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Time Enough

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Time Enough

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
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

LB Kovac

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Almost in Orbit

You will meet her at a boydee shop. She'll be wearing a pair of well-worn Retro 2000 Converse underneath the hem of her shimmering Infinitee dress, and she'll be drinking dark green boydee from her hovercup. You'll duck through the door, already late for some meeting offplanet, and you'll see her there as the bell on the door jingles. As you are pressing the tired barista behind the counter for a caramelized boydeecino, extra quick, you will spy her features again over the face of your silver watch, the black digitized second hand pointing straight at her wispy blue hair.

After you grab your drink, you will coyly slide into the seat across from her and offer her an apology. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't see you there." But the way you'll look at her, never breaking eye contact, unblinkingly following her movements, you'll know that she knows this is all an act.

Her pale pink face will dip in the light as she brings her hovercup to her painted lips, and her eyes will narrow. She'll ask you to leave.

You'll oblige, but you'll leave an old fountain pen, one of a thousand in a cardboard box at work, with the number of your delivery service etched in the side and a note that says, You're

Beautiful, tucked in the clip. As you hurry out the door, almost spilling the frozen boydeccino down your pants leg, you'll cross your fingers, because this act has never quite worked, but maybe this time, it will.

You will go back to the docks where your Class 15 is docked, check the empennage, run some navcomputer simulations, vid-chat with your scowling boss, all the normal stuff on the pre-delivery checklist, but you'll catch yourself looking through your windshield at the simmering yellow clouds. Maybe she's looking out at those same noxious clouds, but she sees something beautiful in them, something reminiscent of her lush home world. You'll call Mercy, the receptionist at the delivery service, to see if any messages have come through at the front desk. You still aren't quite comfortable with the way she turns the edge of her lip up when you walk by, but she is quick at her job, even by Hyrelian standards, and, when you feel like this, you can let little things go. She will say that you have two messages, one from a spice firm in the next quadrant, one from an old client who wants to go out for drinks, and those are the only two. The way she says two, you will know that she knows you're up to your old trick.

Over the next couple of days, you will call Mercy every hour, the minutes on your watch face ticking away, so often that she prepares a little speech, one that she won't know is actually a script for how to put another crack in your heart.

There have been plenty of others before Boydee Girl, maybe a hundred other note-girls before her, but the subtle pink hue of her skin - the perfect grapefruit hue - will not fade into the darkness of your memory over the coming weeks. The way she kicked up her shoe, the casual angle that she held her hand under the table: these things will feel all almost too deliberate, almost like someone is acting out a simple fantasy written somewhere deep in your younger years.

Boydee Girl will not call. She'll have seen the pen but ignored it. She will be the kind of woman who gets tokens like this often, but not too often. She will be absolutely gorgeous, even to the Earth-men who say that off-world women have no hearts. She will have looked down at the pen over the edge of her boydee cup and wondered, just for a microsecond, how calling you would play out. You will have been confident, after all, despite the brown locks and the stupid grin and the outdated silvery vibrasilk suit. She usually hates suits, so stiff and inadequate at revealing the features of the man underneath, but she will like the way your hair was swept to the side, how your tie will be pulled down around your collar, almost tugging itself loose. She will sense that you are a man who can be prevailed upon, if it is necessary, to act in a way that was unexpected.

You won't see her for weeks.

Work will march on. In between the local deliveries and short trips to the Jaguar XKL sector, your boss will send you a contract for a delivery of supplies and farming equipment to a small planet in RoLex Deep Space 62. The navcomputer estimates the trip will take at least two years, two months, to complete.

You will think, ever so briefly, about not signing the contract. Your pen will hover over the black line, and you will think that, maybe, she'll show up in a blur of pink and blue. Maybe, the note was stowed in her pocket and tossed in a pile of laundry. Maybe, she is drawing things out to not seem too eager or too desperate. You will realize, even as you think these things, that they are foolish. A dozen times, your trick has not worked. There will be absolutely no reason to believe it will work the hundred-and-first. And you will need the money. Heavens, you will desperately need the money. Your years of hopeful gambling won't have been just on things like affairs of the heart.

You will sign your full name, James Cromwell Maximillian Temple, on the last line of the last page.

The weight of your black-inked signature will sink in quickly. For each of the letters, you will have to spend more than twenty-six days in space. Twenty-six days alone, with only TeeVee and a memory deck full of hologirls to keep you company. You will have to give up your apartment, cancel your bills, sell your truck, and tell your aunt and her friends that you will not be able to attend the weekly cribbage meeting at the community center.

This will all have happened in the afternoon. You'll ask your boss, a short and thick-waisted Gremillion, for the rest of the day off, to put your affairs in order. He will comment on the fact that it sounds like you are dying, putting your "affairs in order." You will not chuckle because that will sound too much like the truth. Instead of doing the things you're supposed to be doing, you will wander the small lot just below your docking station, in the great shadow cast by your ship, telling everyone who cares to inquire that you are "contemplating the mysteries of long-term interspace travel."

Already, it will feel like you only have minutes until you leave, but it isn't too late for Boydee Girl to come back. She will come across the lot, hair streaking out behind her, an inky shooting star over the dirt of your lot. All of these days, these weeks, spent pondering in your ship, and she will have been under you the whole time. You will wring your fingers in relief. After all this waiting, all the subtle divine invocation, the Boydee Girl will be flying to you, right before you must leave, but not too late.

You won't waste this opportunity on flowery pick-up lines or chivalrous gestures. You won't have the time. You'll just shout a simple, "Hey," in the path of her flight.

She will stop breathless at your feet, the exertion making her already pink cheeks even

rosier, and pump a few breaths before speaking.

"Hey," she will wheeze back. She will flick back the bangs of her hair, run her hands along the sides of her face to remove any sweat, and look toward you. You won't have noticed her eyes back at the boydee shop, the too-perfect iridescent spheres of her irises, the shimmer produced as she looked from you to her cup to the sun. In her eyes will be reflections of all the cosmic wonders of the universe, tiny stars erupting, growing, fading to red, galaxies spinning for thousands of years, being eaten away by massive black holes and reappearing as hanging crystals.

You will hardly know what to say to her. You will sputter out, "I think we met."

"Oh?" she will offer, looking at the hard outline of your shoulders in your space suit and then down to her shoes.

"Yeah. In a Boydee shop."

"Oh. I thought I recognized you. You gave me that pen. Do a lot of girls respond to that?"

It will be your turn to flush. You won't be able to lie. "No." You'll squirm in the heat of the dual suns. "Yeah, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have stopped you." You'll turn to walk away. You'll curse yourself for breaking from your imperfect method of finding love.

But, you'll feel a faint and light hand on your shoulder.

"It's okay. It was kind of cute." She'll point towards a cloud in the distance, one fat and gray. "I'm trying to stay ahead of the rain." And she'll laugh, so beautiful and cheerful a laugh. You are encouraged by this laugh. "Besides, I had to sign something right after you left, so..."

"Listen, I'm leaving on a commission tomorrow for a couple of years," you will stammer, "but, tonight, I would like to have some fun before I leave. Will you come and have a drink with me?"

She will widen her eyes, stare at you for a second, move the weight from her right foot to the left. She is not all that easy, does not often accept such advances from Earth men, but you will not tune into the subtleties of her dance. A few drops of sweat will slide across her cheek, down her jaw, and into the fabric of her jacket, and you will watch as it splotches, widens, deepens across the outline of her body.

"Alright, I guess. Where do you want to go?" she will finally ask.

"Kelt is right over there, across the street. Meet me around eight?"

"I have work tomorrow morning. Could you do seven?"

"Seven is great," you will say, and you will not be able to help your sudden chuckling.

"Seven is perfect."

That night, you'll scramble through your closet, looking desperately for something nice. You'll finally grasp your outdated unwrinkle-able Infinitee shirt. You'll put it under a leather jacket, comb your hair, and stare for only a second at the man in the mirror. You'll spend a few moments on your automater looking up the names of good Blootine singers, thinking maybe, a well-placed name will gain you a point in her favor. She might like old Blootine music, you'll tell yourself. But, she might also not be there.

You'll try not to linger on this thought: her in a short silver dress, one that picks up the red undertones of her skin, and her bright smile.

Something will be enough to animate your legs, put up your arm for a hovertaxi, and spill out into the parking lot of Kelt's right as your watch reads 6:59:59.

You will rush inside, your Infinitee shirt crinkling, and you will wish you had something else, anything else to wear. You'll go to the bartender, Kenlen, an overgrown bat from a race whose name you won't be able to pronounce, and you'll ask for a stiff whiskeyhol, no rocks.

He'll serve it to you in a copper mug, just like the ones they used to have on Earth, and you'll throw it back in one gulp.

You'll realize that you didn't even ask her name.

She'll walk in behind you, and, when you spot her, she'll already be sitting at the hoverable right across from the bar. Her legs will be crossed just the way they'd been that first day, weeks ago, and you'll think, as the whiskeyhol is bubbling in your stomach, that you've made a terrible, horrible mistake coming here. But it will be much too late to back out by anyone's standards.

You'll lock eyes with her and feel all at once that she is much too beautiful for you; you're leaving for two years; you should be spending this time readying yourself for the lonely months ahead. Something, maybe the whiskeyhol burn, maybe your burgeoning heartbeat, will make your chest feel a little warmer.

"Hi," she'll say to you softly.

"Hi," you'll say back.

"Nice place. I've never been here," she'll say, floating one hand over the table, moving her other to the back of her chair.

"It doesn't look like much, but they have good drinks, okay prices, and they're music selection is nice." She will look so out of place against the faux-wood hoverchair.

"Will you order me a drink?" she will ask.

"Sure," you'll sputter out. "Of course." You'll pat the pockets of your shirt, scrambling for your wallet. "What do you want?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not much of a drinker, really. Dealer's choice."

You will go back up to the bar, order two more whiskeyhols, and she will have already

made her way to the jukeblock. You will carry the copper mug to her, placing the handle in her outstretched soft pink hand, and, for not even a microsecond, your finger will graze her skin. So soft, so elegant, her skin will feel under your rough hands, and she will look you directly in the eyes.

"Who's your favorite Blotline singer?" she will ask.

You will be relieved that the old adage is true, that Korkians are suckers for old Blotline music.

You won't answer quickly enough.

She will repeat her question, tipping the whiskeyhol towards her lips as she finishes.

You think that you don't have a favorite. It will seem wrong in the moment, despite your studying, to not tell her the truth. "I don't have a favorite. They all sound the same to me, honestly. I just like the vibe."

"So, you want me to pick out a song?"

"Dealer's choice."

She will smile wide, her white teeth peeking between her painted lips. She will press her finger in the credit pad, hit the random button, and slurp down the rest of her whiskeyhol. She will toss your glass onto the hovertable, grab your hand as if you are a friend, and pull you away from the bar.

"Let's dance."

And you will dance.

Your night with her will be like a jolt of electricity. Her arms will follow yours with every movement, and her hair will seem exceptionally bright, each curl reflecting in a perfect arc the light from the vintage-style chandeliers overhead. You will pull closer with each turn, the

dulcet tones of the Blotline music tightening you in, and when your heartbeats are so in rhythm that they beat together, you will finally let your lips touch hers. An electric jump will course from one mouth to the other, and you will think that that will be the moment you think about again and again, when millions of miles are in between you and her, as you shoot through the stars from planet to planet. You will know that this is all happening fast, too fast, even for the breathtaking tempo of the music; but, then again, you won't have any time of your own to waste that night.

Six songs and at least four whiskeyhols later, and she'll whisper in your ear, "Order two to go. Let's get out of here." The bat will give you two Dynamo cups, and she will be pull you by your elbow out the door. You won't believe your unbelievable luck, that the two of you are here, that she remembered after all these months, that her almost iridescent hair is falling around the back of her gown for you, just you, for absolutely no one else. And it won't matter that this is all just for one night.

You'll try to hail a hovertaxi – to where, you're not sure – but she'll press your arm down just in time and push you towards your lot, your ship, where the two of you met for the second time.

As the two of you make your way across the street to the lot underneath your ship, she'll stop. She'll look like she is tripping on something, but she is actually dropping to the ground, splaying out in the dirt, the edge of her coat forming a ring around her, and she'll pull you down, too. She'll roll you over until you're facing the night sky.

Up there, past your own Class 15, there are a million golden stars, a million tiny gold dots on a black sheet. You've never laid there and looked up. You've never taken the time to see past the twin autolyzed engines or the two hydrospace cannons or the thrusters that will take you from

here to RoLex Deep Space. You've never taken the time to look up there, up to a million different stars with ten million different planets, all of them populated with who-knows-how-many different people and places. And you've never shared this wondrous lost, dizzying feeling with anyone.

She will be able to tell that you are feeling something, not just the whiskeyhol, and she will take your hand in hers and point at a star that just seems a little red pinprick in the vast night sky.

"See that one?" she will ask.

You will see the little red dot past the curve of her painted fingernail, all the way at the end of her straight pale arm, and it will look so close. Maybe deep space is really an arm's length away. You will nod.

"That's the galaxy I came from. It's called Kanador, and it's part of the Upare constellation." She will move her arm up and down to connect the dots of a V. "It contains Mieldred, Moreso, and Ushi. Now, Ushi forms the leg of Jorsen Stucco. Do you know who he is?"

You do know a little bit about Stucco, you're an interspace delivery pilot, after all, but you shake your head. The longer it takes her to explain, the longer the two of you will be here, in this moment. You breathe more deeply with every tinkle of her voice.

"Stucco was the first man to go into deep space. I mean, men before him had theorized its existence. I think it was the Lareto Equation that is given credit, but Stucco was the first man to go there. In a Class 34, no less. It took him seventeen years to get there."

"Wow," is all you will muster, and you will mean it more for the way a few strands of hair are falling across her eyes than the thought of treading the unknown in a class 34.

"The Universal Interspace Summit of 23.16.2, helmed by my great great great grand uncle, was the one that introduced the proposal to name a constellation after him. I think this one used to be name Oron, Orin, Aurin, something like that, but, now its Stucco. If you follow Upare up, that's his belt, and that cluster, the Krill Cluster, is his head."

You won't correct her pronunciation of the old constellation, but you will watch her mouth as it forms around the words, around Aurin, Stucco, Krill cluster, the way her lips move over her teeth.

"I like looking at stars," she will tell you. "Ancient peoples used to think that they were fiery balls of gas, held together by some internal gravity, and they would burn for millions of years, until they run out of fuel. Then, the carbon in them compressed, and they turned into enormous diamonds. We might be flying through some cluster millions of miles away and discover the old stars, giant hanging crystallized skeletons, and we'll disprove thousands of years of research."

She'll stop for a moment, searching with her eyes for evidence of these diamond-like stars, and you'll realize that it is your turn to take her hand, to point at another star, this one alone and hanging.

"That one," you will say, "is Oyster Perpetual. It's in RoLex Deep Space."

"That's where you're from?"

"That's where I'm headed tomorrow."

"Oh yeah," she will say. "How far away is it?"

"A little over six trillion miles."

"And how long will it take you to get there?"

"A little over a year."

She'll hold out her hand until it covers the star.

"What is it like? Traveling offplanet all the time?" she will ask.

"I've never seen the crystal fields you're talking about, or run into any calcified stars. It's more like running past light bulbs, really. I don't really look out too often. I just make the deliveries."

"Oh," she will say, a little disappointed. You'll realize that she had some grand idea of you, a space delivery-man, traveling amongst the stars.

You will not be able to help the fact that you are hurt by this. The feeling will be unexpected. So little time will have passed since the moments you second met, but, already, you will feel something stronger for her. You will offer her one of the Dynamo cups, and you will sip out of yours, and the two of you will lie out there, beneath the hulking ships, staring at the gaps of sky that are visible, for only a few more minutes. Then she will throw the empty cup over her head and roll onto her stomach.

"Is it time for you to go?" you will ask, looking down at your own cup, swirling the last of the whiskeyhol in tight circles, trying to not let her know that you're disappointed she is so ready to leave you.

"I figured I could stay with you," she will say.

