store said it’s the last one, and there’s no real ending.”

She tosses the book onto my lap. “That’s too bad, Stanley.” She switches tones and facial expressions from inquisitive and friendly to plaintive and serious. “Back in the valley?” She stops and looks at me. “Have you heard about this yet?” I haven’t, so she goes on to tell me about a house, one in the middle of town that caught fire the day before. It burned to the ground, but the wind never carried it to the neighbors’ nor the woods. She said that a family of five had lived there, and as the fire marshal did his investigation he found three skeletons that they were trying to identify since the two remaining family members hadn’t turned up yet.

“That’s it,” she says.

“That’s it?” I wring the comic book in my hands. I hear some of the pages tear. “What do you mean that’s it? That’s all that they know?”

“I mean, it just happened yesterday.”

“Holy Christ.” My head is still throbbing as I walk out to the concrete back yard and sit on the top step. For a second, I think that clenching my teeth and tightening up my neck, letting the blood rush up to my head, will be enough. I punch the concrete wall at the back over and over. I start bawling and mash my closed eyes with my knuckles. I can feel the warm, wet blood smear across my face, and after I look down at my hand and know that I can’t explain it, I walk out the alley and into the street.

The closest that I can get to out-of -the-city, right now, edging past tipsy, is the park eight blocks down the street, a square block patch of uneven and half-dead grass cordoned off from crooked row homes on one side and public housing projects on the other by a low wrought iron fence with most of the filigree kicked off by the neighborhood drunks. The grass is sectioned with a Union Jack of sidewalks. Each triangle of green has a single tree, only one of which can be described as a shade tree. I go and sit with my back against it. I shut my eyes and pull up handfuls of grass until there is none left, and then I keep my eyes closed to try to empty out my head.

When I open them again, stomach churning from the beer, the sun is starting to come up, and there's a guy with a forty walking the outside edge of the south side of the park. He makes eye contact with me and starts over. I settle back farther. Maybe he'll believe that I've fallen asleep in the time it took him to walk across the park. He's quiet, but I can tell he's there by the smell of stale beer. "Hey, man," he says. Beneath the smell of the beer hangs moth balls. There's no trepidation in his voice as he announces himself a second time nor as he starts rummaging through my pockets when I don't respond.

He has a knife probably. If he doesn't have a knife, he knows how to do something. I try to control my breath. I try to think of something mundane. What's in my pockets? The rolled-up *Moon Knight* in the inside pocket of my coat. That's the first place he looks, and when I feel the jacket against my chest again, the book is gone. I have the notebook. There are some fragmented ideas that I'd been working out about the kid. What's the house out by the yellow barn where I dropped the kid off? His house? Why hadn't the papers mentioned it? Important enough to keep quiet or not important at all? The man pushes me over and I let myself fall without resistance and make an *oomph* when I hit the ground. If the place was the kid's house, then it would've been

mentioned. They would have shown it on some of the newscasts. The parents crying outside, cameras aimed at the house, but away from the broken dog. He pulls the notebook out of my back pocket, and then pulls up my shirt so that for a second I think something else, worse, is happening, and my breath hitches, and I almost open my eyes, but before I do he pulls it back down.

They wouldn't aim the video at the impressive vista of the lonely yellow barn because that field would be covered with news vans, thick stems of wires blossoming antennas broadcasting the plea for help. The longer I watched the newscast the more alien it became. No yellow barn or rutted dirt road, no lousy cur, no run-down house.

The footage showed a red-nosed woman in front of a house with blue aluminum siding and an unattached two car garage, a house that looked to be on a road that was as far removed from town as the yellow barn but on the opposite end of the valley, a full twelve miles away. "Please help us find our Cody," the woman said, hiccups giving way to coughs that sputtered snot through the fingers she splayed across her nose and mouth. The man, seeing his wife in distress and no longer able to talk, stepped forward, opened his mouth at the cameras, and put a clenched fist to his lips. As transmitted on all the local affiliates and some nationals, that short reel is all I learned of Cody's family.

After he rolls me onto my stomach and takes off my jacket, the curtain of smell pulls back and I hear him say, "S'neighborhood coming to? Can't roll a fucker ain't already been robbed."

I crack my eyes, and I can see him walking away. He drinks the dregs of the forty and then drops the bottle. He's got the issue of *Moon Knight* shoved in his pants, and the notebook is behind him, dropped in the wet grass.

The main question: Why did the kid bring me all the way across town? I had written it in the notebook more than once, trying to rephrase it, as if parsing the sentence was what prevented me from getting to its answer. The kid was excited about *Moon Knight* because it was new, unfamiliar. Maybe it was the same reason he hugged that disgusting dog, the same reason he asked to be taken to a place twelve miles distant from his house. His favorite hero, who was as C-list as they get, was getting a do-over, a chance to be of a new wave of Avengers, to be A-list, and Cody couldn't wait. The kid knew that his guy might finally see some fame, go through the panels toward some sort of redemption.

I'm up and walking, heel toe, heel toe, the backs of my fingertips being wetted by the still dewy grass just before I pick up the thick malt liquor bottle. And just then, the sun halos the top of one of the thirty story housing towers to the east, and as I head toward the man, I hear the smashing metal and glass of a garbage truck compacting. And the bottle leaves my hand, flipping end over end toward him. I let my breath return to how it should be: jagged, pained, and melodramatic. He falls face first onto the grass, and the bottle skitters across the concrete. It opened a crescent of blood that I watch run from the man's head as I straddle his body and take my things back. Even though the sun is just now full up, it feels like all the moisture has already been wicked out of the park, and I'm left pulling at cold, sharp air.

I walk the eight blocks home only slightly faster than usual, and when I shut and lock the front door behind me, after spitting into my hands and rubbing at what's left of the dried blood on my face, Cindy says, "Why were you out all night?" She's sitting on the couch wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt. The TV is on but muted. The kettle is slowly starting its whistle, but the house is otherwise quiet. She gets up and walks toward the kitchen.

“I just got up early,” I say. “Just out to think. It’s hard not having a job. Too much time on my hands.” There’s a framed picture of her family on the wall above the couch. Cindy, her mom and dad, and her older and younger sisters are all wearing green Lacoste shirts and white pants, but none is wearing the look of pity I know them for. I don’t focus on them but try to see my face in the glass instead. It’s still rough, but I think that I can pass for sleep wearied if I keep far enough away from her. My wallet and cell phone are on a table on the landing of the steps. While she’s in the kitchen, I make my way upstairs and grab them. When I get back down, without turning around I say, “I’ve got some errands to run today. I’ll be back late tonight.” I’m at the front door, ready to get out fast enough that she can’t say goodbye. But before I’m out, she grabs me at the crook of my arm and turns me around. She kisses me on the cheek.

“You smell bad,” she says. “You should take a shower before you leave.”

“No time,” I say. I don’t need to see anyone to do what I’m doing today. I’m smiling, almost laughing, as I walk to the car. Moon Knight, or at least his Spider-Man personality, would definitely think that it’s funny: using a borrowed Prius to do amateur detective work, but that’s what I’m going to do. I whirl down the street and past the police cars, pulled up on the sidewalk around the park, with their lights and sirens still on, toward the highway, toward the yellow barn, the mangy dog, and the burned down house. Hurtling toward resolution, Vol. II: Redemption.

Dead Kids

A Siamese fighting fish in a pint glass, dropped into a bowl with another one. The three of us sit there for a long time watching the fish try to fight. We talk about bullshit.

“I don’t want to do any coke.”

“Why not?”

“Have you ever had it?”

“Yeah, I like it a lot.”

“That’s true. He’s got a point.”

“Like it too much. I don’t know how you could buy it.”

“I just bought it once.”

“If I bought it once, I’d buy it again and again. I could never stop myself.”

I ask CJ and Phil when the wake is, and they don’t know, and before I leave to get a newspaper to find out, we divvy up Phil’s coke and each do some, and later, from home, I call to tell them that it wasn’t in the paper, but they already know when it is. Mom’s gone to a conference, so I climb into the crawl space and pull out containers of Dad’s old clothes and find a wool coat that sort of matches the suit I’ll wear, and I put the coat on and it still smells like smoke and cedar and expensive cologne, and I walk around the house with it on and then try to fall asleep in it, and later I just sort of drift until I have to drive to the funeral home, and I get in line to see Russ for that last time, but I never make it to the front. I start crying as I put my cigarette out when my place in line reaches the door. A little closer to the casket, I see his face,

and I see the Phillies and packets of Zig-Zags stuck in his breast pocket. He's got a joint behind his ear. My tears start turning into choking, hyperventilating sobs, and I step out of line and walk back toward the door. A few people put their hands on my shoulder as I head out.

"Andy, are you all right?"

"If you need someone to talk to."

"Fuck, man. Can't believe it."

Dino, who was the first to call me the morning Russ died, grabs onto my forearm and squeezes lightly. "If you need anything," he says, "I got you. Just call me."

Jodie's in the parking lot, half-sitting on someone's car, dropping one cigarette after another onto a growing pile at her feet. As I pass, I grab onto her hand for a second, but I don't say anything. I hiccup and gasp toward my car where I sit and push in the electric cigarette lighter over and over again until I'm clear-eyed. I don't know if I'm crying because I'm going to miss Russ, because I'm going to miss the money he owed me, or because I'm realizing that I'm not going to miss him at all. A couple thousand dollars isn't enough to hold a grudge with a dead person, but it's enough to wish he wasn't dead so I could get the weed back and sell it myself. When I'm done crying, I light two cigarettes and step out of the car, heading back for Jodie.

"Hey," I say. Her cigarette is smoldering at the filter, almost burning her lips. I pull it from her mouth and drop it to our feet. I hand her the cigarette. We stand together, looking at the funeral home. "You doing all right?" I ask.

She shrugs and drops the cigarette and lights another.

"You were with him, right?" My eyes are still on the funeral home. "That must be hard."

"We weren't dating, Andy," she says. "I don't know why everyone thinks we were dating." She stops and wipes off her face with some tissues and drops them.

“I just meant he was at your place that night.”

“Oh.” She coughs, turning away from me. “Him and Dino were there and a couple other people.”

“It was a good party at least?”

“You know? It was all right.” She laughs and flicks this cigarette toward the entrance.

“Can you give me a ride home?” she asks and starts to walk to my car, like, No way you’re saying no.

By the time I get there, she’s already in and has another cigarette lit.

It’s a long drive to the lake, and then we’ve got to go around the whole thing to get to her house, and we spend half of that time in silence before she finds the cable and plugs her iPhone into the stereo.

“He really liked this song,” she says.

When she turns it on, I’m surprised to hear that it isn’t sentimental or something that would make us all nod and say, He sure did like this one. I guess he did love Ol’ Dirty Bastard though. I look at her without turning my head.

She spins the knob to turn it up. “Listened to it so much... He just ordered a Dirt McGirt T-shirt. It probably hasn’t even come yet.” When the song’s over she puts the music on shuffle and says, “The way he sang it was way better.” Something slower and more boring plays next. She pulls out another tissue and, after wiping her face, drops it out the window.

At her house, she steps out of the car without saying anything, and I watch her walk up the long driveway without looking back. I think about calling after her to see if she knows where Russ would’ve put the weed I gave him to sell. I’m going to have to come up with all of this money on my own. It’s too crass to ask her about, so I put the car in drive and do a U-turn back

toward town. It's quiet on the road through the woods, and even though it's not that late, there's no one on the street, and I can hear everything.

When I get home, Phil is waiting in the front of my garage, smoking. "I didn't want to go," he says and passes me the joint. "No, I wanted to. I guess I did, but I don't believe in God, or whatever. You know what I mean, Andy? I don't want to do that."

"It's just a wake." I shrug and take the joint inside with me. "I'll leave the door open."

Inside, I open up my laptop. I have a half dozen invitations on Facebook, a whole list of parties. The first one started right after the dedication ceremony at Russ's house. It's also somehow hosted by him. It looks like his mom invited every one of his friends and also went through and replied to all of the posts. Stuff like, "I'll miss you too," and, "We will meet again."

I shut the laptop and walk back outside to Phil. "Russ's mother sent messages to everyone about a party," I say. "I don't think I want to go. She was OK to smoke with, or whatever, when he was around, but now it's going to be weird." I take a final drag and hand the joint back to him.

He twists the cherry out with his fingertips. "Dino said she got an Indian Chief to come to the funeral." He puts the roach in his pocket after making sure it's out. "You ever hear him talk about Indians? Like whoop-whoop Indians?" He shakes his head. "Whoop-whoop." He laughs. "Do you have anything to drink?"

"CJ's coming with Ange and maybe Jodie. They're going to bring some stuff, but my mom might have something inside."

He ignores me. "I didn't really like Russ."

“No one did,” I say. I think that maybe if I go to the party at his mom’s house I can see if he was keeping the stuff there, off-site, if he was maybe as paranoid and off-kilter as he was starting to seem or if that was just acting. “He owes me a couple grand.”

“A couple grand.” Phil shakes his head. “And now he’s dead.”

“Yep.”

“So, now...” he says like, Give me permission to move on.

“So now, go inside and drink a glass of something, and then maybe we smoke a joint. And then maybe Jodie tells us what happened—if she knows, if she makes it here—and we listen to music, maybe, and we talk and you drink some, maybe too much, and then tomorrow we wake up, and maybe you puke from the hangover, or maybe you puke because you wake up next to Ange and you can smell the patchouli coming off of her, but after that you go out and you make some calls and you find someone new to buy from. Right now, I’m going to make a playlist and a drink.” I point inside. “What do you want?”

“Seems like Dino’s going all in. I bought this bag from him last night. Good, really cheap. He must’ve gotten Russ’s hookup, I guess.”

“There’s your new guy,” I say. “Check that one off the list.”

I don’t really give a shit about the playlist. I search for a best-of compilation from Ol’ Dirty Bastard, which I’m surprised to find actually exists, and once the download is started, I go to the kitchen to look for my mom’s liquor. She still moves it around every once in a while, but I find it quickly enough behind the pans above the sink, a bottle of Beefeater, Stoli, the last sip of in a bottle of Blanton’s. I pour some gin into one tumbler and vodka into another and check the refrigerator for something to mix it with. There’s milk, Clamato, a jug of cold coffee. I shut the fridge and grab the glasses. I take them outside and hand one to Phil. “I don’t have any mixers.”

“What is it?” he says.

I look down at mine and shrug.

He puts the drink back and starts coughing. “Gin.”

I finish mine in a couple sips. I can feel that the joint has already taken hold of my arms and legs. Dino always sold crap middies or terrible schwag bags, the kind of shit old-heads will get nostalgic about. This is closer to the sort of weed that I was getting for Russ lately.

Phil leans over and lets a stream of spit run out of his mouth. “I’m going inside to pack a bowl. And get a glass of something that isn’t gin.”

After he goes inside, I take out my phone and send text messages to a bunch of people I know bought from Russ.

“Did you buy from him in the few days before?” I don’t say before what, but they’ll know.

“Did he have it broken down and packaged up?”

“What kind of baggies was he using? Those fold over sandwich bags? Ziploc? Was he just sealing it up in cigarette pack cellophane with a lighter?”

I don’t get much in the way of responses. But I still stand in the driveway and pull the phone out of my breast pocket every thirty seconds between throwing rocks into the trees and trying to flick cigarettes butts through the little gap at the bottom of the garage door. And while I’m still out there, about an hour and a half later, Ange pulls up and she and CJ say, “Hey, Andy,” and walk into the house with a case of beer, and she smells like incense not patchouli, and I follow them inside, and Phil is sitting at the coffee table rolling a blunt with a green apple wrap, and after we smoke that, CJ gets Ange to show everyone how fast she can shotgun a beer, and it’s pretty fast, and she mixes us a round of drinks, and we go out onto the back porch, and

Phil makes a steamroller out of a beer can by punching some holes in it with the awl on his Swiss Army knife, which he says is the only tool that he's uses with any regularity, and after we smoke out of that, I feel like I'm going to piss my pants, so I get a beer and walk down the steps, off the tall back porch and into the yard. I lean up against one of the supports, and I try to just listen to the crickets and leaves and the crackling ember of my cigarette, but really, I know that all I'm listening to is CJ and Phil up on the porch talking.

First, it's about the dedication of the ashes by the Chief: "Or whatever, man," CJ says. "He didn't even look like an Indian to me."

One of them flicks a cigarette from the porch. It goes end over end, little red circles, into the night.

"I don't understand how you can die there. You know? At that spot," Phil says. "People run into the median, but that's no big deal. Tom's brother totaled a car there, but he just crunched to a stop."

"I guess his mom talked to the cops. She sort of had the story." CJ stops and coughs. "Here, take this."

"No, I'm good," Phil says.

I push my cigarette into the lattice around the porch and walk up the stairs. I see the joint still smoldering between CJ's fingers and take it from him. "What's her story?"

"Nothing real sure," CJ says.

"Doesn't matter," I say.

"All right," CJ says. "So, Russ was coming home from Jodie's house. I left at like two. I guess you know that, right? And remember that this is all from like skid marks and how the car was fucked up because no one saw it. So nothing real sure, but he gets to that turn—the one

where I saw that guy on the motorcycle go like, *schwoosh*, straight off?” He stops and takes a deep breath. “When he got to that corner, he does everything you’re supposed to: he brakes before the tightest part of the turn, slows down, and doesn’t get on the gas again till after he gets over that little blind crest, so no skid marks there. Right after the crest, he hits a patch of black ice or something. Do you remember how cold it was that morning?” He looks at me and then Phil.

“I thought it was pretty warm,” I say. “But that early in the morning, I don’t really know.”

Phil just shrugs.

“Anyway, that’s where he went wrong. I don’t know if you know this, but you’ve got to steer into the slide. Russ’s little Nissan did a bender into the concrete median and he got two wheels on top of it, while the other two stuck down on the road. He rode the median like that for a solid ten yards before the thing flips onto the roof. The windshield and the rest of the windows break—like they’re supposed to—and a lot of it pelts him in the car. His arm gets cut and starts bleeding because it gets crushed next to his seat when the side crumpled.”

He’s been talking fast but slows down now like he’s gotten through the hard part of the story. “The road’s not all that busy. He sits there for ten minutes, bleeding, until the night shift guy at some gas station drives by on his breakfast run and calls the police. He didn’t stop but at least he called, I guess.

“The paramedics get there like twenty minutes after the gas station guy calls. In just enough time to see Russ bleed out. He didn’t say anything, just sort of gurgled for a couple minutes while they tried to do chest compressions or defibrillate him or whatever.” He stops and

takes a sip of his beer. “I bet his subwoofer was still going unce, unce, unce when they called the medevac and told them not to bother.

“Either that or he was high, and like wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am. I don’t know.” He dumps the rest of his beer off the balcony. “I still think he started doing junk, but I guess you’d drive slow on downers, not faster. He always drove slow when I was with him. You think they did an autopsy?”

“Why would they do an autopsy?” Phil asks.

“See if he was on anything,” CJ says.

“Twenty year-old dies in a car accident,” I say, “and it’s an open and shut case of ‘twenty year-olds are bad drivers.’”

“Dino’s got all right stuff now?” CJ says and looks at Phil.

Phil nods. “Cheap, too. But he’s coming with Jodie later, so don’t mention the price.” He tries to crush his beer can with a fist but just knocks it off the porch.

Eventually, Phil walks inside to use the bathroom, but he comes back out and says that Ange is locked in there, and then he starts to piss off of the porch while CJ goes in to check on her. He comes back and says that she won’t open the door and that she’s pretty quiet and also that it doesn’t look like the light is on, and I shake my head and say that he shouldn’t have had her shotgun that beer if he wanted her to be any sort of useful, and he agrees that I’m probably right and piles some weed onto the beer can-steamroller, and we smoke that, and we’re still on the porch when Jodie and Dino come up the stairs together. She looks a lot better at least. Like she finally stopped crying for more than a couple of minutes. He’s wearing what I can only imagine is the Dirt McGirt T-shirt Jodie mentioned earlier. It’s a sort of sketchy black stencil of

Ol' Dirty Bastard's face with bright gold teeth set off by a thick, shiny ink that's not on the rest of the shirt.

"Andy," she says. "Is Ange here?" She starts to pull a cigarette from her pack but pushes it back in.

"She came with me," CJ says. "She's been puking for like two hours, or something."

"Yeah," I say. "She's in the bathroom. Door's locked though."

She nods and walks inside.

"Hey, Dino, good stuff you're selling now?" CJ pats his pocket where a bag would be if he had one.

"Yeah, tell me about it." Dino looks down, polishes his nails on the back of his neck.

"Actually," he says, turning to Phil, "I'm going to have to get some more money from you for that. I was selling it too cheap."

"Caveat whatever, man," Phil says. "That's on you."

Dino's holding onto the collar of the T-shirt with both hands. His arms make V's that come to a point at his stomach, and it looks like he's flexing his biceps. "Fuck you. You think I get the stuff for free?"

"You knew what you paid for it when you started selling it," Phil says. "I mean, right?"

CJ is slowly moving toward the stairs that lead to the backyard while Phil and Dino are getting closer to each other.

I want to break them up, but more than that, I want to figure out how Dino came to have Russ's weed. "Where'd you get that shirt?" I say and point at it with a cigarette. "That's pretty nice."

"You saying I don't usually dress nice?" Dino says.

“God, man,” Phil says, “take a compliment.”

“I don’t even know where I got it.” He pulls at the hem and brushes the front of the shirt off.

Seeing his reserve, the way he backed off when I asked him the question, makes me want to jump on him more. “Why’d you come here?” I say. “Are you just here to fuck with us? Or are you making your services available to all grieving parties? It’s a little fucked.”

“No,” he says. “Come on. You know I wouldn’t.” His arms hang slack at his side now, no longer flexed.

