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Care Forgotten

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Care Forgotten

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

J. Michael Norris

A.A. Delgado Community College, 2005
B.A. Louisiana State University, 2015

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Old Friends

Outside of Louis Armstrong Airport by the baggage claim, I became restless. I'd borrowed a coworker's truck to pick up Jeb, one of my oldest friends, and I couldn't sit still. The truck, a shiny blue, was one of those extended cab monstrosities, the kind that looked impressive. I had a sign with me, written with colored markers on a white poster board, like something you'd bring to a gay rights march. "Welcome Back JEB" it said, scribbled in my uneven handwriting. I decided it seemed childish, so I folded the sign in half and in half again, then shoved it under the back of the driver's seat. It had been twelve years since I'd seen Jeb, and I needed to stand, stretch, walk, move. I was nervous about how I'd look to him, nervous about what he'd think of me. Maybe I should have just scheduled an Uber.

I jumped out of the truck into the summer heat and paced the sidewalk, sneaking glimpses of my reflection in the sliding glass doors, worrying my T-shirt was too tight or my biceps weren't big enough. Jeb and I had been workout partners before, and I didn't want him to

think I'd let myself go. People came in and out the airport, some smiling, their rides carrying their luggage for them. Others were sullen, stalking straight to the line of cabs waiting at the curb. I worked it over in my mind, some witty thing I'd say when I saw Jeb. Of course I never said it. When he came out of the airport I simply screamed his name, like he wasn't already smiling and waving at me.

“Chase,” Jeb said, pulling me into a hug and sniffing my neck. “You still smell just like you.”

Like a fool I said, “So do you.”

Taking his suitcase, I noticed the grey hair coming in around Jeb's temples, and then a slight limp, something he'd told me about on Skype. He'd broken a femur out in the field living with the Xavante, doing research one summer between semesters teaching. Apparently the aboriginal equivalent of a cast left his right leg a tad crooked. So strange that my old friend, the same one who got lost time and again during drunken binges, had become a respected ethnobotanist, a professor at one of Brazil's most prestigious schools. Driving to my apartment—the studio in the Quarter—I glanced over while he filled me in on his new life, catching sight of the bags under his eyes; the front tooth staring to yellow; the way the skin around his lips wrinkled from smoking; the impossibly deep tan. Those things were all new. Jeb hated A/C, so we kept the windows cracked to let some air in, sweat pooling under my arms.

“You've got to come to Rio,” Jeb said as we passed through Metairie. “The beaches are beautiful and the boys are amazing.” It was an offer he'd made many times.

“If I can get enough money saved, I will.”

“No one driving a truck like this is doing that bad.”

“This?” I said. “Oh, it's not mine. It's a friend's.”

I didn't bring my car because I didn't own one. I told Jeb I could walk to work, the grocery, the river—take a taxi or a streetcar anywhere in the city. I could forget about insurance and gasoline for the first time in my adult life. I bragged about this as best I could, trying to convince my old friend I'd developed a thoughtful life, even though I remained as stuck as ever at the Bourbon Pub slinging cocktails and bullshit. I can only imagine how pretentious I came off. I'm sure I even mentioned I'd stopped eating meat and tossed out my TV.

When we got to the Quarter, I parked on Orleans a few blocks from my place, and we walked up Royal Street, passing a band playing bluegrass, artists hawking over-priced paintings, and a couple of sash-wrapped tarot readers perched at their folding card tables.

“Let's get our fortunes read,” Jeb said, grabbing my arm and pulling me to a stop.

“Please,” I said. “You don't believe in that nonsense.”

“Lately I've been more open to finding, I don't know, answers.”

“The only answers you'll get are ones designed to make you feel good.”

Jeb smiled broadly and shook his head. “But those are the kind of answers I like.”

As we continued on, Jeb tossed a crumpled, blue Brazilian Real into a silver top hat lying on the ground next to one of those metallic-paint-covered street performers, the kind who stand like statues on plastic milk cartons. Making our way through the thick weekend crowd, Jeb's grey hair and yellow tooth vanished, replaced by a familiar squint when he laughed and the way he resembled an imp when he cocked his head to ask a question. “Is that our coffee shop?”

“Where's the antique store that used to be here?” “Has it changed much since Katrina?”

Entering my apartment, the eclectic mix of thrift-store furniture and hand-me-down art, curated through years of careful collecting, looked suddenly bleak. Even though I'd straightened up the night before, something about having Jeb there transformed shabby chic into crappy

cheap. I stowed Jeb's suitcase into the walk-in closet and offered him a Corona from the kitchen, hoping one would help me relax.

"What's the word for an apartment like this?" Jeb asked, moving from the main room into the small foyer off the front door.

"A studio." I sat down on my futon and sipped my beer, watching Jeb as he walked around. He wasn't muscled like he used to be, but still had the broad shoulders and big hands that had made him such a beast at the gym. Though he may have been doing steroids back then. Jeb had never shied away from any type of drug, a habit that kept him on the edge of disaster most of his time in New Orleans. How he managed to finish his doctorate is beyond me.

"No," he said, looking into the kitchen, "they have a different name for it. Something old."

"A slave-quarter?"

"No, it's something else. But I think in Portuguese now." He tapped his head with two fingers. "A garçonnière. That's it." He came back and sat down next to me. "I figured you'd know, with your French degree and all."

"I mean, sure, if you're being politically correct." I got up and turned on my computer so we could listen to some music. "I don't get to use my French as much as I'd like."

Jeb nodded agreement. "Spanish is more useful."

By the time we'd downed a couple of Coronas, I found myself saying how he looked exactly like he had back in San Francisco, back when we first met. In the ways that mattered, I suppose he did. An attraction still moved between us, tides we felt as strongly as our denial surrounding them. Our relationship had almost always been this way, even back when we called ourselves best friends, not old friends. We'd acted on it a few times, our attraction, mostly during

drunken escapades, but the reality of my HIV meant it would remain relegated to mistaken, hazy nights when fear gave way to lust. My microscopic hitchhikers scared Jeb, no matter how much he understood the lack of risk, what being undetectable meant. Science cannot conquer that brand of fear. When the apartment could no longer contain the emotion of our reunion, we decided to go get some drinks at the 700 Club, a new bar on Burgundy Street.

I always say we met in San Francisco, but that isn't exactly true. Though to be honest, I've told the story that way so many times it's become true enough. Most stories work that way. We actually met through a defunct website called MenForMen.com when Jeb had visited New Orleans, considering Tulane for grad school. We didn't get a chance to hook-up—he'd been very busy—but we chatted and hit it off as well as you can online. When Jeb invited me to come visit him in Guerneville, a small town in the mountains north of San Francisco, I cobbled together enough money for a plane ticket, took a week off work, and went out to see him.

It was late December, just after Christmas, and it was bitter cold. Driving up the winding mountain road to Jeb's cabin, I was stunned by the huge trees, fascinated by how Jeb seemed to know the name for each, what the local Native Americans had used them for. The Russian River Valley had been where Jeb did his undergraduate work, and his face lit up when he talked about all the things he knew. It was a huge turn on.

When we finally reached his cabin, I stepped out of the car in awe at what I was seeing. That cabin remains one of the strangest places I've ever visited. Made of logs and situated 15

feet up into a tree, it looked a bit like an oversized child's playhouse. Hanging ferns ringed the eaves, and vines grew up the base of the tree, stopping just where the cabin started.

Inside I found quite a different story. A glass shower, set smack-dab in the middle of the bedroom with no curtain or anything, had dozens of hotel-sized bottles of shampoo and conditioner stacked in one corner. Weeks of unwashed pots and pans hid the counter in his cramped kitchen. Dull, green linoleum covered the floors throughout, and Jeb slept inside a sleeping bag he kept waded up during the day on a fold-out camping cot. He told me he'd been doing the remodeling himself. I figured he smoked a lot of pot. I still remember my embarrassment at showering there the first time, with nothing but glass between us, while he lounged on his cot reading a book about plants. I'd had to brush my teeth at the same time since he never installed a bathroom sink. He'd claimed it saved on water.

"I'm pretty spartan," Jeb had said when I turned off the shower. "Hope that doesn't bother you."

"No, I think it's kind of cool." I stepped out and dried myself with a towel he'd left on top of a stack of books.

I was shivering, so he grabbed a crumpled beach towel off the floor and wrapped it around me, pulling me close. I went to kiss him, but he turned his head and squeezed me.

"Not right after you brush your teeth," he said, then kissed my forehead. "We need to be careful. Micro-cuts on your gums are worse than not wearing a condom."

We had spent the rest of the week mainly playing tourists, driving through the Sonoma Valley tasting wine, hiking to the black-sand beaches on the coast, drinking at the gay bars in what I had already started calling San Fran. We had had sex in his car, the woods, even the

bathroom of one club. That passion had somehow disappeared when he moved to New Orleans six months later.

“Do you remember when I first moved here?” Jeb shouted, leaning across a table at the 700 Club. Despite the loud crowd, this bar was my favorite. They always played older music, like Whitney and Celine, and they served vegetarian sliders and the city’s best sweet potato fries out of a side door to an alley where they’d set up a kitchen. Plus, most of my regulars didn’t drink there.

“Of course I do,” I said, and took a swig from an Abita Amber. “I was your tour guide for at least three months.”

“No. I mean do you remember how weird I was.”

“Weird?” I shook my head. “You weren’t weird.”

“I was. I’m sorry.”

I scoped the bar to see if anyone was listening. “You were fine.”

“I was kind of an asshole.” Jeb came around the table and sat next to me, putting his arm over my shoulder. “I was afraid.”

“You weren’t afraid. You were horny and wanted to fuck the city.”

He kissed my ear and whispered, “I did fuck the city.”

We both laughed.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” he said. “I need dance music and boys on a bar.”

“Not The Corner Pocket?” The Corner Pocket was a dingy dive bar a few blocks away—I knew that was where Jeb wanted to go. He’d always had a thing for strippers and the drama that came along with them. “Those boys are all crack addicts and hustlers.”

Jeb stood up. “Perfect. Let’s go.”

We spent the next several hours shooting tequila and drinking Coronas in the dim light of The Corner Pocket. We sat at the far end of a long, oval bar in the center of the only room, just in front of an unused pool table. The main attractions were a dozen or so dancers and a drag-queen emcee. The emcee, probably in her sixties, looked like the walking embodiment of despair, her cheeks pumped up from too much filler and her sequin gown too tight across her breasts. Her voice echoed through the bar, a deep growl tinged with alcohol and bitterness, somehow clearly audible over the constant booming of electronica in the air.

The dancers appeared to range in ages from 18 to 22, and most of them looked malnourished, high on crystal meth, or both. They strutted on the bar with false confidence, castoffs, I imagined, riddled with guilt and desperation. When they thrust their speedo-covered cocks out mechanically or lowered their asses in the faces of the men at in the bar, I only felt pity. Their dancing didn’t turn me on, it made me wonder if their families missed them, if they’d lost their homes during the flood, too. One well-hung Hispanic in worn tights-whities had caught Jeb’s attention, and after Jeb’s fourth trip to the ATM I decided to intervene.

“You can’t keep feeding him bills all night.” I grabbed a stack of 20’s from Jeb’s hand when he got back to his stool. “He’s not going to fuck you.”

Jeb shook his head. “I don’t want him to fuck me. I want him to get me some meth.”

“You still do that shit?”

Jeb shrugged. “When in Rome.”

I pocketed the money. “No way are you getting high tonight. You just got in.”

“My boyfriend is back in Rio. He said I can do what I want while I’m here.” Jeb made a point of punctuating his words.

“*Now* you have a boyfriend?”

“More than you can say.” Jeb stuck out his hand, asking for the money.

I shook Jeb’s outreached hand. “Sorry, but right now you’re coming home with me.”

“Why?” Jeb smiled.