She will laugh as your hatch falls from the ship's belly, revealing a short ladder, and you will both ascend. This is the first time you have brought someone back to your ship, and it will feel awkward at first, intrusive. But this feeling will not last. You will pull apart the zipper of her zerspace bra, and two of you will be all arms and legs and hot breath for hours on end. You will not want this feeling to stop, this loss of sense of time and space. But it will come to a stop eventually. However, you will be left with the memory of this moment where she fell off the

hoverbed and laughed, her chin going up and up, just laughing and laughing there on the floor with all the white sheets swirling around her. So few moments you had together, and this is the one that will stay with you, that you will play over and over in your mind, when you are seven million miles apart in RoLex Deep Space: her face disappearing below the edge of the hoverbed, and the timbre of her voice rising from the floor as she screamed and laughed. It will become so familiar that you will swear that it was a scene from an old holodisk or a book that you read as a child.

Months from that moment, you will look through your windshield up at the stars. Most will be flying by in tight straight streaks, but you'll still be able to pick out the two brightest ones flickering out of old Joseph Stucco, the first man to go into deep space. Alone at the navpanel on your ship, you will hold up your finger and thumb and attempt to move the two stars in his belt closer together with a pinch. Space is so very vast, and you and Boydee Girl are so very small. Still, she'll feel this movement with some mysterious sense of being. Sitting in her vintage hoverchair by her bedroom window, looking up across the millions of miles, she'll know just where you are. She'll feel you moving the two stars together so she wouldn't feel alone. And that small thought will be enough for you to make it one day, then two, then one hundred, until you are at day 790, the last day you will have to be in orbit around the planet you will now think of as home.

As he pops the cork on a new bottle of whiskeyhol, Kenlen finishes his story. He pours the brown liquid into my cup and adds two new Stonez.

“So, what do you think?” His high-pitched voice cracked on the last word. It sounds far away, even when he is close to me, just on the other side of the bar. But it has a nice melody to it, especially when he’s telling a story.

“It’s a lovely thing to think about this beautiful woman waiting for me,” I say to him, taking a deep swig of my whiskey, reveling in the synthetic burn. “Quite poetic. Romantic, even. I would almost venture to say that you’re soft on me.”

He unfurls his wings and lets out a squeaking laugh. “You’re calling me soft.” I think he has more to say, but someone else sits down at the bar, and Kenlen leaves me to my whiskey and my thoughts.

I pick up the crystal glass and stare at the brown liquid inside. Ten years on this planet, with nothing but the synthetic stuff. It’s been so long that I’m not sure I can remember the actual taste of whiskey. But I’m still sure, every time I drink it, that something is just a tad off about it. I gulp the rest down.

As I make my way out the door, Kenlen calls from behind the bar. “I’m going to miss you, buddy. Vidchat me some time.”

I nod at him, not quite sure if I will or I won’t.

In the lot beneath my ship, I power up my electric cig and draw in a deep breath. This might be the last time for a whole year that I can breathe in fresh air, non-circulated air. I absolutely refuse to enjoy it.

I try to concentrate on the mission ahead, on RoLex Deep Space. I’ll have to navigate the Gibraltar asteroid field at some point, and that will require a fair amount of precision on my part. But, as my cig simulates burning out, I feel mind wandering back to this image of a pink Korkian, one I’ve seen in a hologram somewhere. That moment, when Kenlen’s story had

seeded itself in me, when I had believed for a moment that there was some beautiful woman waiting on the other end of this two year trip, I'd pictured her as the one on the other side of the galaxy, sitting in her chair, looking out at the stars and waiting for me.

The Language of Snails

In 1851, French occultist and would-be scientist Jacques Toussaint Benoit unveiled to the world his greatest invention, the pasilalinic-sympathetic compass. This device utilized the “telepathic bond” created between two snails to transmit messages instantaneously. Benoit was giddy about his new compass, promising his many investors nothing less than a complete revolution of personal communications.

Allow us for a moment to think about a world where, instead of microchips and complicated wiring, every cell phone would contain a personal snail that would use its telepathic abilities to send our LOLs and KKs to another “snail phone.”

Meanwhile, in 2016, in the office of a small magazine, Harold, twenty-nine, focuses on marking up article copies.

His official title is Assistant Editor, but he has allowed duties to encroach on that of the editor, until he has the office assistant fetching his lattes, watering his rhododendron, and grabbing his final prints from the copy room. The Editor, with his proclivity for eighteen-hole-

length lunches, is fine with this arrangement.

As he proofs another article on promoting perennial growth, Harold feels in his back pocket for his lifeless phone. He has already tried turning the phone off and on, as well as pulling out the battery and replacing it, but nothing new has appeared on the blank screen.

Harold has never heard of Benoit or his telegraph. He has watched a documentary on the mating habits of garden-bound creatures, in which the ritual of two fine specimens of *Helix Aspersa* is set to dramatic music, but that is hardly related.

The night before, Harold had gone on a date with Linda.

After dinner – after dessert, and drinks, and even a somewhat passionate caress at the door – Harold had tripped on the bottom step of Linda’s building.

Linda had rushed back out the door to him. She gingerly rolled up his pants leg to reveal an awful gash.

“Eh... That’s a bad one. Wait here,” she told him.

She returned with antiseptic and a cotton ball and got to work cleaning the wound.

As she brought the cotton up to his knee with a slow-motion speed, her long fingers even more elegant in the moment before she was to bring him pain, Harold winced.

“Don’t be such a baby,” she’d said.

What coursed through Harold in that moment could not be interpreted as pain. Yes, a tiny rush had snapped through his body, but he was not focused on that. No one had told him not to be a baby, not for a long time, not since second grade, when a schoolyard scuffle had left him in the care of one Suzy Mae, eight, future nurse.

Harold grabbed Linda’s wrist as she applied a lilac bandage. He pulled her into him. It wasn’t the right moment to kiss her, he knew this, but he couldn’t help himself. And the moment

after – her hand still holding the cotton ball, her face flushed, and him, trembling from a mixture of pain and passion and loss of nerves – was an awkward one.

It is of interest to note that in the documentary Harold had watched, under the dramatic music, the announcer had explained that snails, in fact, do not communicate by telepathy. Rather, they use “love darts:” sharp, tiny arrows shot at would-be mates. These darts, made from calcium within the snail’s own body, directly communicate affinity and carnal desire.

Throughout the work day, Harold is doing such a good job of filling his articles with green marks that he distracts himself from the thing he has tried so hard to ignore. When his phone does ring, he is almost too startled to answer, and he momentarily drops the phone.

“Hello?” Her voice fills up his head. “This is Linda.”

There’s a second when he considers pretending to be his answering machine, but something compels him to answer her with full honesty. “Oh, I’ve been waiting all day for you to call.”

“Really?” she asks. “I had no idea.”

Saving Elvis

Me and Kim were hanging out at the Dead Rabbit that Thursday night, listening to the classics and drinking, when “Don’t Be Cruel” suddenly came on. Elvis’ sugary voice piped over the bar’s speakers, filling up the whole space. Kim, already two gin-and-tonics into the evening, let out a roaring laugh. When the chorus came on, she slid her stool away from the bar. Her lips formed around each lyric like she was eating chocolate. Watching her, I knew right away what I needed to do to get her to be mine: I had to go back in time and save Elvis.

I can remember now being a little struck there by the fact that I had never thought of it before. It wasn’t the first time the Rabbit had played classic Elvis music. It wasn’t the first time that I’d sat back in my seat and watched her put on a little concert for the patrons at the bar. And, I mean, the technology had been there for ages.

There were a couple of laws in the way, but, come on. It was Elvis. You can’t really fault a guy for wanting to save him for her.

Kim squealed even louder when I told her. Her eyes lit up. “This is brilliant,” she said.

I didn't know how serious of a reaction it was, but it definitely still swelled me a little.

I could see it then. The two of us, waltzing into Graceland, travelers from the future, bringing the King tidings. I thought we could stop him before he ended up in his bathroom. I imagined us as heroes. And Kim, maybe, she'd let me get further than the front steps of her apartment building.

It all sounded so good.

The next morning, I woke up to a ding from my bank app, saying my credit card had gone through for a purchase of two Platinum Tour Tickets of Graceland. And that night, when we met at the Dead Rabbit again for more drinks, Kim carried under her arm a brown, ordinary-looking box. Inside was a TimeX ContinYOUus 3000. It was red and chrome with LED indicators and a gesture-controlled interface. A real thing of beauty.

It was rare that my plans ever got to this stage, and we were only two steps in. It was more than a little exciting. I was giddy as I put my hands on the thing. I'd only ever done time travel once. Almost three years ago, I used one of the machines in the mall to go back to the 1980s. That model had been larger, clunkier, with big buttons and a small touch pad. And the 80s had been lame, too much pleather and hairspray.

I tried to pull it out of the box, but she swiped me away. "We don't have a permit for this thing. I don't want everyone and their aunt knowing we have it." But even when she was shooing me, her hand touched mine for just a second, and she smiled at me. I knew this is what I needed to do.

We got down to brass tacks. By which I mean we got shit-faced and sang "Teddy Bear" at the top of our lungs. I don't remember much after that. But, somewhere along the way, we hammered something out, the whens and the hows of the plan, because she showed up at my

house around breakfast time with a suitcase of Buds. We climbed into my rambling Chevy, stowed the suitcase of Buds behind the front seat, and set about closing the gap between us and Graceland.

I took first shift driving.

“What are we going to tell him?” I asked her. The road was open on all sides of us. I couldn’t see any cities, even at the edges of the plains. The fresh air felt good.

“How about... Don’t do drugs?”

I did my best to look indignant, though it was hard. “This isn’t some after school special, Kim. That didn’t work in seventh grade. It’s not going to work now.”

She took a swig from one of the cans of Bud. “How about the truth?”

“The truth?” Did she know I was just doing this to get her attention? Was I that plain?

“Yeah.” She gulped down some more sour-smelling beer. “We’re from the future.”

“Oh. Yeah. Let’s tell him that!” Bravely, I took a swig out of her can.

At one point, she said to tell him that we were gods and could predict the future. Think of that, huh? Me, a god. We fell into this rhythm, the good kind. I’d tell a joke, she’d tell a joke, and we’d both roll and laugh and roll.

Eventually, though, we got quiet and didn’t know what to do. Kim took to staring out the windshield. I could feel her looking over at me every once in a while, but I had no idea what to say to her. I wanted to say something funny or charming, but I didn’t quite have the nerve. I told myself that this would ease once we got there. It was okay to just dream on the car ride over. The car ride back, though, would be different. Then, I’d be the guy who saved Elvis. If I could save him, I could do anything.

I looked down the highway, down the miles and miles of road ahead of me, and I tried to

picture Graceland at the end of it. I'd been there so many times as a boy, that I could almost see it, right past the skyline. That white fuzzy part was the outside, and the long straight lines were the columns out front, and the green space beside is where the horses ran and Elvis drove around his Jeep. If I looked real hard and concentrated – not so hard that I went off the road – I could see Kim at Graceland, maybe poking her head out of one of the upstairs windows, her yellow hair falling in front of her face. I'd be downstairs, helping Elvis with some yard work, and she'd give me a smile, even though I was all sweaty and dusty, that I knew meant she thought I was the only man in the world. Maybe, if I saved Elvis, if I brought back the King, if I showed her that I could be the kind of big-shot man she ought to have, maybe we could move our little thing forward.

Sometime during my musing, she fell asleep. She had the crook of one elbow right out of the window, and her head was resting against it. Her blonde hair caught in the wind, and the light from the rising sun lit her in this halo. She looked so peaceful and so beautiful. It made me ache to look at her.

“It all seems so easy,” I whispered to her, careful not to raise my voice enough to wake her. “Saving Elvis, I mean. We'll just go there, and we'll talk to him, and we'll change everything. We'll change history.”

In her sleep, she turned over, her face towards me, and I swear to God, she smiled at me. It was just a little wink of a smile, but it was there. And that was enough to make me the happiest man in the world on the drive over. I didn't even care that first shift turned into the whole trip.

This thing was almost really simple. The first part went quick and smooth. When we got to

Graceland, Kim didn't even have to try that hard to hide the time machine. She threw a jacket over it and said it was a souvenir clock, one of those hip-swinging ones you could buy at the gift shop. And the security guy that held up the line in front of the bus, he just ate it up. I gave an eye to the guy, just to let him know who she was with, but I couldn't fault him that much. Who wouldn't want a smile from a pretty girl like her? And we took the bus through the wrought-iron gates to Graceland herself. There she was, the home of Elvis, all white and tall and columned like I remembered. And it only took a few minutes to slide off the main tour group, to stash our audio guides, to jump a velvet rope and hide in Elvis' parents' bedroom closet, located just down the hall from the living room, like the audio guide said.

We were both a few in at that point. I'm surprised someone didn't hear us laughing. She pulled the time machine out of her jacket, and then the box, and there was a moment when we both sat, knee-to-knee, and we just took it in. The high-polished silver reflected our faces, but they were both blurred and turned, like the bathroom mirror on your way to the floor.

She suction-cupped it onto the door. Her hands moved around, and, a second later, the LED lights glowed on, and the whole machine made a soft whir. She cracked her long, elegant fingers, said "All right," and punched in the date.

There was just a second, as her finger fell closer and closer to the red button, right before she pressed it, that I had a creeping thought this might be a bad idea. Call it a moment of clarity. Call it sobriety. The booze wore off just enough for me to see outside of us, to see the two of us crouched inside this room, the guy who wanted to save Elvis as part of some hair-brained scheme to get my girl back. But I didn't say anything. Could I? Could I have stopped it? I don't know? But I didn't. And she pressed it. And with a little snap, we were there, 1976, Graceland, Elvis Presley Boulevard.

Let me tell you that meeting the King in person was everything that you could want it to be. First, he's taller than he looks on TV, not short, like you'd expect. He cuts an imposing figure. At home, he hangs out in these silk pajamas, but he keeps his hair combed up and slicked back, and he's always wearing these gold rings.

And all that stuff they say about his voice, and his hips – it's all true. His voice was like honey. Thick and syrupy, and all the words just fell out of his mouth. He could've talked to me about bus routes, and I would've hung on every word. And he walked like a girl. From behind, I can tell you, I felt some things about him, the way his legs moved, the way his legs met. There was something going on with that man that wasn't quite man but wasn't quite woman, either.

He was surprisingly chill about two drunk people stumbling out of his mother's closet in the middle of the day.

We must've made some kind of thunk coming in from the future, because he and a gang of identically-dressed ruffians were crowded around us as we opened his parents' closet door.

I poked my head out first.

“Hi,” I said.

His blue eyes peered down at me. He was at the front of the group, the men all crowded around him.

“You sneak in here?” he asked, so smooth, like molasses pouring over pancakes.

“Sort of.” I couldn't lie to him.

Kim popped up behind me. I could feel her head on my shoulder. “Hello,” she said,

extending a hand.

Elvis looked at it, and he took it in his own hand. “I didn’t realize there were two of you,” he said.

Kim seemed charmed by him. I could tell by that little uptick in her voice. She used to talk like that to me.

We burst out of the closet, and his little group – the men with identical coifs – they all fanned out around us.

“Back off,” he told them. “Give our guests some room.”

“Guests?” I asked. “That’s so kind.”

“Of course, you’re guests. Now, can I ask what you’re doing here?”

“Doing here.” I could see it being our song, rising to the top of the charts. “Doing Here” could be Elvis’ new song, the one that people in my time had never got to here, and he could credit it to me. I wouldn’t ask much, maybe a cut of the profits, but, really, just having a song sung by Elvis would be a pleasure in itself.

“We’re from the future,” Kim said from behind me.

Elvis laughed. “The future?” He was skeptical.

“Yeah,” I rallied for her. “The future.”

“We’ve come to save you.”

“Save me?” he asked. He looked to his friends, then back to us.

“I suppose,” he speculated, “I get shot by somebody. Or my plane goes down.”

“No, you die of a drug overdose on your toilet.”