“You called me up that morning. Told me, if I need anything. Or whatever. Got anything of Russ’s other than his shirt?”

CJ is gone, and now Phil’s backing up to the stairs.

“He was my friend too,” Dino says.

“Fuck you. He was no one’s friend. Russ fucking smelled. You couldn’t have a conversation with him because he’d been doing acid three times a week for four years. Not to mention he lived with his drunk asshole mom who always wanted to be part of everything. No one liked him when he was alive, but now that he’s dead he’s got the whole town in grief?” I grab onto the front of his shirt. “So what you got for me? Condolences? Or something worth a fuck?”

Phil is gone now too, and I have Dino backed up to the top of the stairs. “You have some money for me since you’re selling shit I gave to Russ?”

He has his hands in his pockets like he’s looking for money. “I don’t—”

“Save that shit. You’ve been selling it at dirt prices for four days.” I still have his collar in my hands. I pull him in close, long enough that I catch a hot breath, and then shove him hard

toward the steps. He catches the banister and manages to stay up until he tries to find his footing, and then he rolls down the six steps to the concrete landing.

I stand at the top huffing for a minute. I flip on the light and see Dino's belly making big heaving motions. I turn the light back off and walk into the house.

Jodie catches me by the arm on the way in, and I spin around fast, and I almost throw my hands up in front of my face, like I'm about to fight. But she doesn't seem to notice. "Do you have a key to that bathroom? She won't unlock it."

I ignore her and walk to the sink in the kitchen.

"What's going on?" she says.

I drink water from the tap for a couple of seconds. "Nothing. Nothing," I say, calmer now that I've got a situation I can control. "I don't have a key, but if you just push the end of a hanger or a bobby pin through there, it's just a button that unlocks it." She gives me a look like, Yeah, and, so? and holds the look until I dig through my pockets and find a pen. I remove the cartridge and hand it to her.

She takes it and walks to the bathroom. She leans at the door for a minute, playing with the knob until she gets it to unlock. She gives me the pen and goes in. Ange is slumped against the bathtub, slack hands at her sides, head resting on her knees. Her hair falls across her jeans, and it's wet and full of chunks. The toilet seat is up, and it looks like there's a mixture of blood and vomit in the bowl.

Jodie is frantic. She lifts Ange's limp head and holds a finger under her nose to make sure that she's breathing. I take another look at the toilet and remember the Clamato, and I can smell it just under the flower of gin and bile in the room.

“I’m going to find one of the EMTs that hang out at the coffee shop,” I say and leave Jodie just as she starts to cry.

I walk down the back porch stairs. Dino is gone, but he left behind a little splash of blood where it looks like his face hit the concrete landing. Around front, I have to brush the safety glass off of my car’s seat before I can get in. There’s a rock on the passenger side that Dino either threw into the car or used as a cudgel and then dropped while he was breaking the faceplate off of my stereo. I instinctively push where the stereo’s on button should be, and I drum along on my steering wheel to the sound of the wind buffeting through the car, and I can hear the crickets and the leaves and road salt crunching under my tires and a dog howling somewhere and maybe this is what hearing is always like at night when you pay attention, but it seems like too much.

Inertia

Skidding and skidding and skidding and skidding. That was the main thrust of the way Bus stole our story. A quick paraphrase would be easy. There was skidding and skidding and skidding and skidding, and then there was a little time spent in the air before landing in a cartoon world where cartoon birds fixed Bus up while little cartoon stars flew around his head. That's not right. Bus wasn't there. It wasn't him in the accident. He only heard the traumatized and abbreviated recounting of it from Ted and me. In reality, there was only a moment of skidding. But in the time we were in the air, ages passed, empires rose and fell, the potted fern in our hallway died from lack of water, and the UV protection evaporated from our sunscreen.

The droning of the TV took the quality of background noise. But it was still sometimes hard to compete. Over the noise of a car chase, I said, "My friend told me I need to take charge of my life." I paused. "Well, that's not exactly what he said."

Ted was sitting on the couch, next to me, drinking a small glass of Budweiser, quietly watching *Nash Bridges*.

"You know the guidance counselor, Francis, I work with?" I said and looked across at Ted.

He nodded and took a sip of his beer.

"Well, Francis told me that I'm too passive."

What he truly said: “Goddammit, Sandra, you have got to stick up for yourself.”

“He said that I need to realize it’s not wrong to take what I need to and get rid of what I don’t.” I lay with my feet on Ted’s lap, and he absently fiddled with my big toe. “Because he says, ‘Sandra, no one is ever going to hand you anything worth more than nothing. Mostly, you’ll be given heartache and pain and unshirkable responsibility.’”

Ted nodded again.

On TV, Don Johnson’s ‘Cuda was jumping down San Franciscan streets. I wondered what he found so attractive about the show. That night, the State of the Union address was on, and I wanted to see it. There was a bottle of wine in the garage fridge, so I went out there and sat on the tool bench and tuned in the boombox to the public radio station.

It’s funny how little things change. Cataclysm conspires to put you in a new place. One where your life is different and things couldn’t possibly be the same as before. But there are a lot of little things that don’t change—small glasses of Budweiser, Don Johnson, inertia, old friends, and corny jokes. Ted did not come out of the motorcycle accident an amnesiac from a soap opera waiting for another bump on the head to put things back to normal. He remembered everything fine. I was fine, too.

Bus’s foot was amputated. He threw a party to celebrate. It was a totally frank, unironic party with a band and hors d’œuvres and an open bar, a party that built to what had to be the acme of bonfires. Bus made sure everyone was drunk or at least happy, and then he led the way to the

gravel parking lot where there was already a half dozen pallets burning in a heap. He hobbled around the fire, threw his hands into the air, screamed, and lobbed the foot, torn from a biological waste bag with his teeth, into the flames. No one could begrudge him his hooray. We all followed suit. Someone shouted, “Fuck diabetes.” The bonfire was a demented idea, but I don’t think any of us, after seeing Bus that night, would have said it was a bad one.

Ted rode a motorcycle. In the five and one half year relationship leading up to the accident, I infrequently joined him. In the buffer between winter and spring, Ted bought me a nice, new leather jacket and a warm, but tight, pair of gloves. I could see his M.O., and it seemed like a good way to spend more time together, even if I didn’t care for the motorcycle.

So I beat him to the punch: “Ted, can you teach me how to ride?”

That weekend, in the high school’s parking lot he gave me a lesson on the basics, and then he rode us out of the township so I wouldn’t have to do any of the wobbly low speed turns. We went to Dinah’s for breakfast. I had oatmeal with a side of bacon and an orange juice. He had a western omelet with toast and coffee. There are important and unimportant details. Sometimes it’s difficult to make the banalities less vivid. And sometimes the color of coffee changes the course of the day.

We set off from the diner with me in charge of the bike.

I was cold. The bonfire had burned to ash, and we went back inside to find Bus sitting on the stage, legs dangling, eating a greasy paper plate of Vienna sausages wrapped in bacon and then

croissant. A stranger came up and sat alongside him. He shook Bus's hand and introduced himself as Tommy.

Ted recognized Tommy as a regular at the bar, and after they reminisced about a recent scuffle around last call, Ted turned to Bus. "Your wife isn't going to be too happy about that plate you got there. Or the beer."

"Fuck her," he said "Her and the sugar can both shove off for the night."

We nodded. Tommy didn't know that Bus had lost his foot to complications from diabetes, and he lied about the occasion of the party, saying that it was to celebrate his full recovery from a motorcycle accident.

"Well, almost full." He laughed and pointed to his prosthesis. Tommy didn't know the crash story either, so Bus gave his redacted version of it, replacing Ted and me with himself and his wife. This was much more compelling backstory than a lifelong love affair with Pepsi and ice cream cake and Wonder Bread.

The accident was long enough ago that we could both laugh about it, and Tommy followed our lead even though it was a harrowing story. Even with Bus's jostling, rosy face doing the narration, it wasn't the sort of thing that I would laugh at without a little prod that said I should.

Halfway through Bus's exploitative rendition, his wife, Lydia, walked across the room to us. Ted was doubled-over, holding his knees, gasping for breath from laughter.

Bus was looking up at the suspended ceiling, pointing between two water spots, drunkenly trying to explain the spatial dimensions of a country road and the forest by using the gridded ceiling as a guide. He spun his finger and said that was where he landed just before a

robin swaddled his wounded foot in bits of the cottony fluff from cattails. “Goddamn lucky I didn’t fly fifteen more feet, or I would’ve been right in the drink.”

Right before his wife got to us, I smacked Bus with the back of my hand to warn him.

Lydia pulled Ted out of his laughing fit by the collar and said, “There’s no need to provoke him, Ted. You, of all people, should know better.”

He readjusted his shirt, looked at her, and nodded. He waited to catch his breath. “You’re right,” he said.

“I bet he’s telling you about a motorcycle accident?” She looked at Tommy, but he didn’t respond. “Speak up.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. I think that he probably knew it would have been better to stay clap-trapped but couldn’t do it with her stare on him. “You was the one piloting the bike?” He pointed at Lydia.

“Oh,” Lydia said, “I would’ve been, wouldn’t I?” She grabbed Bus’s upper arm, pinching loose skin between two fingers. “I bet you can tell from all the extra skin that Thomas here has lost a little more than just foot weight recently? But he’s still pretty damn big. No one, not even him, is going to argue there. Knowing that, when’s the last time you can picture the two of us on a bike together, him riding pillion?”

We were all silent. Bus was still looking up at the ceiling.

“You know how much I weigh, Sandra?” she said.

Tommy excused himself, and I guess she knew it wasn’t a conversation Ted or I were about to take sides in because she turned to me and said, “Give us a minute, honey?”

* * *

We had to cross the bridge. Its roadway was steel grate, and I didn't even like it in a car. "You're going to feel out of control," Ted said. "Just steady on the throttle and keep straight as you can. Remember that it's really short."

For whatever reason we both wanted to skip rocks, and getting to a part in the river with fast enough current that there would be no ice meant crossing the bridge.

As we got really close, he yelled, "You'll be fine, Sandy."

He wasn't wearing a helmet. I was wearing the only one we owned, an old three-quarter coverage Evel Knievel-patterned thing, but I could still hear him. And we did make it. It's the small sorts of feints at story that life makes that start you thinking about predestination. If there's a God, I think that maybe he uses pen in the Book of Life and doesn't spend any time rethinking things.

We went up the mountain to the scenic overlook where he sat on the edge of the low stone wall, crumpling up old dry leaves and dropping them over the ledge. "Winds north northeast," he said. "Going opposite town, toward the city."

"Yeah?" I said, not knowing what to make of the statement.

"Yep, probably blowing hard through the rock cut in the mountain." He stuffed his hands deep into his pockets. "If we ever go out that way, make sure you're careful. The wind blows hard, and between that and the buffeting from the gas tankers, it can sometimes get pretty hairy. Wind feels like it'll knock you right over."

After the accident, the EMTs cut off our clothes in the ambulance on the way to the local clinic where we would wait for a Life Flight to the bigger hospital. I woke up before Ted, and in my gloaming, I heard people talking about the ring they found in his pocket.

“How tragic is that?” a nurse said.

That was the second marriage proposal catastrophically preempted.

“Now who knows what’ll become of either of them,” my mother said just after she must have believed me to be asleep. “The boy was finally about to do the right thing, too.”

I pretended to sleep through the first proposal. This was on the same couch, with a different episode of *Nash Bridges* playing. I lay with my feet on his lap, as he drank a glass of beer before going in for the evening shift at the bar.

My eyes were closed when he started talking.

“You know, I’ve been thinking. Bus is almost seventy, and he’s just about the happiest guy I know. The other night, while I was working, I started talking it over with a couple people, and we figured, he got married and had his two kids pretty young, and his troubles with Lydia aside, those two kids are basically his life.” He half stood, holding my legs up as he did, and reached for the remote control on the coffee table. He turned off the TV.

“Now, I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do, but Sandra, I’m almost thirty-five and you’re getting around there, and I love you, and I think that we should get married. And no pressure about the kid thing, but it’ll be something to think about.”

This would be before Francis said, “Goddammit, Sandra, you have got to stick up for yourself.” But even without his advice, I know that I should have said, “Yes. Yes! Yesyesyes,” or “No, Ted, I don’t think it’s ever going to be like that,” or even, “Can I have some time to think about it?” But rather than doing any number of things, I said: “Hurghhh,” an improvised sound of sleep. A sound, of course, that I have never heard myself make.

Ted lifted and rotated my legs to free himself as he quietly stood. He squeezed the heels of my feet and then put them back on the couch. I waited until the rattling of his getting ready for work ended, and then I turned the TV back on and watched the conclusion of *Nash Bridges*. I watched through the credits, and then I watched the evening news.

It was a tragic joke. And when Ted told it, despite his assurances, I was never sure that it would actually be funny. It was a deadpan, serious story that ended with a man named Doodah drowning, face curled into a silent scream as he came up underneath the ice of the pond he and his friends were fishing. The other men drew straws, and the unfortunate one lotteried to deliver the news to Doodah's wife, did it to the tune of "Camp Town Races." Singsong but as sad and shamefaced as could be, he said, "Guess who fell through the ice today. Doodah, Doodah."

He told this joke to me for the first time on the night we met. It was a way to make me feel better after he sprayed the contents of a bottle of Wild Turkey across my blouse while he imitated Tom Cruise from *Cocktail*. It was a joke that split groups. Almost everybody thought that it was one of the worst in history, but as I held my bourbon soaked shirt away from my chest so that it would dry, I laughed until I was red in the face.

Francis stared at my scar over his book. I had declined cosmetic surgery to fix where the branch had gone through my left cheek, and I was getting used to people gawking. We were eating our lunches in the faculty room. I made quick eye contact, hoping he would be self-conscious and break the stare.

He shut his book and kept looking at me. “Why would you keep living with a man when you know you can’t ever make anything out of it?”

He forked the last bit of microwave dinner mashed potatoes into his mouth. “You’re living in separate rooms,” he said while still chewing. He worked a plastic knife around the brownie, trying to free it from the black tray.

“So what?” I said. “What’s your point?”

“Goddammit, Sandra, you’ve got to stick up for yourself.”

“And what would you have me do, Francis?” I wiped my mouth with the corner of my napkin. “What am I doing wrong?”

He dropped the plastic knife onto the tray. “You know what you’re doing, Sandra. You should know that no one is going to hand you anything that’s worth more than shit. Mostly you’ll be given pain, heartache, ennui, unshirkable obligation, and bullshit. Heaps and heaps of bullshit.” He paused. “It’s not wrong to try to shovel some of the shit away from you.” He waved a hand, as if dusting away a fly. “Like you’re taking off a Band-Aid.”

“Read your fucking bullshit book, Francis.”

After the accident, Ted didn’t ask me to marry him again. I was glad he didn’t. The idea of him making the effort to wheel himself and his IV to my room, where I lay thinking and rethinking us, terrified me. I should have followed Francis’s advice and ended it. But Ted was walking and would be coming home soon, and by then it seemed too heartless. And too late.

* * *

In a lifetime, I'd hazard, each of us has a finite number of moments of complete lucidity. And after the conversation with Francis, I looked back at the moment of Bus's revision and its aftermath as exemplary. On one of the most exceptional days of Bus's life, one when everything was supposed to be about him, he sat silently, legs no longer swinging, and took a barrage of insults from his on-again-off-again wife in front of all of his friends.

When I asked Ted later if that's what he supposed marriage was like, he said, "My examples have never been too good."

A loss of traction. "And that's pretty much the size of it." That's how Ted would tell the story, and Bus would say, "Skidding and skidding and skidding and skidding." I'm not entirely sure how I would explain it, but like I said, condoms expired and weeds grew feet in the time I was in the air. Yes, we hit gravel, and yes, saying we lost traction, and there's not much more to say about things is a basic summary of events, but we lost traction and got it back and hit the wire guardrail and then we went into the trees.

Being with Ghosts

I.

The last night we spent together, I came home from school, and Dani was sitting on the driveway, back against the bumper of her Volvo. Pat was curled below the car's rear window, her body squeezed so tightly into the little space that it looked as if she was made out of flat, tabby-colored boards. I flicked the window, and Pat stood up, looked at me, and walked in tight circles on the small shelf, rubbing her face against the glass and meowing. Dani stood and hugged me. She held onto the first two fingers on my left hand as I asked her what happened this time. She shrugged, meaning, same kind of thing, your dad's doing something crazy, and we need to leave because I'm scared. I got back into my own car, and we drove in tandem to the bar.

Cottage D, in the sparse woods behind Boomerang's, a dark, nearly windowless bar, was the same as ever: the faint smell of insecticide, yellow paint browning where the ceiling leaked in the corner settled lowest, free HBO when the satellite dish wasn't being molested by the trees outside, and tinted by the unhappiness carried with us from Dad's.

Dani went about her routine of lighting cones of Nag Champa and rolling a joint, while I sat on the side of the bed opposite her, watching Pat scratch at the worn carpet.

I had been sixteen when Dani came around. She was twenty. Dad was thirty-five. They met in Boomerang's. The bartender, who would later give us our keys to Cottage D, was serving

her when Dad came in. It's possible that Dad recognized her from somewhere and knew that she was too young to be drinking. It's possible that he knew the bartender had a girlfriend. It's possible he saw the way Dani's hair stuck in her mouth as she talked, animated. It's possible that he then sat down next to her, noticing more. It's also possible that she saw violence and trouble in him and was drawn to it. The particulars of how Dani became my stepmom for two years never reached me, but I remember the first night they came home.

Sixteen years old and worrying about my own girlfriend, I lay in bed, listening to the occasional low moaning of Dani, the smoky grunts from Dad. I banged on the walls, yelling for them to stop or quiet. This was before I knew that Dani was closer to my age, more apt to be my girlfriend than my Dad's.

The next morning, at breakfast, I met her. We shook hands, and I said, "I'm Shane," and waited for her name, but she didn't offer it. Dad stood over the stove, brewing coffee and drinking a mug of whiskey. As she sipped her water, as Dad stood, spectral in the rising steam from the percolator, I imagined them. I remember leaving to get the bus that morning much earlier than I had needed to.

Incense was filling up the cottage. The lingering insecticide faded in inverse proportion. After she opened a window, Dani sat down close to me on the bed and lit the joint. As we smoked it, she said, "Loren killed a fawn today."

I held my breath for another ten seconds. "Is that what we're doing here?" She understood the implied question which was, That's it?

"Shane, it was barely out of spots." She pushed her hair up, over her head. "No, it wasn't out of spots."

“But...” I said, trailing off as I watched Pat jump to the open window and try to squeeze his head through the fifty cent piece-sized whole in the screen.

“I know that maybe I’m supposed to be ‘country’ now, but that’s not all right.”

I don’t know why none of this really struck me as a problem, but I just sat next to her with the joint smoldering between my fingers, not responding as she seemed to want me to. In the ill-heated room, she was the only evident source of warmth.

“Well, I called the game commission on him,” she said, “and I don’t want to be out there when they come. When I left, he had the deer strung up in a tree.”

“He won’t leave it up there long enough for them to do any good.”

“I don’t want to be there either way,” she said.

It had always been a good idea to stay out of the house when things were any sort of off-kilter. I had gone to find Dani when I came home and Dad was bivvied out at the tree line, past the pond. “Camped to get some of those coyotes that’re eating little kids,” he said. He had finished cleaning his rifle and was wiping the blued steel with a rag.

Dani came home to him using the bench grinder in the garage to make flat point bullets. She called me at work, and we met at the cottage.

I once saw him, in early March, standing in the center of the pond, wearing a pair of waders and nothing else, holding a break-barrel shotgun across one arm. It was forty degrees. As I called Dani, from the cordless phone, I stood at the kitchen window looking out. Dad pointed the shotgun into the water and fired. I think I had seen him shaking from the cold even with the hundred foot distance between us.

“I don’t really want to be there either,” I said. I walked to the window and stood, huffing in the cold, fresh air with Pat. I scratched the top of her head, and as if palsied, she jolted to look

at me. Her pupils went wide, and she ran under the bed, into the box spring. I held onto the windowsill, laughing. When I turned back around, Dani was in the bed with the sheets pulled to her neck, flipping channels. I went to the closet and dragged out the folding cot. I unrolled my sleeping bag onto it and lay down to watch TV.

The first time we'd come to the cottage, it was late at night. I was just recently seventeen. We got there after last call in Boomerang's, but the bartender put the till back in and let us into the cottage. Dani told me that it would've been the night of Dad's eighteenth anniversary with my mom.

I'd been in my room earlier, just after dusk. Pat sat on the windowsill, looking out at all she could be doing. Her head rotated slow circles as she followed Dad's movements outside. His flashlight filtered through the window, and she jumped down and crawled under the bed. I looked out and saw him, his hand on one hip, pointing the light up. While I watched, he shut off the flashlight and went back to the pond. By the light of the campfire, I saw him pull the tab from a beer can, tie it on one of his fishing lines, and cast it out into the pond. He sat down cross-legged and drank the beer. This was a normal night.

But later, I heard three cracks. I turned off my lamp and went to the window. Dad was walking with his parkerized Colt pistol by his side. The flashlight, still on, dangled from his wrist by a lanyard. It swung in a tight arc, making a lightshow around his feet. When he got back to his tent, he took his kerosene lantern and walked off, toward the woods. By the time the light disappeared, I was on the first floor of the house. I walked into the kitchen and stood over the sink. I stared out of the window trying to find the distant bob of light that showed his position. I couldn't see it.

One of the bullets that Dad shot into the house had shattered a glass door at the back of the house and the transom above his bedroom door before becoming lodged in a rough-hewn ceiling beam.