“Because you have a conference in two days.”

Jeb jerked my hand. “And you love me.”

I shook my head.

“And you love me,” Jeb said.

“Yes. And I love you.” Saying those words in that moment stung. “Now let’s go home.”

We stumbled over the uneven flagstone sidewalks to my apartment, making our way through the crowd on Bourbon Street. A girl in a pink wig with oversized butterfly wings tied on her back punched her boyfriend’s chest and pointed at us, shouting, “They’re so cute!” Jeb leaned on me for support the entire way, the mix of alcohol and his bum leg making him unsteady. Once we got into the musty stairwell of my building, he kept trying to talk too loudly, so I pushed him against the wall with my hand over his mouth, shushing him. He grabbed my other hand and put it between his legs.

I jerked my hand back. “No.” I wanted to be with Jeb, but not like that.

Upstairs, I pulled out my futon. We both undressed and crawled under a blanket together, Jeb giggling on and off for a few minutes. After he quieted down, I lay in the dark for half-an-hour listening to his breathing, wanting to reach over and hold him. I studied his profile in the dark, his strong nose like a mountain, wondering why things always got so complicated. No matter how far apart or how much time passed, we seemed determined to always make things tough. So many nights I'd lain next to him on my bed or his, wanting to hold him. We never seemed to get it to work. When I turned onto my side, finally deciding to sleep, he rolled over and wrapped an arm around me, his body pressing against me like a heavy sack. He kissed the back of my neck before he began snoring.

The next morning, I woke early. I had coffee ready when he got up, and after eating beignets at Rue De La Course off Jackson Square, Jeb told me he wanted to find some local flora for the speech he was giving at his ethnobotany conference. We hadn't been hiking together since Guerneville, and I thought heading down to the trails around Jean Lafitte Swamp south of the city might be a great way to find that spark we used to have. Jeb rented us a car and did the driving, saying he needed the practice.

Once we got there, we found a canoe at a mom and pop place beside one of the main bayous, then rowed out to a hiking trail I knew about from before Katrina. I felt relieved it was still there; a quiet surprise often rose up when I visited someplace I hadn't seen since the storm and found it the same. We tied the canoe to an ancient cypress covered in moss and meandered down a worn dirt path, the air slowly growing oppressive from heat, humidity, and hangover.

“How’d you find this place?” Jeb asked.

“Used to come here with Tyler.” I pointed to an alligator surfacing a few yards away from us, its eyes rising above the water. “They’re not really aggressive.”

Jeb nodded. “What ever happened with him?”

I heard cicadas buzzing in the distance. “He died.”

“Oh. I had no idea.”

Of course not. He never asked.

I waved my hand in the air, shooping a fly. “It was a long time ago.”

“I know you cared for him,” Jeb said as he squatted by a cluster of mushrooms.

“I’m not here to chase ghosts.”

Jeb thumbed the cap of one of the mushrooms. “Seeing anybody new?”

“Nothing serious,” I said. For the past year, since I’d learned Jeb was coming, I’d put off dating anyone. “What are those?”

“*Psilocybe Cubensis*. This is an odd place to find them.” Jeb plucked the mushrooms from the ground and put them in the side pocket of his cargo pants. “No dung.” He struggled up to his feet and we continued down the trail. I slowed down when I noticed he’d fallen behind, his limp keeping him from walking too quickly.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“Does what hurt?”

“Your limp,” I said. “It seems to be acting up.”

Jeb shook his head. “It’s more like my body remembering it was hurt. The older I get, the more it remembers. The more it has to remember.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I know you’ve been through worse.” Jeb stopped walking. “I should have been better about the HIV thing.”

“You were fine,” I said.

“I realize now—”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I couldn’t believe he was focusing on my HIV again. It felt so rehearsed, like when someone who’s in AA tries to make amends. I walked on ahead of him.

After ten minutes of silence Jeb wandered to the edge of the bayou and bent down in front of some purple flowers rising above some tall grass. I noticed a familiar vine in the brush next to Jeb’s hand.

“Watch out,” I said. “That’s poison ivy.”

“What? This?” Jeb reached over and snapped off a piece of the vine. “This is most definitely not poison ivy. The leaves converge at one spot.” Jeb walked toward me holding out the plant.

I backed away. “Look. I was a scout. That’s poison ivy.”

Jeb shook his head, then rubbed the leaves up and down his arm. “Man, you still think you know everything, just like when we worked out together. *Toxicodendron radicans* is a trifoliolate with alternating leaves. This is a palmately compound trifoliolate with leaves radiating from one point.”

“What?” I said.

“This isn’t poison anything, Mr. Bartender. This is *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*, a plant used by Native Americans to treat jaundice and diarrhea, among other things.” Jeb tossed the leaves into the water, causing something just below the surface to thrash, sending ripples across the bayou. “Let’s head back. It’s too hot out here.”

That night after our trip to Jean Lafitte Swamp I had to work at The Pub, so I left Jeb with a spare key to the apartment, put on a tank top, and headed out around 7. My shift didn't start until 8, but I wanted some time to walk around the Quarter and clear my mind. Something about seeing Jeb frustrated me, like no matter what I did he'd never take me seriously. I thought after all the time away, things would be different, we would be different, but after the hike I'd started to wonder if time could heal all those things people liked to claim it could. I was beginning to question what it was I felt for him.

Instead of walking around, I went in early. They'd scheduled me upstairs, which meant it'd be dead until at least 11 or midnight. I didn't have anyone to relieve, so I could work at my own pace getting the bar set up. I played some 90's Annie Lenox and sat outside on the balcony for half-an-hour sipping a vodka tonic, watching the birds circling overhead.

When the sky turned from blue to orange to purple, and I'd allowed myself enough time alone to forgive Jeb for being grumpy and myself for being ornery, I went back and started prepping the bar. My boss, Lance, came in while I set up to tell me I'd had the highest sales the last month, and gave me a hundred-dollar tip as thanks. After 14 years the bar was nice to me like that. The money came at a good time; I needed to pay my electricity bill before the end of the week.

"Hope it's enough," he said. "I know things are tight."

I shrugged. "Sure. What's going on?"

"I heard you and your friend were out until 3 a.m. at The Corner Pocket."

“Now you have spies?” I put the cutting board on the bar next to him and grabbed some lemons.

“It’s probably none of my business, but—” Lance hesitated, as if he was searching for the right words.

“What’s none of your business?”

Lance never particularly cared for Jeb when they’d known each other years before.

“Is your friend coming to the bar while he’s in town?”

“He mentioned,” I said, “he might be here with some colleagues later. “Why?”

“I don’t know. You remember how wild he was. The trouble he almost got you in?”

“What?” Lance probably meant one of the times I’d had to go out searching for Jeb when he disappeared during a night out. Or maybe that time I found him in the 9th Ward getting high. More times than not I didn’t find him at all.

Lance rapped the bar with his fist. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. I know you always—cared about him.”

I picked up a lemon and sliced it in half. “Jeb and I are friends.” I took one of the halves and sliced again. “He and I are *only* friends.” I sliced it again. I kept slicing the lemon until I had thin strips, too small even for cheap drinks in go cups. I shoved them in their plastic bin. “Gay men can be friends.”

“I know but—” Lance took a deep breath. “It’s none of my business. Just know I’m here for you. I’m not just your boss.”

“It’s not like that. I promise.” I forced a smile. “Now let me get the bar set up, okay?”

Lance nodded. “Fine. But if you need—”

“I don’t need anything. I’m fine.”

For the next hour I busied myself getting the bar ready to open.

Two hours later, a few regulars had trickled in, and I did my usual shtick, making tasteless jokes and getting them to talk to one another. The familiarity of the nightly performance usually cleared my mind, the way any task repeated enough becomes a meditation. Even so, I kept thinking about Jeb, wondering why, even now, things were so strained.

While I was caught up in my worry, two guys, both overdressed in slacks and button-up shirts, came into the bar together. They looked almost like brothers: tall and thick with full beards, bald heads and chunky glasses. They talked excitedly to one another, one of them pointing at me while the other one nodded.

When I walked over to them, the taller one said in a thick accent, “You must be Chase. The best bartender in New Orleans.”

“Oh, you’re Jeb’s friends, yes?” I asked.

“*Sim*, I’m Adalberto,” the taller one said. “And this is my partner, Martim. We are early.”

“Jebidiah has been telling us,” Martim said, “that you have always been his best bartender.”

I nodded. “Yes, we’ve always been close.”

“He mentioned you make the best drinks.” Adalberto smiled.

“And you never forget his name,” Martim said.

“I don’t forget his name?”

They nodded in unison.

I wondered if something was being lost in the translation. “No, how could I forget his name?” I rubbed my palms against my hips. “Did he say anything else?”

“No,” Adalberto said. “Just that you are a great bartender and—” Adalberto waved his hand up and down at my body.

“—that you have an amazing physique,” Martin said, nodding. “He certainly was right.”

“Thanks.” I smiled, my teeth gritted. “How about I buy you guys something?”

They both ordered rum and orange juice. After I fixed their drinks, I suggested they enjoy the balcony, the perfect place to watch people passing on the streets. Adalberto and Martim hadn’t come back in when Jeb arrived. He seemed nervous in a way I hadn’t really seen before.

“So I’m your favorite bartender in the city. How nice.”

“You met Adalberto and Martim?” Jeb said, leaning against the bar. “They’re the ones who got me on at the university. Sponsored me for my citizenship.”

“So nice of you to send them to your favorite bartender in the city.”

“You already said that. Did they do something?”

“No. *They* didn’t. They’re great.” I picked up a rocks glass. “Why don’t I mix you up a drink and you can grab them from the balcony?”

“Cool. Make me whatever they’re having.” Jeb leaned over the bar close to me. “And if you could, call me ‘Jebidiah.’ I kind of gave up ‘Jeb’ when I moved down there.”

“Of course.”

When he left I poured him a double rum and orange juice and poured myself a shot of Cuervo, drinking it before they returned. I circled around the bar, refilling cocktails and throwing around compliments, trying to figure out an entertaining story to tell.

When the three of them came back in I poured us all a shot. They raised theirs in the air together and shouted “*saúde*” before downing them.

“You guys want another drink?” I asked. “It’s on me.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Jeb said.

“No, I’m happy to. Favorite bartender and all.”

While I fixed their drinks, I watched the way Jeb kept smiling and nodding over at me. When I placed the glasses in front of them, I asked Adalberto if he was enjoying New Orleans.

“*Sim*, yes. So far.”

“And how long have you known our *Jeb*?” I said, glancing at Jeb when I said his name. “Since he moved to Rio?”

“Since right after, I think.” Adalberto looked at Jeb.

Jeb nodded. “Not long after I moved there. They were just saying how hot you are.”

“I bet they were,” I said. “So, is our *Jeb* still a character?”

Adalberto and Martim both shook their heads. “What do you mean?” Martim asked.

“Oh, you know Jeb. Always so mischievous.”

“Mischievous?” Adalberto asked, raising his eyebrows in mock surprise.

“You know, like that time he got arrested for drunk driving. On his bike.” I pantomimed holding handlebars. “I’m sure he told you about that one. Great story.”

Jeb cut me a look. “I’m sure,” he said, “you’re thinking of someone else.”

I shook my head vigorously. “Nope. It was you, Jeb. The only person I know who’s gotten arrested for drunk driving on a bike.” I smiled and slapped the bar. “Of that I am 100% sure. Also the only person I’ve ever known to get caught in the 9th Ward doing coke with a drag queen prostitute. How about some more shots?”

Jeb shook his head. “No. I think we need to get going.”

“What’s the rush?” I asked. “Don’t want to get another drink from your *favorite* bartender in New Orleans.”

“I want to show them Jackson Square at night.”

“Should be beautiful,” I said.