He looked stunned, but the kind of stunned where you know that there’s a grain of truth in there, like when a friend makes a joke about you being ugly. He looked again to his friends,

who told him, of course it's not true, but when he looked back at me, there was something new in his baby blue eyes.

But it was only there for a moment. He laughed. "Well, future travelers, the least I can do for you bringing me this message is show a little hospitality.

And he seemed to take our whole, "We're from the future" story in stride.

After we'd introduced ourselves to him and the others, all of the hands were shook, and we got a grand tour of the house. Just like the tour we'd left, only there weren't any velvet ropes or people in blue polo shirts. He showed us to each of the rooms, and I remembered that this was somebody's house, not a museum.

We tried to pull him away. We tried to reason with him. We could tell by the far away, glassy look in his eyes, that maybe he was already on his way down. And so we tried harder. We weren't going to give up. But none of us had thought to bring something that might tell him definitively, expertly, that we were not from his time.

Kim thought that the whole thing was a hoot. She set about making herself part of his gang. She and all of Elvis' copycats started playing pool in the basement and putting a few more tallboys back, and it wasn't long before everyone- time dwellers and time travelers alike- was all aglow in a way only 1970s celebrity can make you.

We were partying with Elvis. We were doing the second best thing to saving him.

It went on like that for hours, maybe days. Time just became this one wave of light and dark when we were in the basement. We played pool, and wrestled, and drank like fish. Oh, the most delicious alcohols the King of rock n' roll was privy to. And we tried our best to talk the King into changing his ways. But we weren't the best models. Looking back now, I can see how all of it must've seemed like some elaborate prank to him, maybe. Some joke that people would

only think to play on a man like Elvis.

Late late one evening, I found Elvis hunched over the side of his bean-shaped swimming pool, his big toes just barely sinking in the water. He was in his silk pajamas again, the pant legs rolled up over his ankles, but I could tell, even in the dim light coming from the pool, that his eyes were red and raw. His face was white, but his eyes were dark and overcast. At first, I thought it might be the after effects of something new and fancy from his doctor or one of his friends. But I saw his nose was a little wet, and a big tear slid off the end into the pool. It sunk beneath the water.

I wasn't sure if I should intrude or not, but I padded over to the side of the pool and dipped my feet in beside him. He saw me coming up around, and he smiled a weak smile. And we just sat there like that for a few moments.

“George,” he said to me, his voice so sweet, a little innocent, quavering just a little over my name, “is it true? Do I really die in a few years?”

I didn't expect this moment when I was gearing up for this whole ride. I didn't expect to break the man. Still, it was sinking in for him, the poor guy. He was realizing something about the way he was being. He was realizing that there was a finish line for people with his way of living.

“Yeah, buddy. Afraid so.” I tried placing my hand on his knee and squeezed a little. He didn't move too much, so I guess it was right.

“The drugs are what do it to me?”

“Prescription painkillers, if I remember correctly.”

He kept his eyes down on the water, like he was watching the lights dance in the bottom of the pool. But I knew something else was going on. Another tear dropped off the end of his nose.

It was hard for me to see him like this. He wasn't some god in that moment. He was JC as the first nail went in.

Suddenly, he stood up. He looked at me, his eyes still red but hardened, and he nodded. He didn't say anything to me, but I felt that something powerful passed between us, something almost magical. Then, he turned and walked off towards the front door of the house, away from the partying. I watched as his purple pajamas slowly faded into the darkness, and I was left alone by the pool.

I stayed by myself for a while, but I eventually wandered back inside. I couldn't stand being alone with this picture of Elvis in my head. I drank hard the rest of the night. I looked for Kim. Somewhere, in the darkness that was my own self, I think I found her, although my memory of those moments isn't as good as I think it should be.

The next morning, I woke up to light streaming through a window. I was crumpled between a bed and a wall in one of the guest bedrooms. The house seemed still, but I could hear some faint sounds coming from another room, something rattling and dropping. I stumbled into the living room and found a pile, at least knee high, of prescription bottles, pharmacy cards, and flattened cardboard boxes.

Elvis padded into the room with a basket full of more orange plastic containers and pills

loose like candy. He dumped them onto the growing pile, some of the pills scattering like seeds into the thick green carpet.

He didn't notice me at first, but, when he did, he smiled. "Morning, George."

I tried to wipe the sleep out of my eyes. There was no denying him standing there, in the morning sunlight, his grin so wide, it was running off the sides of his face. "Morning, Elvis."

"Listen, George, I want to thank you. I called my doctor this morning and fired him. I tore up all my prescriptions."

"Gee, Elvis. That's great."

"You can shut out the sun for a while, but it ain't going away."

There was no denying that.

I had to tell Kim. I darted back through the house, checking all of the rooms for her. I found her in the basement, one arm off a yellow couch. She looked wondrous asleep, but I had to wake her. I couldn't leave her asleep with this news. I shook her gently. "Kim, Kim."

Life slowly came to her eyes. Her lids fluttered. "George, what the hell?"

"Kim, we did it."

Her eyes widened. "Did what?"

"We saved Elvis."

I pulled her by the arm back into the living room. The pile had grown even taller; the loose pills had spread further. Elvis was more determined than ever. From the living room, I could see him digging in cabinets, under couches, between shelves, unearthing more and more of his old life and dumping it in front of us.

"Holy shit," was all Kim could say at first. She, too, watched this careful process.

But, then, she moved, and she wrapped her arms around me in a deep hug. We'd never

touched like that, not in any moment that I could hang on to, anyways. It felt close enough. As she pulled me in, letting me wrap my arms around her body, I could feel the shape of her underneath her clothes. I could feel her arms stretch around my back, along my spine, a place I rarely got touched. I shivered. That moment, when I think about it, was almost enough.

“We did it,” she repeated to me, low enough that I’m sure only I could hear her. “We really did it.”

I pulled her in tighter, letting my hands touch her back as well.

We didn’t go back to our time, not immediately. I gave us a few more days to celebrate. It took more than a little convincing on my part to even get Kim to come back at all. I wish I’d just let her stay. She kept asking for one more day, a few more hours. But we finally decided that it was time for us to get back to our own time. We’d done what we’d came to do, and we needed to get back.

I tried not to tell everyone good bye. I thought I’d be easier to be there one minute and gone the next. Kim said goodbye in her own way, I guess. She grabbed my hand one night, her soft fingers tugging me away, and I took that as the signal that it was time to go. We walked together to Vernon and Dee’s closet. I latched the time machine to the door, punched in the date, and pressed the button. One breath, we were in the seventies; the next, we were back in our own time.

I was so happy, stepping out of the closet, her hand around mine. I was barely anxious when the tour guide told us that we couldn’t be in that part of the mansion. We ducked under the

velvet rope and fell in the tour line before he could think twice about throwing us out.

And we went through the tour again, the two of us trying to keep it to ourselves that we were the ones who saved Elvis. We bit our tongues so many times, trying not to brag about to it every tourist in line with us. It was almost too much not to share. But if we told anyone, even a tourist, we could both end up in jail for the rest of our lives. It just seemed so silly that all of these people were there to see a version of Elvis that wasn't even real. They had to look at everything behind plate glass, but we were familiar with the sofas, the chairs, the plates. It was as if everything was our own. And we shared that moment between us. Kim was so alive then, in that second tour. That's something I'll never forget.

But then we got to that last exhibit. I knew it was coming. I remembered it from my younger days, when I'd gone to Graceland with my family. It was the exhibit that covered his final days. I thought, maybe, there was something there to celebrate his later life; there might even be pictures of him with his grandchildren, his great-grandchildren even.

It wasn't like that at all. It was almost too familiar. There were the cardboard cutouts of the headlines from his last days. "Elvis Dies." "Long Live the King." "Nation in mourning." Only, this time, a few words had to be changed. "Painkillers" and "pills" had been blotted off the newspapers. Those were replaced with "drugs" and the darker, scarier "cocaine."

Elvis had laid off the pills, just like we'd told him. But he'd traded in one bad habit for a nasty coke addiction.

"Shit," Kim and I both said, simultaneously.

A couple behind us, a kid clutched in-between them, hissed at us. "Language."

"Sorry," I said. Then, I said it again. "Shit."

The woman looked mad.

Kim turned to me. All her elation had fallen away. She said what I was thinking. “He died anyway.”

That was the end of the tour. We were ushered outside Graceland’s gates by one of the blue-shirted tour guides. Our heads were hanging. We were too stunned to say anything. It was almost too hard to swallow. Neither of us could really take in that what we’d done hadn’t done any good.

On the ride back home, the first hour or so was complete silence. Any time I thought Kim was about to say something, she’d just shake her head and look back out the window. When she did finally talk, it was about the last few days, or weeks, as if I hadn’t been there with her the whole time. She recounted every detail. Every shirt tail, and pocketed ball, and evening spent drinking and staring at the Tennessee night sky. Every word we’d said to Elvis to try to get him to see his ways.

That’s when it hit me: we could do it again.

I was so excited, I nearly swerved the truck off the road.

“We changed something,” I told her. “We could easily do it again.”

She whipped her face back towards me. That smile was back. “Yeah,” she screamed. “You’re right. We just need to plan it more!”

“Yeah,” I urged her on. “We can do some more research. We can tell him not to do cocaine or other stuff.”

“Yes! Yes!”

“We’ll get him to swear off alcohol, too, just in case.”

She reached over and squeezed my shoulder. “Brilliant.”

For a few weeks, I was alive with her. At the bar, she’d whisper to me about the plans she

had for the next time we went, the next time we'd try to save Elvis. She always told these things to me like they were an inside joke, like we were the members of some club. She'd rib me and say, "These fools don't even know what we're up to." It was a perfect little moment between us. But, then, her eyes would drift to something else in the bar. And this plan, our new plan for saving Elvis, never got past the planning stage. We were always a day too early, a few dollars short, one unread book on Elvis' life. And I stayed the man at the bar, sitting on the other side of a beer, looking at the girl he loved but could never find it in himself to have, until even Kim came up with other plans.

I just keep thinking about that night, that Thursday night, when we decided to save Elvis, how crazy we were, how excited we were, how lit up she was when I told her. So lit up. She was the most beautiful thing when she smiled, her eyes crinkling around the edges just a tad, her hooting laugh escaping her in a soft breath. And sometimes, in my mind, I make myself laugh, too, and say, "Hey, let's save Marilyn Monroe, too." We have a good chuckle about that one, and everyone will think, gee, what a great joke, saving Elvis. I'll order another round, and that will be just another tale for another night, something else to add to our list.

The Fade

It's nearly 9 p.m. Another tense family dinner is almost done, and my mother is still asking me why. Why I don't come to dinner more. Why I don't answer all of her texts. Why I don't like more of her posts on Facebook. We're halfway through dessert, practically out the door, and she's prodding and prodding. My sisters listen politely through the questions, nodding their heads between spoonfuls of vanilla ice cream. My stepdad, Mike, chuckles, all too aware of where this line of questioning is heading, himself often the object of criticism. When are you going to be done with school? She asks, When are you going to start practicums? When are you and Marcus going to get married?

Something in me starts to crumble when she turns the questions on him. Marcus, shining example of manhood, firefighter, friend, lover. He has been paying my water bill, car insurance, and Netflix bill throughout college, through late night classes and doubles at the hospital. He doesn't deserve this sort of censure. Sure, he can handle it, and he lightly squeezes my hand under the table to help me calm down, but I can't help it. I'm tired. I lose control.

When I look at her, it has already started. She has begun to fade.

Mike puts his spoon down into his bowl, lets it clang a little, and I can see him look at me through my fading mother. His eyes wander around her ghostly outline. The leopard-print glasses, the thinning red hair, the soft nose, then her left arm and ringed fingers, they all become light outlines, like she has become a coloring book page of herself. Where there used to be a middle-aged teacher, there is now a rapidly disappearing blouse. The hem of it fades from deep red to light pink. Mike reaches out to her almost-gone wrist to grab it, to hold onto her, but it disappears as well. He is left with a ring in his outstretched palm, which after a second, whiffs out as well. Where there used to be a mother of three, a wife and a Sunday School teacher, there is now an empty chair at the table.

I always think that this first moment after the fade is going to be cataclysmic. Five people I've faded, so far, all without warning. I tense up in my chair and wrap my hands around my armrests. I wait for the rug beneath me to split and swallow me whole. I wait for my sisters to scream, or Mike to jump over the table. But, as usual, everyone goes on with their merry lives. Mike finishes his ice cream and goes into the kitchen for another. My sisters chat idly about their management jobs. Under the table, Marcus' hand moves from my wrist to my thigh.

Time goes on for him. But it has stopped for me.

I excuse myself to the bathroom.

As I walk down the hall, I see that all of our family photos have now updated. Where there used to be my mother, there is now a suspicious person-shaped hole. There are my sisters and me, our faces squished together at a parents' luncheon with no parent. There is Mike in a neat tux standing alone in front of an arch of flowers. There he is again, holding his left arm around the three of us, his right arm reaching out too far, grasping around air. I see us all by ourselves, single stepdads standing in museums, sunbathing bodies sitting next to empty chairs.

Who is going to look? Who is going to care? No one is going to scrutinize the details of our lives for something that isn't there.

I am alone in this sadness, this remorse every time. I carry it with me everywhere I go. It is a pain I cannot share with anyone in the world, even Marcus. The ones I trust can also be faded.

When I get back to the table, someone has told a marvelous joke, and they're all laughing. And I have that moment where I come back to the table, ask the joke, but even when it is told, I do not laugh. It isn't funny to me, though I understand the mechanics of the joke, the build-up, the punch line. But it doesn't make sense.

When we say goodnight and ready ourselves for the drive back home, Mike seems a little off, like he might need to check if the oven is still on. My sisters, though, seem at peace. As they hug, none of them seems to question why they are there, together, three girls and this older man who isn't related to them at all. They split to their separate cars and drive off to who-knows-where.

When we get home, Marcus squeezes my thigh again, then he moves his hand up my shirt, unsnaps my bra. He moves his cool hand past my bra, to the place where my flesh is warmest. Normally this contrast, hot and cold, would excite me, but I softly push him away.

What's wrong? he asks, stopping for a moment. What's missing?

Marta, Anna, Rosalyn, Shariq, my mother. I look at Marcus now, his dark eyes glistening. His moment will come, one day, just like the others. It is inevitable. I've known this

since I met him. He'll rile me in some insignificant way, and I'll be the only one to see the fade. I wonder if he notices that I already treat him as if he is gone.

I can't help my desire to be with him, but his presence here is at a great cost. It's hard for me to even think of him as here. In my mind, I can see, all too clearly, the moment when his actual shape fades to a faint, ghastly line. Still, I don't stop him when he moves his hand further down, giving me a comfort I both desire and don't deserve.

Second Skin

I found my seventh grade yearbook while cleaning out my room. It was packed between a pair of jeans that didn't fit me anymore and one of my old Carrahan Middle sweatshirts. I cracked the spine and flipped through the black-and-white pictures of me and my classmates. In the first section were pictures from band, soccer tournaments, and after-school cheerleading practices. Knee-high socks had been a thing that year, and I'd had a regrettable taste for side ponytails.

I got to the page for my classroom, about halfway through, and I noticed something, or, really, someone: Draco, the lizard who was now in my Physics class. There he was, alphabetically between Justin Schletzky and Will Soda. In the picture, his long, scaly snout took up half the frame. His parents had opted for the farm background, the one with the picket fence and the bale of hay, for his picture. It was a horrible choice, in my opinion. His solid eyes did pop out against the rough hay, but cross-hatched scales faded against the zigzagging grasses of the field. He looked like he felt out of place. It was as if he was just a pair of creepy floating eyes over an oversized starched collar.

I quickly flipped through our homeroom's activity pages and the last sections of the

yearbook. I couldn't find him in any of the other pages. But, when I flipped back to my homeroom's page, I couldn't deny the large pinecone scales jutting out of his pressed white shirt and his yellow eyes, almost as big as tea cups. When I looked closer, I could see that his shirt was custom-made. His barrel-shaped chest was much too wide for a normal collar.