The door to the bedroom he and Dani shared was open, and I could hear a steady thwacking from inside. I called Dani on the hall phone and tried to ignore the sound. After I told her what was happening and she said she'd be right over, I heard a low thud join the reverberating thwacking.

I hung up the phone and stood, crunching on glass at the threshold of Dani and Dad's room. The air was live with a bat flying fast laps near the ceiling. For only a second, Pat looked up at me, eyes glowing orange. She turned away and jumped, clearing three vertical feet above her launch-point on the bed. When she came back down, she let out excited, chirping meows. The second time she jumped, she caught it. She didn't turn to look at me before walking, fast and low, out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, mouth heaving with the struggling bat.

She sat on her haunches in the corner, watching the movement of the bat's wings slow. When they stopped, she turned away. She came to me and reached up with her front paws, clawing into the legs of my jeans.

"Pretty exciting stuff, huh?" I said and brushed her off. She started meowing while weaving between my feet. There was still a small amount of blood weeping from the bat's neck. I worried about it staining the unvarnished wood floors, and I picked it up with a piece newspaper. I was carrying it through the living room, to the garbage cans outside the front door, when Dad walked in.

Hot blood saturated the newspaper and crept through the valleys of my palm. Dad looked at my hand. Pat walked in from the kitchen, and before rubbing against my leg, she licked the remainder of blood from her whiskers. He walked back out, into the night.

Dani showed up an hour later. That night, we slept foot to head, not knowing that there was a cot in the closet. Midway through the night, I woke, sleeping on my side. Dani was curled tight, her toes lightly playing on the small of my back as she'd slept, making quiet noises.

On our final night in the cottage, my legs tightened with cold from a draft springing into the sleeping bag through the broken zipper. Dani snapped off the TV, not finding HBO. "I'm going to be leaving tomorrow, Shane," she said. "I don't have much in the house, but I would appreciate it if you would help me out a little."

It took some time respond. I just nodded for a few seconds. "Where are you going?" I asked. "Is it somewhere I can come?"

"When we go back in the morning, before you go to school, I'm going to gather up my stuff. While Loren is still asleep." She started kicking under the sheets and pulled them from the mattress. "I'm going to put some stuff in my car, and you can put some in yours."

I nodded. "You're going back to the city?"

She pulled up the sheets and comforter until her feet were sticking out the end. She rolled over to face the edge of the bed, and her feet receded back under the sheets. The muscles in my thighs contracted with the cold once more before I got into the bed. Like the first night in the cottage, we lay head to foot and both slept well.

In the morning, I carried some of her stuff to my car. We made plans to meet later in the day, in the gravel lot outside Boomerang's. She didn't show. I had a box of her CDs, a handful of

novels, and three slim boxes of joss sticks. I kept these in the trunk of my car for an inordinate amount of time, a small look into Dani.

II.

“Makes sense that the last gift I get from your mother is you turning out a complete fucking faggot.” It was the first time in maybe a week that we had exchanged more than nods or grunts. Dad stared at me, his nose red and dripping from coming inside, out of the cold. A line of clearish-green snot ran from his nose and pooled at his lip.

Dani was only recently gone, and I couldn’t afford to leave the house every time things went wrong. I spent some time sleeping in my car. I ran the battery flat one night listening to one of Dani’s CDs, *Music from Big Pink*. The next time I slept in the car, I decided to read instead.

That morning, Dad went through my car and found the CDs. I came downstairs to get something to eat and found him cross-legged on the living room floor, a handful of jewel cases in from of him, a drink tucked between his legs.

“What’s this shit, Shane?” he said. When I told him it was from Dani, he grabbed a handful of discs and tossed them at the cardboard box, and then said, “Makes sense that the last gift I get from your mother is you turning out a complete fucking faggot.”

“Dani, Dad.” I shook my head. “Not Mom. Dani.”

He pointed to the picture of Mom on the end-table, the only picture of her in the house, and said, “Tell that to her. Tell her that she’s your real mother and not some strange slut who isn’t even here.” He stabbed at the photo. “Tell her.”

Mom and I in the field behind the house: I'm young, maybe four, and she's holding me a foot or two off the ground by my wrists. Her legs are spread wide to carry the weight, though it can't be much. Her face is red, and there's a vein on the right side of her neck that stands out. She's skinny. I imagine her arms shaking with the thirty or forty pounds of my body. She's smiling wide, showing clean teeth and an overbite. I don't have any memory of the day the photograph was taken.

"What do you want me to say, Dad?"

He lowered his hand from pointing and draped it over the glass resting between his legs. "Say it. I want you to say you're sorry." He used the glass to push himself up from the ground. "Say it."

I turned around but hung in the arched entrance to the living room, waiting for something, impetus, maybe. "Do you need to apologize?" I said. "I don't." He didn't say anything, and I didn't storm out, but I did leave.

I didn't come back for at least a week. I slept in the parking lot of a shutdown grocery store, knowing that no one would bother me there. I woke up at points during the night, teeth chattering, and turned the car on for heat and to keep the jug of water I used to wash from freezing. I ate breakfast at school, and chewing on rubbery sausage and rubbery egg, I thought about five months later and graduating and leaving.

The memories of Mom were sparse and scattered.

Holding my hand as we walked into daycare. She was wearing lustrous red shoes, and there was a mole above her big toe that the leather rubbed and irritated.

Wooden spoon to my bare ass. Apologies from me and her.

Ruffling my hair and encircling me in arms as I cried when she cut her hair. I couldn't recognize her anymore. She smelled metallic outside the influence of the rosewater perfume.

Riding through the fields around a yellow barn in a hay trailer. A boy fell over the side. She helped patch him up while I tugged at the hem of her blouse and asked if we could get back under the blanket.

Running around outside in the summer and finding myself locked out. Through the window, I could see her head lolled to the side, asleep in a wingback chair, neck ligaments defined and ropy.

Eating a sugar and butter sandwich in the backseat. Mom, driving and listening to country music on the radio.

Drawing on the back of her hand at church and being unable to get the walls of the house to stay straight over her tendons.

In that week, I searched for something to apologize for and came back to the house prepared to continue my refusal, since I'd come up with nothing. There was no commingling of Mom and Dani in my memory.

Dad had forgotten the whole thing. "Come to the kitchen when you get a minute," he said, after I opened the door as if I'd never left, as if I hadn't been gone for a week. "I need to talk to you about something." His tone was sober, but he was not.

I went upstairs, and when I came back down, he was sitting at the kitchen table. I heard Pat's meow from outside. Dad stopped me when I went to the door to let her in.

"That'll wait for now." He took a sip from his mug. "You know that rodents are carriers of disease." He nodded. "They are carriers of diseases that have and will probably someday again be a problem for humans. I don't know if you know it, but a bat is basically like a flying

mouse. Same difference. Now, I'm not trying to be shitty—I know you know I don't like cats—but that cat can't stay here anymore.” He lit a cigarette and took a long drag. He laid it, still burning, across the top of his mug. “It killed that bat, which could've had rabies or God knows what else. We can't let it stay here. And I don't think it'd be good to let it out into the woods. Then we run the risk of running into it again when it's mean and crazy and doesn't know us anymore.”

I nodded along. I could take her across town and leave her at the animal shelter. She had killed the bat a long time ago and wasn't sick and wouldn't be getting sick.

“So, I need you to come with me,” Dad said. After he opened the back door, he picked up a boot box that was wrapped with duct tape, lengthwise and around the width. He clumped it under his arm and walked out toward the pond.

I kept pace about twenty feet behind him. The sun had just set, and I imagined the horizon a deep violet, but the woods were dense and young and no light made it through their tight growth. He had placed the boot box on the stump he split wood on. I could hear Pat's meowing again. She was becoming frantic.

“The cat's in the box?”

“I can think of, basically, two ways to do this,” he said. “You can pick. The first option, I think, is better. That one is to just fire a couple rounds into the box. It's quick, and the box isn't big enough for you to mess it up.”

I wanted to scream at him. I probably could've grabbed the box and run into the woods or back past the house and onto the road. “OK,” I said.

“The other one: the box is taped up,” he said. “Just row out in the pond and drop it in.” He shook his head. He pulled a rubber band from his wrist and tied back his hair. “It’s cruel. But it’ll work.”

“Give me the box.” I held out my hands and waited.

He looked at me in disbelief. After he put the box in my hands, he pulled the Colt from the back of his jeans. He offered it to me, grip first. “You sure?”

“Why the fuck do you care?”

“Right,” he said. “I just thought with you being superior and all that... Your call though.” He put the gun back in his jeans.

I looked behind me as I walked with the box, moist and clumsy with the weight of the live thing inside. Dad was slowly following, but I already had fifteen feet on him. I started to work the duct tape off while I wound my way around the pond toward the rowboat. The tape must have been wrapped around the box four or five times, but when I settled the box aboard, between the oarlocks, I had at least started to peel off each of the loops. I unlashed the boat and pushed it out into the water before he could reach me and insist on coming out. I rowed to about in the middle.

I pulled the oars in and opened the box. Pat lay against the bottom, soaked in her own urine. She looked up at me for a second before jumping. She paddled frantically toward shore and Dad’s camp.

He was still on the opposite side. I pushed the oars back through their gates and rowed toward him, hoping that he hadn’t seen what I did. But before I reached land, Dad was running for the other side. I watched from a distance as he put two rounds into Pat, who was hunkered low to the ground, a ridge of hair on her back and tail standing up.

I retched with my hands on my knees until Dad was only twenty feet away, walking slowly, carrying the pistol by his side. I stood up straight, and without even needing to think about it, I ran.

Cottage D was cold. I slept in the sleeping bag underneath the comforter and sheets. The joss sticks burned through the night but never seemed to rid the room of insecticide or mildew. In the morning, I pushed the key and the money for the room—all I had— into an envelope and dropped it through Boomerang's mail slot.

And sitting in the parking lot, waiting for school to open so I could eat rubbery sausage and rubbery eggs, I reclined in the seat and thought about leaving, leaving for what I thought would be forever. And then right away, I thought about coming back.

Love Stories

Daphne, I don't know if I've told you this. When I was in the city? After I moved in with your brother but before I met you? I was doing that thing downtown, and I would sit outside on my lunch breaks. There were benches on the sidewalk that were meant for when it used to be a cab stand, and it was a good place to think because there weren't many people, but every once in a while, someone would come by like they were waiting for a taxi, so I could talk to them if I wanted. It was nice to talk to someone for a minute about how they ended up there and where they were going before I told them the cab stand had left with the department store. I always wondered what made a person remember something like that. Why did they think something so long gone was still there? What would hold that in their mind? The city, as a living thing that you have a relationship with—love, hate, ambivalence, whatever—changes, but not to these people. Talking to them, the city seemed static as a photograph. I pictured it as a locket around their necks, something that they loved but which had to remain in a certain way. They were unaware that maybe the city had changed, and they were just a tchotchke, a memento of its past.

I was sitting on one of these cast-iron and pine benches, listening to the cars go by and keeping the newspaper on my lap warm, when this guy came up and sat down next to me. It was obvious that he wanted to talk, but I let him just sit there for a minute before I acknowledged him. Now, before this guy ever started talking, I noticed his smell. It was strong but not overpowering. Something natural and slightly sweet, sea foam at high tide, tossed with summer

melons. It wasn't the most masculine cologne, but it was good. I could imagine it being this guy's little idiosyncrasy.

He leaned over, as if to touch my knee, but just let his hand hover there. "I don't want to bother you," he said, "but I suppose I will anyway." He looked up the side of the building for a second, and when his gaze came back down, he was smiling. "Sorry," he said. "I just had to tell someone. I'm taking the jump. My fiancée"—the smile got bigger—"is meeting me here, she's getting out of work early, and we're going to go up the street, and we're doing it. Man, I'm going to sign the papers today. I'm getting married." The look on his face: the kind of smile that couldn't be reeled in, wide and enthusiastic, like a child opening presents, realizing he got the one he wanted, and trying to go on like before, as if he could possibly care about the next gift as much.

I told him congratulations, that I was happy for him, and the hand, which had been hovering, dropped. He squeezed my knee for a second before reaching around my shoulder and pulling me in for an unreciprocated half-hug. He said, "Thanks. It only took me forty years, but still, I'm just so excited."

I told him that there wasn't any sort of hurry, take your time, wild oats, and so forth. And when he asked me if I was married, I thought, at my age? Married now? Married ever? But I just answered that I wasn't. And he laughed, a nice, throaty, understanding laugh, and looking back at it now, I think that he might have been able to guess at my contempt for the whole idea.

He said, "I don't want to say that I'm signing my whole life away but..." He stopped and adjusted his glasses, brushed nothing from his slacks.

He just looked off, up the side of the building again, I'm guessing, thinking about his fiancée in her office, hoping she was just as excited. He didn't stop smiling, and it only grew as I

said to him, groaning inwardly at the way I turned one cliché into another, that maybe he should think about it more as signing his way into a new life.

“Hey, I like that,” he said. “Yeah, that’s nice.”

I shook his hand and congratulated him again and wished him and his fiancée well as I headed back for the building. I guessed that his fiancée would know that they couldn’t get a cab there anymore, but I still imagined them sitting there in perpetuity, smiling big and silly, maybe holding hands, floating in the body of his scent.

I remembered this as soon as I met you, when you came in with a wash of lemon, a pale green sundress that billowed with unfelt winds, your brown hair tied in a messy bun.

When I met Jess, he had a head of liberty spikes. He was walking across the stage for the bathroom, spraying a mouthful of beer spit above the band’s monitors, his chest all bloody from something that he would never tell me about. “Not fake blood,” he said someday later as we sat close on a sofa in a coffee shop, “real blood. God, too much of it. I was so woozy.” With no shirt and tight-rolled jeans and an open leather jacket, he looked like some psychobilly zombie, straight out of a Cramps song. The Billy Idol sneer fit him well, and though it was at odds with the rest of the costume, he made it work. I was dressed like Adam Ant: face paint, a single feather earring. Except for my shaved head, I made the perfect image. Even the band was playing along with Halloween, doing hard, fast covers of Doo Wop songs.

The club was a tight fit for the holiday shows, and sometimes the mosh pit would expand. The first time I got shoved into it, the band was playing “Little Bitty Pretty One.” It was ear-shattering. I was windmilled in the face by a two-stepping kid in suspenders and Doc Martens

and then shoved back out of the pit with no ceremony. While I stood at the edge, dazed, still being jostled in the crush, Jess pushed himself up onto my shoulders, so his crotch was resting at the base of my head. I looked up to see whose weight I was supporting and saw him above me, the dry blood flaking from his chest as it expanded to let out a scream.

He got down at the end of the verse and slapped me on the back. “Cool, man,” he said, neck straining as he yelled over the crowd. He squinted then pointed at my face. “Bleeding.” He wagged a finger at his chest. “You, not me.”

I flicked at my nose with the back of my hand, and it came back dark and wet. He grabbed me by the upper arm, the fingers making almost the full circle of the top of my bicep, pinching skin on the inside.

“Come on, come on,” he said.

As we crossed the stage to the bathroom, he knocked over a mic stand. The feedback was harsh, but the bassist looped and E.Q.’d it, and the whole time we were in the bathroom the feedback played just under their cover of “I’m Not a Juvenile Delinquent.”

Jess pushed the door to the bathroom in with his shoulder and slid the bolt across. “Look at yourself in the mirror, man.” He turned my head to face into the mirror. I was wobbly from all the beer, so I held myself up with a hand on either side of the sink as I looked at the blood leaking slowly from my nose and going around the curve of my lips.

“Coke?” he asked, and when I said no, thank you, he laughed. “No. Is that from coke?” He pointed at the crushed Solo cup I was holding. “Ditch the beer if you’re going to bleed so bad all night.” He pinned me against the sink basin and tilted my head back. He ran his forearm along the space between my nose and lips and then wiped it onto his hip. He thumbed my upper lip and then looked down at his hands and then down at the embroidery and buttons of my jacket and the

string-ties of the collar of my shirt. “Not too much blood on you,” he said before he pushed me toward the wall so my back bent at a strange angle over the sink. He kissed my neck and said he had ecstasy to sell. His breath was fresh. Not so much like toothpaste as crushed rosemary. But when he kissed me, hard, the nose started to pour out blood again, and I lost the smell. I pushed him back, off of me, but my hand felt wrong on the flaky blood on his chest, and it seemed right to slip it around his back, under his jacket.

In the coffee shop, close on the couch, Jess would usually talk about some book that he was reading. For weeks he went on about this steamer trunk full of old issues of *Screw* magazine that he found in his parents’ summer cottage. I mostly talked about music. Later, I realized that we didn’t have anything in common, but that took a long time, and even afterward it was OK that we didn’t. I moved into his apartment when my lease expired. We were rarely physical unless I was exceptionally drunk or he was some sort of high. We both dated women off and on and maintained a frank and easy bond: truthful, happy, and energetic.

We once got in an argument about whether it was possible to maintain a romantic relationship with a trans woman if she withheld that information in the beginning.

His argument for it hinged on the honesty of feeling. “Love is love,” he said and shrugged, as if his answer was self-evident or love wasn’t basically arbitrary.

I said that if trust is the key in a relationship then how could a relationship founded on lies ever work? Could the romantic connection outweigh the feeling of being duped? Long after Jess was gone, I thought about the way we could have these arguments, disagree so vehemently on something, but still come away smiling.

* * *

Daphne broke her clavicle right before the side of her head bounced off the pavement. She was riding a bike behind her long-time boyfriend when someone opened the door of their parked car into her path. She flipped over the handlebars and into a light post, while he, turned around to look at her, drifted into an intersection. He would be in the hospital indefinitely, they said, and she couldn't wait tables with her arm in a sling. She spent all of her savings while unemployed paying rent on their apartment, strong in the hope that he would be out before she had to leave for lack of money, but her savings were scant.

When I met her, her face was still marked with bruises, but this didn't diminish the range of emotions she was able to display with eyebrow raises, forehead scrunches, lip downturns, nose twitches, or controlled blushes. Even under the mask of brownish-yellow skin, I could see the same candescence that drew her brother, Jess, and me together. I saw it the first time I met her, when she knocked on the door with a pillow and a purple rolling suitcase.

She said that Jess promised her a place to sleep, and she smiled, turning up half of her mouth for just a second before swishing past me—a simple sachet of lemon, a pale green sundress, brown hair tied in a messy bun. To me, the look was suggestive but benign, as if it meant whatever I wanted it to, and she would be unembarrassed by whatever interpretation I chose to make. I shut the door behind her.

I didn't say anything at first, I just watched as she lined her suitcase next to the bathroom door and folded the pillow under her arm as she walked to the futon. She pulled her skirt up to her thighs as a remedy for the late summer heat and settled down on my futon. I tried to talk to her about music. I sat on the steps that led to the loft where Jess slept, and I ran through all of the topics I could muster, but mostly she just sat there and smiled at me.

She never pulled down her dress as if she were uncomfortable. She never weighed in on my monologue about the state of music. She just sat there, quietly listening, and showed a range of expression that I would come to know as fully as probably anyone, including herself. If I saw the half-smile brow-furrow chin-wrinkle on someone else it made me anxious, clammy, and unsure of myself. It gave me an odd sense of calm, a slightly disturbed melancholy laced with a feeling of invincibility.

Jess moved in with a girl named Marvel who was covered in tattoos, and Daphne moved into the loft when he left. I stayed downstairs on my futon, from time to time confronted with the noise of a date she brought home, upstairs. I spent this time aloof. I hung out with Marvel and Jess. I treated Daphne's boyfriends with cool disdain and ignored her almost entirely. I didn't want to listen to her fuck. I didn't want to run into the boyfriends in the kitchen in the morning. I didn't want their smell of beer sweat and lack of bath and manic desperation to rub off onto her. This was the first time I thought about Jess's ideas of love, that maybe it wasn't arbitrary.

Jess was getting married. They arranged to have the ceremony at the park, officiated by a minister of some made-up church. Marvel went out and had a simple line tattooed around her ring finger. Jess wore a ring. The late spring ground was muddy with the thaw coming off, but the wedding was casual, with many wearing boots, although my date didn't know this. She was wearing a simple ice-blue dress. Her flats were completely covered in mud within the first hour. When she walked, the shoes made staggering lines on her heels, but she didn't say anything.

We had been on three dates, halfhearted, shambling, mediocre dates that broke no new ground for either of us. It was just a way to kill time, to not be the one person who wasn't coupled. But after the first date, when she knocked off her heels at her front step and scooped them up before walking to the door, leaving me outside, I was ready to be hooked. I had been going to parties and bars, fucking on the beds of strangers, the soft crinkling of bed bug mattress covers reminding me of what I was doing. The ease with which she left me outside, not even thinking of allowing anything but a staid peck on the cheek and firm hug, was arousing in its own way. I spent many of the intervening weeks thinking about her even though now I couldn't recall her name if pressed, couldn't explain the line of her nose, the arc of her eyebrows, or the sound of her voice. She's a pair of high heels scooped up, a muddy Achilles tendon, a disembodied dress.

Daphne came to the wedding with a man named Clint, who I watched get more and more red-faced and bulging at the neck each time I addressed him as Cliff. She was wearing a maroon blouse and dark and tight slacks that tucked into a worn pair of mid-calf boots. There was no seating arrangement, so my date and I roamed around. She drank slow glasses of white wine, and I drank water. Gulped it down while I watched Daphne and Clint talk, close, mouth to ear or cheek to cheek. I didn't watch them dance. I gave Jess my best wishes and hugged Marvel. I wondered if she would think the time that Jess and I spent together was strange, whether it would make her insecure or jealous, and I wanted to tell her just to see how she would react, a personality barometer like the trans woman question. But I didn't. I backed out of the embrace and put my hand over my breast. I didn't say anything. I just patted my chest and bowed before walking away. I wondered if Jess had already maybe told her. Anyone who says a life well lived

should be free of regrets is a wind bag. A life really well lived is composed mostly of regrets. A true personality is a patchwork of mistakes and their attendant waves of effect.