Jeb grabbed Martim’s elbow and began guiding him to the door.

“You guys stay safe,” I shouted as they got to the exit. “And watch out for speeding bicycles!” Adalberto turned around, a confused look on his face, and waved before they disappeared down the stairs. My victory felt hollow.

I woke to my phone ringing the next morning, a constant noise that seemed to have been going on for hours. The display showed no caller ID, so I ignored the call. When it rang again I answered, and a computer voice asked if I would accept a collect call from Orleans Parish Prison. I pressed “1” for yes.

“Chase, it’s Jeb. Are you there? Can you hear me?”

For a moment, I thought about hanging up. “Yes,” I said instead.

“They’re going to let me go, but I have to have someone come get me.”

“Let you go for what?” I looked at the clock. It was only 9 a.m.

“Please. I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Fine.” I hung up and got dressed.

It surprised me how easily they released Jeb from O.P.P., a place infamous for keeping people longer than necessary. Fortunately for Jeb he was on a Brazilian visa, having naturalized the year before. The New Orleans Police didn't want to chance another international incident, especially for something as simple as a drunk tourist spilling hallucinogenic mushrooms on Bourbon Street. Nobody had gotten shot. I'd asked the Uber driver who drove me over to wait for us, and we sat in silence in the back of his black BMW the entire ride home, Jeb reeking of alcohol. Jeb looked tired and old, his eyes black pools of dilated pupils.

I only spoke after we got back to the apartment.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" I flopped down on my futon.

"Why did you tell them those things last night?" Jeb paced unevenly around the room, rubbing his hands over his head. "They're my bosses."

"You can't be serious." I pulled the blanket over me. "You got arrested and you're worried about that?"

Jeb sat down on the edge of the futon, shaking. "You're supposed to be my friend."

"You're supposed to tell people we're friends. Not that I'm just your favorite bartender."

I rolled over on my side. "How fucked up are you, anyway?"

Jeb didn't answer.

"You don't have to go to sleep, but I do. I work tonight."

"I don't have a boyfriend back in Rio." Jeb lay down next to me. "I only said that because you were trying to make me go home the other night." He put his hand on my hip. "I don't want to hurt you again."

I pushed his hand away. "You're not going to."

Jeb rolled onto his back and took a deep breath. “I tested positive last month. It’s just been hard.” His voice sounded weak, scared.

I felt nauseated, my stomach twisting. An ache grew in my throat. I wanted to hit him, scream at him, ask him why he’d let it happen. I wanted to call him a liar, tell him to get out. I wanted to make him take it back, and I wanted to cry. All at once I wanted to tell him that I loved him, that we could make it all okay and that he never should have come to me with this, not like this. And I wanted it all to be a dream, a nightmare, a terrible hangover.

Instead I turned over and put my arm around him. “It’s not that bad anymore,” I said. “You’re going to be fine.” I kissed his shoulder and he nodded. “You will have a long and healthy life. You’re just tired right now and need to get some sleep.”

He nodded again and turned on his side, his back to me. I held him until he started snoring.

When I woke later that afternoon Jeb was gone. He’d left a note taped to the door, telling me he felt much better, thanking me for everything, and saying he’d be in touch when he got back to Brazil. I doubted I’d ever hear from him again. I checked the closet; his suitcase was missing. For a moment, something seemed to pull me, and I thought I should run down the stairs after him, even though I had no idea how long it had been since he’d left. I knew I could go to Hotel Monteleone, where they were having the conference, and try to find him. I also knew that if I did find him, things would always be the same.

So, I started a pot of coffee, put on some old Whitney, and got ready for work.

Your Very Own Robot

I waited all day in our lonely house on St. Charles Avenue, anticipating the toy robot's arrival. The empty ticking of our antique grandfather clock echoed through the hallways, hypnotizing me. I sat cross-legged on the foyer's hard, uneven tile—a surface not unlike the sidewalks a few miles away in the French Quarter—my gaze tracing the light-gray maze of grout angling around the hand-thrown terracotta. My wife, Channing, and I chose the terracotta seven years before when travertine seemed too costly. Since our son, Destin, began his stays in the hospital, a room covered in travertine sounded like a good deal. Six months in and out of Oschner Clinic didn't come cheap. When the FedEx guy knocked on the door, excitement surged through me.

The package seemed smaller than it should, only a bit bigger than one for an upright vacuum. The robot inside would be around 42" or so when complete, right about the same height as Destin. Our son, short for six, took after my wife: pale, thin, delicate. He was more delicate of late. A mural of Disney cartoons I'd painted when Channing was pregnant covered his bedroom walls, and when I placed the box in the large space I'd cleared on his room's blue carpet, I

realized the time had come for an update. He was getting older, and his recent interest in outer space seemed more suited to him than Bambi and Thumper. I ripped open the top of the box more enthusiastically than a man of almost forty should, but I didn't care. In the past six months I'd realized how difficult the lifelong attempts at stifling my emotions had become.

Miniature metal scaffolding, multicolored wires, and an eyeless, latex head fell out of the box when I turned it upside down. The head rolled across the room, disappearing beneath the bed. I spread out the other items in front of me and dug through the box for an instruction book, pushing aside rubber arms, legs, and a hard, protective torso casing. When assembled, Your Very Own Robot™ would look a bit like a My Buddy doll from the 80's, only its eyes would be bright red bulbs and its mouth would move when it spoke. The only instructions I could find, wrapped around two motherboards, were in Japanese. And Chinese. And some other logographic languages I couldn't comprehend. I felt like a first-time parent with a newborn baby. After a difficult search on my phone, I found the website for the manufacturer, Robotica Corp., but no link to English instructions. Building a toy robot wouldn't be any easier than raising a child after all.

It seemed the longer I lived, the more technology replaced the things I knew: cars starting to drive themselves, books made of pixels on shining screens, a phone in my pocket instead of on the kitchen wall. I'd even swapped my cigarettes for a silver, cigar-shaped vape meant to protect me from cancer, yellow teeth, and trips outside. I fished it from my pocket and took a puff, sensing my wife standing in the doorway.

"I didn't hear you come in." I said, putting the vape down next to me. I snapped a red wire from one motherboard into a juncture on another. "Or up the stairs."

“I hate you smoking that thing. It smells like scorched microwave popcorn in here.” I didn’t need to look up to know she was glaring.

“It finally came.” I snapped another red wire into place. “After half a year. You’d think things from China wouldn’t take—”

“You should be at the hospital. It’s been three days.”

“At least it’s in time for Christmas. When I’m done with this, I’m going to paint the room.” A new coat of paint always made things fresh and new and right. I set down the pieces and stood up. Channing looked tired, thinner in the face these past few weeks. Her shoulders slumped, hunching her back. Her hair lay flat to her head, a couple of inches of dark brown roots showing before the blond began. I tried to kiss her cheek, but she turned away.

“You have the time,” she said. “One of us has to work.”

“I’m thinking stars. And planets. Putting those glow-in-the-dark stickers on the ceiling for when he turns the lights off.” I gestured to the ceiling as I spoke, as if my words could show her the things I had in mind.

“I’m thinking of visiting our son. At the hospital. I’ll be back later.” She slammed the door behind her; a rush of cold air pushed through his room.

She must have thought I looked silly sitting on the ground when she came in, like some kid playing with an Erector Set or Legos. No matter. Building this robot was important, regardless of how it looked to Channing. I had tried to explain to her what finishing this project would mean to me, what the finished product would mean to Destin, but she didn’t want or try to understand. I sat back down and continued to assemble what I determined would be the best friend I could make for my son.

* * *

The same week the doctors had diagnosed Destin with acute myeloid leukemia, I had sent off for a Your Very Own Robot™ kit as a surprise. Channing had refused to consider a dog or a cat, saying Destin needed to be older to understand responsibility before we got one, so he could help out. I resented her for that, for her constant need to be practical, but reluctantly agreed. Then I went online and found the most lifelike toy I could find, something that could walk and talk and obey simple commands. Expensive, sure, but my son deserved it. It would give him an artificial companion while he got better, since my wife had ruled out the real thing.

The accident happened in mid-July. Destin and I had been staycationing at home, him with a break before second grade, me with a break from teaching English Lit at Tulane University. While we lazed around the house, Channing kept slogging away as a loan officer for Hibernia Bank. I could always sense her jealousy during the summer months, the same subtle way you sense you've spoken out-of-turn to a new acquaintance or unfamiliar coworker. My son and I had been the lucky ones, able to spend our time lounging together in the hot tub by the pool, cooking up s'mores over the barbeque pit, or singing old-school R&B songs as loud and off-key as we wanted. TLC was his favorite. My kid was cool. Cliché, I know, but a warmth as comforting and tangible as the summer's humid air had settled around us. Our fun ended the day Destin tripped while running after a butterfly in the backyard, banging his elbow against a wayward rock; it bruised a dark mix of brown and purple that spread over most of his arm within an hour. I rushed him to the emergency room, so panicked I forgot to give Channing a call, sick to my stomach the entire drive.

Destin held his arm against his chest the entire ride, staring at it like an alien creature. “Will it fall off?” he asked, about halfway to the hospital.

“Of course not. It’s just a bruise.” I jerked the steering wheel, swerving around a car going too slow. I had no idea what was coming, but I needed to keep him calm. “People get bruises all the time.”

“Will they cut it off?”

I focused on the road ahead, alert for potholes and pedestrians—anything that might get in our way. “They don’t,” I said, “cut off people’s arms because of bruises.”

“They cut off Paw-Paw’s foot. Then he died.”

I noticed a red light, too late to stop. I gunned the engine. “Paw-Paw was different. He had diabetes.” The next light turned red. I slammed on the brakes, flinging my arm out to hold Destin against the seat.

“Am I gonna die like Paw-Paw?” Destin looked at me, begging for comfort. I’m not sure what he saw on my face, but he started bawling.

I threw the car into park and leaned over, closing my arms tight around him. “Don’t worry,” I said. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you.” I kissed his head. “You don’t have anything to worry about.”

A horn blared, startling me. The light had turned green. I flipped off the driver in the car behind us, shifted into drive, and raced as fast as I could to the emergency room.

The results came back in two days; the doctors seemed to know what to look for. Advanced blood cancer. Multiple chromosomal translocations. High mortality. I assured Destin he was going to be fine, even though the outlook was grim. I’d always said he was my “Destiny without the ‘Why?’” No doubt he’d come through okay, right? Channing, probably still angry

that I didn't call her before heading to the emergency room, disagreed, thought we should let him know what his real odds were. Said it was only fair. I realized she couldn't possibly understand the need to stay positive. My need to stay positive. Our default had been misunderstanding ever since, a deepening of unnamed resentment that had crept in, sending us to opposite sides of our bed at night, forcing us to forgo our pet names. Soon after that, I stopped getting up early to make her breakfast and she stopped coming home for lunch, even though the bank was only seven blocks away. As each month passed, the season tickets we'd bought for Broadway in New Orleans went straight from the mail into the recycling bin, the envelopes unopened.

* * *

The day after the robot kit arrived, I struggled for hours trying to correctly join the limbs to the body. It all appeared to fit together fine, but things just wouldn't move the way they were supposed to. The arms, loose on their joints, swayed from the shoulders. The legs splayed from the hips, akimbo. I hooked the black and red wires for power to the battery box and flipped the switch. The whole production just shook, with one arm beating up, down and around, with no real direction. The headless body looked more like a giant, deranged hand mixer than a robotic boy.

I decided to take a break and get some coffee at Rue de la Course on Oak Street, calling up my best friend Hector, another English professor at Tulane. He was free, Christmas break and all, and I needed someone to talk to. I hadn't seen him since starting my sabbatical, and wanted to catch up.