Surely I couldn't have overlooked him for a whole year?

I asked Mel about him the next day during English, right before Mrs. Hannigan began to call roll. I'd finger-brushed my hair and pulled it into my usual ponytail that morning, but I could tell from the burnt smell and the lingering scent of hairspray that Mel had spent the whole morning curling and primping and brushing her hair into a sleek updo.

"Oh, that loser?" she hissed. "Wasn't his mom the one that always sent those crappy cookies on bake sale day?"

I thought for a moment. "Are you talking about the ones with the raisins?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"That was Gilly's mom. Mrs. Brant."

"Oh," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Didn't she make those herself? Like, from scratch?"

Mel's mom had always sent perfectly-frosted cupcakes with glittery sprinkles purchased from a professional baker downtown. "I don't know. Who the heck cares?"

I slid back down into my seat, only moving to raise my hand when Mrs. Hannigan called my name. I wanted to let it go, but it seemed so odd that I could just blot him out of the whole of

my seventh grade memory. When Mrs. Hannigan's back was turned to us to write something on the board, I whispered to Mel, "Do you remember him being at anything?"

She slid down into the seat, turned her head, and whispered to me, "No."

"Nothing at all?"

She shook her head.

"Not even at a game or at a party or like in band or something?"

Mel turned her face even more towards me, to where I could see one of her eyes under her heavy, sparkling lid. "Need somebody to pinch your cherries?" she whispered.

Mrs. Hannigan had turned back around to the class, her blue eyes now visible behind her square glasses. "Something you want to share with the class, Ms. Crete?"

Mel whipped her head back around. "No, ma'am, Mrs. Hannigan," she said, "but Tara has something she's just itching to share, ma'am."

"Bitch," I gasped.

Mrs. Hannigan's smile didn't waver. "Thank you, Ms. Crete. Ms. Occinelli?"

I tensed up. "Um..."

The corners of Mrs. Hannigan's smile started to drop. "Ms. Occinelli, you were saying?"

I thought about crawling under the desk.

"How about you tell us about the chapter you had to read last night?"

I answered her meekly. "Okay."

After school, I found Mel where she always hung out before away-games: in the band bathroom.

During the walk from Mrs. Dominguez's classroom to the band room, I'd planned out a little speech to give Mel, demonstrating just where my mind was after English that morning. Her little stunt was a big embarrassment. But, by the time I got to the bathroom door, my mind had drifted back to Draco.

All I got out was a meek, "The hell was that in Mrs. Hannigan's class?" which went largely ignored.

Mel wouldn't be seen at a football game without her face on. She always made a show out of applying her makeup. She spread out her brushes and picks and palettes across the tiny bathroom's two sinks. In the narrow, fingerprinted mirror, she peered at her eyes, her lips, the few puckers of pimples above her nose.

She barely looked at me in the mirror as she drew a dark line around her eyelids. "Oh, girl. You know. I needed a good laugh this morning."

I sat on the counter across from her on "the changing table," a little bench the schoolboard had installed after the school's pregnancy rate had skyrocketed. I watched her ritual in the mirror. "I don't know why I didn't remember him," I said aloud, my feet kicking under the bench.

"Oh, lizard boy," she mumbled.

"It's just so odd. He would've been the only lizard in middle school. It's not like you can just forget about the guy."

In layers, she painted on a brighter, thinner face. First primer, then base, concealer, then highlights and lowlights. All words that I didn't know before I met Mel.

When she got to her eyeshadow, I could tell that she hadn't really listened to anything I had said. She brushed the powder, green and sparkly, across her eyelids, being extra careful to

smudge it up towards her brow bone. It took her half an hour, maybe longer, to paint on her face. Meanwhile, a line of freshman and sophomore flute players formed behind her. Each girl waited her turn to wash her hands in the one sink Mel wasn't completely crowding. Some of them murmured soft *rudes*, but none of them said it loud enough for Mel to hear.

“How do I look?” she finally asked me.

Overdone. Maybe it was the bathroom lighting. The lines she painted in rich tones of brown – umber, aubergine, chestnut – had been buffed so as to appear like one lightly-changing color, like a painting you'd find in a museum. It didn't seem quite right to put that much fuss into a version of yourself you'd just peel off in a few hours. “Beautiful.”

She grinned at me. “Your turn.”

“No, thanks.”

She didn't listen to me. She pushed me square in front of the mirror. There, I couldn't deny the straightness of my jaw, the stray hairs around my face, my red and uneven skin.

“I have to make you look pretty for your football player.”

I sighed. I'd regretted telling her about the thing for one of the wide receivers, Kenneth Holton, since the moment after I'd opened my mouth. I'd met him at a party over the summer, and I thought he was really cute. He was dating a senior at the time, but they'd broken up a little over a month ago. In the past few weeks, he'd started texting me every day. And, at the last two games, he'd look up into the band stands after he'd helped get a completion and raised his helmet in my direction. Things were going places. And the Homecoming dance was coming up in a couple of weeks, so, I wanted them to keep going places.

She'd told me the way to get him was with my girlish good looks. And I hadn't had much success on my own. So, I let her paint me a face as well.

She picked lighter shades, moodier blushes, a less attention-getting eyeshadow. The process took a little less time when she did it to me. When she done with the new “me,” I hardly recognized the face in the mirror. That’s how it was supposed to be.

“Beautiful,” I repeated, though I didn’t believe it any more than I had before. I just hoped that Kenneth would, though.

After the display, we had just enough time to grab our instruments from our lockers and change into our away-game uniforms. By then, we heard Mr. Sanders over the intercom announcing that the bus had arrived.

The away-game bus was parked near the band hall. As we were standing in line waiting to load our instruments, our band director, Mr. Sanders, stepped out of the band hall with a microphone. “Listen up, band, ” he said, his voice crackling. “We finally found a replacement for our trumpeter. I would like to introduce Mr. Draco Salemoni.”

There was Draco, his claws wrapped around a hard metal case that clearly wasn’t property of the marching band. A few guys in the back chanted softly, “Lizard boy, lizard boy.” But Mr. Sanders’s enthusiasm seemed to be enough for everyone. “Mr. Salemoni has never been in marching band, so we’re giving him a few weeks to get familiar with the music and learn the formations. I trust that everyone,” and he paused here for punctuation, “will welcome him as part of the Jaguar band. Can I get a Jaguar growl?”

Without even thinking, as one, all of us band members raised our “fighting paws” and bellowed our school’s trademarked growl.

I was stunned to see him again so soon. There he was in one of the band away-uniforms, stowing his case under the bus like the rest of us. When he was bent over, sliding his trumpet further into the bus, he almost looked like any another band member. Only the outline of his

spiny tail, tucked into the left leg of his grey uniform trousers, gave him away.

I didn't think he knew that I was watching him, but, as he turned back around to get in line to get on the bus, one of his eyes followed me. I tried to act natural, and I carefully put my own case, with "Property of MHSB" stamped in white letters on the side, under the bus.

This eye eventually focused on Mr. Sanders, who thrust copies of the sheet music into his outstretched claws.

When I finally got on the bus, it was crowded and nearly full. I scanned the seats for a familiar face and found Mel near the back. She was waving a hand near a seat that would have been choice for the hour-long ride. It was close but not too close to the drumline, well away from the tuba players, and far enough back that Mr. Sanders wouldn't be able to see what was really going on. I could tell that she wanted for me to join her, but I found myself steering towards a half-empty seat closer to the front.

Draco was tucked into a seat behind the driver. He was new to band, so I figured that he wasn't holding out for anyone to sit next to him. Not unless someone wanted to come get a closer look at the lizard. I slid into the empty seat with a smile, something that I hoped came off as an attempt at niceness. As soon as I sat down, I started coming up with an excuse to tell Mel later: the bus looked crowded, and I thought this was the last seat.

Draco barely moved when I set down next to him.

The diesel engine of the bus gurgled to life. After a second, we all lurched forward. We were off for our one-hour trip to Destrehan.

I sat there for the first few moments of the trip, racking my brain, trying to remember some place, any place, at which I'd seen Draco. I thought if I were closer to him, if I could see him in the flesh, something might come back to me. Maybe a birthday party or a soccer

tournament or an afternoon at the park.

But, when I was looking at him, there was no flash of memory. There was just him, the lizard boy, and his diamond-patterned scaly skin. Each movement he made rustled the scales like leaves in the wind.

From my seat next to Draco, I turned to look back a couple of times, just quick glances, and to see how upset Mel was. She was very upset. She didn't like when I deviated from her plan, even a little bit.

He was the first to speak. He'd noticed my furtive glances to the back. "Why do you keep looking at her?" he asked.

"She's my friend," I said.

"Then, why didn't you sit with her then?" he asked

I tried to think of a way to answer him that didn't make me feel guilty. The fact that he was only a picture in my memory of seventh grade didn't play well into my idea that I had always been a caring, kind individual. "I was going through my middle school yearbook yesterday, and I saw your picture in my homeroom."

"Yeah?" He blinked his wide eyes several times.

"I just... I don't remember you being in my homeroom."

He narrowed his scaly eyelids at me. Now that he had his snout turned straight towards me, I couldn't ignore his red tongue, which flicked out between his lips. "You don't remember me?" The scales at the corners of his lips rose.

"It's not that I don't remember you, per se," I said, recalling the black-and-white photo of him from the yearbook. He had been strangely absent from the other pages of the yearbook. "I just don't, like, remember you in my homeroom class."

“And why would you remember me anyway?”

“Well, you know...” I paused before pointing out the obvious. “You’re a lizard. And you’re the only lizard in school.”

“Maybe, I wasn’t very good at making friends.”

“Yeah. But, you’d still, you know, stick out.”

He seemed to be done talking. His snout drifted back to the bus window, and, as he breathed in and out, a fog appeared. I knew he couldn’t see out there, but he insisted on staring as if he could, ignoring me.

Mel picked that moment to start texting me. *Come back here now.*

The light from my phone caught his attention. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see his right eye dart towards it before quickly returning to focus on the fog.

I typed out the sign from the front of the bus. *No moving while the bus is in motion.*

When I sent it, I again turned in my seat to look back at Mel. Only the top of her perfectly combed hair was visible, but when she received the message, the light on her face changed from blue to green. I could see a sparkle, too, from her eyeshadow as she frowned.

Very funny Kenneth wouldn’t like it if he knew u were hangin w/ lizard boi

Kenneth doesn’t know

I thought that was the end of it.

At football games, I usually sat two seats away from Mel. The clarinets were always grouped together on the second row of the band section; we were one row behind the flautists, and two

rows in front of the trumpets. I was second clarinet, and Mel was fourth clarinet.

Draco, now second or third trumpet, was settled into one of the rows behind me.

For that game, Karen Walters, third clarinet, had the unfortunate job of sitting between Mel and me. Usually, Karen liked to pretend that she was uninterested in us; she was secretly hanging on our every word. But, for the first part of the game, Mel didn't even speak to me. Karen was delighted that she did not need to be so surreptitious in her desire to be seen talking with a senior.

During the first quarter, every time I looked over to Mel and opened my mouth, Mel just adjusted her reed or fixed one of her instrument's cork seals. She blew air into her instrument to warm it up.

As I was sitting there, neither Karen or Mel to talk to, I occasionally looked up at Draco. He was uncomfortably squished between the first and second trumpets, who were doing their best to show him thumb positions on his custom instrument. The trumpet Draco had was about the same length as a regular trumpet, but the finger pads were a lot smaller and thinner. The metal mouthpiece had been replaced with a small rubber plunger. It seemed odd until Draco went to play the band's fight song. He had no lips to pucker into a metal mouthpiece. I could see Draco put his mouthpiece into his trumpet and begin to play, softly at first, and then more loudly. It was odd to see his snout forced into the small plunger. His claws pushed down each of the trumpet's elongated stops, and the sound was bright and round and a little eerie. It was definitely a trumpet sound, but it wasn't quite like the other trumpets

By the second quarter, Mel was tired of her game, and she began ignoring Karen and whispering to me behind Karen's back.

Karen finally asked, "Do you want to trade seats?"

Mel threw the fourth clarinet music in her face and practically pushed her further down the bleacher.

“You saw me on the back of the bus.” Mel’s cheeks were hot and red at this point. “Why did you pass me up?”

“I just want to know how I can’t remember anything about him.” There was something about this whole mystery, some weird pull. I felt like it was more than just an unanswered question.

She shook her head. “I get it. You’re tired of me, aren’t you?”

This threw me off. “What? No. Tired? Why would you say that?”

“It’s something that happens with Seniors, right? They start getting bored with each other. They start moving in other directions before they go off to college.”

I carefully put down my clarinet on the bleacher and grabbed her hand. “No, Mel, of course not.”

She sniffed. “It is true.”

“Look,” I said, mustering a little bit of seriousness, “I’ve got to figure this out. Do you remember seventh grade? My parents were getting a divorce. It was a pretty awful year. I spent like half of the year at Mom’s and half at Dad’s. I hated home. And I loved school. And I can tell you everybody in our homeroom class. Everybody except him. How is that not odd? How is it that no one remembers him? Like, I don’t have a lot of friends now, but I can tell you who I hang out with, who I’ve seen, who I’ve talked to. I can do that several years back. There’s nothing in my mind when it comes to him; at least, not until the beginning of high school.”

Her face changed a little as I was talking to her. “Ok.”

I thought that “ok” meant that it was sinking in, that she believed me and was going to let

it rest a little bit. But I noticed her put away her phone a little too quickly when I came back from the concession stand.

In the middle of the third quarter, I saw Kenneth's number, 68, move towards the sidelines. Coach hadn't put him in for the whole game. I stood up in my seat and clapped as he ran onto the field.

At the whistle, the quarterback snapped the ball to him, and Kenneth ran between two brown-uniformed players. For a second, I couldn't see him. Then, the 68 appeared again on the other side of the brown mass, a little closer to our end of the field.

It was an exciting play, one that I was sure would warrant a long look cast my way. I stationed myself at the foot of the bleachers, in clear view, a beacon for him.

I watched from the band stands Kenneth walk off the field. He pulled off his blue-stripped helmet. He held the helmet in both of his hands. Then, when I thought he was going to turn in my direction, he held out the helmet towards the Jaguar crowd. He screamed and thrust his helmet in the air.

I immediately stopped clapping. I knew just what had happened. Mel's text message from earlier popped in my head.

I wanted to cry to right there. I nearly did. But I forced myself to keep it in for a few moments. I didn't want to let Mel see that she affected me like this. I didn't want her to win this stupid game. I think it was the point of her game, anyway, to let me know that she could take something away from me, that she could make me feel so small. I forced myself to clap my hands together, to act like I was excited for another score for our team. I even hung around for Kenneth to help score a touchdown, only the second of the night. But I only barely held it together when the moment came, again, when he should've looked my way in the stands, and,

instead he turned towards the Jaguar crowd and let out a big whoop.

The Owls' away-team band bathroom wasn't nearly as nice as ours. It was just two stalls that were labeled "unisex." There weren't even mirrors above the sinks. This was probably for the best because I couldn't see myself cry. I couldn't see the face that Mel had spent so much time making ruined by my tears.

I managed to be alone in the bathroom for a few moments. I propped up against the sink and let it all out without anyone to see my shame. What I'd had with Kenneth was tenuous at best, but I couldn't help but want it. I'd thought I might be able to hang out with someone besides Mel all the time.

After those few minutes were up, Draco wandered in. At first, he stared at me with his great wide yellow eyes, but he wasn't surprised. He helped me stand up straight and limp over to a folding chair near one of the stalls. He carefully wrapped his claws around me, applying just enough pressure to pull, but not so much as to scratch, as I sat down.

"What's your deal?" he asked gently.

I must've looked like a mess. I could feel the mascara pooling around my eyes and leaking down my face. It took all my will to stop crying, but I didn't have anything left to talk. "That bitch," was all I could manage.