“You must have really been in love with her,” the date said. She was upset that I hadn’t introduced her to anyone, that she had to be there with only the bad company that I provided. I sympathized. I told her I was sorry and that I wouldn’t be so unthoughtful again. After the wedding, we went to some bougie bar where she fit in and I didn’t. She drank three weird prohibition era gin drinks, and we went back to my house and had sex on the bed in the loft. Daphne and Clint weren’t coming back that night. Jess wasn’t coming back ever.

I don’t know how conscious an effort it was not calling or seeing the wedding date ever again, but that’s how it worked out.

Daphne’s old boyfriend, Ward, left the hospital and went to live with his parents while he finished his physical therapy. During this time, Daphne was dating Clint. She had been to the hospital to visit Ward, but now that he was out, she couldn’t justify making the trip into the suburbs.

I came into this knowledge slowly. I learned that when she last saw him in the hospital, Ward’s mouth had a strange, persistent downturn on the left side, as if he were always just sort of sad. Daphne told me this while she dangled her legs from the island in the loft’s kitchen.

Once, in the hospital, he lay in bed shirtless while she sat on the bedside chair talking to him. All that she was able to focus on were the patches of bald skin on his chest where electrode pads had ripped off his thick hair. I learned this the night she fell into bed with me. I woke from

the thud of her wedge hitting the wall. She laughed on the edge of the bed, radiant heat. She called me Ward, realized her mistake, her eyes welled without spilling, and then she talked the circuitous, rambling sentimentalism of the drunk. Nothing else happened. Later, I wondered if her memory was selective by design or intoxication.

I learned a lot about Ward. He was an amateur astronomer and felt empowerment, rather than insignificance, when confronted with the sheer weight of the sky. On the day of the accident, he spent the last of the money in his wallet on two cups of coffee and an orange juice at a coffee shop mid-bike ride. He was clingy, but this somehow didn't translate to neediness. He ate breakfast standing up while listening to the news on a thirty year old radio. I learned again and again that he had drifted into the intersection while concerned for Daphne and not paying attention to his own path. The cosmic mass empowered him, and he was made insignificant by a crossover SUV.

She thought that it was oddly endearing when I asked what he smelled like. She half-smiled. From then on this look was rarely without concomitant meditation on my part. Exiled to the suburbs, forgotten, wearing the mask of a stroke victim in his twenties: Ward.

"He smelled"—she paused—"musty," she said. We were sitting on opposite sides of the coffee table eating Chinese food. She tapped her chopsticks off on her plate and put them on the table. "Have you ever smelled ultrasound gel?"

I shook my head. I meant to ask what he smelled like before, how the street smelled that day, if the coffee he bought was too roasted or acidic. I knew Clint's smell as a base of lightly sautéed garlic topped with splashes of diesel fuel and Aqua Velva. But I wanted to know Ward.

I watched as she shuddered, thinking of the mustiness.

Ward was a topic of conversation more often than Clint at this point, and I thought this was a good sign for me, but I couldn't stop thinking about Ward's empowerment by the outer massiveness. I came to the conclusion that cosmic insignificance was not a poor state. I couldn't say if this is the same as his empowerment, but it's different than being freighted with the weight of Everything. How little my actions were able to influence anything made me feel good. That Jess and I made no great universal waves came with a feeling. That I could lean across the coffee table toward Daphne, while her chopsticks balanced half off the table, without any great consequence felt.

Daphne's parents lived on the line where the suburbs went from upper-middle to upper class. I took the train out of the city and got a cab from the station. When the driver hopped out and opened the door for me, I think that he was expecting more in the way of a tip, but I just nodded my thanks to him and started up the landscaped walk toward the mock Tudor. I stood and looked up at the house for a second before going on. I think I would have expected more of a tip, too.

Her father was waiting at the door for me and opened it before I had a chance to knock. His handshake was too hard, as if it was trying to make up for his soft hands and the luxury of his surroundings. The foyer had high ceilings, and the whole place smelled of hardwoods that I couldn't see. Despite its exterior appearance, its appointments were modern, stainless steel or primary colors.

Draping my jacket over his arm, he yelled for his wife. "Helen, we're going upstairs." Then showed me to the third floor. "This is the only part of the house that maintains the look,"

he said. “I like it, but Helen... you know?” He started laughing as he patted my back, guiding me into a study.

This is where the smell of the entire house comes from, I thought, looking around at the heavy wood panels, the leather, the wall lined with law books, complete with a brass-accented sliding ladder. The smell was weighty and made the mood of the room dark even though the look on his face was not.

“So, this is it?” he said. “I figured it would happen at some point. I honestly thought it was going through with that last boyfriend. The bicycle one? Goddamn shame.” He shook his head and bit his lower lip, offered me a drink that I refused. He poured himself a finger of vodka. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I like you fine. When the bicycle one asked me, I had to think about it. I was thinking, this guy with a nose-ring married to my daughter? Honestly, surprised that he even asked, but you? No need to worry.” He drank the vodka in a mouthful and stood.

“Come here.” He put an arm around my shoulder and led me over to a dumb waiter that he called up to reveal a safe. He punched in the code and opened it. In it were a couple velvet jewelry trays, a ream of bills, and a dozen or so bagged and boarded issues of *Screw* magazine. He pointed to the magazines. “Tell my wife and my opinion of you might have to change.” When I told him that I wouldn’t think of it, that I had seen the old issues that his son had, he reeled around and said, “That little shit has those? I bought these magazines in college because I thought I was going to fight for the press or something. This guy”—he pointed at the magazines as if I knew who was associated with it—“fought for some things that a couple people cared about.” He shrugged. “And I kind of half thought that they’d be worth something someday.”

He pulled out a ring and put it in my hand. “That was my mom’s before she passed, godresthersoul.” I put it into my pocket without looking at it. “I think that Daphne doesn’t know

that we still have it. The dementia made Mom not like Dad so much in those last years, so when he died, she took off the ring. We all kind of just assumed that it was gone.” He closed up the safe and lowered it back down. “Now get a nice box for that,” he said.

He went back to sit at his desk, and I sat across from him. He talked and talked, and I tried to participate, but mostly I was overcome by the smell of the room. I could feel sweat running down my back and from my armpits. The ring felt heavy against my thigh until I took it out to look at it when I got back to the train station. It had an acrid smell like oxidized nickel, and it needed polishing. I was going over and over the history: man goes crazy from old age, wife grows to hate him for it, ring is almost lost from the annals of family history, but here’s the ring. My gift now to give to Daphne.

Jess and Marvel never seemed like the types to care, but we found out later they married because Marvel was pregnant. They named the little girl Kitty. Marriage did a lot to keep Jess and me separate, and the little time that we did spend together was completely eradicated when Kitty was born. He got a second job. It’s strange to think that Jess, this guy that I knew as a bloody, sexually noncommittal punk with a pocketful of tabs of ecstasy to sell was shackled up with an office job and a baby and a wife. For a while, I think that he maintained the persona. He was the kooky guy in the office, Daphne told me. “The night job at the club”—he was a bouncer for a pretty rough joint—“keeps him sort of hip,” she said. “In a kind of sad, desperate way.”

* * *

Daphne spent too much time at work. I didn't.

"You spend time in your head," she said, shrugged, and tipped a bottle of cooking wine into a pan full of vegetables. "It's not like I hold it against you. That's your thing." We hadn't been married for more than a few of years, and she was already this good at making excuses for me. I had been unemployed for eighteen months, milling around the house, occasionally getting on the computer, tailoring a résumé for some company that claimed they needed someone like me. She'd look over my C.V. when she got home from work and nod a bunch of times until she got to the end. And I spent a lot of days in the loft milling. What am I going to do? I thought. What am I doing now? How am I contributing to this whole thing?

I remember when my parents divorced. Mom got a little bit more than half of everything. She spent the days inside. Yes, she was taking care of us, but really? What did I think of it? Dad got fucked. Now, I was Mom. I never expected to be the one who wasn't pulling his weight, but there it was.

One day, I watched an hour of daytime TV and fell asleep with an empty bottle of wine on the coffee table. Daphne came home. She was watching a sitcom when I woke up from the couch. And when I sat up and wiped at the dry spit on my cheek, she turned off the TV.

"You got a lot of work done today?" she asked.

I picked the bottle up and took it into the kitchen. I rinsed it out and put it into a paper bag near the door. I opened the cupboard and took out a bottle of bourbon. I poured a glass, drank it, and poured another. Daphne said when I drank I often talked in my sleep. Less often I would walk in my sleep. Even less frequently, I slammed doors over and over and made wild, sweeping, violent gestures while in a walking dream.

* * *

After Daphne and I called it quits—really, Daphne gave up well before I did—I met Jess at the little diner at the edge of the small town she and I had been living in. I showed up early and ordered a cup of coffee. My head was throbbing, and my stomach felt ulcerous. The days in the cottage alone had been worse than those with Daphne which didn't feel all that possible beforehand. When I asked if the waitress could make the coffee a bit more interesting, she glared sideways at me, shook her head, and swished away. I drank it anyway, but it was bad.

I was struck by the way that Jess walked when he came in. The swagger that he used to have was gone. Now, he loped. He wore tan chinos, a pair of scuffed moc toe loafers, and a T-shirt that advertised a college he hadn't gone to. He sat down across from me and put down a cell phone and a full pack of cigarettes after offering me one.

Before he lit a cigarette, I took note of his cologne. It was so familiar that the sense memory made me want to sneeze or scream. I was holding my nose and breathing in, trying not to sneeze, and he gave a hyuck-hyuck sort of laugh-cough and dusted away the smoke by waving a hand in front of his face. "If it bothers you that much—" was all he could say before the waitress sashayed over.

"What... is... with... you people?" she said as she poured some water into a mug from another table. She beckoned for Jess to drop the cigarette into it. "There's no smoking." She turned and walked away, the pad and wrapped silverware in her apron making it swing from side to side, little oscillating black triangles of apron outlining the curve of her ass. I remember that she was wearing black Levi's but not whether she made good on the tacit promise to come back and get our orders. I have no idea whether we ate anything that day.

His faced bloomed with a crimson rush. He palmed and pocketed the cigarettes without saying anything. This was as adventurous as he got now, I thought. “I really just bought them because I thought we could share a couple while we talked,” he said. “It’s been such a long time.”

I nodded.

“How’s the cottage treating you?” he said. “Is everything all right up there? We haven’t been able to spend any time there since Kitty started kindergarten.”

I told him that I was looking for a place in the city, and I’d be out soon, that he could tell his dad not to worry. While we were living there, Daphne and I had been fighting. She kept accusing me of coming home with a totally lecherous look in my eyes. “Like you want to get in bed without washing someone else off first,” she said. I told her that she and her cunt could go fuck themselves, that I did not smell like strange pussy, that the lecherous look in my eyes was in fact contempt, that I was fully capable of washing myself before I got home, and that I had no intentions of climbing in bed with her in the first place. She slapped me and gave a laundry list of reasons for why I was a bad person, why I should be in rehab or at least a program, why I should seek professional help, why I should consider self-immolation.

She had imagined that getting to the cottage would help us to regroup, and I was willing to try, but it’s where the worst of our fights happened. It turned out it was just harder for us to get away from each other. It was where she pulled out hunks of my chest hair and tried to push me down the steps. It was where I slept on the couch, not because I wasn’t allowed to sleep in the bed with her but because being that close made me realize how wrong it had all turned out.

Jess went on about realtors. He copied telephone numbers and names onto a napkin while I hovered over my coffee. It seemed that Jess and I weren't going to talk about us, so I thought about Daphne, a line of reason that echoed.

Sometime in the wake of the fight about my lecherous eyes, I got home to find her father at the door. I was coming in from a jog that was mostly about trying to sweat out a hangover. I ran into town from the cottage, and I gave up on beating the hangover when I got there. I bought a half pint of whiskey at the store and drank it in the parking lot before running back up to the cottage. My eyes were burning from sweat. Through the burning slits of my eyelids, I could see the look on her father's face, unburnished scorn, hatred. When he took a step down from the stoop, I could tell the exact moment that he smelled me, but he didn't say anything about it. "She's not going to see you right now." When I took another step toward him, he straight-arm shoved me onto my ass. "We're going to give you a little time to vacate before we call the police, so I suggest you start looking for a new place ASAP." As I pushed myself up onto my elbows, he pointed down at me and said, "For now, I want you to take a walk. Be gone for the next hour."

"That loft we had..." Jess grinned and pushed a hand through his hair. "I really didn't realize what a steal that place was until a lot later." He stared at me, waiting for a reply, and then bit the corner of his mouth, a look that Daphne had that meant confusion. "Well," he said, "I guess we can just make it brief then."

In one of our last fights, Daphne had taken off her ring. She didn't throw it at me. She came to me, pressed it into my hand, and closed my fingers over it. That pretty well ended the argument for the night. She walked away and went to sleep, and I stood in the living room, staring with blank-eyed intent at the local TV news, a burning house. I put the ring on the pointer

finger of my right hand, where it caught on the second knuckle. A cold ring, I thought as I used it to punch the off button for the TV before walking outside, into the night, and toward one of the town bars.

“I’m sorry that this worked out like this,” Jess said and dropped his hands, like a preacher or some sort of counselor, onto mine. I pulled my hands out and pried the ring, which hadn’t left that first finger since she gave it to me, off. I put it in Jess’s palm, and he looked back at me again with the big, wet-eyed look that was his sister’s trick. He used to have a glower, a look that made you do things, not asked for your permission. “Thanks,” he said, shoved up, and walked away.

And I sat there for a while catching glares from the teenage waitress. I crumpled and uncrumpled the note I had in my pocket that I was going to give to Jess to pass on to Daphne. I watched the note age as I balled it up and straightened it back out. I saw the ink smear and kept crumpling it until the text became illegible and meaningless. I smelled it and it smelled like me: whiskey mixed with little else, mild notes of absence became the overwhelming take-away after the top scent of sadness quickly evaporated. I dropped it into my empty coffee mug and walked out.

After we first met, I woke up in the morning, Daphne, and it didn’t matter that the night was all dreams because I knew I was going to know where you were or how to find you, and more than anything, I knew that I was going to see you again. But then I saw you, and we were walking hand in hand, and you wrapped a leg around my waist, and we were still walking. I knew that it

was a dream, but it didn't matter. So I wrapped a leg around you and talked for the first time. "I can keep this up forever," I said, like a challenge.

And you responded and wrapped another leg around me, and we were still walking somehow. In the dream, I could feel the stubble on your legs against my thighs. This is a dream, Daphne. I felt this good about the things that were happening to us before I knew you and while I was asleep. And we were still moving, and you were still whispering to me until I wrapped my other leg around you and then we were on the ground, a Celtic knot of limbs and heat. We were on the ground talking and whispering, and your smell was really rich and heady but not manufactured, and it matched the taste when we kissed. And we kissed and our teeth hit and we both pulled back and laughed a little. But that's just a dream. A good one, but still just a dream.

Building a Bonfire

I remember her behind me, close to my ear, whispering, holding me like I needed to be fixed. I remember the stale smell of breath. When I turned, her arms still wrapped around my belly, her mouth was opened slightly. The mascara bled down her face, everything subject to the dense, contractive heat of that room in summertime.

For the second time that night, she kissed me as if it were a mode of consumption. She lingered close to my face before coming back for another kiss, one that ended in her biting my lip. I spun, my mouth still caught up in hers, and shoved her away.

I stared at the louvered closet door while I fingered my lip for I don't know how long, before her cry of my name, "Bell!" brought me to, and I saw that she was curled on the ground, cradling her head.

I said, "I'm sorry, Lucy," and sank down into the bed. I reached out both of my hands. She took hold of my forearms, and we pulled her up. I felt inside the tangled mess of hair at the back of her head for a cut or a bump and found none.

Meanwhile, blood rolling down my chin, which she swabbed with tissues saying, "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god." She mended my face, and after she finished, I felt over the strange topography she'd made with gauze and tape. She kissed me on the cheeks.

Words came to mind: symbiosis and parasite. Which one? Who's the host? To what end? This was our first night together, but having been lonely for so long beforehand, I welcomed the change.

* * *

Lucy pointed at him, sitting on the couch, and spoke words that rode up in a swell and away from me. He was wearing the uniform of the local Catholic school. He sat, empty-headed, with a bag of tortilla chips between his legs and a brown joint smoldering between his fingers.

“What?” I asked

He looked up from the couch, caught my eye, and raised the hand with the joint.

I accepted it from him without making any more eye contact and had a long pull. It burned. I held in the smoke while I glowered at Lucy. I exhaled and took more smoke.

“Dino,” she said, “is my boy,” her voice washing out in a bout of laughter.

I was shocked at first, but she did no explaining, let it hang as if her meaning were obvious. Dino looked close to finished with the Catholic uniform, near seventeen or eighteen. Too old to be Lucy’s son. I took her upstairs to talk about what he was, and what this meant.

At the high end of summer, September blasting us with an unusual final burst of heat, the ceiling fan spun, throwing the light hung on the vaulted ceiling above it into a strobe that set my stomach on edge. I leaned against the mirrored bureau, and though I supported my weight with two arms and widespread legs, the room seemed to spin wild circles beneath me. I opened my mouth to ask where the kid came from, but what came was a dry smacking, a rasping from my throat, a weak fit of coughs.

I shoved up from the bureau and turned to find Lucy. I stood in front of her, rocking from heel to toe and back in an inescapable rhythm. She broke my sway before the oscillations were wide enough to topple me. She forced me to sit on the bed and stroked my hair. At that point, I was beginning a cold flop sweat. The water beaded and then ran down my face nearly

simultaneously. I couldn't focus on anything but holding onto the edge of the bed. Without focus, I would be ripped backward and thrown out the window.

"Wha-wha-wha..." I said, trying to start the question, but she silenced me by thumbing my bottom lip. The ghost pain of the bite still lingered there three months later, but the shock of pain wasn't enough to dilute the high.

"Shh," she said. "It's okay." She pushed my hair, now wet with sweat, back out of my eyes. I felt her lips, and she recited a litany in my ear. "It's okay. You'll be fine. Everything is all right. I'm right here. Don't worry about Dino. Shh, shh, shh." Worthless, tiny baby. Helpless in her arms. Emasculated by a teenager. Reduced to a blubbing mess, shivering on a bed.

I tried to speak but couldn't. I put my hand at the base of her neck and squeezed. She yelped and moved the hand down to her shoulder where my fingers dug in deeper. A coalescence of scent, texture, temperature, and luminance spun, wrapped in blankets. Lucy below, above, below, beside.

I felt better, and in the morning, when I made coffee and saw Dino walking through the house with no shirt on, still half erect from just waking up, I felt a calm. A bruise formed on Lucy's shoulder later, but that morning the only evidence of the night before were four crescent moons of red in the little hollow above her clavicle.

Dino's omnipresence eventually took the form of static to me. The flick of a lighter, the sound of music filtering from ear buds, a clacking keyboard, a pen scratching paper. He lingered quietly at the dinner table, eyes heavy with smoke, or at the TV enthralled with some show. He lived in an irreality I had no cause to visit. But when I came home to find him on the bed, his omnipresence didn't impress me as abstract any longer. He lay asleep, one leg draped over Lucy, his arm haphazard across her neck. She lay on her back looking up at the ceiling and barely

noted my entrance. After I flung a jewelry box at the bureau mirror, he bolted from the bed, and I chased him from the room and then the house, screaming.

I plodded the rural road in front of the house long after the plume of dust from his car was gone. My eyes stuck to the dirt of the road, I wondered if I should go back. All problems of my creation. Each and every one. Lucy, Dino, my reactions to the pair. Whatever the outcome, it couldn't turn out well. Explode in anger, acquiesce in cowardice, bed strangers in retaliation. All yielded punishments, whether immediate and external or prolonged and mental. I sat in the middle of the road and dug out rocks, deeply compacted into the hard dirt, until my fingernails cracked, and then I walked back to the driveway and got into my car.

I drove up the road to a concrete block house, intent on finding a new place to live. Long abandoned, its window panes sat cracked in their frames, and the crooked door burdened its hinges by the angle at which it stood ajar. I went into the house, and the dank smell of mold hung in the air along with dead cigarettes and the smell of a place once too closely peopled.

I swept the place with a fresh pine branch and taped the cracked windows with a swollen roll of duct tape, mostly as an ameliorant, a way to put my mind on process and take conscious thought away. After, I sat on the stoop, my hanging feet tracing patterns in the pile of dirt I swept right out the door. I looked out through the gap in the trees the drive made.

Out there, a yellow barn. It sat crippled on its plot, an empty hull, disused and now useless. Once the home for all of the farmer's chattel, it now sat forsaken, the back forty beyond fallow, beyond gone to seed, totally done and probably forever. Salt the fields, I thought. It doesn't matter. I wanted to go pull the barn down shingle by shingle, slat by slat until I was left with a bonfire as a tangible piece of work. I imagined the sky orange and smiled as I got into the car.

Boomerang's, the town bar, was packed tight. The bartender went to get me a beer, and when he came back, I grabbed onto his wrist. "What's your name?" I said.

"Ted." He looked up and down the bar and then back down at his wrist which I still held. "It's busy. What do you need?"

"Can I buy you a drink, Ted? For just a couple minutes of your time?"

"Sure," he said. "Whatever you want."

"No, Ted," I said and let go. "What're you on? What're you drinking?"

He came back with a bottle of Jameson and poured two brimming shots, took ten dollars from the pile of money that sat in front of me, and tipped back his whiskey. "What do you need a couple minutes of my time for?"