When I got to the coffee shop, I locked my bike to an electric pole covered in flyers vying for my attention, wondering how I should talk to him about Channing. They'd grown to be friends over the years, and I didn't want to seem callous. I panicked at the door, nervous, I didn't understand what I'd come for. Advice? An ear? I couldn't be sure. I saw him almost immediately, sitting alone at a wooden table next to a window. He looked like an Englishman from a PBS miniseries, wearing a thick brown sweater, a burgundy scarf, and a green Irish flat cap, typing away at his laptop. I ordered an iced mocha and sat down across from him before he acknowledged me.

"Don't you think iced coffee is a strange choice for December?" he asked.

"If it wasn't seventy out, sure. What are you working on?"

Hector kept typing for a moment, nodded, then said, "Beyond their understanding is the plain lie that lies beneath the plane, a weighty guest standing there, just under the surface, waiting to be guessed." He shut the laptop, then smiled at me. "Next semester I'm teaching on the fallibility of language. How easy it is to misconstrue things from our unique perceptions. Touching on Saussure. Urban. Presenting some of my own stuff."

"And that's your example?"

"No," he said, cocking his head to inspect me. "I got bored waiting and strung together some words. You look like utter shyte. When was the last time you bathed?"

"I don't bathe, I shower," I said. "I'm having some trouble with a robot I've been putting together for Destin, and I needed some air. It's driving me crazy."

"How's everything going?"

"I can't get the arms and legs to work right. One does. One arm. But it flaps around like a helicopter." I swirled one of my hands in the air.

He raised one eyebrow and shook his head.

“Oh. You mean Destin. He’s fine,” I said. “But Channing’s been off the charts lately. Nagging me non-stop. At the hospital every night until they kick her out.”

“Shouldn’t you be at the hospital every night until they kick you out?” Hector stared at me, concern twisting his face. “You said the last round of chemo didn’t go so well.”

“Not as well as the first couple of rounds, but it’s expected.”

“Cancer is never expected.”

“No,” I said, “but that’s not why I wanted to talk. It’s about Channing.”

“Don’t you think that can wait?” He spoke in a measured tone, as if working out the calculus of his words. “I know it’s difficult to accept—to understand—what’s going on with Destin, but shouldn’t you be spending as much time as you can with him right now? Won’t you regret—”

“I don’t need reality advice from someone dressed like it’s thirty degrees out just because it’s December. The nurses said it would be better if we gave Destin some space, so I’m giving him some space.”

“Perhaps,” Hector said, maintaining his tone, “they told you that because you’ve been acting a little off?”

“Have you been talking to Channing?”

“She called the other day. Said she was worried—”

“Fuck you, man.” I stood up from the table, my throat aching. Desperation drained through my body. I felt betrayed. “I don’t need your shit right now.”

“I’m sorry. Look. I’m just trying to—”

I raised my hand to stop him from talking. “Fuck. You.” I left my coffee.

* * *

Things hadn't always been strained between Channing and me. We met back when we had been students up at LSU in Baton Rouge, both as freshmen in a biology class. I hadn't figured my major out, not for certain anyhow, but Channing was already studying international finance. She was better at science, had the skills to see it in her mind, how it all worked. Somehow, kismet I often said, we'd ended up in a study group together. We were both from New Orleans, and liked to kid with the others in the group that we were roughing it up in Red Stick, like pioneers in an unexplored land. I'd fallen for her the moment I'd laid eyes on her.

She was beautiful. She always kept her hair, brown back then, cut in a short bob that made her look smart, and she had this red flush that came up on her cheeks when she smiled. Destin would inherit that from her, the crimson cheeks, but his seemed to sit on his face like accents in an oil painting, something classic. She had a disarming laugh, loud and free, and she liked to let it loose whenever I tried one of my silly puns, something I was dedicated to back then. She made the first move, calling me one night after a meeting of our study group, asking me to get together for coffee later that week. We somehow opted for red wine at my apartment instead, and became more honest than coffee would allow. Years later we still shared a joke with our friends about Channing and I "wine-ing" too much that night.

Our courtship was typical, as typical as can be nowadays. We told people we were on the 5-5-5 plan, dating for five years, engaged for another five and planning to have a kid after five years of marriage. Channing's banking mind kept us on schedule, and I was lucky enough to get a solid job teaching at Tulane before we'd been married for three. Unfortunately, her ovaries

weren't as regimented as her brain, and we'd be married for almost nine years before we finally conceived, and only after help from a doctor. She had premature ovarian failure, what people like to call early menopause, and we were lucky we'd gotten started in time to have even one child. He was our one shot. That's the reason I called Destin our "Destiny without the 'Why?'" After all that work, he was simply meant for us. He had to be.

I still remember her coming home with the news. We'd almost finished painting the rooms downstairs, and the house had that new paint smell that reminds me of fresh starts, new beginnings. We'd had to cut some corners on the house, with the expenses of trying to get pregnant, so we were doing the painting ourselves. Every night for three weeks I'd come home after teaching two classes, one about Shakespeare and one about Chomsky, change into some tatty jeans and a white T-shirt, and get to work. Channing usually showed up from work a few hours after me, so I was surprised when she got in before I'd even gotten off my clothes.

"Not feeling well?" I asked when she came into the bedroom and collapsed onto the bed.

She began shuddering, like she was going to cry, then burst into laughter, rolling side to side. I froze, like I usually do when surprised, and just stared at her thrashing back and forth on the bed, happier than I'd seen her in years, kicking her feet.

"We're pregnant," she shouted, sitting up and throwing open her arms. "Two months pregnant."

"We're pregnant?" I said, watching the way her eyes crinkled when she smiled, wanting to remember the moment forever.

She nodded. "We're going to have our baby."

I sat next to her, pulling her close. "We're going to have our baby?"

She kissed my cheek. We held one another as we cried, eventually passing out from the emotional exhaustion we'd been through trying to conceive.

Things were great through the pregnancy, as if we were falling in love all over again. After Destin was born, Channing made a great mother, strict and consistent. I made a great dad, as much fun as any kid could want. But after my own father died, something shifted. I imagine I can blame myself as much as her, though sometimes it's hard to face your own part in things. She wanted me to "hold it together," she'd said, be a good role model for Destin, show him how to push through grief. I took my sabbatical from work anyhow, a year to let myself recover, and I suppose that's when things really started to get tough. Then Destin had his fall.

* * *

A few days after my unfortunate visit with Hector at the coffee shop, I was sitting on the floor in Destin's room working on the robot, TLC playing in the background on an old boombox, when Channing came in, her face red and her eyes bloodshot.

"I'm sorry, Channing," I said, "but this is taking longer than expected." I wrenched the two motherboards out from the hollow cavity of the latex head. "The instructional diagrams, as best I can figure anyhow, say they should go here, but I think they'll work better where the heart goes."

"It doesn't have a heart. It's a toy." She jingled her car keys at me. "You've been on that thing for almost a week. You need to visit our son."

I turned the head over in my hands, caressing the smooth rubber scalp with my fingers. It felt almost like rubbing Destin's scalp, now that his hair was gone. Part of the reason I'd avoided the hospital was the need to reshave my own head. I'd buzzed it clean when Destin started chemo, for moral support and all, but I kept slicing open my skin with the straight razor. The blood was incredible. Channing insisted I didn't need to keep doing it, but I had to be there for my boy, show him I cared. Besides, he'd be out soon. Doctors are famous for giving the worst-case scenario so you'll feel like they're heroes when things go well. Honestly, I find it extraordinarily selfish of them.

"You need to visit our son." Channing bent down to the boombox, shut off the music and jingled her keys again. "Don't you understand what's going on?"

"I'm not a dog," I said. "And I've made a ton of progress, if you'd just look." I raised the robot up in front of me, carefully lowering the arms to each side. "I call him Yvor, an acronym for the name on the box." I slid the motherboards into the open hole of the neck, popped the head into place, and flipped on the switch where the tailbone would be. Red lights poking through the eye sockets lit up, and the robot raised one hand in the air, as if to ask a question. "See?" I said, turning around to Channing. But she was gone. The doorway stood empty.

"No matter," I said to Yvor. "As soon as we get you talking, it'll be time to visit Destin."

* * *

On Christmas Eve I finally had Yvor ready. I'd tested him all day in Destin's room, asking him questions, listening to his answers. His mechanical voice struggled with some words, always wanting to sound out silent consonants. It would have to do.

Channing came home from the hospital at lunch, yelling through the door that I needed to stop talking to myself and visit Destin. The desperation in her tone seethed with melodrama, something I'd begun to fault her for. People can get so worked up over the tiniest things, always borrowing worry from the future. By the sound of her voice, Destin wouldn't make it through the night. I started to wonder if I'd become sexist, hating the newly emotional nature of my wife. I suppose a sick child can change a person.

I decided to take Yvor out to Audubon Park before heading over to Oschner Clinic, get a little sun and Vitamin D before I surprised Destin with his Christmas gift. I placed Yvor on a bench and practiced some of the things I'd taught him.

"Yvor, wave hello," I said.

Yvor's eyes blinked red, his right arm rising above him.

A woman in a pink jogging suit came up to us, pulling a black and white boxer. "Is that a robot?" she asked.

"He is. A gift for my son. He's in the hospital."

"His arms and legs are so lifelike."

"My wife hates him," I said. "I think she's jealous."

"She must be," the lady said. "He's really gorgeous." She reached out and squeezed Yvor's hand.

"Say 'hello' Yvor," I said.

"Hello, Yvor," he said, his voice tinny.

"Oh." She smiled. "You're a ventriloquist. My Uncle Bob was a ventriloquist."

"No." I shook my head. "It's all him. See? Say 'nice to meet you' Yvor."

"Nice to meet you, Yvor," he said, his eyes blinking.

The lady giggled, smiling at me and tilting her head as if we were friends sharing a joke. “Well that really is a good act. But your lips are moving ever-so-slightly.”

I laid Yvor on the bench. “Listen lady,” I said, “I don’t know where you get off making fun of my robot, but this has taken me almost two weeks to build.”

Alarm came across the woman’s face and she backed away, jerking at her dog’s leash. “Forgive me. I’m so very sorry to hear about your son.”

“And I don’t appreciate you coming up to me and being such a bitch,” I yelled as she jogged away, looking back over her shoulder with an expression of concern. I picked up Yvor and carried him back to the car.

When I got to Destin’s hospital room, I stood outside for several minutes, trying to decide how I should explain the time that had passed since I’d visited. He’d understand, it was his nature, but I still needed to find the right words. I stuck a green bow from the hospital gift shop on the crown of Yvor’s head, and decided to let the robot do the talking, certain that would explain things better than I could. When I pushed open the door, the sight of my son in the bed, shrunken and bruised, shocked me, and for a moment I was dizzy, as if gravity had somehow stopped working.

A tube taped to the side of his face snaked up into his nose; a clear mask covered his mouth, a plastic hose leading from it off the side of the bed. His bald head, tinged yellow, sank into the pillow, making him look smaller than I remembered. His eye sockets were brown smudges, like he’d been punched. I could barely make out his body under the mound of blankets draped over him. Channing sat in a chair beside the bed, cradling his small hand in hers, an IV

leading away from his wrist into a bag hung next to him. Beeping filled the room, with the occasional whoosh of the machine breathing in and out. The air smelled like disinfectant and decay.

“You came,” Channing said, looking up from Destin as the door closed behind me. She positioned his hand on his stomach and stood up. “Come say hello.”

I hoisted Yvor onto the bed between Destin’s feet. “Hey buddy,” I said, “I got you this little guy for Christmas.”

The machines in the room continued their rhythmic beeps. The breathing machine wheezed.

I gazed at Destin’s face, willing his eyes to open. I squeezed his foot.

“I’m not sure he can hear you,” Channing said. “He’s been like this for a few days now.”