He knew who I was talking about. He wasn't like other people who'd caught me crying, not there were many times that I just cried. He seemed to know something about what it was like to cry. After he'd propped me up, he brought me a clump of paper towels, and, when I couldn't manage to get all of the mascara off by myself, he took a careful claw, dipped one of the paper towels in water, and wiped the rest of my face clean.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked him. I'd been kind of rude to him on the bus. And, try

I as might, I couldn't remember anything of him from middle school.

“Look,” he said, not quite looking at me, but not quite looking away from me. “I know what it is like to feel lonely.”

After I'd stopped crying and was breathing normally, he asked me again if I was ok. I barely nodded. That didn't seem quite good enough to him, but, after another moment, he left me anyway with a wet paper towel in my hand. As he walked out of the bathroom, I could see the outline of his tail, stuffed down the pants leg of his uniform. Of course, the school didn't just have a uniform for a lizard. Of course, they'd have to make him something custom. And, in the meantime, he'd simply have to make do. And I realized that this couldn't have been the first time that this had happened to him, someone trying to fit his lizard shape into a human-sized thing. The uniform, the trumpet, the bus seat. This world wasn't quite made for him.

When I found it in myself to go back outside, I felt a little bit better. I could hear the last few bars of the fight song, and I realized we must've scored again. We were winning.

But when I wandered back to the band bleachers, the sight before me made me feel even better. Draco was standing in front of the bleachers, directly in front of Mel, who was curled a little back. She was obviously not too happy about a visit from the lizard boy.

As I walked closer, one of his eyes drew in my direction, following my movement, and the scales around his mouth tightened a little. He then moved his right claw to the scales at the end of his lip and began to pull up. It was like he was scratching his nose, but I saw something come off between his finger and thumb claws.

I found out later that. Draco hadn't gone to my middle school. The yearbook publishing company – ABC Publishing, don't ever use them – had dropped his proof in the wrong pile after picture day. It was a simple mistake, probably one that had nothing to do with the fact that he

was a lizard, but this mistake had had rippling consequences. Draco's own middle school yearbook had no photo of him. And everyone from Carrahan had a lizard. The publishing company had refused to fix the error, even when Draco's parents had asked for a single, corrected copy for their son. He'd been written out of his own middle school and into mine, where no one bothered to learn his name or even remember that he hadn't been there.

Mel has been my best friend for years, but I couldn't stop the smile from growing that night. Her face wrinkled into a grimace as Draco peeled back his top layer of skin. It came off in his claws like an old, sweaty sock, in one piece, and he held it out to her, a ghostly outline of his eyes, his snout, and his tympanum.

She gasped, then let out a scream a little. "Ew, ew, ew." The other clarinet girls screamed as well. I marveled for a second at the chaos of the moment. Mel swatted at it, like a fly, trying her best to move it, but never actually making contact with it.

The Bee's Wife

Melissa came home from work on a Thursday night to find her husband, Travis, right where she left him. He was in the same position as that morning: his face was resolutely focused on the television; his feet, shoulder-width apart, were planted on the rug; his hands were pushed into his thighs. However, there were mysteriously more boxes, wrappers, and beer bottles around him.

Her request that morning had been simple: tidy up a little around the house. She hadn't expected much in these months since his layoff, but she had hoped, on this Tuesday, for the tiniest of movements: a few things in a trash bag, maybe some light sweeping, or a carefully used feather duster. Just one thing different would be enough to tip the balance back into their favor.

But, as she returned from another exhausting day at work, hoping to sneak away for a relaxing yoga class, she found the living room even more debris-filled than that morning.

Her husband, seemingly-unmoved throughout the hours of the day, could not have been

responsible. His head was in the exact position as it had been that morning, his overgrown hair outlined in front of the blue light of the television screen.

And, so, Melissa decided a much more likely culprit was at fault: magic. It was like magic that she had closed the door each morning on her way to work, only to reopen it later that afternoon to more trash, more detritus. It was like magic that her husband, forty-five, father of two, did not move, though the clock marked several hours passed. It was like magic that he would forget his family, his wife, his home, for this feeling.

Melissa was equipped, somewhat poorly, to deal with the depression of a middle-aged husband while managing a career, minding two kinds, and paying some attention to her own body and health. But she was not equipped, being the real woman that she is, to deal with magic.

She walked up the stairs to the rooms of her two kids, Justine and Tim, and ushered them to pack clothes for a few weeks. And, as she packed her own bags, she convinced herself that magic, with all its mystery, was insurmountable. And, since it was insurmountable, there was no shame in giving up when set against it. It was not selfish to stop fighting a battle she could not possibly win.

She wondered, as she and her children walk along the sidewalk from their home to her car, if she opened the door now, would more bottles appear? Would her husband even notice that his family is gone? Had the way she closed the door communicated that she wished this magic to end? Those small thoughts were enough to allow her to close her car door and drive away.

That first night, Travis had felt them leave. Alone, he lost sense of who he was. He wasn't a

father without children. He wasn't a husband without a wife. He moved through the rooms of their home, looking for artifacts that would give him some sense of meaning. After checking his own empty room, and his son's room, he found in the back of Justine's closet her old sweater, some wings, and a mask. They were part of a last-minute bee costume Justine had worn the previous Halloween. The sweater and mask were tight, but he felt that the wings lightened him somehow.

Travis took a six pack of Mickey's malt liquor outside with the intent of going on the roof. It had taken him a little bit longer than expected. He'd seen his son, Tim, make his way onto the roof a thousand times – a few steps up the lattice, a leg over the eaves, and he was up. It had seemed so effortless, like flight, when his son had done it. And Travis had managed to get up the lattice relatively quickly, though his feet were much too wide to fit as neatly in the diamonds, but he had hesitated at the eaves. One try, then two, and he could only stretch his leg far enough to get his toes on the roof. It was 6 p.m., and he was covered in sweat. If it had been a different day, he might have worried about the creases he was getting in his pants, or the stains that now covered his daughter's sweater.

When he got up there, though, it was worth it. The clouds from the early rains cleared out, and the sun hung like a big round peach in the sky. The stars came out one-by-one, and he could see them sparkle a shy hello. It was a perfect night to sit on the roof and drink a beer.

And he had a beer, then another. At the fourth beer, Travis reached around his back and felt the hard-wire outline of his wings. He would've been a sight for a neighbor walking by: a grown man in a bee costume. At the fifth beer, Travis took one more look around the neighborhood, at the place he'd called home. But it wasn't a home without a family.

Before he decided to clamber back down to his couch, he caught sight of movement in

his neighbor's house. The Robinsons next door weren't home, but he could see through the window into their bedroom. There was the bed of a man and a woman who stayed together, who protected each other when they were alone. He looked once more at the stars.

Things started to get blurry, but he could see someone moving in the Robinson's house. He thought maybe he had died. He could still feel the cold bottle in his mouth, so he decided that he had not. A dark figure in a one-piece sweater appeared outside the bedroom's door. The figure crouched as it walked down the hall and into the bedroom. It stood up next to the couple's dresser. It pulled open the top drawer and began to check under silk and satiny underwear.

Travis took the bottle away from his lips. He was more than a little drunk, but he stood up on wobbly legs. The man in the house moved from the dresser drawer to the jewelry box above. He pulled out tangled necklaces and small glinting rings. He shoved them into his pocket.

The houses were set at an angle on the block. Their front doors were more than a hundred feet apart, but the rooftops almost touched. If he got a running head start, Travis could jump through the window into the room.

The next morning on the news, they called Travis a hero. He didn't stay around long enough for the camera crews, but a neighbor snagged a picture of him as he took off into the woods behind the house. Channel 8 said a costumed man stopped a burglar from taking a family's jewelry.

Travis didn't think himself a hero. He had only done what he could to protect his neighbors. When he got back home, he didn't bother to retrieve the empty six-pack on the roof.

For the first few days, Melissa did not leave her old room. She was living at her mother's house, with the same lilac bedspread and lace curtains she had as a teenager. At thirty-nine, it was not the place she wanted to be. She stared up at the white popcorn-spackled ceiling. She traced the pieces enough with her eyes that she referred to certain clusters as constellations. Her two kids, Justine and Timothy, stayed in her sister's old bedroom on bunkbeds. Justine complained about the distance between this house and her boyfriend's in Wilmington. Timothy called their new situation an adventure.

After a few more days, Melissa lightly slept all the way through the night alone.

"Lunch is almost ready, kids," her mother called up one afternoon. Mema, as they called her, hadn't let Melissa cook anything since they'd moved in to the two spare bedrooms. Melissa took this as a slight on her maternal instincts, but she was too busy tracing constellations to actually bring this up with her mother.

As Melissa came down the stairs into her mother's kitchen, she could see Tim at the old oak dining room table with, working on a school project. Even in the blue light from the den, she could see the ends of his hair trickling onto his ears.

"Need some help, buddy?" she asked, rubbing her hand along the hairs on the back of his neck.

He pulled away slightly and continued writing in his notebook. "No, Mom. I'm good."

Her mother was a blur of pots and pans in the kitchen. At times, it seemed like she had more than two hands. Melissa watched her season the gravy, check the chicken in the oven, and chop tomatoes for the salad almost simultaneously.

On the TV in the den came an update about the recent robbery of First Community Trust back in Pine Grove. Susannah Blackstone, a squat woman with broad set eyes and low

cheekbones, was on the scene. She said three or four men forced their way after hours through the glass front door of the bank with a tire iron and a pair of cable pliers. If it hadn't been for the work of a masked man in a black and yellow-striped sweater, Susannah said, the would-be robbers would've made off with thousands of dollars. Susannah smiled smugly when she dubbed the masked man, "The Bee."

"Mom, I didn't know you got Channel 8 all the way out here."

"I added it a couple of months ago. I also got Cartoon Network!"

Timothy gasped. "Mom, we don't have Cartoon Network!"

Melissa felt Timothy's hair slip through her fingers. He put his pencil down and turned to face the TV. Before he changed the channel, a grainy handheld video of a paunchy man jumping over walls, over pipes and construction equipment on the bottom floor of the festival parking garage in downtown Pine Grove, filled up the screen. At one point, Melissa could see the black and yellow stripes of his sweater again. In the next shot, Susannah stood in front of the three robbers, all tied together around a pole. A bemused-looking police officer worked to untie them. The men and the police officer were then replaced by an oversized animated duck.

Melissa looked down at Timothy. "Do I need to turn the TV off?"

"Mom, it's Saturday," he said, his voice raising to the same lilting pitch as his father's. "This stuff isn't due until Monday."

Melissa turned the knob on the side of the TV, the faint hum of the inner working parts going silent. "We can watch some more after lunch. And after you've finished your home. Come on, babe. We have to eat."

Melissa sat down at the dining room table beside him, at a folded napkin and silver-rimmed plate, as Mema burst out of the kitchen. In front of Melissa, her mother placed a whole

chicken with a small plop. She zipped back off to the kitchen and returned with a gravy boat, some smaller Pyrex dishes filled with vegetables and casseroles, a basket of bread and rolls, and a bowl of fruit. “Just a little something I threw together,” she announced, before returning to get serving spoons.

Melissa reached out for the lid of the chicken pot.

“Nah-ah, Clara,” Mema clicked from the kitchen. “Wait on Justine.” Melissa was only momentarily phased by this click. She did as she was told; she waited, begrudgingly.

As if summoned, Justine descended from the stairs as well, with a copy of Nietzsche under her arm. Her hair bounced as she took the last step off the stairs onto the ground level’s floor. As she came to the table, she looked at her brother, then her mother.

“Hey, Mom. Glad to see you out of your room on a Saturday,” she said, cheerily.

When Mema returned, she took her place at the head of the table, and they all bowed their heads and prayed before they eat, though Melissa hadn’t stepped foot in a church in almost five years. God was one of the first things to go in the tangle of her failing relationship.

Mema pulled the lid off the chicken pot, and they all dug in.

Timothy chatted about his math project, how he only had a few more problems to finish. Justine swore that Nietzsche is changing her life, how his world view was so progressive. If Melissa tilted her head towards the drawing room window, she couldn’t see her mother, and the wallpaper pattern reminded her of the print she had picked out for her own dining room. For a moment, lunch seemed normal to Melissa, almost complete.

“You’re thinking about him,” Mema interrupted.

Melissa dropped her spoon. Her bowl rattled. Beside her, Timothy sucked in a low, sharp breath.

“I wasn’t, actually. But it wouldn’t matter if I was. He’s my husband, after all.”

“It’s not doing you any good to think about him. He’s a lame duck, that one.”

Melissa clinched her knee with her free hand under the table. It was a compulsory move, almost like a breath in and out. “Mom, don’t say stuff about him like that.”

“Sweetie, you’ve been here for three months,” she said, and then, more softly, with her hand held to the side of her mouth, “and he hasn’t even tried to come here? He’s moved on sweetie. He doesn’t care.”

“Justine, Timothy, go to your room.”

“But, Mom!” Timothy sputtered. Justine quickly stood up and exited, Nietzsche sticking out from under the arm of her sweater.

“No, buts. Take your lunch with you. Get out of here.”

He pushed himself out from the table, leaving his napkin in his chair, a little white flag.

“Mom, you listen to me,” Melissa began, pointing her finger at her own mother, her own flesh and blood. “I can’t help it that Travis is acting this way. I can’t help that he lost his job and his will to live. He’s been doing this for the last few months, and I tried everything I could think of. I worked my ass off, trying to give him and the kids some time together, hoping that it would help. I just didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what was wrong with him. He spent most of his time watching television on that goddamn couch. I still love him, though. I do. He’s the father of my kids. I just don’t know how to fight this thing.” She sucked in a breath at the end of her speech. She managed to get out all of it, the whole speech, without her mother interrupting her.

Mema led with, “Melissa, I’m your mother,” before laying on, “You know I love you.” Melissa recognized the usual moves. “I’ve really tried to like Travis, for your sake. I just don’t

want to see you wasting your time on a failed relationship...”

“It’s not failed,” she bit. “It’s complicated.”

“Yes, of course, complicated. Just like they have on Facebook these days. You can just hide behind that little update instead of facing the fact that your marriage is over. I just don’t want you to get hurt, is all. I’m trying to protect you, too. Nothing’s happening with him.”

“You know, sandwiches would’ve been enough.”

Back in her room and staring at the ceiling, Melissa thought about the day Travis told her about the layoff. It had been a Wednesday – running club day, back then – and she fixed a quick potluck meal of beef stew for dinner, something simple that Justine and Tim could’ve helped themselves to as they got hungry. He came through the house door shaking, and he didn’t say anything to her at first. He just gave her a quick peck on the cheek as he slid into a chair at the dining room table.

She’d known as soon as he’d come in the door that something was wrong, but she didn’t said anything.

Instead, she ladled beef stew into a bowl, placed it in front of him with a spoon, and said, “I’m off to running club. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

He looked up at her, his big brown eyes tight at the corners, and, for a second, he said nothing. Then, as if he remembered the lines for his part in the play, “Ah, yes, see you in a few hours.”

They pecked again, and she closed the door on him staring at his full soup bowl.

In the months since, Melissa has thought of this moment as *the* moment, the one where it had all gone wrong. She realized that she could’ve waited to go to running club or perhaps not gone at all. Perhaps then, she could’ve mitigated the effects of the layoff. Instead, her husband

kept the secret of his layoff to himself for another two hours, by which time Melissa ran six miles.

Staying with her mother hadn't done much to improve the relationship. All the calls she made to him, his old job, and some people at the church, and no one seemed to pick up. Melissa prophesized that if she just saw him in person, maybe she could make some movement towards patching things up. Maybe she can understand what he is going through.

She imagined that if she opened the door on this day, he would be there again, at that soup bowl, with the things around him gone.

Melissa flew back down the stairs.

"Mom, I have to go see him."

Her mother was settled in the den, a crossword puzzle opened on her lap. She looked up at her daughter over the edge of her horn-rimmed glasses. "Melissa, dear..."

"No, I have to go see him. He won't pick up the phone. I still want him to be safe. Geez, he never made dinner the whole time we were together. He's probably starved."

"That man hasn't starved, Melissa. He ate before he knew you."

Melissa ignored her mother. "I'm going to go help my husband."