I stuck my hand out. "First of all, I'm Bell." We shook hands, and the whole time that we were talking, he was looking around the bar, watching the man at the CD jukebox in the corner, the woman whose head was lolling at my eight o'clock, and keeping an eye on the line at the bathroom door. "I figured that you work here, so you would know who's who and what's what. What I'm looking for is something. You know what I mean, a woman. Not too difficult, but not too easy either."

He took a moment to think about this while still looking around the bar. Women in dresses sitting at high booths among more of their kind, denimed women with flannelled men, blue-hairs alone with Tom Collinses, and young women scattered throughout, talking to young men or groups of them. Outnumbered, but the depth of emotion I was freighted with could only be incentive. I wondered if their cumulative feeling as a group could balance the sad mass of mine.

Ted cleared his throat, and when I looked back to him, he was pointing across, at the front corner booth, occupied by a lone woman. He dropped his hand as soon as I looked. "Name's Rachel Kapral," he said. "I want to tell you that she's married, and her husband's a foreman at the plant, got people in this bar know she's his wife. But he's not a man with friends, so people aren't going to go and get you beat up." He waves a dismissal over the bar. "The rest of these are a crapshoot, I would say. Rachel's a good woman with a stink coming to her off her husband, but a good woman still, and I don't know it for a fact but I think she'd appreciate the company for talk, if nothing else."

I was staring into the corner at Rachel while he went on. She was raven haired and not heavy but hearty. I would say her features were arousing regardless of the observer. Angular but somehow still soft, with a wide nose that led to bright lips, pursed in some thought. High cheek bones, rosed with inborn hue. She was the natural born opposite of aquiline Lucy. Each beautiful in her own way, their appearances now stood in opposition, as an argument, one against the other. I wish I had never seen either.

I asked for another drink and one of whatever Rachel was drinking. Ted couldn't remember, so I brought her the most inoffensive drink I could conjure.

I lowered myself into the booth and slid the tumbler across the table to her. "Bell," I said, by way of introduction and held out my hand, which she didn't take. "I know that maybe you might not want to take a drink separated from the herd like this but it's good, honest. I was just talking to Ted up there about you, and he couldn't remember what it was you were drinking, so I just bought you something."

Her lips drew tight for a quick second, in mimicry of a smile, and she took the drink but refrained from raising it to mine when I brought my pint up between us.

“I hope you’re having a good night,” I said. “And if I’m interrupting your peace, then you can just let me know. I’ll leave, but you just looked a bit... well, alone. Me too.” I raised my glass again, this time not expecting a clink. “Bell is short for Belmont. My parents must’ve had a sense of humor because naming a kid Belmont in this middle-of-nowhere is a pretty damn funny joke.”

Her mouth hung open for a moment before she bit her lower lip, front teeth slightly buck, eye-teeth backset enough that it was noticeable but not entirely off-putting. She kept the face for a moment before going back to tight lips. She didn’t say much at first, but I went on complimenting her, and eventually she loosened up, and we could have a conversation. She was worried about her husband hearing about her with another man, which I granted her was both a rational and reasonable fear, and I took her number, promising to call her within the week.

The drive home was happier than the one to the bar. I drove down the dirt road to Lucy’s house, past the yellow barn. It took on new meaning as a sort of hopeful reminder, a memento of change. I no longer saw it as an explicit judgment on the present. Just something that used to be, no reason to sentimentalize it, make it into something it wasn’t. Smiling, as I got out of the car, I could see the flickering azure of the TV filtered through the blinds, and I knew that Dino had come back. The realization that I did not strike an imposing figure, wasn’t even worth running from for more than a couple of hours, surprised me.

I slammed the front door as I entered, and I heard the tinkling crash of the door’s window breaking, muted, as a blood-rush forced to my head. “And you’re right back,” I said, pawing at the light switch so I could see Dino. “I chase you out of my house and you come right back, you fractious little shit?”

He looked at me through narrow slits. His stale smoke hung in the air, and as he opened his mouth as if to talk, I pulled him up from the couch by the front of his shirt. To my surprise, looking eye to eye with him, his demeanor didn't change, his eyes didn't widen, his body didn't pulse with a quickening heart.

Lucy walked into the room, and I let him drop. "This is how it's going to be," she said. "The boy is going to be staying. It's my house. If that's not the way that you want to see things go, then you'll just need to make them go another way for yourself."

I stalked the room, kicking at the boy's feet, the coffee table, and the bag of tortilla chips to clear a path for myself. "What is this kid?" I said. "What does this mean? I don't understand."

She answered that she had known the boy for longer than she'd known me, that he didn't have a place to stay. His parents had shoved him out, his old friends wouldn't have him, and this was the only likely place he'd be able to live that had any sort of regular comforts.

"I don't know," she said, stabbing a finger into my chest, "if you still think that this is a negotiation, but it is not. He'll be staying, and I think that you should go find a place to cool off."

My hands tensed and relaxed, and I felt a tingling under my jaw bellowed into a tremor that shook my whole face. I went closer to Lucy, willing my hands to unclench, my face to stop shaking, and I tried to kiss her. Bite me again, I thought. Tear off my lips. But she was a still block of stone in my hold, and my lips found no purchase.

"I didn't mean to..." I started. "I thought that we would... that he could..." and I trailed off again as she looked at me. "Fine, fine, fine," I said. "I'm going. Right now. I'm leaving." I ripped open the stair alcove door and pulled out a blue saddle blanket. I walked out without looking back. Conviction, doubt, hope. Which one? I threw the blanket in the back seat of my car and powered out, onto the road, yellow barn a sear in the south.

I slid into the drive of the concrete shack, and before the car was stopped, I put it into park. Transmission pin slamming in with a grind, the car thumped to a stop. I closed the door as well as possible and situated myself in the house. I lay down, using the saddle blanket as both bed roll and blanket and a moldering jacket from my trunk as a pillow. The orange moonlight, filtered and cracked by a dirty window, cast a strange pattern across the painted concrete floor. The glimmer shifted as the wind blew through the stand of pines in front of the house, as though the moon were subject to the power of terrestrial wind, as if celestial bodies were closer to Earth today than normal, more tangible.

I found my phone and Rachel's number and dialed. It rang until her recording answered. The message was benign and professional, but the voice made the veins on either side of my forehead pulse. I hung up the call without leaving a message, and I lay back, smelling the stain of moisture on the old coat as I tried to settle in for the night. I knew that calling Rachel the night I met her, even though she would be home, settled into bed beside her husband, warm, was a gambit that was as apt to fail as succeed. I spun the phone across the floor and shut my eyes tightly against the moonlight until a thrum echoed between my ears, and I fell asleep.

In the morning, after taking a sponge bath with creek water sopped by the prior day's undershirt, I found my phone in the corner of the house, and when I woke it, I saw a missed call from Rachel and a message.

Whispering, she said, "I'm at home. I snuck out. I have to get back in now before Tom notices I'm not in bed," and without anything more, any instruction or indication of how to proceed, she cut off.

I talked to Rachel again three days later. We made plans to meet when she got out of work at the fork which one way veered to the sawmill and the other became the rutted dirt road.

In the intervening time, I cleaned the house, bought proper toiletries, and hooked up a rented generator. I saw Lucy and was cursed out when I slapped Dino for sneering at me. He stumbled across the coffee table and caught himself on the arm of the sofa before falling. She told me she never wanted to see me again, and I turned out my drawers in the dresser, filled up a large garbage bag with my things, took my book from the bedside table, and left while she and Dino were gone.

It was unseasonably cold. Rachel stood outside her car, ungloved fingers pushed into her armpits. She said, “Hello,” water vapor escaping as she did. I arrived late, but she didn’t mention it. Underdressed and shuddering with cold, she stood looking out into the woods around us.

I was practically thrust into her without volition. I took her and hugged and said, directly into her ear, “I’m glad you came.” I moved back but kept the embrace.

Her lips parted as if to say something, but she silently stepped forward, out of the slanted afternoon sunlight.

When we kissed, she dived into my mouth and prodded and flicked across my tongue’s frenulum. I pulled back slightly and with my hands still on her hips, I looked. After that kiss, I felt dried out, sapped of energy.

To see Rachel, I wondered. Her makeup was caked on and showed wear from its application it in the morning. Her lips were layered with flakey white skin. Her chest was rising and falling quickly beneath her coat.

I kissed her again even though I knew she was somehow parasitic. I bit her lip while I pulled away.

She yipped and broke free. “What the hell are you doing?” she asked.

I apologized but didn’t explain.

“I should just go,” she said. “This isn’t right. I don’t know what I’m thinking. I shouldn’t be doing this to Tom. I don’t know why I would...” She shook her head and fumbled with the keys to her car with rigid fingers.

“Listen,” I said, “I told you I was sorry, and I am. I didn’t know you’d be so put off. You’re all right, aren’t you?”

Pushing the key into the lock and still shaking her head, she said, “No, I’m not. I mean, yes, I’m fine, but that’s just too much.” She shut herself in the car and cranked the starter until the car woke with a squealing belt. Without looking back at me, she drove toward town.

I thought to follow might not be a bad idea, to come screaming up behind her with a honking horn and flashing high beams. By the time I got in my car and started it up, she was gone around a curve somewhere up ahead, so I couldn’t tell for sure that she was there.

Not in my head, just moving fast, surrounded by trees fraught with the dead weight of early winter, gray all around. The immaculate experience of sensation. The road was a mess of potholes to avoid, and while going around a blind curve, I took the inside to avoid a deep gravel-patched hole, and hit a skid on a pile of road grit on the soft shoulder. Sensuous. I pressed down on the gas pedal and steered into the slide, came out of the corner, not sideways, but with still-cold tires skipping as they tried to regain traction. The car came back under my control, but I almost wish it hadn’t. It’s not being uncontrolled that was necessarily the goal, but that pure sensuous feeling. At seventy-five miles per hour with the forest a black and white smudge out either window, curves came, and I used both lanes, approaching wide, hitting the apex with a heavy foot.

True sensuous feeling amounted to empty-headedness, purely experiential. It was the fully blank numb when instinct or dark animal brain shambles to life, wraps its old fingers around conscious action, and throttles.

On a long straight, where the forest gave way to more forever fallow rolling pasture, the road went straight, and I could see Rachel up ahead, going much slower than me, and the conscious mind took back over, easing my foot off of the gas. I slowed down to the thirty-five speed limit and followed her from two hundred yards distant.

She made a stop at the grocery store in town, picking up something for her Tom as an excuse for being late, I imagined. I sat in the back of the parking lot, near the exit, with the car running, waiting for her to leave, and when she did, I let two cars get between us before I followed her out. We hit the lights in town at the same intervals, and when we started out into the country again, I settled back and followed her at a distance. When she pulled into the drive of a house with ashy blue aluminum siding, I drove up the road and circled back in the dirt lot of a body shop so I had a view of the house.

In the house, she would've been pan frying the steak she bought at the store with minced garlic and crushed black pepper. Her husband would be fragrant when he came to her feebly, saying hello. A kiss on the cheek after she flipped the steak with a fork and put a bowl of peas into the microwave.

What are you doing home so late? he said

She shrugged and peeled at the loose skin of her lips with her slightly buck teeth. I know how you like steak, and I thought I would treat you, but I had to wait for a butcher for a good cut.

He might have looked into the pan to see the thin slice of meat and doubt her, but he might have just kissed her again and thanked her for thinking of him.

They sat down to the meal and shared quiet conversation, polite, inconsequential. He wiped his mouth after finishing. Thank you, baby, he said.

There was no passion, no truth, no beauty in their relationship.

I found myself pulling at the steering wheel, wide-eyed and angry, boring a hole through the house and thinking of Lucy and of action, extremes, and the opposite of the deferential, milquetoast, bullshit excuse Tom. I thought of Rachel, a motionless pallid sack, beneath her heaving husband, the sweat dripping from his nose, wetting the mess of black hair on the pillow beneath her head. Impotence versus omnipotence. Infertility versus fecundity.

Rachel, a barren landscape. Lucy, I thought, Lucy. Lucy.

And I found myself, hands on the cold mailbox, looking at the blue house, inside, bright with artificial light, a mimesis of warmth, radiance, emotion. From the shadow of the street, I watched a young boy step through the kitchen and stop at the table, alight. I didn't know I had been picturing the whole scene wrong. I didn't know there was a third, this one innocent, the sole source of truth in the house. He looked from one to the other, and they nodded. The boy, flouncy and joyous, exited the house. He seemed to radiate as he came across the sidewalk to the unattached garage twenty feet from me. The house darkened, a husk without him.

He reemerged from the garage, carrying a can of soda with both hands, and stopped midway on the sidewalk. He put the can down on the concrete and sat down in front of it. He held the can between his sneakers and used both hands to pull the tab.

As if propelled by his light, I ran to the sidewalk and swept him up. The can fell with a neatly silenced thud into the hard frost of the yard. Though he was light in my arms, his body tensed with an incredible energy as he inhaled to cry out. I stuffed my gloved hand into his

mouth, muting the scream, and he bit down onto my fingers while I loped, against the tiny feet swinging at my legs, to my car.

Two miles down the road, I stopped. The boy wouldn't stop pawing at the lock, and I didn't know if I'd be able to keep him in indefinitely if he kept it up. On an unlit corner, I leaped out and ran to the other side. By the time I got around, he had already plunged into the dark of the woods. I found him almost immediately, huddled beneath a tangle of broken branches. As I pulled him out by the arm, he yelped. Red lines mottled his pale face, scratches from branches and swells of moisture from streaming tears. I tried to pull him along, but he went limp. When I picked him up, his eyes were closed. His breathing had slowed, but I could still feel the hummingbird-fast flutter of his heartbeat. Still passed out, I situated him in the trunk. I took off my jacket and placed it beneath his head. I looked through the car for tape but found none and ended up removing my glove and shoving it into the boy's mouth. I was on the other side of town, headed back to Lucy, before I thought I could hear distant sirens.

I parked at the dark outer edge of Lucy's driveway and got out. The bare light bulb hanging from the trunk-lid illuminated the boy. He had pulled the glove from his mouth and was sucking his thumb. His pupils were dilated in wide, wet eyes, and his face was a dry-white, striated by red swells from gone tears. He was looking at me, but his eyes seemed unfocused.

I pulled him from the trunk and held him by the neck and the crook of his knees as I walked up to Lucy's door. Again, the flickering azure of the TV filtered through the curtains. Holding the boy, I bent slightly and turned to hit the doorbell with my elbow. I tried to situate myself, to look composed. My arms were starting to shake with his weight, and I still couldn't hear movement from within the house. I bent again to ring the bell and held it until I could hear movement from inside.

The movement manifested in slow, light footsteps and then the porch light going out. I put the boy on the ground near the door and backed up to get a full view of the house. The light of the TV was gone. The house sat in a muddy nadir.

To what purpose was I yelling? What did I hope to accomplish?

I pried a paving stone up from the walkway, bending back half of a fingernail in the process, and hurled it through the bay window into the living room. The light tinkling of glass lasted for only a moment. The boy looked back at me. Snow fell in huge flakes. They landed on his head and melted. They caught in the trees around the house. The snow covered the gaps in the grass.

“It’s okay, buddy,” I said and took his hand.

His chest was heaving and his body shook, but there weren’t tears streaming down his face any longer. I led him to the car, opened the passenger door, and helped him in.

“I want to go home,” he said. “Take me home. I want to go home.”

He was wet, and I pushed the hair back off of his forehead. “Oh, buddy,” I said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I just got upset.” I imagined him cleaving to Rachel’s chest, frightened or sad or sick. A buoyancy in the boy would pull her up, make her better, and she would be protective, loving, present. She would stroke his head trying to calm him, aching to maintain the light that kept her floating.

I brushed through his hair with my fingers and said, “Shh, shh, shh,” trying to calm his hiccupping bawl. “I just got upset. Shh, shh, shh. It’s okay. Don’t you ever get upset?”

Leaving big pauses between every word to catch his breath, he said, “I want to go home. Take me home.”

“Oh, buddy,” I said.

I started the car and backed out of the driveway. I continued running my fingers back through his hair as I drove slowly up the road to the concrete house. I pulled up close to the door and helped him out. I took him into the one room and wrapped him in the horse blanket. I rolled my jacket and put it under his head.

“I’ll be right outside if you need me,” I said. “Just knock on the door and I’ll come right in and get you whatever you need. I just got upset.” I looked at him “That’s not me all the time. I’m not really like that.”

I shut the door and stood with my ear against it, listening to the quiet of the boy. Tomorrow, I thought, I would offer him a dog, a companion, and I would find out his name. I would get him a Spider-Man blanket and a warm change of clothes. Without my jacket, I stepped outside to watch the snow.

The moon hung over the field, and with its light reflecting on the steadily accreting snow, the night was bright. I imagined, over the next couple days, the snow would accumulate, drift across the roads, ride gusts and build up on the sides of the yellow barn. In the morning, the world would be bright and clean. I pushed Lucy from my mind and rode the boy’s buoyancy into a place of light and warmth. When I heard the quiet but insistent knocking inside, I was empty-headed, enveloped in beautiful white oblivion.

Little Changes

For most of the night Sandy has been sitting on his work platform backward, not looking at the churning, noisy press. I've been watching both, trying to avoid us both getting yelled at by the pressman. Every once in a while, I've got to run over and pull out a wad of screwed up papers or hit some buttons to avoid a jam. The last time I did it, a splash of my gray, inky sweat fell onto his Igloo cooler and made a sort of black flower. I don't know if he sees this or not when he turns around. "Hey, Jeff," he says, "you're working too hard for sure, man." His feet dangle, and he's drinking coffee from a paper cup bought from the vending machine in the cafeteria.

"No'm not," I say over the high-running press. If I take the plugs out, I'll end up with a buzzing head in the morning. With them in I find it hard to talk at all. But I'm not working too hard, just staring blank into the growing stack of paper, trying to stay awake, hoping that I don't get hemorrhoids from sitting on the diamond plate through every night.

He reaches over and slaps my shoulder with the back of his hand. "Let me tell you something, man, you better get up and out of this place quick, or you're going to give up the ghost sitting right there, and no one's going to care or notice." He pushes his glasses up onto his forehead and stares hard at me.

I think to get mad and belt his arm. He's just out of prison, but he's an expert on living now? Him, paroled and surviving hand-to-mouth in a trailer with three other guys, each of them in some sort of twelve-step?

Sandy's in NA and an anger thing. "A clean split," he said a while ago, bragging about being done with crystal meth. "And I don't miss it a bit most of the time. This'll be twenty months coming up."

He was looking at me, but one of us had to watch the press. The paper they had us using for that dwarves-and-goblins book was shitty and getting jammed like nothing.

"I took a bus into town when they let me out," he said. "No one came to pick me up. The bus dropped me off at a gas station. Standing at the counter, waiting, I had my hand in my sweatshirt pocket, like a gun." He said the clerk was counting off packs of cigarettes on his fingers and writing down the numbers on a yellow pad, back turned, not paying any attention. When the guy was up and turned around, his eyes sort of flashed, and he smiled. He knew Sandy right off. It didn't hit Sandy that it was this guy named Duck as quick. Duck shoved the pen behind his ear, reached out to shake Sandy's hand, which was still all screwed up in his pocket, trying to fake a gun barrel.

"For a second," Sandy said, "maybe a tick longer, longer than I like to say, I thought, I should just go through with it, thought about what I could do to Duck so that he wouldn't tell. Had myself all talked into it when he asked if I had a place to stay. Asked me with his hand still out, waiting to be shook." Sandy laughed. "Maybe it was just a second, but it seems like he stood there with his hand out like a dummy for a minute to me. He wrote down his address and number on some of the yellow paper and handed it to me. He just nodded, didn't say anything, and you could imagine a halo around his head. Saint Duck, patron of dumb fuckers and screw-ups. For a second it made me want to get him even more." But he took his hand out of the pocket and shook Duck's, went back to the wall and got a six pack of tallboys, spent the night in the woods,

drinking and trying not to remember his old friends' phone numbers. He called up Duck the next day and lived with him rent-free for a month.

He told this story like his not buying meth, not robbing a convenience store, and not probably almost killing Duck was something that should get him a commendation. With Sandy staring at me, just having told me I need to quit my job, I want to tell him that those weren't shining moments, that he wasn't a role model.

But he lifts his eyebrows to let the safety glasses fall back down and says, "My little sis, Lucy, is living in the country out there." He waves his hand at a wall. "She's not doing much, but she just, for no real reason, took up a high school kid she found out living in a car somewhere." He finishes off his coffee. "Little changes," he says. "It doesn't take much, but that kid'll always remember her, and he probably won't ever know just what a shit she really is."

"Not'trested living with some kid," I say.

He sighs, says, "Doesn't have to be that exact thing, Jeff," and swings back around to look at his stacker, piling pages of a Hardy Boys book.

Next night, Sandy's got his eyes closed behind safety glasses while he chews the brim of his paper coffee cup. Off to my right, twenty feet away, a nylon compressed air line busts off a nozzle and rockets around, pluming up paper dust as it smacks off the ground and then shoots back up, ricocheting between support beams. Sandy's head moves along with the rhythm of the press as it kicks out a chunk of a book, and he keeps gnawing on the cup. It's getting wet and torn, coming apart in his mouth as his head bobs.

I think about going to fix the air line. It's still tearing around, but I just sit and look at my stacker. It pulls the signatures from the top conveyor and lines them up. This signature is a thirty-two page section of something old and Russian. I tried to read it but couldn't follow along.

The old man janitor, walking a dump-bin back to the incinerator, stops and goes to the broke air line. He's trying to catch it, hands out front and head leaned away and to the side. He's just getting battered though. Sandy looks across at him and laughs, keeps laughing and starts smacking his leg and doubling over. He has to push the glasses up, out of his face, so he can wipe his eyes, and when he does, his stacker jams and buzzes. I look above our lines to the complicated arrangement of rollers that cut and split, then fold, refold and cut again the long-grain paper. This web slows, loses tension, and bursts in an explosion of flying paper.