“Hey, Destin,” I said. “This is Yvor. He’s even more machine than you are.” I smiled at Channing as tears welled in her eyes. “Yvor is going to be your new best friend.” I rubbed my hand along Destin’s leg, his knee sharp and angular, even under the sheets. “I’ve taught him to walk, and talk, and he can even sing that song you like so much. The one about the waterfalls.”

A mangled snort escaped Channing’s nose. She covered her mouth with her hand.

“Now, I know you’re probably a little mad at me for not coming, but I promise it was worth it.” I reached behind Yvor and flipped on his switch. “Now Yvor, say ‘hello.’” I looked at the robot, its eyes dead. I flipped the switch off and on again. “Give us just one second, Destin. Sometimes it’s tricky. Yvor, say ‘hello.’”

Confused, I looked over at Channing. She kept her eyes trained on Destin, her jaw trembling.

I flipped the robot on and off several times. “Yvor!” I shouted, shaking the robot. “Say ‘hello!’” The bow fell from Yvor’s head, landing on the floor.

Channing sat back in the chair and took Destin’s hand in hers, petting it.

“It’s usually not like this, buddy,” I said, lowering my voice. “I promise. Please just give us a little more time.”

I stared at the robot’s eyes, waiting for it to speak.

Confessions of a Call Boy

Lounging on a leather chaise in the living room of an overpriced suite at the top of the Canal Street Marriott, I gazed out of the floor-to-ceiling windows and across the French Quarter, wondering when my trick would arrive. I hadn't pegged him for being late; he'd been so adamant on the phone about having me for the entire hour. Bored, I got up from the chaise and studied the crowd swarming through the streets below. Maybe someone down there cared. I sat back on the chaise, the leather still warm, dug a glass pipe shaped like a penis from my blue duffel bag, sparked up my torch lighter, and smoked a little Tina. I was blowing a thick cloud across the room when the desk phone next to me rang. My trick would be twenty minutes late. I took another hit and exhaled; a thick chemical fog, faintly scented like dying tulips and chalk, filled the room.

I didn't mind waiting per se—I'd get paid the same—but I did mind people disrespecting me by showing up late. I changed out of my slacks and button-down into some gym shorts and a

wife-beater. Figured I'd look tough if he wanted to start some shit. Late tricks and talkers liked to start shit, and this guy qualified for both. His first call to my work cell lasted damn near half an hour, with him going on about how he mainly wanted to ask some questions—not like a cop, he said—and that I could wear whatever I wanted. Best guess, he wanted inside me. Either to fuck me or fist me or crawl in my head with some S&M bullshit roleplay, the kind where I'm licking his shoes or some degrading nonsense. That's how it usually goes with talkers—they want to get in, deep as possible.

He showed up dressed like a junior undertaker, frumpy black suit and all. I guess he wanted to look official. Seemed around twenty, with his polka dot tie, thick-rimmed glasses and slicked-over hair. I found out later he was twenty-eight, not much younger than me. At least he wasn't one of those patchouli-infused hipsters who wanted to try out a guy “for the first time.” He spent a few minutes explaining he was an anthropology grad student talking to male prostitutes for his master's thesis. Said he needed a few more interviews and thanked me for agreeing to talk. He put his phone on record and set it atop the cocktail table by the chaise I'd lounged on while he performed his monologue.

“It's possible,” I said, “we have a misunderstanding, Alex.” I sat up and tapped his phone to pause the recording. “If that's your real name. You're paying for my time, not my story.”

He scrunched up his face to try and look confused. I imagined he'd heard the same before. “It is Alex. My real name. But Todd,” he said, “which I can only assume is—”

“Dilbert.” I closed my eyes. “Or Dill. Call me Dill.”

“Like a—”

“Pickle. Yes.” I opened my eyes and leaned forward, spreading my elbows on my knees.

“Okay. Well like I was saying . . . Dill. I don’t want to have sex with you, I just want to interview you.” Alex sat down in the chair he’d been standing next to. “Get an ethnography.”

I leaned back on the chaise and put my hands behind my head. “I think you might want my body just a little.”

“That’s beside the point.” Alex took off his glasses and cleaned them with his tie. “But I need to get this project done.”

“So you want my story?” I said. “You want to know what makes me tick?”

“I’m trying to find out what drives people to do—what you do.” His words were safe, calculated. He held his glasses up to the light, then put them in his coat pocket.

“Fine.” I stripped off my wife beater and threw it on the ground. “Take off your clothes.”

“What?”

I stood up and slid my shorts to the ground. “If you want my story, I get —”

“To see me naked. Fine.” He pulled the polka dot tie from his neck in one motion. “But I promise you, it’s nothing worth seeing.” He threw off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt. His body was white and pudgy beneath. “Don’t think you’re the first to try this with me.” His belt cracked as he whipped it from his waist. “I’m here for your story.” His pants fell to the ground.

“First, we smoke some Tina,” I said. “I’ll need some extra money for yours.”

“I don’t do drugs.”

“Whatever,” I said. “But we’re making some ground rules.” I slipped off my underwear and picked up my duffle bag. “You get one question. Then I get one question. A *Silence of the Lambs* quid pro quo. You’ve seen that movie, right?”

He nodded as he pulled off his socks. “I’m not that—”

“And don’t interrupt me when I’m talking.”

The bedroom of the suite was pretty nice, king bed and everything. If you could get past the mauve and forest green décor, or the cheap modern prints, their frames bolted to the walls. I guess the gold accents were supposed to give the place a Mardi Gras feel, even though the room seemed more like a waiting area in a doctor's office than some sort of celebration. We settled on opposite sides of the bed, and I leaned back, making sure to flex my abs while Alex talked to me.

He said the kinds of things tricks usually said to butter me up. *I'm not like most guys. I just want to talk.* Things I'd heard again and again before they asked me to do whatever they wanted to make their bodies feel good. To make their egos feel good. The whole time he kept his hand in front of his crotch, hiding himself. This was different. This had promise.

Alex never moved past that. He insisted his thesis advisor kept rejecting all his best stuff. He couldn't shut up. I wondered if all the Tina I'd been smoking was giving him a contact high. I laughed when Alex claimed he'd spent six months interviewing drag queens at The Corner Pocket, a discount strip club on Rampart Street, where they hung out after their shows. As if anyone cared what some drag queens at a strip club thought. Professor Whatever rejected that project, told him to start over. Get something better.

I guess Alex forgot our arrangement, because he went on for quite a while, telling me so much of his story—how he'd come to New Orleans because of Katrina, seen it on TV and wanted to help out some way—before he even got to asking me a thing about myself. I was right—he was a talker. Transplants often said the same thing about moving to New Orleans. Almost ten years since the storm, and I still hadn't really figured out what they meant.

“So what, exactly, is *your* story,” he finally asked.

I brought the meth pipe to my mouth, watching the fingers of flame from my torch lighter wrap around the glass bowl, bringing the Tina inside to a clear, bubbling boil. I took a drag,

blowing the smoke out through my nostrils like a dragon. “You don’t want my story. You want some safe fiction made up for your ‘research.’”

“You said I get one story. What’s yours?” he asked, his eyes fixed on mine.

“My ex died,” I said. “And that’s all your getting tonight. So now it’s my turn. What did your father think when you came out?”

Alex pressed his lips together and glanced at the ceiling. His forehead crinkled and his eyes became strained. He shook his head. “‘My ex died’ is not a story.”

“But it is,” I said. “And all you’re getting. Now, what did your father think—”

“I haven’t told him yet. I couldn’t.” He looked down at the bedspread, disappointment on his face. He seemed beaten, small. I should have told him not to interrupt me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” Instinctively, I reached out and put my hand on his knee. His skin was soft, warm. I pulled my hand back quickly and took another drag from the pipe.

“I really just need your story.” He looked at me, his eyes begging.

“Maybe next time.” I glanced at the digital clock by the bed. “It’s 11 p.m. Your time is up and I have another trick on the way.”

“But I really need—”

“Do you think arguing with me is gonna work?”

Alex shook his head, and I stood up and pulled some slacks out of my duffel bag. I watched as he got dressed, the clumsy way he put on his socks, the way he tried to pry his shoes on without sitting down. After he left, I stripped off the bedspread and lay there alone, keenly aware that I wouldn’t sleep for hours. I didn’t have another trick coming—I told him that because I wasn’t sure what he was up to. He was cute, an awkward cute, and I wondered if he was someone I could be with. Someone I could love. I know it sounds crazy, but my brain works

like that when I'm high. Two hours later, I left and headed home before it got light out. Before I had to face the morning work crowd with their fresh clothes and judgmental stares.

* * *

I hadn't been in love since Devin, almost a decade before. We'd met at the bathhouse on Toulouse Street the April before Katrina. Probably not the likeliest place to start a love story. We both lived in the Marigny at the time, and the downstairs at The Club New Orleans in the Quarter had the best gym around. Some of the weights had rusted, but they did the job just the same. Who cared if an occasional guy in a towel strolled through while you benched? It cost \$35 per month; I needed cheap since paying for school at Delgado sucked up most of my bartending money. I planned on being a top interior designer in New Orleans when I graduated.

I was in the middle of a heavy squat when Devin came in from the locker room. Almost dropped my weights when I glimpsed him in the mirror. I've never had a type per se; been more like the United Nations when it comes to sex. But I still hadn't imagined a short redhead would be the one to make my record skip.

After I wobbled the weights back onto the rack, I did my best not to stare at him doing pullups. But the way his freckled shoulders bulged and his butt clenched when he tugged up, I couldn't help it. He caught me watching and came over to say hello.

"You know where there's a clinic around here?" he asked. "I'm down from Atlanta and I need to get my meds."

A weird panic buzzed through me. "I don't know what you mean, 'a clinic.'" I got up and started unracking my weights.

“An HIV clinic.” He stared at me in the mirror.

“Do I look like I have HIV?” The plate I carried slipped from my hands and slammed onto my foot. “Fuck!” I hopped on one leg, moaning.

Devin ran over and helped me to a bench to sit down. He let me squeeze his hand until the pain died off a little.

“You gonna be okay, man?” he asked.

I waved a hand at him and said, “I’m fine. And I don’t have—”

“I don’t care what *you* have. I’ve got a week of pills left, and I just moved here.” He looked angry or panicked, I wasn’t sure. “Hope your foot’s not broken.” He walked over to the Smith machine and resumed his pullups.

I slid off my shoe and sock. My foot swelled with pressure. I tried to wiggle my toes, but they just sat there, throbbing. “There’s one in Mid-city. It’s free. Called the HOP Clinic. I have a nurse friend there.”

He dropped down from the pullup bar. “Thanks.”

Devin grabbed some weights as I tried to stand up. The room spun and everything went blank. When I came to, he had my head in his hand and the most genuine look of concern I’d ever seen.

“You’re beautiful,” I said.

“You definitely need a doctor. I think you’ve got a concussion.”

We both laughed.

* * *

The weekend after I met Alex the anthropology student at the Marriott, I'd booked a gig with my friend Angel dancing at Oz, the biggest gay club on Bourbon Street. A bald guy pushing three hundred pounds stared at my crotch while I danced on the bar, thrusting my junk to the rhythm of remixed pop songs pulsing through the air. Occasionally he'd reach a five-dollar bill and tuck it under my waist band, brushing his hand against me with a crooked smile. He hadn't tried to shove a finger in my ass or anything, so I figured he couldn't be too bad.

Angel danced over from the other side of the bar and grabbed my wrist. "Come on, girl. Our shift is done." He waved his watch in my face.

"But this guy—"

Angel yanked my arm. "You don't want to start shit with the West Hollywood queens." He jerked his head, indicating a group of bodybuilders in their underwear waiting to get up on the bar. "Bottom in one porn and they think they're stars."

I rolled up the bills from my speedo and tucked them in my sock, then bent down and kissed the bald guy on his head. In the dressing room, I slipped my hand in my pants and slid off the cock ring I'd been wearing all night. My penis had turned purple. "Man," I said, "I hope this thing keeps working when I'm done dancing."