Mema got up from the couch and walked over to Melissa, to stand next to her. She grabbed her daughter's hand and held it in her own. She began to pet her.

"Melissa, calm down. Honey, listen, you've been here three months, you've got a good thing going with the kids, with your job. Don't ruin that for him."

Travis spent most of his nights alone in Pine Grove hanging out in his 1991 Buick Regal a block or two off the police station. He ordered a police scanner from an online surplus store, but, through some error, he received a Whistler dosimeter. He kept it because he figured it would be good to know when the police were around, even if he couldn't hear what they were saying.

He thought it was funny when he found out he was known as the Bee. He liked the way it rolled off his tongue, the Bee. "The Bee the bee the bee thebee."

He never thought of himself as a bee.

He spent many nights crouching down in the front seat of his car, his black-and-yellow striped sweater carefully covered by one of his old work blazers, waiting for a police officer to walk out of Pine Grove's tiny police station.

"Why not just Bee?" he asked of no one in particular.

Maybe, he could tell his nice, older neighbor that he was going to be the Bee for Halloween. Maybe, then, Mrs. Roberts could make him a better costume.

When a uniformed officer finally left the station, Travis followed his unit for the better part of four hours, weaving in and out of the streets of peaceful Pine Grove. Around lunch, the officer put his lights on to run a red light. Travis waited at the red light, sweating until it turned green. He quickly found the black-and-white unit again parked outside the Hen House. The officer came out of the restaurant toting a Styrofoam box and a large drink.

As Travis waited for the cop to finish his lunch, he spied a kid, maybe sixteen, walking towards the police car. The kid peered inside the car to see the officer eating chicken. He then turned from the car to the alley behind the Hen House.

Travis saw the kid disappear. Then, after a moment, he watched a small cloud appear over the Hen House dumpster.

“Those kids are smoking dope,” he told himself.

Travis thought to himself that this wasn't the best way for kids to be spending their time. If the cop caught them, he would send them to jail.

Travis gingerly opened his car door and slid to the ground. He was careful to stay out of the line of sight of the police unit. He snuck around the police car, past the front bumper. He darted behind the Hen House's dumpster.

When he found the kid, Travis saw that he was with three other boys. One of them was barely Timothy's age.

“Get out of here,” he yelled at him.

At first, they didn't move. Then, they heard the siren coming from the police car. They scattered down the alley.

Travis realized that the officer might see him. He wasn't ready to work one-on-one with the police. He ran to a neighbor's fence. He jumped over it just before the police officer rounded the corner. He could hear the officer check inside the dumpster and around the alley, but he didn't come close enough to the fence, not close enough to find Travis.

Travis' heavy breathing slowed. He had done a little bit of good in the world today. He smiled.

By the end of the eight-hour shift, Travis was tired. His earlier giddiness about another night on the beat – another night stopping crime – had worn off. His grip on the Regal's steering wheel loosened.

He eased back towards his own neighborhood and his own house.

“Well, if I'm the Bee, this must be the Hive,” he proclaimed. Justine would've laughed at his pun, he was sure. Justine always laughed at his bad jokes, even in the months after the paint

shop, when others in the family seemed to think Travis was less funny.

In his Hive, Travis had three months of chip bags, coke cans, and pizza boxes, strewn around the couch, the counter of the kitchen, and into what remained of the dining room. To him, it was a homey mess. But it was an unwelcoming mess to others. He thought about why Melissa and the kids left: she needed to sort things out on her own. As he walked towards the couch, his feet finding their way around the artifacts of his life now, Travis stripped off his blazer, sweat-stained sweater, pants, underwear and socks. He lay down on the couch. For a moment, he considered that the boxes and wrappers might not be homey to other people, to visitors. This was not enough to occupy his mind. He slept.

He woke up only a few hours later for a brief moment, and he was sad. He hadn't slept by himself since college, when he'd had a cramped bunk bed in a cramped dorm room. He hoped that wherever she was, Melissa's bed didn't feel as empty as his couch. He slept again.

The first thing he noticed as Melissa peeked her head through the front door was that he was still lying down. His face stuck to the leather of the couch. There was a dark, wet stain underneath his mouth. With Melissa back, he knew that he shouldn't be lying down; he should be standing up. He must seem different from the way they had left, when she walked out the door with her suitcase.

He stood up.

"Travis," she said, her hand moving to cover her mouth. But it didn't look like excitement to him.

He looked over at her. "Melissa..." he said. "I didn't know you were coming..." He turned towards her. His face lit up. He tried to walk towards her but tripped over one of his own pizza boxes. "I should have cleaned up," he said, dusting himself off. He pushed the pizza boxes

behind and under the living room's two couches. He kicked a few brightly-colored chip bags into one of the pizza boxes. He took the growing stack of Diet Coke cans and tossed them onto the stairs.

“Travis?” she asked. She closed the door and walked towards him, her heels clicking against the floor. She was a sight to him. She was wearing a cotton blouse and a tight grey skirt, like the ones she used to wear to work every day. But there was something about the way the clothes fell, the way she lined up the buttons of the shirt and the zipper of the skirt. She was tired. Still, he noticed how beautiful she had always been, how aging had made her look more distinguished, like a writer on the back cover of a novel. She had lost her round cheeks and soft eyes and replaced them with laugh lines and angles that told the story of their lives together.

The couch was beginning to sag where his weight was most commonly concentrated.

He bounded from behind the couch. “Melissa? What are you doing here?” He grasped her hands in his. He hugged her deeply. He kissed her on the cheek. He wanted to kiss her on the mouth, to draw her into him. She was so beautiful. But he remembered that he had not showered the day before. Or the day before that.

“Melissa, oh my goodness, it is so wonderful for you to be here! So wonderful! I've missed you. Are Justine and Timothy with you?”

“No...”

“Oh,” he said, casting his eyes towards the floor. “Still, it doesn't matter. Did you come because you saw?”

“I came...” She faltered. “I haven't heard from you in months.”

“I needed some privacy.”

“Travis, where are your clothes? I can't talk to you like this.”

He realized that he was naked and sweaty. He looked around the room. He saw the sweater and the blazer on one of the pizza boxes. His pants were underneath the coffee table. He grabbed the jeans and slipped them over his legs. He was hot in the jeans, but that was all he had. He would have put on the sweater, too, but he wanted to tell her first. He needed to tell her then show her. He needed to break it to her like that, slowly, carefully. If he told her all at once, she'd run away. She'd be scared. He had to protect her.

After he buttoned his pants and buckled his belt, he held out his hands over the couch, inviting her to sit. She picked her way around the boxes and sat on the far side, away from the sagging spot on the couch.

"Travis," she began, "we need to talk." She put both her legs down, her feet together. She stepped on a chip bag. She pulled one leg away, trying to move the chip bag, not finding a space to kick it, before folding her leg over her knee.

Travis moved from around the coffee table to the couch. He knew they needed to talk. Maybe she sensed something about it already. Maybe she knew already. Maybe she had been watching on TV, seen the reports and the pictures. Maybe this would be easier than he thought, this whole process of explaining and telling and revealing.

"Yes, we need to talk," he said. He rested a hand on her knee. His body was shaking. He knew that this moment was important.

"Travis, I know you've been going through some stuff. It's been hard, since the paint store layoff, I get that. And, maybe, it's been harder since we left. I know it's been hard for the kids, for me. I've spent a lot of time just staring at the ceiling. It was hard to leave that day..."

She didn't know about the Bee after all. He puzzled over what this meant for them. If they were going to be together, she needed to know. She needed to know that there was a risk for

them being together. Someone could find out he was the Bee and use Melissa to get back at him. He was obligated to tell her what she was up against, so she could keep herself safe.

“Melissa,” he cut her off, “I have to show you something.”

She was crying now. She knew how important this was. She knew that there was a lot at stake. It would be hard for her, but he had to show her.

He jumped off the couch and stumbled through the maze of trash he had accumulated. He grabbed the sweater. With his back to her, he pulled the sweater over his sweaty chest. It was so hot in here, but he had to do it. He had to show her who he had become.

“Melissa,” he said, “I’m the Bee.”

Three years after they’d were married in a quiet ceremony at a local park, Melissa came home from her job to find her husband on the bathroom floor.

She walked into the small bathroom of their apartment, her bladder full, and found, instead of an empty, quiet bathroom, her husband, on the floor, sobbing.

She was all too used to crying. Melissa thought back to a particularly long cry she’d had in high school, after a trip with friends had been taken without her. It had comforted her to cry, alone. The tears felt good. But she was not used to her husband crying.

So she tried to comfort him as if she was the one crying.

“Shhh,” she told him. “There, there.”

His sobbing continued.

“What’s wrong, sweetie?” she asked. Her fingers probed his back and sides. She

squeezed his shoulders.

For a moment, the sobs became gentler moans. The crumpled mass of her husband relaxed a little bit.

But, with sudden force, he resumed his sobs. His hands curled up around his temples and pulled at his hair.

She was not prepared for these actions. They made her feel unmoored. And, rather than sort these feelings at her husband's side, she'd left him there for the bathroom downstairs. There, it was quiet and empty. There, she was quite sure of herself and her role in things.

She'd returned to the upstairs bathroom a few minutes later to find Travis quite unlike he'd been before. He was sitting up, his back against the cabinets, and, though his eyes were red, he was quiet.

Sadness. This was something Melissa understood. Not the hysterics or indulgence of crying, but the quiet resoluteness of sadness.

She'd known just what to do in that moment. She'd slid under his arm, nuzzled into his neck, and petted his arm. She'd whispered into her ears that she loved him, that she was there for him, her husband.

And that night, over a quick dinner that Melissa had prepared, everyone cheerful, she and Travis had shared a knowing look and smiled.

When she returned that night to her and her husband's home, she again could not put the pieces of the puzzle together. Through the redness developing in her eyes, Melissa looked at him, her husband, the man that she had loved for more than sixteen years.

"What are you doing in Justine's sweater?" It was a little tight on him, but she recognized that sweater.

“You don’t recognize it from TV?” He held out the bottom of the seam again, pointing to each of the stripes, black then yellow.

“What?” She moved further down the couch, towards the armrest, until she felt the stuffing inside the arm depress. Then, she could feel the sturdy wood against her spine.

“I’m the Bee!”

“You’re the Bee?” She shook her head.

“I’m the Bee! From TV!”

“You’re the guy from that sandwich shop robbery? The one who has been following the cops around?”

“Yes!” He couldn’t contain his smile.

“You’re the vigilante? You stopped that robbery? You stopped those three guys at First?”

“Yes!”

She couldn’t believe this was what he’d been doing. She’d hoped he’d been stuffing himself with pizza and watching TV, maybe consuming recreational drugs. He actually looked leaner. His belly had receded. His jeans hung off his hips. His eyes, too, moved more than she’d seen in months. He was actually looking around him, at things besides a blue screen. This change felt new and foreign to her.

“Travis, what are you doing?”

He dropped the hem of his sweater and steps back.

“I can’t believe you are doing this. What are you doing? Those three guys could have killed you!” This behavior was so unlike anything she had ever dealt with.

Upstairs, in the bedroom they used to share, Melissa found the bed almost exactly as she had left it. She hadn’t bothered to make the bed before she left, and, with the covers open, she

felt invited in.

She spread out on the bed, and she look to the ceiling. In their room was the same popcorn-spackling, only this one didn't look so familiar. There were no constellations, no assortments of stars for her to trace. It looked more like white marbles dumped on the floor. She tried to sleep. She couldn't. The house was too hot, and she was too mad.

That day she had left Travis in the living room, she and the kids had driven around for hours, going nowhere, before she'd finally called her mother, crying, asking if they could just stay for a week, maybe two, maybe longer.

The top of Travis's head appeared beside the door to their bedroom.

"Melissa?"

She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Yes, Travis?"

He was still dressed in the black and yellow sweater, and he'd added a pair of wire and tulle wings. They followed his body as he entered the room and strode towards the bed. A black mask hung out of his pocket.

"You didn't get the full effect earlier. I thought that might help."

He pulled on the mask, the strap going over his bushy brown hair. The eyeholes nicely framed his thick black eyebrows and light blue eyes. The wings caught the light from the open window, diffusing it to give him a halo. She couldn't believe the sweater fit his new body. He used to be all round and soft, but he was sharper, more angular. She could see the resemblance between her husband and the man on the TV.

"So, you're the Bee, huh?" She allowed herself to laugh at the sight of him. It was something she hadn't done in a while, laugh with her husband. The feeling was warm. It was a

familiar feeling, and she knew how to react to it.

And that night, when she closed the door to her home, she didn't think that by some magic it would be filled with even more bottles. No, she was assured that there was a real man in there, a man she could call her own.

The Call

That first call I got from Ahab was to rob a liquor store. I knew “Ahab” was a fake name as soon as he told it to me. The name was the setup of a rather long and painful joke, one that ended with the all-too-obvious punch line of this upcoming job being a “whale.”

Ahab knew a guy who worked at a package store down towards the nicer end of Lincoln Road. This friend had passed along the information that the closing shift hid the drop at the end of every night in an old Coors box in the long fridge. The cameras in the store were fake. The alarms weren't hooked up to anything. The police station was on the other end of Lincoln, a good ten-minute drive if traffic was just right.

There would be just two guys on this job: me and Ahab. And the way Ahab laid things out, I knew that this was a test. He'd sprint through the cooler and grab the bag. I'd walk my fingers through the store's stock. For my effort, I'd get a cut of the drop and any bottles we walked out with. And, if I did it right, it'd be my ticket to bigger and better things.

Ahab said he'd called me because he'd heard I might be interested in some steady work,

and because he'd heard I knew my way around fancier stuff. This was true. I'd worked at the original Fleming's Steakhouse, the one with the wine list as long as the real menu. Four years before, after an unusually short stint in parish prison, my parole officer had got me a job there washing dishes in the back kitchen. Fleming's was a constant parade of black pressed pants, dirty-hemmed long aprons, crystal glasses that'd been polished with a mixture of grout cleaner and spit. I worked for six months scraping off half-eaten baked potatoes and mac and cheese that cost more per plate than I made in a day. I did eventually get to sample every wine the restaurant served out of the odd lipstick-stained bottle, including the 2001 D'Yquem the restaurant's sommelier had kept in the bottom drawer of her desk.

In short: I'd developed a taste for some expensive things.

During the phone call, Ahab made a few too many references to tricked out engines, leather seats, stick shifts. I wasn't particularly interested in stealing cars, but I, like everyone else, needed some money. And there was the whiff there of large stacks of cash. I was planning on opening up my own luxury furniture shop in the next year or so. I had a corner on the market; no one for a hundred miles sold premium furniture to higher-end clientele. There was a lot of money to be made in selling to people with a lot of money. I just needed some money of my own to get things started. I wasn't the right "people" for Ahab to invest his time in yet, but he seemed to think I could be. The liquor store would get me there, he said. Nice, easy, quick. Take the money, take the bottles, get out of there. Don't let anybody see you. Don't screw anything up.

It would all go down in a couple of days. He didn't say exactly when. He'd call me.

In the meantime, I was bored.

I called up my buddy Jim. We'd met at a halfway house shortly after my first stint in prison. We headed downtown to the Pink Pony parking lot and started pulling on car doors.

You'd be surprised how many people just leave that shit open, not a single concern. They think that no one cares about their shitty stuff. They think that strip club parking lots are sacred places, where all men have this shared sense of camaraderie. They think they've talked to a billion people in their lifetime, a hundred billion; they've shaken hands and ordered coffee and sat next to people at the movies. How many of those people ended up stealing their shit? How many people have climbed into their cars without them knowing? The news anchors at six o'clock, they're talking about some mythical place two streets over, across the train tracks, in a different part of town. Never where you are. Never people you know.

Jim and I were those people.