"Motherfuckers!" the pressman screams. He walks to the paper and starts tearing at it, wild, throwing it every way but toward the dump-bin.

Sandy's mouth makes an O, and he looks over at the clock on the wall. "Six-twenty, Jeff," he says. "Man, it's almost quitting time." He slams his Igloo cooler shut, hops down off his platform, and starts walking to the time clock.

After spending fifteen minutes rewebbing the press while first shift stands by watching and laughing at me getting berated by the pressman, I throw my orange earplugs into the bin and swipe out. As I walk out the front door, I'm turning my head side to side to relieve the pressure and drain out all the ringing. This works so seldom that it can't actually be helpful.

When I slouch through the front door, Sandy's outside, sitting on his cooler. "I'm glad I didn't miss you," he says then stands and picks up the cooler. "I was thinking that you could give me a ride home. Maybe we can stop, and I'll buy you a McMuffin on the way?"

"Still in the trailer park?" I ask.

“Yeah, but I’ve got to make a stop out by my little sis’s. She’s got something going on, and I wanted to check up.” He tongues a cigarette out of his pack and limp holds it in his mouth as we walk by the security gate.

I point to my truck at the front edge of the lot. “S’mee,” I say, still a little spun out from the noise.

“You look a little, whatsit?” Sandy says. “Sick or something. You all right, man?” He smacks me on the back with his cooler as we get to the truck.

“Just a bit fuzzy,” I say. “The noise.”

I pop the locks from his side, and when I get around and climb in, he’s already sitting there, holding out a wrinkled plastic bottle. “Give this a shot. Bet it helps.” I ask what it is. He just waves his hand. “You work here how long? And this is what you get, a headache to end out every day. You know you could run that place, right?”

He looks at me to say something, but after taking a sip from the bottle, I’m just trying to stop spit from dribbling out of my mouth.

“This is what I’m saying. Down the road, not more than fifteen miles, they got another one of these places. You go there, get the job you got now, then get rollman, pressman, end up foreman. Maybe even get off third shift.” He reaches and takes the bottle. “You realize right now you’re a press assistant? Me too. We’re assistants to a machine.” He takes a small sip and puts the bottle back into the cooler. “Goddamn, that’s something. Assistant to a giant hunk of metal with no brains or blood.”

While the diesel warms, Sandy lights his cigarette, ashes onto his pants. “If you want a bottle of that stuff, I can get you one when you drop me off.” He kicks at the cooler. “A couple gulps and you’d be down easy in the morning. Probably cut out that fuzz too.”

I find a flat can of ginger-ale in the cup holder and take a sip of it. “Not that it’s bad,” I say, “but it’s not my thing. I have a couple of beers sometimes, but liquor without some sort of mixer never did agree with me. I’m sure yours is good though.”

“Well,” Sandy says, “one sip and it’s got you more motor-mouthed than I ever heard you, so it’s doing something right. Really it’s shit. Just cheap, is all.”

I pull out of the parking lot and drive up the road. In silence, except for the engine rumble, we pass McDonald’s. He doesn’t offer breakfast again, and I don’t ask for it. He pulls from the bottle every once in a while, and when he does, he shakes it at me. I say no every time.

When we’re out near the intersection that leads to the trailer park, Sandy looks at me. “Enough times getting in trouble, and I finally got the message.” He laughs. “Look at me now, printing books.” He puts away the bottle and looks at me.

“Right,” I say.

“Small library in prison,” he says. “I think most of us read most of it while we were there. Not that it’s paid off or anything. I didn’t finish school either, Jeff. That’s no big thing. I don’t think either of us would’ve done much good with more school.”

The truck rumbles at a stoplight. “Where we going now?”

“Like I said...” He looks out the window. “Out by my sister. I’ve got to go to talk to her ex for a minute. He lives just a hair past this big yellow barn that’s on Rural 22. I guess things didn’t go all that well with her changes, and they had words. I’d like to talk to him about that.”

* * *

The barn's bright yellow where it's not fading or peeling. I don't know if I've ever seen a bright yellow barn. I turn the radio down. It's been blaring for twenty minutes. "I thought there was a reason they painted barns red," I say.

"I think they do it so they don't have to wash off all the cow blood," Sandy says. "Maybe this one's a chicken farm." He shrugs and then points out his window. "The house should be on this side."

The house leans. It's not enough that you can take a picture like you're holding it up but enough to notice.

There isn't much grass in the yard in general, but there's a dog, and in the circle that's within reach of its leash, there's none. A narrow rut at the edge shows where it spends most of its time loping around at the end of its chain.

"What a dump," Sandy says. "This guy, man... I wish she told me about him earlier."

I drive up the hard packed, rutted driveway and park close to the house.

"When it gets cold it gets cold," Sandy says. "I bet that dog never sees the woodstove." A galvanized steel chimney on the roof pumps grey smoke into the sky. Sandy steps out of the car and stands there with the door still open. He pops the cooler and pulls out the bottle, takes one long sip, and throws it to me. "See what you can do about finishing that. I'll be about five minutes." He makes a couple big swings with his arms. "Sorry about this," he says as he pulls a three foot piece of rebar from my truck bed, "but I didn't want to tell you when we were still in the parking lot. Put it there this morning." He pats the hood of the truck and walks to the plywood front door. With the rebar he bangs the house until someone starts to pull the door in.

As soon as it starts to move, Sandy pushes in with it, shoving the man back inside before shutting the door behind.

I should leave, but five minutes isn't a long time to wait, and I don't want to be back on the road yet. My head is still sort of swimming from the little bit to drink he gave me. I turn on the radio, and they're talking about traffic. One DJ's laughing loud at everything that the other says, even though it's about traffic and there's no way to make that funny. I drink some more of the flat ginger-ale.

This might be a little change for Sandy, but it seems like he's going the wrong way. He told me about the meetings for the meth and the anger, that the most memorable thing was how bad the coffee was. "Worse than the stuff we would sometimes get in prison," he said. "And everyone thinks that they've got the worst story, but everyone else has heard every version of it. Maybe even seen or done it. Steal from your mom? Fuck over your friends? Yep, yep. If your mom will still let you around. If you've still got some friends. That's not the worst of it. Those're just the things that you're always hearing about."

Sandy went on to say that hearing people talk about how angry they would get when their wife did the same thing that they'd forever been asking her not to, or how bad they wanted whatever drug it was they liked, just made him want to get angry or buy some drugs.

"Get angry over anything. Get any kind of drugs. Heroin, whatever. Things I never wanted before the people in these meetings told me how much they used to mean to them." He laughed. "It's bad, man. This is not where I want to be." He waved over the plant. "But here I am. Ten-thirty at night to six-thirty in the morning. No breaks. Barely any conversation. Come home, take a shower, watch the gray water run out of my hair. But I started talking to my sister again, and maybe my mom will have me back someday. It's too late for my dad."

The gray water running out of the hair and the lonesome shift are familiar. I don't have something that I want to run back to though. There isn't crystal meth or a sister to make up with. The sister is there in the next county, with her two kids and husband. Mom and Dad are up near the state line, living in a little place where they don't have to drive and someone will bring them their meals if they want it that way. We all talk. We get together on holidays. They ask me why I haven't brought anyone, tell me that I should get out and meet new people, maybe that I should find a dog, or a cat.

Sandy shoves open the plywood door the wrong way, and it falls lopsided, the top hinge snapped from the door frame. He knocks the bare steel on the toes of his boots with the rebar. He wipes the rod off on the grass, but then shakes his head like he just remembered something.

As Sandy starts to walk to it, the dog is straining the opposite way, like it's trying to break the chain or pull out the stake. It probably spends a lot of time trying to free itself. When Sandy reaches the stake, the dog's down, low to the ground, front paws sliding, not getting any hold on the packed dirt, as it struggles at the leash. It's got its mouth open and the choker is digging in, wrinkling its skin. All the fur is gone from its neck from too long on the chain, the skin scarred over and red. I open the door to get out and try to calm the thing down.

"Hey, Jeff?" He points the rebar at me as I'm halfway out of the truck. "Jeff, just stay in the fucking truck, all right? I'll be there in a second." He makes it the rest of the way to the patch of dirt. Bending over at the stake holding the dog's chain, he pushes the rebar into the loop at the top and pries until the whole business comes out of the ground with a big clod of dirt still around the spirals at the bottom. Sandy's still caught up in the stake when the dog takes off running, and it pulls him to the ground and makes off with the rebar. The spike bounces and hops for a few yards before the rebar clangs out, onto the froze ground.

The dog runs through the tree-line at the edge of the road and crosses toward the fields around the yellow barn, dragging ten feet of chain and the spike behind it. Sandy runs after it until he makes the stand of trees then stops. He hunches over with his hands on his knees for a few seconds, and then starts to walk back toward the truck. After making about fifteen feet, he leans down, picks up the rebar, and hucks it into the trees. He gets to the house slow and sits on the stoop for a second. He stands up, rights the door and pushes it back into the frame, and knocks his boots on the steps. When he reaches the truck, he gets in while I'm still standing outside, holding onto the door with both hands.

"Come on, man, get in the truck." He sits back and turns off the radio. He points to the wrinkled plastic bottle and says, still panting, "You were supposed to finish that, Jeff. Doesn't matter, you can mix it with Kool-Aid or some shit at your house."

I pull myself up into the seat and back out the driveway and head down Rural 22 back in the direction of Sandy's trailer park.

"I was going to get that dog. Take it home. I think me and the other guys would've liked a dog, and I think it would've had a better time with us." He lights a cigarette and takes the long kind of drag that makes the ash grow fast. "Looked like that guy had a little kid living in there. Comic books on the chair, tiny underwear folded up in the hamper. Don't know how I feel about that."

I shrug. "At least the dog's gone."

Sandy is looking out across the field at the yellow barn. I wonder what he thinks. Whatever happened there, weighed up against being in touch with his little sister again.

“Every week my sister, she has a big meal with her husband and kids after church,” I say.
“I thought maybe we could go out that way and get something to eat before we have to go back to work next week.”

Sandy bounces along with the dirt road. It’s near impossible to tell if he’s nodding, meaning, yeah, sure, or just still looking out at the barn, thinking. I refocus on driving. I wonder if it’s better to ride the rut or straddle it.

Twelfth and Sycamore

I pick up the portable radio from the dash, and I'm about to turn it down, lean back, and go to sleep when the DJ comes on. "This'll be our last request for the night. For Duck, from Alan. Enjoy it, Duck." There's a moment of quiet before the song comes on with banging drums, the sound of bells, and then what sounds like an ancient P.A. system broadcasting bursts of static. I take my notebook from the passenger seat and open it up to wait for the song to get to some lyrics, but when they come I can't understand the words, so I just listen to the song and scribble large concentric circles onto the paper, still intent on hearing something when the DJ comes back on, announcing the next show. I turn off the radio and put it back up on the dash, tilt back my seat, and shut my eyes, hoping to get some sleep before the sun.

After Alan and I were split up—he with Mom and me at Dad's—we used the local radio station to communicate. He would call up and leave a request during the nine to ten block, and the next night we would meet on Twelfth and Sycamore, downtown, at eight. Eventually, he went away to college. I stayed in town with Dad. I would hear a dedication once or twice a month that let me know he was back to visit. But the time between songs got longer until it was only once a year. I would hear some Bad Brains song butted right up against "Father Christmas" by the Kinks or Richard Hell & the Voidoids right after "Alice's Restaurant" and start rearranging plans so I could make it to my yearly chat with Alan. After he finished school and went off to make a career, I had to put up with the regular playlists while I worked at the convenience store doing inventory on cigarettes at three in the morning.

When Dad died, I got a little bit of money, his old car, and a call from his landlord saying I should put my name on the lease or move out. Alan and I split the cost of the funeral. He mailed me a money order that I got after listening for days for the dedication letting me know if he was coming. The note wrapped around the check said, "Sorry, I just can't make it, Duck. I don't think he'd miss me much anyway." And then scrawled after the signature: "Come for a visit sometime?"

I wake up with the sunrise, having learned earlier in the trip that it gets too hot in the car. I go into the grocery store, use the bathroom, and buy a cheap cup of coffee that I'm glad they have. It's weak but at least it's not muddy or burned. Outside the store's entrance, I stand and wait until someone else walks in so that I can ask them if this town's got a Twelfth and Sycamore. An elderly man supporting himself on a shopping cart makes eye contact and then ignores me, and I wait another couple of minutes before a man in blue coveralls comes to the entrance. "Excuse me," I say, stepping in front of him. He steps around.

I'm still waiting when someone comes out and taps me on the arm. He's wearing an apron with an iron-on smiley face patch. "I'm Ted," he says. "I know most of the people who come here. There are some people who come in that'll wait for me if I'm not by my door. If I take a day off, the manager says at least one or two people will always come up to him and say, 'Hey, where's Ted?' But I don't know you." He puts out his hand. "I'm Ted."

"Duck," I say as I shake his hand. I feel guilty about how I look. I've been driving for almost a two weeks, and I haven't had a shower in five days.

"Well, the manager said you've been out here for a while and I should go on out and check on you. Do you need help with something?"

And so I ask him if they've got a Twelfth and Sycamore, and he says that they do, gives me directions, and starts in on a story about how he would splash through the fountain and scare pigeons at the park near there when he was younger. I listen and nod, grateful that he's treating me so well, until halfway through a sentence he says, "Well, I've got to go now. Have a good day." I raise my coffee cup to him and walk back to the car.

I'm sitting in the park that Ted told me about with the cup of coffee. I let it go cold and then drink in one shot. Across from me is the fountain Ted splashed through. It's good to look at, but it's turned off. I sit staring at it until the Styrofoam cup is in pieces at my feet, then I walk into a theater, and cut from one movie to the next until seven o'clock. I exit to twilight and wander until I stumble onto Twelfth and Sycamore.

As soon as I come up on the corner, I see Alan, and he says, "You got a new phone number yet, Duck?" He tugs at his ear and looks me up and down. "How's that money holding up?" I almost don't recognize him with his new close-cropped hair and thick neck.

While I hug Mallory I say, "You're early. Good to see you," and before pulling away I mouth, "No," over her shoulder, not in answer to his money question but to tell him to knock it off. I shake his hand. I probably hold on a bit too long. He's wearing a ring.

"Not early," Alan says. "You're late. It's always been seven o'clock. Wonder why I never said anything before." He laughs. "Let's go get something to eat."

I walk behind the two, trying to get the picture to make sense. I wouldn't have believed Alan would get married or wear a high and tight like Dad or gain all that weight, but there it is,

walking in front of me. It's hard to imagine that Mallory's enough to do all that changing for. Maybe it was just about being thirty-five, and I would need to get a gut and a wife soon too.

The restaurant is casual, which is good because I'm not dressed for anything else, but when I look at the menu, I'm surprised at the prices. When the waitress comes around to get our drink orders Alan orders a bourbon with soda and Mallory asks for a vodka tonic. I fumble the menu and point to the glass of water they brought out when we were seated. "This will do it for me," I said. "Thanks."

"Oh, come on," Alan says, "live a little." He holds up a finger to the waiter.

"Alan," Mallory says, "if he doesn't want to have a drink, don't order him a drink."

He looks at the menu for a minute before ordering an expensive glass of beer. "We'll make a night of it." He smiles, and I'm almost sure that he's had his teeth capped. "You're staying in a hotel close enough that you don't need to drive anywhere, right?"

I shrug and watch the waiter walk away.

"So, how you been, Duck?" Then, looking over his menu at me, Alan says, "It looks like you've been selling dirt for a living."

Mallory scoffs.

"Does it?" I put on my button-up for tonight, but it hasn't been washed since the funeral, so it's still wrinkled, and I can see the faint outlines of one of Dad's friend's eyeliner on the shoulder. "It's been a while since I checked myself out. Took my time with the trip. Trying to see America the right way, I guess."

"They don't have hotels in this America you're seeing?" He shuts his menu and lines it up at the edge of the table.

"Lots of rest stops and campgrounds," I say.

“Jesus.” Mallory shakes her head. “You’re not a kid anymore, Duck. You should get your shit together.” She doesn’t make eye contact with me but looks into the empty space next to me instead. Alan squints at her and tilts his head before picking the menu back up.

“Yeah, and neither are you guys apparently. You ever planning on telling anyone you got married?”

“Congratulations, you mean?” Mallory has been maintaining an airtight look on her face, but when she says this it cracks into a punchy sort of glare. “That’s what you mean, yes? Congratulations?”

“I guess.”

“Alan,” Mallory says, “we should go.”

Alan shakes his head behind the menu. “No,” he says, “I really want to eat this steak. You should see the picture of this thing I have in my head. It’s going to be good.” His attempt at lightening the mood doesn’t work. She glowers at him.

“Sorry,” I say. “Congratulations. I’m happy for you.” I’m anxious, pulling at the lamination of the menu, halfway hoping that this goes badly and we split so that I don’t have to worry about what to order. “A little upset that you never told me but happy.”

“We had it all planned and we were going to tell you but then Dad and all that.” He looks down for a second and shakes his head. “We just had a little thing. No big deal.” He looks to me and then Mallory and smiles. She looks back at him with another hole punched in the airtight glare. “It really wasn’t a big deal.”

I nod. “Got it.”

The waiter comes and Alan orders the filet mignon, Mallory gets a Cobb salad, and I order whitefish with steamed vegetables, the cheapest entrée on the menu. The eating is done in

near complete silence. Alan looks up from his meal at one point and swirls his fork over the half gone steak. “The picture in my head didn’t do it justice,” he says. “This is terrific.” He wipes at a line of sweat that’s creeping down his hairline and goes back to his meat.

When the waiter comes around again after clearing our plates to ask if we want dessert, Mallory shakes her head, and as Alan starts to order a malt, she says, “We have that thing at church.” She stares at him. Before they moved out of town, they had a way of communicating without talking. They would rise from the Thanksgiving or Christmas spread at the same time and one would say, “Hey, it’s that time. See you soon, Ducky,” like it was on some sort of schedule. It’s odd that they lost it. It seemed like something that would just get stronger until they were communicating totally through eye flutters and telepathy.

“Church?” I say.

Alan keeps his eyes on Mallory. “Oh, man, I forgot. Yeah, we’ve got to go, Duck. Sorry.” He drops a handful of money on the table—too much—as I try to pull out my wallet. “My treat,” he says.

They walk me to my car. “You know where you’re going?” Alan is staring directly at my shoes, but Mallory’s using her leftover telepathy trying to laser a hole through to the back of my head.

“What hotel are you staying at?” she says. “We can give you directions.”

It throws me off for a minute, and I try to come up with a hotel name, but I can’t. “No,” I say. “I’m OK. I was already there. I know how to get back.” I open the car door, lean in, start it, and get back out. I look at the pair on the sidewalk and say, “So, I’ll see you tomorrow?” They nod, and I get in.

Outside, Mallory is just looking at Alan again, her face airtight. I jerk the car backward and turn the wheel enough to get out, slot it into first, and merge into traffic with my hand out the window, waving.

I drive through the city with no real destination until I see to an overpass, which I follow until I find an onramp to the highway. I get on, and before long I'm on the beltway, making the big loop around the city, one, two, three times. There's a song on the radio about stealing mail. There was a time when I could've listened to it and gotten something from it. I would see Alan and tell him what Jello Biafra was screaming about. I would get back to Dad's apartment and call Alan up to ask what he thought of the song. Even then I kept a notebook that was full of lyrics and song names so I could read him the words and he could tell me what a song was about. The meaning was usually beyond me, but he always had a way of coming up with something. I turn the radio up and try to remember some of the words to write down later.

I drive for a few miles before a new DJ comes on and the format changes to classic rock. I turn the dial over until I find the public radio station. They're playing some sort of classical music, and at the break they say it was Polish and in G minor. I think about what this means. I have no way to decide what the decision to put it in G minor means to me or the music. How was the Polish classical scene different than the others? Alan would probably tell me they weren't scenes. They were such and such, he'd go on to explain, but I'd be lost thinking about a young, punk Beethoven, wearing a torn shirt and a bullet belt, blood running down his face while he conducted.

Even when we were younger, he thought that punk rock was too easy. "Absolutes are meaningless, and that's all that punk is concerned with," he said on one of his visits from school. "I mean, I don't believe in God either and Reagan was obviously a dick, but really how many

songs does it take to make that point?” As I got older, the music only made more sense to me, and Alan put up with it because really it was the only thing that we had ever bonded over.

I exit the beltway and head back in the direction of the grocery store. Once I’m there, I walk straight to the payphones I saw that morning. I drop in two quarters, dial, and wait for Alan to pick up. When he does I say, “Alan, it’s Cartwright. I need the Johnson file,” an old in-joke that we shared.

“Duck?” he says. “Something wrong?”

“Uh, no. No, nothing’s wrong. I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

“I just heard a song on the radio. That song ‘Stealing People’s Mail.’ You know it, right?”

“Yeah, it’s, uh, it’s from—I know it, yeah.”

“What do you think about it?”

“I couldn’t say. It’s been a long time since I heard it.” I can hear him fumble his phone just long enough that he has time to say something. “Why?”

“I don’t know, just wondering. You always had some sort of something to say about music when we were kids.”

“It’s been a while since I listened to that sort of stuff.”

“Yeah. I guess I should’ve figured. That song you requested last night was a whole new level of noise.”

“What’s this number? Your hotel? Should I save it?”

“Oh, no, don’t save it. I’m just calling from the lobby phone.”

“Oh, right.”

“One last thing before I let you go?” I say.

“No hurry.”