Angel slapped my butt. "You always got this. And that mug, girl. The face to launch a thousand—"

"Ships, yes," I said. "But—"

"Loads, bitch. Launch a thousand loads."

"Whatever," I said. "I'm getting back into design."

"And how you gonna do that, boo?" Angel pulled some jeans out of his backpack. "Fucking an architect?"

I pulled a glass pipe from my duffle bag and wagged it at Angel. He shook his head. I heated the bowl and drew in a deep breath. I blew the smoke at Angel.

“Don’t puff that shit in my face.” Angel flapped his hand in the air.

“As a matter of fact, I have been fucking an architect. Says he needs—”

“Girl, please. Tricks tell you what you want to hear.” He spread his jeans on the back of a chair and smoothed the wrinkles out. “You talked to that anthropologist, yet?”

I nodded. “He came by the other day.”

“Heard he’s been out at the bars, drunk as fuck. Acting a mess. Maybe he’s not who he says he is.”

I took another drag off my pipe. “He’s the real deal. Trust.” It bugged me to think Alex was getting a bad rap.

After getting dressed we headed through the Quarter to Rawhide, a self-proclaimed “Levi/leather bar” a few blocks away. Truth be told, it was more like a dive bar with a dark handicap bathroom where guys hooked up. If they weren’t getting head by the pool table. The streets teemed with tourists, many wearing store-bought beads out-of-season. The Tina started to kick in as we dodged through the crowd, the sensations of strangers’ bodies pressing against me turning me on.

Crossing Royal, we saw two homeless guys lying next to one another by a stoop across the street. One rested his head on the other’s stomach as they passed a cigarette back and forth. I took out my phone to get a picture.

Angel grabbed the phone from me and said, “Bitch. What are you doing?”

“Isn’t it beautiful? That’s real love right there.” I reached for my phone but he held it away. “C’mon,” I said, “I want to capture it.”

“First off, you can’t capture love. Second off, that’s not love. That’s drunken homeless guys, and you’re high.” Angel poked my phone. “You’ll get her back when we’re in the Rawhide.”

When we walked into the bar, Angel gave me my phone and took my duffle bag. He handed the bag to the bartender, who stashed it in the back and gave us two rum and Diet Cokes, Angel’s go-to drink because it has no carbs. A single drop light over the pool table lit the entire back room of the bar. I could barely make out silhouettes of men leaning against the walls or guys crouching before them. Angel took off his shirt and headed to the back. I hung tight up front; public sex was never my thing.

After I’d downed three drinks, Angel reemerged from the back. I didn’t care what he’d been up to, just hoped he wouldn’t share. We’d dated for a hot minute when he first moved up from Miami, and even though I don’t like to think I’m the jealous type, it still stung a little when he talked about having sex, even if it was a simple blow job in the back room.

He got busy chatting with the bartender—some guy who’d worked there for twenty years or so, always wore a cowboy hat. I went into a small bathroom near the front of the bar, the one with a locking door, and pulled out a miniature Ziploc baggie full of Tina, dug my house key in and did a couple of bumps. The sting felt like a hot pick shoved in my nose, causing tears to leak from my eyes. As I leaned over the toilet trying to whizz, someone banged from the outside.

“C’mon. I need to piss.” The voice sounded familiar.

I opened the door to Alex in a tight white T-shirt and skinny jeans, crossing his legs and pushing his fist into his crotch.

“Doing some more research for school?” I asked.

“Seriously. I need to go.”

I swung the door open and stepped back into the bathroom. “Who’s stopping you?”

He slammed the door behind him. “Fine. But don’t look.” He unzipped his pants and a loud stream splashed in the toilet.

I locked the door and said, “I’ve seen you naked before.”

“That was different.”

“Because you were in charge?”

Alex zipped up his pants and leaned against the wall. His hair glistened with sweat and his glasses were foggy. Even in the dim light I could make out dark circles under his eyes. “I was never in charge. I paid, but I was never in charge. And you still owe me a story.”

“Isn’t this a story?” I dug the Tina out of my pocket and loaded up my key. I sniffed another bump into my nose.

“Not the kind I need.” He wiped the sweat on his forehead and nodded his chin at me. “You always doing that stuff?”

“Quid pro quo. You know the deal,” I said.

“I need your story,” he said. “If I don’t get another ethnography soon—”

“Call me when you’re ready to talk.” I leaned in close and whispered in his ear, “I’ll give you half off,” then kissed his cheek.

Alex kept his eyes down at the bathroom floor while I left.

When I got back to the bar, Angel was still talking to the bartender. I got my duffle bag and said my good-byes, then headed to Canal to catch the streetcar back uptown. All the way I thought about Alex, wondered why he made me so curious.

* * *

The last time I'd gotten curious had been with Devin. After he had driven me from the bathhouse to the emergency room to have my foot looked at, I didn't expect to hear from him again. But Devin called the next day and asked to come over, check up on me. Had some silly line about his Florence Nightingale complex. He showed up with a gift box, bow and all. When I opened it, my shoe was inside, along with a note explaining that he refused to be my Prince Charming, no matter how much I came off like a little princess. I knew he'd end up nothing but heartache and trouble.

Devin had moved to New Orleans to go to Tulane. Planned on getting his bachelor's in civil engineering. Wanted to change the world, improve people's lives. I exaggerated my studies at Delgado, said I wanted to become an interior designer so I could make public spaces more accessible for the "differently-abled," as we said back then. Really, I wanted to get paid too much to help rich ladies pick out trim for their throw pillows. I needed something easy after Mom and Dad cut me off for coming out. They still haven't learned what the word "unconditional" means. I also needed something worthwhile to be with Devin, since he made me want to be worthwhile. The way he talked so bold and sure about his future scared and excited me, made me feel not on his level and made me need to get onto his level.

After a few months, we moved in together—rented a shotgun house out in the Bywater, about three blocks from the Mississippi. I'd graduated and started a job interning at an architecture firm drafting with AutoCAD, and he'd registered at Tulane. Things were good. Before he could start his semester, Katrina hit. We'd stayed behind because his Civic might not make the drive to Atlanta, and my parents didn't want to see me, much less me with a boyfriend. We figured it would blow over like all the other storms that came through. They always did.

The first few days were peaceful, almost like a camping trip. All the neighbors had left, and the city was quiet in a way I've never seen it since. At night, the sky filled with stars, casting a subtle glow that caused specks in the asphalt to shimmer. Country sounds like cicadas and owls reminded me of the farm I'd grown up on. Devin and I made it fine through a week without electricity, and had plenty of food in the pantry, though cold canned beans got old pretty quick. Guess we were lucky; houses close to the river like ours didn't flood. Two blocks away the water started, looked like it went on forever. Some days I'd walk to the edge and drop in a brick or a rock, anything I could find, and imagine the ripples spreading all the way across Lake Pontchartrain.

One night we stayed up drinking cheap merlot, talking about what we'd do when things got back to normal. We sat in his little red Civic, the engine on, listening to the news we could get on the radio, passing the bottle back and forth. The moments in the car were the only A/C we had during those hot days and nights. Sometimes I'd sneak out after Devin went to sleep and start up the car to cool down. He wanted to make sure we didn't waste gas, so he tried to keep car time to a minimum.

The air that night smelled like dead animals and mold, a stale, dirty stench that snuck up over several days and clung to the city. Eventually the news on the radio began to repeat, so Devin said we should get back in and get some rest, figure out what we needed to do for when things got back to normal.

"There's fucking sharks on Canal Street," I said. "It's not getting back to normal."

"Please," he said. "The news always blows things up." He chugged from the bottle of wine. "The curfew was sundown. We need to go inside."

“What? You afraid of looters?” The way he kept trying to be in charge since the storm irritated me. He didn’t know New Orleans like I did. Nobody cared if two guys were hanging out in a car.

“It’s time to go in. We’re wasting my gas.” Devin shut off the ignition.

Something about him telling me it was his gas, staking that claim, made me twist. “Oh, it’s your gas now, is it?”

He got out of the car and walked back to the house. I stopped him at the front door.

“Don’t,” I said, “ignore me when I’m talking.”

“I’m not trying to fight with you. There’s a curfew.”

“Fuck the curfew!” I shouted, my voice echoing down the street.

“You know what Dill, I’m out of my meds. I’m cooped up just the same as you. I’m hot and I’m hungry, too.” He wiped his face with his hand. “And *I’m* not being a dick.”

“So now I’m a dick? Is that what you’re saying?”

Devin shook his head. “I need some space. I just can’t—I’ll be back in an hour.” He walked off toward the river, the bottle of merlot in his hand.

I went inside, opened another bottle by banging the bottom against the kitchen counter, popping out the cork. I drank it down, waiting for him to return, ready to tell him to fuck all the way off. By midnight and he hadn’t come back, so I locked the front door, took an Ambien, and curled up on the sofa. Nausea growled in my stomach, mostly from embarrassment, but a bit from anger. He knew I got sloppy with my words when I’d had too much to drink.

Hours later I woke to someone beating on the front door. Then glass breaking. Then gunshots.

Funny how sober you can get when adrenaline pumps through you, moves through your veins and turns on your brain. I switched from a fuzzy haze to utter clarity by the time I made it to the door. Flashing blue and red lights illuminated the porch. They had mistaken Devin for a looter.

* * *

After that night at Rawhide, something switched. Perhaps it was seeing Alex in the bathroom. Perhaps it was Angel getting blown in the back of the bar. Perhaps it was the homeless guys on the street sharing a cigarette. Whatever it was, something had switched in me, and I decided I needed to stop getting high.

The first few days were the worst. I emptied the different baggies of Tina I had into an aspirin bottle and stashed it beneath my bathroom sink, leaving it there to give away to one of my addict friends when I felt better. That's what I told myself, anyhow. I stayed in bed almost 72 hours straight, waking from time to time in a sweat, with barely enough energy to drag myself to the toilet to piss. I'd collapse back in bed afterward, sleeping in deep fits, vivid dreams leaving me in a semi-waking state for hours on end. Devin consumed my mind when I was lucid, a deep regret coming to the surface, as it did whenever I tried to get clean.

But this time I was going to make it. Alex would call and he'd come by and we'd talk and he'd see in me what I saw in him. Things would be okay. He'd get his story and I could move on. The fifth day I ordered a large peperoni pizza after being up for an hour and ate the entire thing before crashing out again. On the seventh day, Alex finally texted. Took him that much time to save up for a night, even at half off.

When I called back, he sounded excited. Said his advisor reviewed a few of his ethnographies and gave him the green light. “But Dill,” he said, “can we go to a cheaper place? I don’t really have enough for another suite.”

“I do in calls, you know.” I usually didn’t offer. But I wanted to help him out. He was genuine, and his drive reminded me of Devin. Besides. I needed the cash. I hadn’t worked in a week. “I can have you over by nine. I need a few hours to finish some things up.”

He agreed, and I spent the next three hours throwing out garbage, scrubbing dishes, sweeping, mopping, cleaning the tub and the toilet—getting my place presentable. When he got there, it smelled like an unfortunate mix of pine trees and bleach.

He showed up in the same black suit as the first time, looking cuter than he had before. Maybe it was because he had on a different tie. Maybe it was because I’d grown fond of him. We sat on the sofa in silence, him with a tight-lipped smile and me with a sudden worry that my apartment smelled more toxic than clean.

“Can you believe I got the go-ahead?” he said, loosening his tie.

“Is that your question?” I asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know, is that yours?”

We both laughed.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “if I’ve been difficult.”

“No more than anyone else I’ve been talking to. You guys have been through it.”

“Us guys?”

Alex nodded. “It’s not right, you know, what some of you have had to do, had to see. I don’t know.” He rubbed his forehead. “But I’m not supposed to tell you about the other guys. Would cloud my research.”