Of course, the men of the Pink Pony were wrong. Jim and I had a good streak going, maybe three weeks in a row without a peep from the cops. Cash, jewelry, a new stereo system in the box, some iPods, cell phones, some weed. Lots of cash. Jim was really good about being thorough. He'd take the time to look under the back seats, the place the slightly suspicious people stuffed their wallets or loose cash, and behind the steering column, the place suspicious people stuffed drug money. I was always too busy looking through the glove boxes. Not much money to be had there, I knew, but, occasionally I'd find a CD. It's not something I expected to miss at my age. In a time when people can download whole discographies in a matter of seconds without even knowing the name of the band, I missed holding an album in my hands and turning it over. You had to need a CD to put down the money to buy it. Nowadays, it was getting harder and harder to find 'em.

Jim noticed that I slowing on the pulls as the night wore on, not checking under things as thoroughly as I could. He was ten years younger than me, so I could write some of it off as age. But I stopped completely when I saw a *Broadway Hits* fold out into the front seat of a blue '84

Bronco.

He was piled in the back seat, running his hands along the cushion, feeling for a bump or a hitch or something leather. He saw me stopping and nodded. “Money?”

“No, no money.”

He looked up, his eyes begging. “Something else?”

I pulled it out of the CD holder, two yellow eyes staring out of the front. “This is an original cast recording of *Cats*. On the West End.” I waved it in front of him so he could see the 1981 stamped at the bottom. His eyes kind of glazed over, though; he looked from the CD to the front door of the Pony.

“Is it worth anything?”

“Not really. If it were a vinyl, it’d be worth a couple dollars, but people don’t pay good money for old CDs anymore, not with the internet and YouTube.”

With a few tugs at the wires below the dashboard, I got the Bronco’s CD player working, and I popped in the CD. Strings and woodwinds, followed by a booming brass section, piped over the Bronco’s stereo, only a little distorted by the crumbling speakers.

Jim looked at me for a second more, his eyes then flicking to the front door of the Pony, but I ignored him. I let myself be carried away by the twanging violin strings and the softly swelling voices. I could never get across to him why I loved listening to CDs so much. It was just the brevity of the thing, the CD, an outdated form of communication. There was so little pageantry left in the world. No one took the time to make an art out of life and living. No, people parked their cars outside of the Pony. They tried to feel something that they didn’t have. And they left their doors unlocked and their money where we could find it.

Someone inside the Pony must’ve tipped off the cops off that lights were on in cars that

hadn't been moved in a while. You think this would be a normal occurrence at a strip club. A tall, young-ish fellow in a uniform started making his way out of his unit. Jim cursed under his breath, dug his fingers into my shoulder, and practically pulled me out of the Bronco's passenger seat. I told him to fuck himself. I didn't even have enough time to eject the CD. He pushed me between two Lincoln town cars and told me to crouch low.

Under the car, I could see the light of the policeman's flashlight darting on the pavement. I realized how close we were to being in deep shit. I slipped between two Hummer's into the next parking lot, which was for a Wendy's. We tried to keep low and quiet until we got to the front door. In the Wendy's, I walked up to the counter like it had been my intent all along and ordered two of the cheapest things on the menu - kid's Frosty's - and stuffed one in Jim's hand. The cashier looked like she was pissed off about something, maybe she knew what we were up to, but she also worked at the downtown Wendy's next to a strip club. There were probably a lot of things she noticed but ignored.

We tried to swill 'em down without looking like we had done anything. I forced myself to breathe even and take small, unassuming breaths. Before I could get completely calm, I saw the tall cop walk past the windows, the outline of his bulletproof vest clear even in the glare of the cheap lights. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him put his hand up to his brow and peer into the restaurant. I could see his eyes, dark and a little wrinkled underneath, as he looked into the Wendy's for answers. I forced myself not to breathe too deep.

He turned away, back towards the parking lot, and I thought, I'd done it. One more time, I'd fucking outsmarted the cops. They were all fucking idiots after all. They might've gone through the academy and got their police training, but they didn't have any street sense.

I looked over to see the door open, and there he was again.

In the painful fluorescent lights, I could see he wasn't as young as I first thought. More experienced. He knew that whoever had been in the parking lot couldn't have got too far.

Jim looked squeamish, but I told him with my eyes to keep sucking on his straw, to act more like a man who'd stumbled into a Wendy's for a late night milkshake run.

I didn't look the cop in the eye, but I was telling him the same, in my head, mind your own damn business. Do what you're supposed to do. Let everyone know that you're here, then go on your merry way.

I couldn't see him from where I was sitting in the booth, but I felt him turn around. I smiled. He wouldn't be coming back in here.

The night before the liquor store job, I ate a bowl of Cheerios and listened to "Memory" and thought about the old grocery store next to my house. There were only four aisles, poorly lit and falling over. Snacks were down the first aisle, the closest to the cash register. All orange- and green- and yellow-colored packages, crinkly and plasticine. It was hard to sneak one into your pants leg without making a sound.

In between watching porn vids, I looked up the names of some higher-end alcohols. I figured if anyone got a hold of my laptop, naked girls and whiskey would be reasonable enough items to search together. I remembered from my time at Fleming's that scotch commanded high prices. A good bottle of scotch could sell for more than a good working man's month's salary.

Ahab called me. "You ready?" he asked, his voice a little high-pitched.

"Yeah."

“Oh. Ok. Good.” He hesitated on the phone for a good while, until I was able to become one with the deep crackle of the phone’s static charge.

“Listen, I am going to be at Gretchen and Walnut, that’s about half a mile away, at ten tonight. Meet me there, Starbuck.”

Ah. He was sticking with this metaphor, this grand device that made the world seem more artistic and lovely. I didn’t know the guy, but I liked this about him, this desire to make life into something better.

That night, I met Ahab at 10:10 p.m. He was leaning, arms crossed, against a white F150 with Alabama plates. He was wearing a thick-knit ski mask with poorly-cutout eye holes. I had on a cheap Wal-Mart hoodie and a backpack.

“Did you clear your browser history after you ordered that?”

He laughed.

We climbed into the F150, me on the passenger side, Ahab driving. He eased the truck down Lincoln, our speed never climbing above forty. I thought about saying something to him about the job, maybe lying about my credentials for long-term employment, but it wasn’t my job, so I let him take the lead. We drove the rest of the way in silence. We passed the liquor store, the windows full of darkened neon signs. I could see inside to the darkened aisles, the row after a row of black and amber bottles shelved neatly. Through the cab window, I could barely make out a counter to the left, the silver doors of the long fridge all the way to the right, and, in the far back, an office door. Ahab parked at the Trader Joe’s across the street.

“Ok,” he said, as he moved the gear stick to park, “Craig left the bar off the back door, so, we’ll slip through there. He said he was going to leave the alarm off, but the owner might have set it after him. Either way, we’re going to be in and out. Grab whatever you think is

valuable. I'll grab the safe bag, and, if I have time, smash the office door. If something goes wrong, we'll both split and pick up the car later. Got it?"

I nodded.

We both climbed out of the truck and headed across the road. It was 10:30 p.m., already very dark, and there weren't too many cars out. The liquor store looked oddly kitsch next to the tailor and dress shops nearby. Garish red and yellow tiles, outdated palm trees, and a disco ball hanging from the front eaves. The insurance money the owner'd get would at least help finance some redecoration.

Ahab strutted across the parking lot. He wanted anyone driving by to think he was supposed to be there. I followed him closely. We trailed the side of the building to the back door. In the center was a washed-out, peeling sticker that said "Protected by ADT Security."

"A little out of date," he whispered, and he pulled the door's handle. It opened an inch. We waited for a few seconds. Nothing.

"You ready?" Ahab whispered, and he looked at me through the eyeholes of his mask. I stared back at him.

"Ok." He swung the door all the way open.

The backroom light was on, and the floor was littered with flattened boxes, old labels, and bubble wrap. Ahab picked his way around these, passed the office door and went into the main room of the store. I could now see that the store was neatly sectioned off; wines, vodkas, whiskeys, rum, each type of liquor had its own space. Beer was in front of the long fridge. Nothing really to bother with there. Wine was behind the long fridge, in the corner of the store. There might have been a few bottles of expensive champagne, something like Dom Perignon, Billecart-Salmon, Perrier-Jouet, words that I'd read over and over at the restaurant and only

tasted flat and fizz-less, but I didn't want to cross that much space. I could see behind the counter, on the top shelf, were some tall bottles flanked by canisters. Scotches.

Ahab watched me assess the layout. He seemed to like what was happening. "Do your thing," he whispered, and he sprinted off towards the cooler. Even in the dark, I watched him manage the distance in only a few seconds. Then, I heard the thwump of the cooler door.

I made my own way across the store, towards the front door, weaving my way through the stacks, taking in a few labels but grabbing nothing. I could fit six bottles in my backpack, maybe seven if I stuffed things. I didn't want to risk carrying anything in my hands. My best hope was to walk out before the cops got here and trace my way down Valley. I had a friend off Milherd who would put me up for the night.

Hung along the front counter, a few feet from the wall, was silver and gold tinsel. Underneath it were cheap plastic Christmas balls. I got so caught up assessing the bad decorations that I didn't notice the motherfucker creeping up behind me.

"Don't move."

I could feel the cold outline of a metal barrel against my neck. A gun, I knew immediately. This might've been my first time robbing a liquor store, but it certainly wasn't my first time around. I kept my hands by my sides.

"I'm not going to move."

"Now, slowly, put your hands on the counter."

I dug my fingers into the tinsel and loosened up my body.

As he patted me down, I could see behind the counter there were a small sleeping bag and a few blankets. This fellow was down on his luck. Maybe he hadn't made enough to make rent this month. Maybe he and his old lady had a row, and he was the one sent packing.

“Hard times?” I asked.

“Shut up.” He ran his hands between my legs, down my back. He pulled off my backpack.

“Why are you sleeping here? Can’t be too comfortable on that tile, even with the blankets.”

He took the gun off my neck and swung me around. He wasn’t much taller than me, and he was thin, too thin. His hair was long and lank in places, pieces of it matted to his scalp. His eyes were red and veiny, and a bit of crust ringed his lips. The guy was making it in this world, but just barely. And he clearly wasn’t prepared for the night me and Ahab were giving him.

“You see this gun? This gun is real. It’s a Beretta PX4. You move an inch, and I’ll... I’ll shoot you! I swear. What the fuck are you doing in here?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t want to lie to the guy. He seemed like he was nice enough, if bad off and kind of ugly.

“I’m robbing the store.”

He looked a little surprised at my answer. Maybe he appreciated the honesty. It took him a minute to answer. “Is that so? Just robbing the liquor store by yourself?”

“No.”

That made him twitch. A small snap of the arm, like he was about to scratch his nose. Such a little movement that jerked the gun away from my neck. But big enough for me. I cupped my hands together, pushing the gun up towards the ceiling. His reflexes weren’t as fast as mine, but he still managed to pull off a shot, which zoomed past my head and up into the overhead light. I was never in danger, but I could still feel the energy of what had just happened, of the bullet soaring through the air and climbing further and further through the drywall and plastic

and glass and shattering the light. I clawed my fingers into his hand. I could see the blood dripping off my fingernails. He dropped the gun into my hand, just like that.

He swiveled away from me, his whole body a ball-and-socket joint flexing away. I could see where this was going – the fellow was going to get himself hurt, trying something against me – and I brought the butt of the gun down towards him. It hit him between his shoulder and his neck, and he followed the swing of my arm onto the tiled floor.

Ahab picked that moment to burst out of the long fridge. “What the fuck?” he gasped. His fingers were shaking. In the waistband of his pants, I could see the lumpy outline of the night drop bag. If we got out now, the night would be something of a success. That felt good. Everything else would just be icing on the cake. He looked at me, the gun in my hands, the guy crumpled on the ground.

He stepped back and let out a short laugh. “ Sleeper?”

I pointed at the sleeping bag. “Yeah.”

“You handled it well. Ready to get out of here?”

“Almost.” I turned back to the scotch wall, my eyes already on a Macallan 20 label standing on the top shelf.

“You going to leave him there?” he asked.

This was part of the test. I turned back around to him. “No. I’ll move him into the back, so the cops might miss him if they do show up.”

He shook his head slightly, a grin creeping up behind the mouth hole in his mask. “That’s not gonna do it. We can’t just leave him here. He might tell someone.”

So this was part of the test. He wanted me to be willing to shoot someone for him. Funny thing was, it didn’t make sense in this situation. The guy didn’t get a look at Ahab – he’d been in

the fridge the whole time. And, me? I had a forgettable face. There wasn't any point in getting rid of him. Made the whole job a lot messier. A lot more open ends.

But that might also be part of the test. He wanted to know that I could think smart, could look at things a different way.

I only had a second to puzzle it out. "No," I said. "That's stupid."

"What?" His grin faded.

"That's a stupid move."

The guy's head shook a little. I'd hit him hard, but not quite hard enough. His eyes fluttered like he was just waking up from a nap.

Ahab crossed the distance between us fast, almost too fast for me to realize what was happening. I could see his hand reach out for the gun in my hand. He thought he was faster than me.

I wasn't about to fail the test this close to the end of the gig. I had to show him how good of a guy I could be. I brought the gun up between Ahab's hands, all the way up to his chin, and I pushed his chin up and up, until he was looking at the darkened lights in the store.

He looked surprised. Maybe he'd come to the gig that night thinking that I was just another loser he could pin a robbery on. Maybe he no longer hoped that somebody out there was actually worth working with. I aimed to show him just how good of an asset I could be. I laid it on for him.

He was too surprised to say a word.

"You see that light?" I whispered to him. I got so close to him that I knew he could feel the breath leave my mouth as I said every word. "If I shot you right now with this pistol, the bullet soaring through that excuse you have for a brain, how long do you think it would be before

someone found your body?”

He blinked his eyes. “Todd, man, Todd, stop this,” Ahab cried.

I didn’t stop just because he started shouting my real name. I had to make him know that I wasn’t just some street-level thug, that I was a man who could be trusted to go as far as necessary to get things done. “The little bits of brain would fly up there into the light. Some janitor would clean it off but not very well. Parts of you would be up there for months, maybe years. They’d have to demolish the building before they got all of you out of here, drag your brain light to a dump in the middle of Hammond.”

The guy on the ground was all the way awake. I could feel him shuffling at my feet as he became aware of the situation before him. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him begin to shuffle away, towards one of the shelves, to try and give himself some cover.

Ahab was shaking, maybe from adrenaline. I, too, was excited by this moment. I felt like I was on the verge of something great and powerful.

But then I heard sirens, unmistakable on this quiet night, and they weren’t too far away. I took the gun off the Ahab’s neck and smiled at him. He let out a long breath and fell to his knees. He landed softly and curled his head into his hands.

Now was no moment to celebrate. We still needed to get out of the store, with the money and the bottles, and get down the street before the cops got there.

I walked over to the scotch wall. I didn’t have any time to pick and choose, so I grabbed six bottles, all with gold foil labels, and stashed them in my bag.

The liquor store sleeper was crouched behind the nearest shelf, and when he saw me, he whimpered. Poor guy didn’t realize that I didn’t give a shit about him.

“Have a nice day,” I told him.

I turned back around to Ahab, still kneeling on the floor in front of the counter. “Let’s go, man,” I barked at him. I could see him hesitate for just a second, but he did it. He stood up. I grabbed my bag.

When we were outside again, I noticed how cold it was. The wind crept around my neck and down my back. Here, we could hear the sirens getting louder and louder.

At first, Ahab didn’t say anything. I figured it was nerves, maybe excitement. I could feel my blood rushing like it hadn’t rushed in a long time.

“What was that?” Ahab asked quietly.

I didn’t really have an answer for him. “It’s better this way,” I finally said.

I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. His eyes flew back and forth without landing.

“Look,” I said, “we’ll talk about it later.” I pushed him in the direction of Acadian. “You go that way. I’ll go up Valley.”

He looked like he didn’t want to. But he finally nodded and shuffled towards Acadian, looking over his shoulder once or twice to see if I was following.

“Slower,” I tried to shout. “Don’t want to arouse suspicion.”