I think about asking why he wanted to meet with me just to ignore all the things we should have been talking about. “Tofu,” I say. “Do you have to cook that stuff? I never tried it raw.”

“Hmm, me neither. Hang on.” He fumbles his phone again. “Mallory doesn’t think so. I guess it’s just soy beans so, whatever, yeah. Plants: they’re all fine raw, right?”

“I guess so.”

“Can’t be good though. Texture and all. Just order some room service if you’re still hungry.”

“Right. Yeah, well, I was thinking about tomorrow anyway. Keep a budget.”

“Is everything all right? I know with everything...”

“Things are fine,” I say. “I’m happy we got to see each other.”

“Hey, yeah, it was good to see you too, Duck. Sorry we had to cut it short. We just had this thing at church we couldn’t get out of.”

“For sure. Hey, before I let you go, I wanted—” I say as the line goes dead. “Shit,” I breathe and start to hang up the phone when I see a kid fumbling, trying to get a coin into a soda machine that’s too high for him. For some reason I put the receiver back to my ear and say, “I just wanted to ask what your favorite soda was.” I smile as I pretend to wait for an answer. The boy isn’t paying attention. “Grape? Yick. That’s disgusting.” I hang up and look over at the boy. “Need help, kid?” He hands me a quarter and I stick it in the machine for him. I take a quarter from my own pocket and put it in. “Hitting the button’s the best part, but if you don’t have to stick the money in yourself, it’s like the soda’s free. Even better. That guy I was just talking to

used to do this for me. But he drank grape soda. I hope you don't drink that." He's mostly ignoring me, scanning up and down the row of buttons until he hits one for Big Red. "Good choice," I say and ruffle his hair.

"Come on, Ryan. Hurry up," a woman calls.

He says thanks as he turns to run to the woman. When he reaches her she leans down and says something to him shortly and then grabs his hand and walks out the door.

I put my last two quarters into the machine to get my own can of Big Red and head to the store's bathroom. In the mirror, I look a bit gray, a week behind the shaving cycle, and greasy. With my cap off there's an arc at the top of my head where the dirt ends near the hairline. My hair is past my ears, but if I push it back it looks like I want it to be that way. I slide the garbage can in front of the door, take off my shirt, and go back to the sink to try to clean myself up.

After ten minutes alone in the bathroom, the garbage can I've used to lock myself in starts to slide in with the door. I pull my shirt back on and mop off my face as quickly as I can. I pocket my toothbrush and head toward the door. I push the can over and a man comes in, glancing at me probably only because I'm in his eyes' way. "Sorry, man. I just got out of the can." I jerk a thumb toward a stall.

He just glances over me and coughs.

I look in the mirror a last time as the man walks to a urinal. I wipe a spot of shaving cream from behind my ear and walk back into the store with my can of Big Red. On the way out the front door, I nod at the greeter. "Hey, Ted, have a good one."

"H'yup. You too." He points his wireless barcode scanner at me and jerks back in imaginary recoil. "See you in the morning?"

"Who knows?"

“That’s right. Nobody knows anything.”

Not quite what I meant, but it works. I nod and leave.

Back in the car, I tune my little portable radio to the station that played Alan’s request last night. The first few songs are nothing special. At some point though I wake to the drums of a new song. It seems louder than the ones before it. I tilt the seat back up and find the notebook tucked in the slot on the door and write some of the lyrics down so I can remember the song. I manage to get three lines down, but after that the song moves too quickly for me to fill in anything else. I take a sip of the soda and tilt the seat back again.

“That’s the Adverts, ‘Bored Teenagers.’ And that’s another one from Alan for Duck.” The DJ seems disinterested, like he’s been playing a never ending game of telephone with just the two of us. “Duck, he says Mal’s not hip to the idea of you sticking around long. Aww, sorry Duck.” Another song comes on but instead of writing down lyrics, I walk to the store again. At the phone, I call Alan collect.

I say the pay phone’s number as quickly as I can when they ask for a name and then hang up. I hit the coin returns on the other phones while I wait. After waiting a couple minutes I call collect again, say, “Call the courtesy phone,” and hang up. I sit, back against the wall, and wait.

Someone kicks me in the foot. “Wake up.” It’s a guy in a cheap white short-sleeved button up and cotton tie. He looks like he just woke up too.

“Yeah,” I say, flattening out my shirt as I push myself up the wall.

“You have to leave. I’ve called the police.”

“OK.”

“I let it go because when someone complained earlier Ted said you seemed like a nice enough guy.” He lowers his voice and looks down at me. “But you can’t sleep in the store.” Without taking his hands out of his pockets, he leans close to my face. “You can’t sleep in the parking lot either. I don’t want to see you in my store anymore. I don’t need some dirty asshole harassing my customers.”

“I didn’t harass anyone.”

“A woman said you bothered her boy right here earlier.”

“I helped him buy a soda.”

“I don’t care if you were helping him buy a soda or trying to put your hands down his pants. She said you touched him funny, and that’s all that I care about.” He puts the phone back in the cradle before starting to walk away. “I called the tow company, and if your car isn’t out of the parking lot, that’s going to be gone too.” He doesn’t turn around to say any of this. He thumbs toward the doors before rounding the corner.

The phone rings as I’m walking to the exit. “Alan?” I ask when I pick it up.

“No, this is Mallory. He’s out.”

“Oh,” I say. “OK.”

“What do you need?”

“I just wanted to ask him something.”

“Well, what is it? I’ll relay it.”

“Would you mind just telling me where I can find him? I should get out of my room for a bit.”

“You should get out of your room? It’s two o’clock in the morning. You should definitely stay in the room. Just tell me what you need, and I’ll tell him when he gets home.”

“What’s he doing out at two?”

“What’s it matter? You guys going steady?”

“Christ, Mallory,” I say. “What did I do to you? Just tell me where he is so I can go meet him.”

“Does it matter?” she shouts. I can hear her voice echo now that she’s louder.

“I imagine he spends a lot of time away from the house if you’re in it.”

“Anything else, Duck? This is getting ridiculous.” She’s whispering again now. “Do you want me to tell him something or not?”

“Tell him I organized a funeral that he didn’t come to, and now that I’m here with a cardboard box full of Dad’s ashes, he can’t be bothered to deal with me, doesn’t even seem to want to acknowledge it. Tell him he got fat, he’s got a bad haircut, and his wife is a dyed-in-the-wool bitch.” She doesn’t respond to this at all. “Listen, Mal, I want to talk to him. You’re in a bathroom trying not to wake him, so just walk out and give him the phone.”

“Why? You know what? Never mind. Fuck it.” I hear her drop the phone and walk away. A loud, echoing Mallory says, “Alan, your strung-out brother is on the phone.”

I shift the phone from one ear to the other, waiting to see if Alan picks up. I look out the window to see a police car pull up, without lights. I put the phone down in the cradle and walk slowly past it, into the parking lot.

When I’m back on the highway, I stop at the first rest stop I come to. I wait around until I see someone else and trade them a couple of cigarettes Dad left in the glove compartment for four quarters. There’s one payphone, and somehow no one has ripped off its phone book. I find the radio station, and once I’m connected to the DJ, I try to get the him to play a specific Misfits

song, but he won't. I think better of trying to request another hateful song and just ask him to dedicate something to Alan and Mallory.

"All right. Next song coming up is a good one. I'll say you asked for it," he says. "And who should I say 'you' is?"

"This is Duck."

"Goddamn, Duck, this seems like it ain't your week. Hey, I know I don't know you or nothing but this is no way to get on with people. You've got to talk to them."

"Yeah, that's the idea," I say. "Thanks, man."

I settle back into the car to wait for the song to come on. Little groups of moths hang around the sodium lights in the parking area. As a group they seem to be throbbing to the beat of the music on the radio. Alan told me once that they go to lights because they screw with their ability to navigate. They're looking for the moon but can't seem to find it for all the other bright lights. So, all over the world moths are banging into shit because they're lost. The brightest thing in the sky changed since they were last programmed. I wonder if it's hot under the light, if really what the moths are doing, without realizing it, is burning themselves to death. The Talking Heads come on dedicated to Alan and Mallory, and even though I'm almost sure that he won't hear it, I think that I'll give that corner one last try tomorrow before trying to get back home.

Somewhere

When winter was still mild, I wrapped a scarf around my face and neck and walked out of the women's clinic with a girlfriend. One of Grandma's bridge partners, toddling along down the street with a canvas tote of groceries in each hand, saw us and called Grandma to tell her that her little tramp granddaughter, Natalie, was off getting abortions. Neither of them could put it together that I was just picking up a friend, and Grandma certainly wasn't listening. When she confronted me about it, while we were rolling slowly down Washington Ave, she couldn't listen. The blood wasn't even in the right parts of her head for it to be possible. It was all jolting through the wandering vein on the side of her forehead.

Drugs andandand boys andandand highschool dropout andand all the late nights andand sex and fuckup just like your mother. She bubbled on, little bubbles of white forming in the corners of her mouth. "I'm sending you to stay with Sally. With your mother." She wasn't paying close enough attention to the road, and we skidded to a stop in a crosswalk.

I could smell the tire smoke, and my stomach was clenching and unclenching, slowing turning inside out.

"I don't want you anymore. I'm sending you back. I've been protecting Sally from this, this beast of her own creation, for too long, and now I'm done. I'm just done. That's it." She went on talking, twisting a hand around one of the spokes of the steering wheel, and I couldn't make out most of it, but when I heard one more round of slut-hussy-fuck-up-dropout, as the light

turned green and Grandma was levering down, hard, on the gas pedal, I reached across the car and slapped her.

I broke her glasses, and they were hanging crooked from just one ear, but she went on, I'll go to the police-abuse-don't have to take this. She turned down toward the police station. That's when I pushed the door open as hard as I could and tumbled out of the car and onto the street. The car door slammed onto my ankle and pulled off one of my shoes as it kept moving. I crab-walked backward, letting the bleeding ankle drag along the blacktop, until I was leaning against the rear wheel of a truck. Once Grandma had backed up to where I was and stopped and rolled down the window, I had already made up my mind that I was going to bean her with my shoe. She gaped out at me as I pushed myself up the side of the truck until I was mostly erect, trying to keep the weight off of my ankle. I had the white plimsoll in my right hand, and I heaved all my weight in the direction of the throw. I fell with the effort, so I didn't see it actually hit her, but she jammed on the gas and drove into a parked Celica, smoking the tires for a few seconds before letting off the gas, so I think it's fair to guess that it was a good throw.

Somewhere, I didn't screw the pooch. What combination of events, influences, actions, decisions, indecisions make up my life as it is? It's easy to do it with other people. This, see this here? This is what you did wrong. All your problems stem from the credit card debt or something like that. Watch: Natalie, if you hadn't made that wrong turn at Spruce when you were drunk, and driving your friend Suzanne home, then you wouldn't have been charged with criminal possession, on top of the DUI, and locked up for the night. And if you weren't locked up for that night, it would've been easier to have been a little less aggressive, and maybe not thrown that

shoe, when your grandma called you a whore for six blocks straight. But before that, if you were less self-conscious, you would have been friends with Janeane for a couple years longer. You probably would've lost touch when you two went to opposite sides of the country for college—Stanford and Cornell—but that extra time would have made a substantial difference, for you at least. But that's the difference between being a hindsight critic of your own life and for someone else's. In yours, as far as you're concerned, it's mistakes all the way down.

Grandma had a bag packed for me and told me that I was going with Tommy in the wood-paneled, sputtering AMC Eagle parallel parked outside. I looked at him, standing at the open door of the station wagon with his arms stretched across the roof. He was slapping at it absently with both hands. He looked up at me for a second and nodded. I looked back at Grandma.

“And why am going anywhere with this guy?” I said.

“This is Tommy,” she said. “He's Sally's partner. Your mom's partner. And I just think that after the last couple of weeks, it's probably best that you get out of the city for a while, and Tommy's got a cabin he's going to take you to after you pick up your mom.” She came down from the stoop and handed Tommy my bag.

“This is crazy,” I said. “I'm too young for you to just push me out.” I stepped around the car and tried to pull my bag back from Tommy, but he held strong. When I let go, he put the bag onto the floor in the front seat.

“Well, it's my house, so yes, I can push you out,” she said. “Your trial is coming up and after our kerfuffle, I think you need to be gone from the city for a while. Clear out your head. Figure whatever it is that you've got to figure.”

“Sending me out with the mom that’s never been around and the dirty-looking boyfriend that I’ve never met? Sounds like a real fucking winner of a plan, Grandma. That ought to clear my head right out. Real good job, everybody.”

“Come on, Natalie,” she said. “I’m trying to be good about this, but you’re making it really hard.”

I got into the front passenger seat of the wagon and slammed the door.

Tommy stood there for a minute longer with his door open, talking to Grandma, before he got in. He turned the heat in the car up, and the vents pushed out a little puff of smoke, and then the smell of burned hair, and then a little heat. The car did have a nice stereo, but when Tommy turned on New Order, I already knew I hated him.

We drove on, out of the city, listening to the same several songs over and over again until, twenty miles into the suburbs and getting quickly to farmland, he turned off the stereo and started talking to me about survival retreats and wilderness rehabilitation. He said that in specialist’s training for the Mossad and the French Foreign Legion, one of the things they do is scare the literal shit out of you because you can’t know fear or discipline or pressure until you’ve involuntarily evacuated your bowels fully clothed.

“I don’t need this,” I said. “I’m fine. I’m fine, I’m fine.”

He pulled into a service plaza on the turnpike and drove slowly past the window before parking. He said, “Wait here, and I’ll be right back with Sal,” and walked away.

I sat on the hood of the car and lit a cigarette. I wasn’t enjoying it, but I didn’t toss it away until I saw them making their way back. As he unlocked the door, I ground my foot down on the butt.

Sally smiled at me. “You shouldn’t do that,” she said. “I smoked for a long time. It’s too hard to quit.”

“If your life is like this,” I said and waved my hand across the parking lot, “you might as well smoke. Oh, and good to see you too, Sally.” She had hair that looked like a pageboy *née* bowl cut, and she was athletic, too athletic, like the gymnasts who’ve managed to exercise away any sex characteristics. Better than the last time I saw her when she was rail thin and shaky. No one said it, and even though I was too young to understand it then, it was obvious that she was only home the last time to detox.

“You still look like shit,” I said, “but in a whole new way.”

“Hey, listen,” she said, “I’m not the one who kicked you out. Don’t even think about taking this shit out on me because I will not put up with it.”

“Sure,” I said while I climbed into the front passenger seat. Tommy shoved me as soon as I sat down and told me to get in the back. I stumbled out of the car and started to walk away entirely, but Sally grabbed me by the collar and yanked me toward her. She pulled my left arm straight across my back, and I yelped, but that didn’t stop her from gripping the crown of my head and shoving me down and into the backseat. Right away, I tried to get out, but as soon as I pushed at the door, Sally slammed it shut again.

She got into the front seat and threw my bag into the back. Tommy leaned in to give her a kiss, but she turned past him to look at me. “Bran muffin,” she said and lobbed a paper bag into my lap. “Get some energy in you so you’re not so cranky. Last thing we need is you jumping out of the car.”

“Oh, yeah,” Tommy said. He turned to Sally and thwapped her on the side of the arm. “Chip off the ol’ block.” His solitary laughing fit turned into shuddering while he revved blue smoke out of the car, waiting for it to heat up.

Somewhere, I don’t exist because of Ace of Base. I looked up the Top 40 music charts from the year I was born. I don’t really know how her musical tastes went, but if Tommy’s, or whoever’s, were then anything like they are now, I can imagine Ace of Base coming onto the radio after “Linger” by the Cranberries, and in the moment that he pulls out and reaches into the front of the car to change the station or push in the tape, a pair of headlights sweep across the windshield of the car they’re parked in, and by the time that he’s into the back seat again, still ready to go, Sally has pulled her blue jeans on and she’s twisting the bra, whose clasp he couldn’t work, back up, and saying that she’s ready to go home. He doesn’t need to pull off a condom and toss it onto the side of the road as he drives away because he wasn’t wearing one. He was probably thinking, as he drove off, if only that Cranberries song was just a minute longer. But odds are that it’s better for him that it wasn’t. The implications of this for me are unclear because this is just one of the possibilities that doesn’t lead to me. There are still others where “Linger” had a longer bridge, and there I am.

“From what I hear,” Sally said, “it wasn’t the jumping out of the car part that created all the havoc.”

Tommy drove the loop that came out of the service plaza with jerky steering. One of his hands was on the steering wheel and the other was on Sally's shoulder giving her a short massage. As the road straightened out, he put both of his hands on the wheel, sped up, and merged into the mid-afternoon traffic. I asked how long we had left to go, and I asked where we were going, but he was already singing along to the stereo. He punched the unupholstered metal of the roof, where it was dented to look like he'd done it hundreds of times before, in time with the music.

"All right," I said, over the music. "I want out."

Sally rolled down her window. She put her naked hand out, palm toward the wind, and let it fly back. She did it over and over, even though it was freezing and there was a billowy snow coming down.

"Let me out," I said. "You can't take me." I gripped the sides of her seat and shook. "I don't consent to being taken."

Sally turned to the window for a second and stared out at the grass embankment, before continuing the arc to look back at me. Her hair was down, and it blew out of the car. With her head resting on the seat belt pillar, she looked at me. Outside, on the window, rivulets of her brown hair moved in unison with the melted snow.

She said, "Honey," and reached back and touched my knee. "We're not the cops. It doesn't matter much if you consent or not."

I kicked at the back of Tommy's seat and said, "Pull over. Let me out. Pull over!" but he went on singing.

"I'm your official, legal guardian," Sally said. "Biology and all, Natalie. Mom, uhm, your grandma, never bothered to adopt you."

“Let me out,” I said. “I want out.” I wasn’t yelling so much anymore. It was more an intonation.

Her hand was back on my knee, rubbing little circles, trying to be comforting. “This is not an abduction,” she said. “You’re moving. I’m sorry that she didn’t explain this to you.”

I pulled my feet up to sit cross-legged and leaned back.

She took her hand away and rolled up her window.

Tommy sang the whole time.

Somewhere, everything was a little bit better. As a pregnant teenager you have the same basic options as a pregnant adult: give birth and keep the baby, give birth and give the baby up for adoption, give birth and throw the baby in a dumpster, or terminate the pregnancy. Sally chose option one, and somewhere, that decision worked out. Somewhere, I grew up with Sally as Mom and Tommy, or some other questionable role model, as Dad. Dad worked really hard to put Mom through night school, and she came out with a degree in accounting, so they stayed in the city and baby-proofed a whole new, bigger, apartment for me while they saved money for a down payment on a house. It was still hard to make the ends meet because they were young.

Sometimes, they would fight about it. Every once in a while, Mom would say something especially demeaning or emasculating to Dad, since she was already making more money than him, and more than once he couldn’t help but blurt out that it was all my fault. I, of course, was too young to understand or remember any of this, and really too young to remember that Dad either, but Mom did her best, after he left, to make sure her resentment toward me abated, and the next Dad did his best to love me. In this somewhere, Grandma is someone I see on holidays,

and we're fond of one another. She makes wassail when it's cold, and I like that, and she also did me the favor of laughing at the jokes Mom had me memorize for get-togethers when I was young. Last year, she gave me a kiss at Christmas after I opened her present and asked if she'd gotten me the right thing. I said she had even though she hadn't because I knew that grandmas sometimes did things wrong, and Mom and Dad later gave me the money to buy the gift she was meant to give me.

There was only one bedroom in the trailer. When we got there, they asked me if I knew how to set up a tent, and after I told them I hadn't been camping since I was ten, they said it was easy, that it should only take me a minute to figure out, and then Sally handed me a ripstop nylon bag and said, "Not like dark's coming on fast, but better to have it done early."

I didn't have it done early. The sun was setting by the time I pounded in the last stake. I surveyed the area of the clearing. There was the white and green single-wide trailer at the end of the dirt drive, my tent, a half rusted-out barrel, and a fire pit, filled with sand and surrounded by smooth gray rocks. The clearing was small, but there was still an excess of space. I smoked my last cigarette at the tree line and tried to think about what I should do. I could walk out, but the closest neighbor was more than a couple miles away, and there was no guarantee that they wouldn't just call up Sally or Tommy, who received greetings from nearly everyone they met at the grocery store in town. They stopped to talk to each of them and explain who I was. "It's great to meet you, Natalie. We're all very fond of your mother." Some of them tried to shake my hand or give me a hug.

“She’s been a real piece of work lately,” Sally said. “That’s why we’ve had to bring her out here, even though she’s so settled into her old high school already.” To a few of them she leaned in and said, “My mom found cocaine in her bedroom.” This was received with gasps or oh no’s. I’d lost that half gram of coke six months so long ago. You’ll find problems anywhere if you want to, Grandma.

But if I really wanted to, I could walk out. I just had to make it all the way out, to a payphone or somewhere that I could find a phone charger. I pulled the collar of the coat Tommy gave me up, and I could see the vapor of my breath in front of me. My lips and hands were already chapped from the cold and wind.

When Tommy walked past me, into the woods, with an ax, I’d finished the cigarette, the sun was all the way gone, and I’d resigned myself to one night there before I walked into town and tried to find some way to get back into the city. By the time he walked back out, I was forearm deep in my pockets and shivering.

He took a bundle of wood and dropped it beside the fire pit. He pulled some newspaper out of his pocket, crumpled and dropped it into the center and built a pyramid of sticks around it. “You’ve got a lighter,” he said, striking his own and lighting the newspaper. “You’ve got a lighter, and you’re freezing. Why didn’t you just do this yourself?”

I didn’t say anything. I opened my mouth to reiterate that I hadn’t been camping since I was ten, but my teeth just chattered until I clamped them together again.