“Oh, would it now?”

He fumbled in his coat pocket and pulled out his phone. “Do you want to ask your question first? Quid pro quo?”

“Sure,” I said. “What’s in this for you?”

He looked around the room, as if searching for the right words. He smiled slightly and nodded. “I want to make people’s lives better, you know? If I can show something through this research that helps others see the kind of people you really are beneath it all, it might, I don’t know, change things somehow.”

“Sure,” I said, caught off-guard by a sadness I hadn’t anticipated. “Not like you’d date someone like me, but we’re just great beneath it all. I hear ya.”

“I would,” Alex said.

I cocked my head at him.

“I would date someone just like you,” he said. “You even. Who wouldn’t?”

We stared at one another in silence.

“You would date me?” I asked.

“Sure.” Alex smiled. “I mean, if I didn’t have a boyfriend. Of course I would.”

Feelings of panic and betrayal gripped me. How could I have been so stupid? I stood up, trying to keep myself from shaking. “I gotta pee,” I said. “Be right back.”

“You okay?” he asked.

I nodded, and hurried out of the room.

In the bathroom, I turned on the faucet and pulled the aspirin bottle with my Tina from under the sink. I opened it up and looked inside. It was halfway full. I turned the aspirin bottle upside down over my hand, pouring out a few bumps worth. My eyes teared up. I licked the

salty, bitter grains into my mouth, then drank from the running tap, swallowing the Tina down. I sat with my back against the door until I felt lightness spread through me, the lightness I got whenever I did Tina after a break.

I flushed the toilet, dried my eyes with some toilet paper, and went back into the living room.

Sitting on the couch with his phone in his hand, Alex looked confused. “So Dill, are you sure you want to do this right now?”

“Do what?” I flopped down next to him, noticing how ridiculous he looked in his oversized suit.

“Tell your story. You look upset.”

I shook my head. “I’m cool. Don’t know what you mean.”

“Okay.” Alex pressed record on his phone and placed it on the upside-down wooden shipping crate I used as a cocktail table. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He opened it, scanning over a list of questions before choosing the right one. “First, and I know this might seem blunt, but when did you decide to become a sex worker?”

I glanced at my faded reflection in window across the room. “Well,” I said, “I’m not even sure how to begin.”

Beyond the Palisades

Emogene Beaton sat crying on the avocado-green sofa she and her boyfriend, Carter, bought from Goodwill when they first moved in together five years ago, back when thrifting on the weekends was still a thing. She rocked back and forth to the rhythm of Haydn's Symphony No. 45, wondering if she'd made the right choices about grad school, the baby, and finding her biological parents. Even before the pregnancy this particular symphony affected her more than most, but during the last three months it shook her powerfully—stirring up remorse mixed with anticipation. Her masters hinged on researching this symphony and how it was designed to be performed; she had been aware of the purpose underlying the symphony's ending for months. Regardless, in the days since she'd decided to find out about her biological family, the haunting denouement of the last movement had resonated with her in a way she could not articulate, bringing up questions she struggled to define.

She flipped open the laptop next to her on the sofa, the sleeping screen fading quickly from an image of sheet music to the open email she'd been reading before she put in her headphones to listen to the symphony. Faster than expected, the service she'd contacted had already sent an email, the subject "*Biological Parents Found.*" Above one New Orleans address was the name Maura S. Larkin. Below that was another name, Seth Salvatici, followed by an address in Gretna. Emogene had mapped the first with her phone; the house was fifteen minutes away in the heart of the Quarter. Somehow it felt natural to find her mother first.

Her boyfriend, Carter, came in from a jog as she shut the laptop, his brusque slamming of the door annoying.

"Something you don't want me to see?" he asked.

"Of course not." She picked up a half-eaten bowl of ramen noodles and headed to the kitchen, trying to decide if she should tell him yet. She'd kept the search to herself so far.

Carter kicked off his shoes by the sofa.

"We need to talk," Emogene said as she rinsed out the plastic bowl in the sink.

"I'll pick them up in a minute."

Emogene shut off the tap, irritated he thought he knew what she wanted. "They found my parents."

"Didn't know they were lost," Carter said as he passed by.

Emogene stared at the bowl in the sink, watching the surface of the water inside shiver. She heard him stripping off his clothes. "My birth parents," she shouted.

"Wait, wait, wait," Carter said from the bedroom. He came back in with nothing on, posturing in an awkwardly self-conscious way. "You know that'll piss them off. Especially your dad." He leaned against a wall, his arm out for support.

Emogene looked Carter up and down, silently wishing for a girl.

“This is about the baby,” she said.

Carter studied her face. “You should care what they think.”

“I’m stuck on my dissertation. Can’t get anything to come. I’m worried the baby will have a hole in its heart or Tay-Sachs like my little brother.”

“Is that what you were looking at online?” Carter shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “We just need to make sure we’re—“

“Carter. This isn’t about us. It’s about the baby.”

“Apparently everything is.” Carter turned and headed back down the hall. “Getting a shower.”

Emogene opened the dishwasher, cramming the plastic bowl between some pots still there from the week before. She collected her laptop and cellphone from the sofa and headed out to her parents’.

* * *

She used her key to get into their house, shouting to let them know she’d come in. They lived in the same two-story gingerbread she’d grown up in, except now it seemed to have a distinct smell when she entered, an odd mix of mothballs and onions. The smell could have always been there, maybe she’d just forgotten. Whatever the case, it smelled old.

Her parents never put in an alarm, and Emogene had started to think they should get one. They weren’t the type of people to own a gun, and they’d become increasing oblivious in the last few years. Maybe oblivious wasn’t the right word. Careless? Detached? Coming up the creaking

stairs, she heard her mother yelling in the guest room, the room they used for Emogene's nieces when her older brother came to visit. She stepped back down a few steps and called to them again.

"We're upstairs playing solitaire," her father said.

When she made it to the top of the stairs he was indeed playing a card game on the office computer. Sometimes, despite herself, Emogene wondered what he really did on the computer when no one was around. She'd mentioned this to Carter once, and he scrunched up his face in disgust, then told her that he thought it was sweet the way they loved one another enough to spend time apart but still together.

"I can't seem to get them to fall into place," her mother said from the other room.

"Do you guys have a minute to talk?" Emogene asked.

"What did Carter do now, Genie?" her mother said, her voice flat.

"Just meet me in the kitchen, please."

She had enough time to brew a batch of coffee and pour a cup before her father came down. Lucien was generally the quickest, especially since retirement left him with little to do other than watch TV geared toward making him angry. Emogene often wondered how much happier he'd be if hate news had never been invented. Probably still playing solitaire in a different room than his wife. Nothing could fix that.

When she was a kid, Emogene thought it romantic the way her father called her mother by her full name: Fianna Morris Beaton. He'd shout it across the yard when looking for her, trying to find which flowerbed she was hiding in that weekend. As she grew older, Emogene realized the emphasis he put on the last name, his last name. Emogene had determined to keep her own name when she married, even if it was her father's to begin with.

“Your mother says she’ll be right down,” Lucien said as he came into the kitchen, a touch of confusion in his voice. He looked older since she’d seen him a month before. “I know that Carter means well.”

“He’s not ‘that Carter’ and this isn’t about him.” Emogene opened the fridge to search for milk or cream. It was practically empty inside, save a few wilted vegetables in the crisping tray, some stray condiments, and an air of rot. “Gone on a diet again?”

“No. Forgot to go to the grocery. Mother thinks I’m getting senile.”

“She might be right.” Emogene shut the fridge and sniffed the cup of coffee, its familiar aroma ousting the stink from the fridge. “How long will she be?”

“Your guess is good as mine.” Lucien sat on a stool by the kitchen island. “If it’s not Carter, Genie, what is it?”

“I’d rather wait for Mom.”

“Will I need my boxing gloves?” Lucien winked at Emogene.

“This isn’t about you, either.”

“I know since you’ve gone back to graduate school money’s been tight—”

“Dad.” Emogene banged her coffee cup on the granite counter. “It’s not money. It’s not grad school.”

Fear spread over Lucien’s face. “You’re not sick, Emogene? Don’t tell me you’re sick.”

“No, Dad. It’s about the baby.”

“The baby’s sick?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Nobody’s sick.” Emogene looked out of the kitchen window at the rusted trampoline from when she was a kid. She’d spent hours out there jumping alone, practicing “routines” she made up to Britney Spears’ songs. “It’s hard being adopted. I never

knew if I was Italian. Or Cajun. I don't know if I might get heart disease. Or breast cancer. Were they movie stars? Were they poor? It's just—I love you to death, but—”

“You've found your birth parents,” Emogene's mother, Fianna, said as she came into the kitchen. She looked older, too. “Oh, Genie, that's wonderful.”

A guilty sadness moved through Emogene. “You're not angry?”

“Why would we be angry?” Fianna asked.

“I don't know. I just don't want you to think it's because I had a bad childhood or didn't think you were good parents or something.”

Fianna smiled. “It's for the baby.”

“Well,” Lucien said, “I'm not sure who it's for. Just don't go getting your expectations up. Those people gave you away for a reason.”

“Father!” Fianna said.

“God, Dad.” Emogene shook her head, bewildered. “Can't you just let me tell you something without trying to ruin it?”

Fianna sat down next to Lucien, patting his leg. “He just wants to protect you.”

“You're sure you're not angry?”

Emogene's parents both shook their heads. “We always imagined this day might come,” Fianna said. “Curiosity is natural.”

“Just don't go getting your expectations—”

Emogene raised her hand to her father. “Got it.”

* * *

The first time Emogene could remember standing up to her father was when she was nine. Surely there'd been times before this, but nothing that stood out enough for her memory to record, ready to play back decades later. She'd come home from school near the end of the fourth grade, probably April or May. The bus had let her out on the corner, like it always did, but as soon as it pulled off she'd noticed an odd chirping somewhere nearby. She followed the sound as best she could until she got to the holly bushes at the edge of a neighbor's driveway.

Emogene kept lifting back the pointed leaves of the holly bushes, trying to find the source of the strained chirping, when she came upon the ugliest creature she'd ever seen. It was a baby bird, a hatchling. The eyes were oversized, black orbs bulging from a tiny, shriveled head. Its skin was a dull pink color, covered in damp, stringy feathers. The beak was a leaden grey, and kept opening and closing, letting out the strangled sound Emogene had followed. Despite everything she'd been told for as long as she could remember about baby birds, Emogene scooped it into the palm of her hands and ran home.

Lucien, who worked from home as a tax consultant, stood in the driveway, waiting, when Emogene came up.

"Daddy, I found a baby bird!" Emogene opened her hands, thrusting the damp creature at him.

He backed away, crossing his arms over his chest. "Young lady, do you know how many diseases birds carry?"

"It's a baby."

"I don't care what it is," Lucien said. "You need to put it back where you found it."

Emogene held the bird to her chest. "No. Its mommy's gone. It needs a home."

"I'm sure it has a home where you found it. You need to put it back."

“No.” Emogene sat in the grass by the driveway, her hands cradling the bird. “I’ll ask Mommy when she gets home.”

“Your mother’s answer will be the same as mine,” Lucien said.

He was wrong, of course. When Fianna made it home, she cleaned out one of Emogene’s older brother’s gerbil cages and used it to carry the chick to the nearby vet they used for their cat. When she came back, Fianna had an eyedropper with formula to mix up, and a heat lamp she’d bought at the Walmart on her way home.

Within a week or so the chick began to develop mature feathers, proving it a blue jay. Fianna and Emogene took turns with the sticky, cocoa-scented formula, growing the bird into a fledgling. After school Emogene would take it into the back yard, letting it run around and flap its wings, attempting to fly. Sometimes she’d take it on the trampoline with her, giving it little bounces to help it practice. One day it hopped off the trampoline and glided into an azalea bush that grew next to the white-washed fence running along the back of their property. Before Emogene could get to it, the bird jumped over the fence and disappeared into the woods beyond.