It was less than a mile’s walk for me. I didn’t look too out of place, a guy with a backpack walking around on a Saturday night. I could hear the sirens get really close, but I kept an even pace. A few minutes later, and I saw 105 loom into view, an old shotgun house split by three frat guys. My old buddy Greg would be the only one here at this time of night. I shuffled through my backpack, glancing at the labels on each of the different bottles. Balvenie 12 or Macallan 10? I closed my eyes and grabbed one of the bottles. I pulled off the plastic wrap, the top, and took a quick swig. I poured a little in my hands and dotted my neck with it like cologne. I knocked on the door.

It took a minute, but Greg appeared in his boxers.

“Todd?”

I leaned back a little onto the heels of my feet. “Greg!”

“Todd? Are you drunk?”

“It’s ok, buddy. I brought some for you!” I forced the bottle of scotch into his hands. He let me in, and I spent the night on his couch, not all that bad of a sleep. I thought I might wake up to the sounds of sirens going through the neighborhood or maybe a call from Ahab, but I didn’t wake once.

Of course, that gig wasn’t the last I heard from Ahab. I waited a few days, long enough to not arouse any suspicion, and, then, I called him about this long term employment. He told me over the phone that I had something the other guys he hired didn’t. I knew this meant I was smarter, edgier than them. It was what I wanted to hear. His real name turned out to be Ricky Quince. He’d been born at the end of Walnut Drive, right before the tracks that cut off Zion City, and he found his first pistol in the hands of his mother’s coked-out boyfriend when he was only eight years old. I guess this life never really comes to you.

Ayúdame

You are already late; the angles of your watch hands confirm it. But you slip into this Starbucks, the door swinging behind you, anyway. He is standing there in front of the pastry case, his head shaking, and he focuses on you. There are four packs of C4 duct-taped around his crumpled white shirt, and he is shouting *ayúdame, ayúdame, ayúadame*, which you think means *death, death, death*, as he swings his hands about.

There are four other people in this Starbucks. Two baristas are hunched behind the counter, one looking terrified, the other, reverent. There's a homeless man by the bar, the one here nearly every time you come. Most customers don't mind him because he doesn't ask for money. He brings his own stained mug and gets half a cup of coffee, filling the rest with Splenda and powdered creamer. Now, he holds his empty dirt-covered hand curled near yours as the bomber shouts *ayúdame*. You see it, see the flicker of the homeless man's eyes, the longing for a stranger's comfort in this moment, but you pull away towards the door. You still think that you can get out.

The last person in this café has curly white hair and a Chanel dog carrier. Inside the

carrier is a purebred Chihuahua on his thin feet, and he is yapping and gnawing at the mesh door. He is scared. The white-haired woman doesn't hold the dog or the carrier but a copy of some romance novel, maybe the one you saw yesterday at CVS when you went for condoms. She doesn't even turn her head as you fall into this situation, this mayhem.

You inch back towards the exit, still hoping to slip out again unnoticed, but the bomber looks at you, straight at you, through you, and he shouts again, *ayúdame*. He points at his chest, at the bomb. Your destiny is to die here, here with the four other people, the bomber, and the dog.

The barista, the young one who is not praying, screams and puts her hands over her mouth. She widens her eyes and begs the bomber to please, let her go, let us all go, we can go home to our families, and you can blow yourself the fuck up. He says to her, pleading, *ayúdame*, *ayúdame*, *ayúdame*, each one sharp, crisp, rhythmic, like the tiny movement of clock hands on a white face.

You didn't realize this morning that every step you took had lead you closer to the bomb - the search for the bathroom, the awkward tooth-brushing, the glance back through the mirror at him stirring under the covers. You were all too happy when you managed to leave without waking him up. It had all been so fluid, so easy, moving from sidewalk to train, from minute to minute, until you ended up here, at this Starbucks, with these people.

As his phone rings, the bomber's eyes widen, and it all explodes around you, one midnight flash of light. Your arms swing out, bits of machine and glass and bone entering you, and with your last synaptic rush, you remember, not your job or your mother or your first love, but, for just a second, that morning: the sun light coming in through a wide window, the foreign and cotton-like smell of this stranger's apartment, the warmth of an outstretched hand from

under the covers. Your one-night-stand had touched your face as if you were an old friend. After a moment, he'd pulled away, but you remember his wristwatch, golden flashes of light beaming off of it, and when you looked it straight in the face, it had burned your eyes. You could still hear it ticking, even with your eyes closed, over the sound of his erupting heartbeat, as you longed for one more graze of his fingertips.

When that second is over, you become the bomb and the people until there is no more of you or them, only it.

Erosion

When they pull him out of the plane's wreckage, this is what he sees: ashes. The field of Jean Paul's vision is captured in a dark-tinged filter. Gloved hands work to clear his eyes and throat of debris; there's a blackness all around him. In his ears, there's a faint humming, like the lowest note on an organ. It is a comfort at first, something to drown out the churning voices, but it gradually makes him feel terribly alone.

A woman he doesn't know grabs his arm gingerly, like a lover. He can't hear her faint whispers, but he can see the arch of her lips form around a word, a word that she repeats over and over again. If this were a different day, she might be asking for a cigarette. Though he doesn't know quite what she is asking, he does know this: the ash isn't normal, and the sky is much too big. Behind the woman, the great white and blue arch of the sky stretches for miles and miles.

He thinks he tells her that his hands are burning. He can't be sure that she knows what he is saying. He holds out his hands and motions with them like he is catching his hand on the burner. He mimes a look of surprise. There is no sign, he realizes, for burning from within. He

doesn't know if she understands, but she checks him. She pulls his arm into her lap and cuts away the fabric of his shirt. Underneath, his skin has been replaced with black oily patches. What used to be smooth looks like the back of a lizard. He cries out as she rubs the ointment into his skin, not because he is in pain, but because he feels nothing.

In this moment, he sees the seats scattered around him and across the field. He sees them with his ash-tinted filter. Perhaps they're not the chunks of swollen fabric and metal that he thinks he sees. Perhaps the wreckage is drawn on some space inside his memory. For now, he notices their emptiness. This is the first time since he embarked on the plane with the other passengers that he can see the bottom of the seats, the airline's logo taking up the whole cushion. He can see where the red and yellow fabric meets in one great line.

Yesterday, he had been on vacation with his father. The two had left the over-decorated hotel room for an hour at the burning sands near the water. They didn't speak at first, but they stood near each other, each grain of sand sticking to their feet, and they felt like it might be enough. It had been more than five years since they had stood so close to each other.

The last vision Jean Paul had of his father was an open doorway closing quickly behind him. His step-mother had heard the whispers of where Jean Paul had been, of who he'd been with. Her hot-tempered gods would not allow this. They were jealous things.

His father's gods were not jealous, but they were not warriors, either. His father had held open the family's screen door as Jean Paul had taken his bag and left.

On the beach, the waves crashed around Jean Paul and his father, and for a moment, all

sound from the city was swept out to sea. That was the most at peace he had felt with his father nearby since he was very young.

Jean Paul noticed his father's face was growing old. His nose and eyes stayed the same, but the edges of his face had begun to fall. If he lived much longer, his skin would run off the sides of his bones. It would droop down to his shoulders, and when he looked at you, you would see only a skull with a big fleshy nose. When his father talked, it already seemed distant, echoing, as if sound had to travel miles and miles to pass his lips.

As they walked into the ocean's cooling waters, his father spoke of the past, of forgiveness. He said that his wife was different now; her gods were more benign, tempered by age. He spoke of reconnection. He was happy to spend this time with his son. He was happy to be on the beach and watch the sunset.

But they had not lingered on this moment of happiness. Eventually, his father had turned his questions to Jean Paul's life, each question more probing, more invasive. His father did not ask the question that he really wanted to know the answer to: did his son, Jean Paul, still care for men?

There had been a moment as they spoke that Jean Paul could have told him the truth, without his father asking, that his feelings were not some momentary predilection, not a single verse in the hymn of his life. He had felt the words to answer his father's unspoken question rise up in his chest, had felt them move around on his tongue like a hot dumpling, but he could not spit them out.

Jean Paul had looked out at the sunset, yes, but he had also looked at his feet. The more he stared, the further away they seemed. It was as if the ocean was slowly eroding him away. If he stood there long enough, the sand would reduce him through friction, and he would be carried

out to sea. He would become the ocean around him, and there would be nothing left of him.

When Jean Paul realizes that he is no longer on the plane, he grabs the arms of one of the medics. She is helping to carry him to one of the many vacant ambulances parked just out of the wreckage's wake. Why is he here? he asks of her. Why is this happening? He tells her that he was just sitting next to his father. He asks if anyone has seen his father; they were on a long flight home together. It was only an instant ago, he assures them. All of the faces around him shake in unison, like coconuts being shaken from trees. They shake and they shake in rhythm. They say nothing.

If they would like, he could describe in great detail the fold of his father's sash or the wiriness of his beard. He could tell them where the man kept his wallet, in the front pocket of his shoulder bag, because he believed that pick-pocketers would look in his pants' pockets before the bag.

The uniformed medics wait quietly, but the details don't ever come out. Jean Paul keeps his mouth shut, and they are left to well up inside him.

They sedate him. He has been through enough, they say, this miracle of a man. They place him on a stretcher and cart him out of the remains, the only breathing man not in a uniform.

No one can see from here, on the ground, how big the plane is, how much space it takes up. In a single piece, it had been more than two hundred feet across. The helicopters circle above

it now, to film for the news outlets, here and across the ocean. On the screens in restaurants and bars and people's homes, the plane only looks as big as a hand.

On the ground, they ask him, how did you make it? The only one in two hundred, they say. Two hundred fathers and mothers, doctors and construction workers. Such a callous thing to ask a man who no longer has a father. Even when he is away from the scene, weeks later, he has no answer. He isn't any taller than any other man on the plane. He no longer prays to any god. The morning of the flight, he'd had a single drink in the airport café. At first, he thinks this is what saved him. He tells no one that his father had the same drink.

For the next few weeks, on the bus, in the car, Jean Paul plays this game with himself. He sits perfectly still and imagines that his father is just out of sight. He holds his breath and does not turn for as long as he can stand it. When suffocation is only a few seconds away, he deeply inhales. He allows the brief euphoria of life to take over him. For a few moments, he can breathe easy. He can pretend his father is lagging behind him. His father is just out of a sight, like a car always in his blind spot. He can forget the pain in his hands. He can rehearse the speech that he will tell his father about his tastes, his great loves, his weak-in-the-knees moments, as soon as he appears. Sometimes, he believes that his father is really at arm's length away. But he does not allow himself to believe this for too long. This is a small moment that he will never get. Eventually, he turns to his left and right and sees nothing.

With the scabs appearing over the burns, Jean Paul mostly thinks about hands. His hands are usually large and white-palmed, but, now, they are scaly and carry a faint, thrumming burn. The doctors say this will recede in time, that this is simply a thing that happens, a thing recorded in the annals of some book only read by other doctors. This is his mark from the crash. This is the mark from his father. Everyone else paid with their lives, but he pays with the soldering. He continues to be formed by it.

His father had small, sleek hands, the hands of a merchant. Jean Paul had watched them carefully when he was a boy. He'd thought his father might be magical, so hypnotic were the movements of his hands. Even on the plane, he'd used them to get a seat closer to the window, an extra package of peanuts, a soft pillow.

The man across from them on the plane, he had hands with wide fingertips. He'd held them out to the stewardess when he demanded a drink. Jean Paul thought to ask him if he was staying in Nargo, but he'd looked at his own hands, such rough and worn bags. He'd hid them in his pockets.

The child in the seat ahead of them, he'd had tiny, red hands. The veins in each finger had shown beneath his paper-thin skin. And the child's mother, she'd had yellow hands, almost scaly, especially between the middle and index fingers. The last moment he remembered, before it had all happened, her hands had flown up, her baby at her side.

Before Jean Paul and his father left for the airport, he wandered back to the ocean. His father followed him, standing just out of the water, watching him. No words passed in this time, but Jean Paul did not care. He began to cry a few, trembling tears, each one creating a small ripple when falling. He felt this was for all the moments apart, when he'd wanted to cry before his father, but he could not.

His father placed his heavy hand on Jean Paul shoulder. It might have been a gesture of comfort, but it felt like he was pushing Jean Paul out to sea. They stood there, his hand pressing into his shoulders, until Jean Paul's shoulders began to burn with pain, and he stopped crying. They returned to the hotel to grab their bags and left for the plane.

Jean Paul tries to go back to life, to living. The doctor said it was the only way he could recover. He tries to go back to his job pushing carts and lifting flour and haggling with the bakery customers. As he is standing with a customer, using his hands to explain the pricing of a muffin, his words suddenly feel very light and empty. This is not the life that his father could have offered, but it is life that he has made for himself. His days after that are bleak.

He tries the usual ways of coping. One night, he eats all of the food in his refrigerator and cabinets. He eats enough food to feed him for a week. For a week, he drinks until his mind is numb, but the blackness reminds him too much of the morning of the crash. These things do nothing to clear his mind or subdue the burning.

In some part of his mind, he remembers the stories told in his homeland of men returning

from war, of finding comfort in women. He finds a purple girl beneath the curtains of South Street. Though he goes with a purpose, he cannot find it in himself to do what is intended. He asks her name, but she only tells him a price; even after he offers more money, she refuses. He leaves her there, her veil only lightly covering her face. He thinks that she knows the truth about him, though there is nothing outside of him that could tell her. Perhaps she could feel the burn in his hands for the moment they touched. He shouts that his father would not be proud of a man doing this. For a moment, he believes this in the present tense. When that moment is over, back in his empty apartment, he cries.

Some days he can forget the crash, but he cannot forget the burn, and therefore, his father. The faint hum returns, almost like a TV that is on but with no-sound, a mechanical-electrical nerve of the universe.

It is better this way, he tells himself. It is better that I am left behind.

But surviving is not so easy. Surviving lasts much longer than dying. He is envious of them, after all, his father and all the rest. Their bodies have been laid down. They sink further beneath the sand.

He finds the gun his father had given him between the mattresses of his bed. This is the only thing his father gave him, not money, or family heirlooms, or pictures. The cold metal of the gun feels good against his palm. It is the first time since the crash that he is not afraid.

For days, he carries the gun in his front pocket, his fingers reaching for it every so often, the grip becoming comfortable. But he touches it so often that it becomes warm and warmer.

Desperate for further relief, he robs a pawn shop near his apartment with the gun. He has no real plan. He only acts. He wears a black stocking over his face, and the world is once again tinged in hazy darkness. The cold of the gun feels good again. He gets swept up in the euphoria

of doing without thinking, without trying, without hoping. There is simply movement in his life, like he is in flight. He knows the woman behind the counter, and he tells her that he means her no harm. He's not sure if this is true. Her face is a twist of lines and curves. She gives him everything behind the counter, in the drawers, and in the bags, and she opens her arms and begs for her life. He carries out the cash and jewelry in a grey-tone duffel bag. He only looks back at the store for a moment.

When he gets back home and drops the gun onto his mattress, he can still feel it in his hand. He waits for the feeling to fade from his palms. He looks at his own hands, watching the diamond pattern of the grip disappear, but he can still feel it. All of this money, and he knows it cannot buy him one moment again, one moment of peace.

On the anniversary of the crash, Jean Paul goes back to the ocean, to the very spot he'd talked with his father. As soon as he arrives at the water, he can tell things are different. The wind is soft. The sun is brilliant orange and yellow.

He dips his hands beneath the water's surface and lets the waves beat over his leathery hands. The movement of the water works against his skin, and, after many minutes, the scabs on his hands become loose and float away. The small curlicues of water catch his scabs and carry them away from his body, throw them back into the sand.

It is there, on the shore, that he thinks he sees his father's face. The year since the crash has pulled his skin further down, until his lines are like the patterns left in the sand.

This time, Jean Paul wastes no time with his father. He lets the words fall right out of his

mouth like stones. These words, with the bits of him, get picked up by the ocean's undercurrents. When he is empty, he steps further in and feels the waves beat over him once again. The little things of him are now part of the ocean, but he, the man, is not moved.

That day, Jean Paul feels sure about one thing: erosion. It is a force that can take away, but it can also create something bigger.

Vita

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In her spare time, LB likes to run and draw.