He shrugged and turned around to crouch close to the fire. As he blew into it, he was silhouetted with orange, and when he drew back to breathe in, he was barely visible. He went on blowing into the fire for a couple of minutes before standing and walking away. When he came

back, I was huddled over the pit blowing at the fire and inhaling the smoke and blowing again, trying to get the wet wood to catch.

He came back and said, “Back up a sec,” and he sang as he squirted a long line of lighter fluid onto the pit. It flared up immediately, and the wood seemed to catch. He danced, raising his hands up high, bringing them back down to barely touch the ground and then scooping them back up toward the sky. He stopped with no ceremony and pocketed the lighter fluid and started to walk away. “I threw the ax into the ground by your tent if you need more wood,” he said. “Have a good night.”

Somewhere, I was never in the tree. The night that I’m left with an ax and a fire and a pile of wood, I decide that I’ll try to make the best of things, and I shiver through it. It takes a while to get over it when they scare the literal shit out of me, but I do. I have my trial, and the judge is talked into probation by the public defender, only because of the lengths that Sally and my mother went to, are willing to continue to go to, with regards to the wilderness rehabilitation. I take a class at the high school to get my GED and settle down on the same mountain as the trailer. I meet a boy at the VFW and we don’t get married right away, but he helps me get a job at the little ice cream stand. Sally and I never connect. We rarely talk, but I keep up with Tommy, who’s long since left her. He comes over to visit, and my husband skulks away while we talk about music. He explains to me that Sally was toxic. Toxic for me and him and everyone. Her own cure was the only cure, she thought, but that wasn’t right, Tommy said. It took him years to relax the apocalypse preparedness she ingrained in him, and when he did it was a relief. He tells me most times I see him that he’s sorry he burned all of my stuff, that he was on orders

from Sally. I was to shit my pants that night, hell or high water, he told me. Having to do that was the deciding moment. He left Sally, got his records back from pawn, and moved into town. He liked being able to walk to the bar and use the jukebox, to try to judge the crowd and find a song that they would all sing along with him on because, he said, that pretty much always made him feel good, or at least better.

I took a moment to compose myself. I dragged my sleeping bag out and laid it by the fire. I felt warm and was about to fall asleep when I rolled and got too close to the fire—the hot rocks surrounding the pit felt good through the fabric, but the old sleeping bag caught on fire. I got out of it before I was burned, but the flames worked their way up the fabric quickly, and I wasn't able to stomp them all out. I didn't know what else to do but go to the door of the trailer and knock and bang and twist the knob and then go back and get the ax and open the door with that. I tried to use the little time that I had before they were out of their bedroom to find the keys to the car. And I did. I found them and I was running, only wearing socks, when Sally caught up and grabbed me by the shoulder. She twisted me around and asked me what I thought I was doing, and I told her to go fuck herself. She pointed out at the fire, which now enveloped the pit, the sleeping bag, and the tent. She asked me the question again, and she told me that I was sure as shit going to pay for the replacement tent and sleeping bag. I jerked my shoulder away from her and elbowed her in the belly before I took off running. I scooped up my boots, which I was only able to find by the light of the flame-engulfed tent, and I ran until I got to the edge of the woods. In the dark, I couldn't hear Sally until she came out of the trailer with a flashlight. By that time, I had on the boots, and it didn't seem wholly illogical to climb a tree. This, the hindsight critic

says, is the moment of effect that caused the fallout of the rest, but this only works with distance because close up it seems like mistakes all the way down.

Somewhere, it was the same city as ever, but it was built into a wide, deep gorge, one end dominated by a hulking concrete dam. I remember wondering how they diverted the water. What did they do with all of it? I was thinking about it while we were, the whole family, in Tommy's station wagon speeding in the opposite direction of the dam, and Grandma started crying, and Sally hopped all the way into the back, and she was pounding on the rear window and yelling for Tommy to speed up. I climbed into the back, tumbling over the seat as Tommy accelerated. The water had topped the dam, and it was coming up behind us, no movie theater tidal wave, just pure anarchic destruction. Tommy slowed down and then stopped. He got out of the car and turned around, looking toward the dam. The implication was clear. Death imminent, contemplate life. You usually wake up in this sort of dream before you have a chance to drown, but I didn't. The wave crashed and swept me away. I scrambled frantically for the surface, ripped along through streets with cars bobbing up past me. Suitcases, paintings, Tonka trucks all slammed into the building I was finally pinned to and disintegrated. I watched an uprooted tree hurtle through the water toward me. I knew the tree from the park on Washington Ave. It flew at me, leaving a trail of mud, shaken from the huge root system, in its wake. I had more than enough time to think about it.

* * *

I fell asleep and woke from the dream to the shuddering of the tree. I was holding onto the rough bark with my arms and legs. I kept my face pinned to it as well. The piss on my jeans had frozen. A kachunk accompanied each shower of pine needles, and when I looked down, through all of the limbs, it was easy to see Sally at the base of the tree, slamming it with the ax to almost no effect.

I looked around for Tommy, and he was in the clearing, thirty feet away. He had my duffel between his feet, and when he wasn't holding his hands over the burning barrel, he was going through the bag, separating the contents into two piles by no self-evident system. He stopped and did a spin, then backed up and started to sing. He wiggled his shoulders before bending down to pick up one pile, and as he dropped the bundle into the burning barrel, I leaned back to let in air to scream. My whole body tensed, and by the time it relaxed, my torso had gone perpendicular with the tree, and I could see the boots that Tommy and Sally gave me when I got there, rise up in front of my face, and the tree shot up away from me and into the sky. I could feel the waves of cold rush around me, and I could see my hair blow up, rising straight, toward the canopy, and I could feel myself being jockeyed by limbs, lightly at first, then harder and harder. For some reason the message hadn't reached everything. I could still feel the rhythmic pounding of the ax winding through the tree and transferring waves of energy into my body, and the whole time, the pine needles keep showering down in waves, heavy then light then heavy, but always falling.

Wire Service

County called open season on coyotes. Sometime after Rachel Kapral's kid disappeared, someone in a town meeting said, We got to do something about this. Get these things out of here. There was probably a hear, hear, and then the guy with the gavel slammed it down and said, All right, fine. Go get 'em.

Cody, the little kid who was the beginning of the whole thing, not but five years old, walks outside to the garage to get an RC from the drink fridge. He doesn't come back for a while, and they get worried. The parents start looking around but can't find him. They call the police and get together a search party. A couple days later, they're still combing through the woods in a line, poking the ground with sticks, like they do, and someone steps on the kid's hand, somehow missed it with the stick, except he's not really recognizable as Cody anymore. That's basically the newspaper version—except with a little thing at the bottom that says you should call Sheriff Dickerson if you have any more information.

But I know Rachel Kapral, and probably what's more important, I know her husband, Tom. I didn't hear anything about him after high school except for the rare mention of "that kid from high school with no common sense? Can't tell time? What was his name? You know who I'm talking about." But when they hired him as Chief Plant Engineer, it messed with the whole promotion schedule and pissed a lot of people off, and they learned his name quick. By that time the plant had laid me off, and I didn't really have to think of Tom until he came into Sam's Garage while I was working.

He pulled up in some almost brand new Ford, with stock suspension and no bed-liner, a truck that couldn't be used as a truck should be, and before he jumped down from the cab I had a good idea of what was wrong.

"Engine's doing all this thwacking," he said. "It sounds like helicopters."

"Pop the hood for me," I said. I revved it up and just listened. "When's the last time you got the oil changed?"

He didn't know.

"Busy this week," I said. "I'll sell you the oil and filter, so you don't have to make a second stop at the auto parts place."

But he said it was no hurry. He'd leave it, call his wife, and borrow her Subaru until the truck was done. I shrugged and caught his keys. He gave me his number, and walked out into the gravel lot. It's almost hard not to like someone who can't change his own oil. It'd be like calling a baby ugly to not like him.

He couldn't remember to change his oil, and there were lights on the dashboard and stickers on the window. What I mean to say is, I bet Tom set that kid down somewhere and told him to wait while he went off and did something. By the time he remembered that Cody was waiting for him, it was too late. People know the story, and even though they all heard the same story to begin with, now they've mostly all got their own version.

It's the kind of story that outgrew itself pretty quick. Someone like Sandy, who doesn't really know Tom at all, has him all set up in his head as either some sicko or the unluckiest man around. Sandy, who doesn't even know Tom, has come up with a whole imagined history of perversion or past lives as Hitler and Saddam Hussein. Some people were saying that it sort of sounded like the time Behrendt drove six miles to get his gun after him and his wife got in a

fight, just stewing the whole way there and back in piss-hot rage. He shot their teenaged kid, instead of her—on accident—and right off, in his grief, he told her that he was sorry, and they could go on—and really he wanted to, seriously; he was so sorry—but she just couldn't tell anyone. The rumor got around that he was a killer before the cops managed to actually arrest anyone. It was summertime, so no one even noticed the kid was missing. No one even bothered to give a shit until it hit the newspapers, and by that time, it had already made it down to the old ladies' quilting circle.

But for open season, me and Sandy are up over the crest of the hill on the top of my property throwing hunks of raw venison into the rusted out shell that used to be my grandpa's Galaxie 500, trying to get it done before we lose light. One of the old hunters in the Lounge told me that if you could get the noise of coyotes calling their friends out to eat and then the sound of them finally chowing down, you could play it back and kill about half the area population from your back porch without using more than a scattergun and a case or so of beer.

Sandy's finished throwing his meat in, and he's off behind me sitting on the split rail fence. He said earlier that there's no way it'll work, but we'll see when we see. The bounty's not a lot, but twenty-five bucks a dog will definitely go a ways toward recouping the cost of beer we'll drink and the ammunition we'll use. And if we end up not doing it—if the sounds don't work—we'll have a good drunk on so it won't matter.

I finish with my Styrofoam cooler, get out the staple gun, and use it to fasten each hunk of meat where it sits. "Just to keep them around a little longer so we make sure to get their calling," I say and put the digital recorder in. The recorder is one of the only things that Sandy actually got away with stealing. He just didn't have a chance to hock it before they put him in jail.

I wire up the mic and drop it on the bench seat and then tape the whole rig down. If the dogs get to tearing at it they won't wreck the plan, probably.

Sandy hunkers down and pushes his hair back, looks into the car, and tilts his head. The hair is greasy from the third shift work he's got himself caught in. They moved him from second shift because he couldn't keep up with all of the new rules. Even now, he tells me, he starts to sweat every time he sees Tom's signature on a memo by the time clock

"I still don't get how this's supposed to work," he says.

I wonder if he's thinking the same thing about me being greasy and tired and sad-looking, if maybe that's what I looked like when I was still at the plant. "Man," I say, "it's coyotes. I don't know the things at all. It's just some shit I heard."

There's a bit of quiet while he stands on the bottom fence rail and looks over the crest of the hill. From when I was a little kid, I know that he can't see the house or either of the old barns, but he should be able, just barely, to see the stream on the other side of the road through the trees. He hops down and pushes his hair back again. "How you get a baby stolen by a coyote makes no sense to me."

"I was going to call up Tom, invite him. Ask him about it if you want to."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know if he's got any malice in him, but... Tom's head's not full of rocks and dirt, so... I don't really know." I squat down next to Sandy and look into the car. "I got that thing turned on. We should get down the hill so we can be there when Jad shows up with the amp and the pot." And before I can say another word, he's off running down the hill, like a little kid headed for cake. The hot summer has burnt most of the grass up on the hill, really the whole property, so as he runs down the hill to the back porch, a cloud of dust kicks up behind him.

After I pay Jad for the weed, I tell him to invite some people over later if he wants, and once he's gone, I get on the phone to Tom to invite him over.

When Tom shows up, we stand in the front of the house for about an hour. I look over his truck, at the new wheels and knobbies he's had put on it since I changed the oil. He shows me his rifle, a lever action Winchester, every bit of metal, even the lever, hammer, and trigger, shining, heavy with oil.

"It was Grandpa's," he says. "A thirty-thirty. The scrolling on the stock is all hand-done." He takes the gun from my hands, and pointing the barrel at the ground, he runs his finger down the woodwork.

"It's nice," I say. "But you should hang it on your wall. Cowboy gun isn't the best choice."

He shrugs. "It's the only one I have."

"Well, it's a gun," I say. "So it ought to be all the same. Let's go back there and start the fire."

We walk past Sandy as we pass around the house. He's standing next to an empty six pack and lobbing rocks into the hayloft of the old barn. I don't say anything to him. I figure he'll come to the fire pit when he wants. After Tom and me make a small fire, I smoke cigarettes, and he rolls his beer can between his hands. The crinkle of Tom's can and the crack of the fire is about all the noise we've got to put up with until Sandy comes.

After talking about the Steelers for a while, Sandy goes quiet and looks at Tom. The sun's been gone. We've been sitting around the fire for a couple hours, anxious. "You ever think that maybe

God took your boy 'cause you make a shitty parent?" Sandy asks. He sounds like he's got himself convinced that Tom fucked his kid to death and hacked off an arm just to throw everyone off. Slurring his words and shaking his cigarette at Tom across the fire, I can smell burning hair. He's drunk enough that the presence of his boss, the guy who made him night shift, lets it out. "I'm just asking 'cause I heard you were shitty at it. You know?" He reaches into the cooler for a beer.

"I mean," Sandy says. "Just wondering if you've maybe thought that 'cause when those cops nabbed me back then I was thinking, You know this is probably 'cause I was always jerking off in the bathroom at church during sermons. Like karma, you know? You must have done some shit."

Tom doesn't say anything. He's on about his fifth or sixth beer and mostly all he's done is open and close the pearl-snap front pocket on his Western shirt.

"I just mean, we all got our things to feel bad about." Sandy takes a sip of his beer and lights a cigarette.

We hear the short, excited yipping of coyotes come to eat the old venison up in the car. I look at Sandy to see if he's as surprised as me that this might actually work. He's got his head cocked, ear pointed up the hill, while he bites the rim of his can. He looks at me and nods.

"What do we do?" Tom says.

"Sit here and wait," I say. "Drink another beer. Hang out."

"I'm sitting out here with a gun across my lap, hanging out with you hillbilly assholes, and when the reason that I'm actually here shows up, I'm meant to just sit around and listen to them make noise?"

“Sounds about right,” Sandy says. “And I mean, just an idea, but you could try talking to us. Instead of just sitting there playing with your shirt, all sad. Can’t even stick up for yourself. Fuck.”

I look over at Sandy again and shake my head a little, trying to get him to stop.

“I just came up here to shoot coyotes,” Tom says. “And I’m getting treated like some lower class of person.” He gets up and works the lever on his rifle. It ejects a live round. He pretends not to see me move it away from the fire. “I’m going up,” he says. “I don’t care what sort of lame-brained shit you all are doing up there.” He starts up the hill without looking back.

The yipping stops, but he still doesn’t look back.

“Not like I think he’s right or anything,” I say, looking at Sandy. “But they’re done calling and now they’re eating. By the time we get up there it ought to be OK.”

Tom’s up ahead of me and Sandy, taking big steps. He’s got his gun slung over his right shoulder, and he’s moving like when he gets up there he’s going to single-handedly, all on his own, John Rambo-style, kill every coyote in town. In his head he’s probably thinking, “This one’s for Cody,” but once he’s up there, if he actually gets one, who’ll the other ones be for? No one else is dumb enough to let their kid get carried away by wild dogs, so he’ll be left thinking, “This one’s for Fido, and this one’s for Meowmers, and this one’s for Puddles,” because really only dogs and cats should be killed by coyotes.

“So what’re you thinking?” Sandy says. “You think that he actually did it?”

“Kill the kid? Fuck no.” I stop walking up the hill and stand, look at Sandy for a minute. “Is that what you’ve been asking me all day? Why the fuck would he kill his son?”

“You know what I mean,” he said. “Last person to see the kid. Only person home when the kid went missing. Only place I’ve ever seen him and his wife apart is the plant. Damn

convenient.” He slides the bolt on his gun back and watches the round go into the chamber as he pushes it back. “That’s all I mean.”

“I think she was home,” is all I say.

When Rachel and Tom got married they were already pregnant, and so trying not to piss off their parents, Tom took a knee at the Sportsmen’s Lounge on trivia night and asked her if they might make it official. Fran Smith was there, and she told me it seemed so perfect that she cried because someone had put on “Desperado” by the Eagles and it was just getting to the part where the violins sound all tearful before the drums kick in. “That boy timed it perfect,” she said.

Sandy and me are walking again, and he’s wondering what kind of beer Jad is going to get because he doesn’t want to drink one more Schlitz, and I don’t know, but he’s mostly just mumbling to himself anyway. By the time we get to the top of the hill, Tom is already up there, and he’s sitting on the ground, back against the fence, one leg crossed under the other, holding his head up with his hands, gun still hung over his shoulder, and Sandy says to me after slapping my shoulder, “I fucking knew it.”

“You knew what?” I say.

“He did it. Look at him. Just like how they ended up finding out about Behrendt.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” I say. “No one found out about Behrendt. He just started telling people. Like he was proud of it. It’s not the same thing.” Before he was brought in by the police, Sally Cobleigh, Jim Nicolette, Ted Francis, and some guy from out of town named Tommy all told me he did it.

“That’s not what I heard. I heard he was in the bathroom at the bar, curled up by the toilet, blackout drunk, mumbling about shooting kids while he punched himself in the leg over and over.” He points at Tom. “Like this guy here.”

“Shut up,” I say. “You weren’t even up here when that happened. Probably hadn’t even figured out what your dick did yet.”

“Hey,” I say. “Coyotes gone before you got here?”

Tom sucks a bunch of phlegm from his nose to his throat. “They were up here. I couldn’t get a shot off though. They ran.” He gets up and brushes off his ass. “They don’t even look so bad. Like skinny dogs. I don’t know what I was expecting. Like hyenas maybe. Or dingoes.” He wipes off his face and ends up leaving dirt and bits of grass in the tears and sweat.

“This is some fucking bullshit,” Sandy says, reaches into the Galaxie, and pulls out the recorder, leaving the mic behind. He shoves it into his back pocket and starts down the hill. “I’m going to get high and see if Jad is back yet.”

Tom gives him a little wave, but Sandy is in a half jog down the hill, carrying his gun hung across one arm, whistling the theme from *The Great Escape*.

“Is that thing going to work?” Tom says. He wipes the back of his hand across his nose and then on his jeans.

I hop onto the trunk lid of the car and let my boots kick back into the rotted bumper. Little bits of it flake off onto the ground. I take a pack of cigarettes out of my pockets and light one, and then toss the pack to Tom. “I don’t know,” I say.

He looks at the cigarettes and shakes his head. “I quit when Rachel was pregnant with Cody.”

He goes to throw them back, but I put up my hands. “Just smoke one,” I say. “Calm yourself down before we go back down there. There’re people coming over, and there’s no reason for them to see you like this, Tom. But the coyote sounds thing? I heard about it from

Glen McCleary years ago. He seemed to think it would work, but at the end there, he thought you could eat a stone as long as you put enough butter on it, so probably not.”

Tom lights a cigarette and puts the pack into his front pocket, stealing my cigarettes with an old habit picked back up in a second.

“I bet I could’ve just found some coyote noise on a CD,” I say. “Like they sell deer and turkey sounds?”

He’s looking off to the moon. It’s near midnight, and the cold is starting to hit. Sometimes you can hear a front coming in, through the trees, if it’s quiet enough. “Rachel is going to kill me for this,” he says, and holds the cigarette up to his face, blows ash from the tip.

“How’s she taking it?”

“She’s not as bad as she was, you know. We keep hearing—or more like not hearing—people talk when we’re out. At the grocery store the other day, we come around the corner into the bakery, Mr. and Mrs. Dunwitty are up at the counter, and he sees us and when he does, he taps his wife’s hip, and they both stop.” He knocks the cherry out of the cigarette and pockets the butt. “They didn’t look at us except that first time by accident, but he like whispered something to her, and they just stood there, stock-still, probably waiting for the baker to finish writing on their kid’s birthday cake or something.”

“Shit,” I say.

“And then there’re a lot of people like you guys. I know what you’re thinking about. Like I somehow did this? Like it’s my fault or Rachel’s? Or RC Cola’s? What was— ”

“Now, hold on. Nobody thinks that,” I say and hop off the car and hold my hands, palms out, in front of me.

“No, no, no. I get it. People have got to talk, tell stories, but I’m not an idiot,” he says.

“What was there we could’ve done? Nothing. It’s fucking terrible. Sometimes terrible shit happens, and sometimes terrible shit happens and your kid gets killed, and there’s nothing me or Rachel or the RC Cola could’ve done to stop it.” He wipes at his face again, but I don’t think he’s crying. It just sounds like he’s mad.

“Tom, I didn’t... How was I supposed to...” I walk over to him, but before I get there, he starts moving toward the house.

I see a flare in front of him as he lights another cigarette, and at about the same time the coyote noises turn on from down at the house. The big old amp still works, I guess, because the yipping barks of the coyotes are loud even up here. Me and Tom are a little drunk and upset, but I should I offer him a ride home since Grandpa was a cop, and I still have ways to talk myself out of trouble if I get pulled over. I walk quick to catch up with him, and as I crest the hill I can hear the excited noise of a bunch of people down at the house, and the Creedence is mixing with the coyote noises, and I see a flash and hear the crack as someone shoots their gun in the air, and Tom moves ahead of me. I can only picture the little red bob of cigarette light in front of him after the smoke clears the sides of his head and spreads into the cloud darkened night in his wake.

Vita

Michael Haines was born in Tucson, Arizona and raised to relative maturity in Dallas, Pennsylvania. He earned a B.A. in English from Penn State University, minoring unofficially in Erotic Science-Fiction. He generally prefers to remain aloof and chooses not to get too personal, thank you very much. Michael currently lives in New Orleans.