“Daddy! Daddy!” Emogene called, running into the back door. “The bird is in the forest, Daddy!”

Lucien came out of the bathroom, frantic, still pulling his pants up from his ankles.

“What’s wrong, Emogene?”

“The bird, Daddy. He’s in the forest. He ran away.”

Lucien picked up Emogene and carried her out to the back yard. “Where did he go?”

“He went over the fence.” Emogene pointed to the azalea bush.

Lucien put down Emogene and jumped over the fence, dashing into the forest. He came back shortly, disappointment on his face.

“I guess the bird has finally flown away,” Lucien said, climbing back into the yard.
Emogene burst into tears and ran into the house, slamming the door behind her.

* * *

Carter volunteered to drive Emogene downtown to meet her biological mother, allowing her a chance to listen to the ending of Haydn’s Symphony No. 45 a couple of times. She was still trying to find something about the last movement to use in her dissertation, some note or inflection—anything really—she may have missed before. She stared at the uninteresting green flashing by on the side of I-10, focusing on the music filling the car. After the different instruments silenced one by one and the music faded to silence, she hit the back arrow to listen again.

Carter reached up and turned off the music. “So, what is it you’re trying to hear?”

“I’m not sure.” Emogene shook her head. “Professor Manors wants something more. Everyone knows the sociopolitical message at the end of the symphony. I need to come up with something more interesting.”

“Sociopolitical message at the end of the symphony?”

“Now you’re interested?” Emogene looked at Carter’s hands gripping the steering wheel. They were strong hands, something she’d noticed when they first met.

He reached over without looking and patted Emogene’s leg. “I’ve always been interested in Haydn’s Symphony number fifty-four.”

“Forty-five. Also known as the ‘Farewell Symphony.’”

“You’re so smart, Genie,” Carter said.

“Shut up. It really was important. Haydn used it to send a message that the performers, commoners, should have consideration for their lives, their families.” Emogene looked back out the window.

“And?”

“Each musician blew out a candle when he stopped playing and left the stage at the end of the piece.” Emogene spoke as if she’d rehearsed the conversation many times. “It symbolized their desire to see their families. They were kept away from them by their patron, a prince, to perform.”

“Did it work?” Carter asked.

“Of course. If it hadn’t, we never would have heard it.” Emogene turned back on the music. When they reached the French Quarter exit, Emogene used her phone to guide them to a red house on Rampart Street, yellow shutters hanging by the windows. A hand-painted sign suspended by the front door: “Maura S. Larkin, Attorney-at-Law.”

“I guess this is her office, not her house,” Carter said.

Emogene nodded. “I guess so.” She studied the building. “How about I call you when I’m done.”

* * *

Standing in front of the door, Emogene gripped a manila folder in her hand, mentally rehearsing what she would say after she knocked. Vacillating between being up front and trying to get a conversation started first, she was still staring at the sign when Maura cracked open the door.

“Can I help you?” Maura asked. She looked nothing like Emogene, with a broad face and bleach-blond hair. But there was something about the slope of her eyes, the same slope as Emogene’s, that looked familiar. She seemed younger than Emogene had imagined.

“Are you Maura Larkin?” Emogene shifted the manila folder from one hand to another.

“Are you trying to serve me?” Maura kept the door firmly in place.

Emogene shook her head. “No, I’m looking to find someone, and I thought you might be able to help.”

“I’m a personal injury attorney. I don’t really do that kind of thing.”

“You’re my mother.” The words came out of Emogene before she could think them. A look of horror came across Maura’s face, replaced almost instantly by fear. In moments her expression ran the gamut from confusion to concern and back again.

Tension twisted Emogene’s stomach. “I’m sorry. I mean I think you might be—”

“Come inside.” Maura opened the door to the office, stepping back so Emogene could enter. It was decorated in typical Louisiana art, things like oil painting of magnolias and watercolor egrets. Silently, Maura guided Emogene into a small, wood-paneled room off to the side of the entry hall. Maura indicated a chair to Emogene, then sat down behind a glossy wooden desk.

“I thought the adoption was closed,” Maura said, opening a drawer and pulling out a pack of cigarettes. “Sorry, I smoke these when I’m stressed.” Her hand shaking, she put one in her mouth and raised a lighter from the same drawer. “You want one?”

“No. Sorry. I don’t smoke.”

Maura clenched her jaw. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to find you because—”

“You want money?”

“What?” Emogene shook her head.

“Do you want money?”

“No. I just wanted to meet you.”

Maura nodded. “So how exactly did you find me?”

“I went online. There’s a service. It cost \$300.”

Maura took a couple of drags off the cigarette, then crushed it out on a metal filing cabinet behind her. “I’ll sue them first. That’s for sure.”

“I’m sorry, I’m pregnant and—”

“I sorry to hear that. But I have a family. I do not want you here.”

“I need to know my medical history. For my baby.”

“The adoption was closed for a reason.” Maura stood up. “And I don’t need you opening it back up. For your sake and for mine.”

Emogene read a diploma hanging on the wall next to Maura. “He must have meant something to you. You kept his name.”

“Excuse me?” Maura looked genuinely confused.

Emogene pointed to the diploma on the wall. “Maura Salvatici Larkin. You kept his name.”

Maura balled both of her fists, shaking her head. “Listen,” she said, her voice strained, “I gave you up for a very good reason.” She strode past Emogene into the hallway. “That’s all you need to know.”

“But I need—”

“No.” Maura’s voice deepened. She spoke through clenched teeth. “You need to leave before I call the police. And don’t come back and harass me. I am a lawyer.”

“But—”

“Go.”

Emogene spent an hour wandering the streets of the French Quarter before she told Carter he could pick her up. When he tried to talk to her about what had happened, she told him it had been the wrong person, but that she would keep trying to find her parents. He held her hand the entire ride back to their apartment, not saying a thing as she cried.

When they had parked in front of their building, Carter finally spoke. “Was she that bad?”

Emogene shook her head. “Yes. I mean, no. I mean, she’s not my mother, so it doesn’t matter.”

“It seems to.”

“I’m just so scared. What if the baby is like Chance?”

“Chance?”

Emogene looked at Carter, suddenly angry. “My baby brother?”

“Sorry, you never really say his name.”

“I wanted a younger brother or sister so bad. But when they brought him home, he was so small. They knew. That’s why they named him Chance. But they knew.”

“They were just trying to give him some happy years. That’s what you always say.”

“Didn’t they know what it would do to me?”

* * *

Emogene had been four when her parents brought Chance home from the adoption agency, and their explanations to her about his health problem had been detailed and specific, including how to call 911 and why she needed to put something soft under his head when he spasmed. They'd told her she was a big girl and needed to be there for her little brother, but that she should understand he might not be with them long. Not that they were going to give him back, they'd said, just that he was very sick. He had just turned one when they adopted him, after his birth parents could no longer care for him. To a young Emogene he seemed the answer to her silent prayers for a younger sibling, despite all the things her parents told her.

He never learned to speak, and though his body got bigger, it got harder over time for him to sit up or move his arms. He smelled faintly of spoiled milk and urine. Emogene loved him just the same, dressing him up in his different clothes, pretending sometimes he was her own baby. Her favorite outfit to put him in was jeans and a T-shirt with a raincloud on the front. She never liked to change his diaper, but would do so anyway. Fianna had taught her to do this along with how to put his feeding tube in the dishwasher when he finished eating, making sure to scrape the crust from the formula off the open edges first. As he got older, Emogene would get angry that he no longer burbled when she kissed his head or that he stopped smiling when she came in his room after Saturday cartoons to play. Sometimes she still got a jolt of regret when she remembered telling him she wished he'd never been born. She only said so once, but somehow the words lodged in her mind, waking her some nights as she drifted off to sleep.

The strongest recollection she had of Chance consisted of several memories jumbled together, glimpses of hospital rooms and late-night trips to the E.R., a cacophony of fluorescent lights, white-tiled floors, and people dressed in scrubs. The memories ended with one in

particular of her father coming home from the hospital when she was seven. He took Emogene to forest behind the backyard fence to talk. There was a lake beyond the property line in a field the people who lived next door used for fishing. Lucien carried Emogene to a large patch of clover and asked her to try to find one with four leaves, something she'd shown great skill with. The air smelled of grass and dirt when Lucien sat her in the soft bed of clover. Emogene looked them over, letting her mind relax so that the pattern before her eye became something she felt more than saw. A four-leaf clover immediately came forward in her vision, and she reached out and plucked it for her father, telling him to make a wish.

“It’s good to find something so special,” Lucien said, taking the clover from Emogene.

She looked back to find another, but Lucien picked her up and carried her back towards the house, tears wetting his face. Emogene had never seen her father cry before.

“Chance was very special,” he said, kissing her head.

Emogene knew somehow this meant Chance had died, so she wriggled out of her father’s arms and ran back to the lake, spending the rest of the day searching in vain for more four-leaf clovers, while Lucien stood at a distance watching.

* * *

The day after meeting her birth mother, Emogene drove across the Mississippi River bridge alone, letting her phone guide her to the address she had for her biological father. When she finally came to Salvatici Salvage Yard, she became fearful again, an odd feeling that she was in the wrong place. She parked by a giant chain-link gate next to a corrugated metal shed grown up with weeds, collected her file from the passenger’s seat, and walked carefully around the side of

the building towards an open doorway blaring 70's rock-and-roll, the type Emogene believed had ruined modern music.

“Hello,” she called ahead, wanting to make sure she didn't cause any unneeded surprises. She'd learned her lesson from the visit with her biological mother. “Hello. Is someone in there?”

The music turned down, and a lean man, older than Emogene expected, came out of the doorway, a baseball bat in one hand and a beer in the other. His face was lean and grizzled, crumpled from sun and probably cigarettes. His strong nose reminded Emogene of her own, and she could see herself reflected in the shape of his face.

“What ya want, missy?” The man asked, his voice gravelly.

“I'm trying to find a friend of my mom's.” Emogene fumbled with the folder in her hand. “Seth Salvatici?”

The man took a swig from his beer then spat on the ground. “Well I ain't got no lady friends, so you must be looking in the wrong place.” The man turned around to go back in the shed.

“Ex-wife,” Emogene said. “She was your ex-wife.”

The man stopped and turned around, the fat end of the bat he was carrying tipping up toward Emogene. “Listen. I said I had no lady friends. And I certainly ain't got no ex-wife.”

“I'm—” Emogene thought carefully about her words. “Mr. Salvatici, I'm Maura's daughter.”

The man's eyes furrowed and he threw the beer can to the ground. “Maura?” He took three quick steps towards Emogene and pushed a finger into her throat. She froze, her eyes fixed on the baseball bat in his hand.

“I’ve been done with her for twenty-five years, and I ain’t starting back down that road.”

His breath, hot in Emogene’s face, stunk of rot and alcohol.

Emogene dropped the folder on the ground, the papers inside scattering around her feet.

The man’s face contorted with rage, turning red. “And I don’t need you coming ‘round here sticking your nose in that hornet’s nest.” The bat tilted upwards. “I suggest you get while the getting’s good.”

Emogene got back in her car and backed out of the parking lot, the man watching her with a scowl until she’d pulled back onto the road.

On the way home, crossing the Mississippi River bridge, Emogene called her father’s cell phone. When he answered, she could barely speak.

“Genie?” Lucien said. “What’s the matter? Are you okay?”

“Wrong . . . family . . . Daddy,” she said, sobbing.

* * *

That night, Emogene lay alone in bed skimming over a printed copy of the latest draft of her dissertation, hoping some inspiration or insight might come to her, her mind muddled with Maura and Seth and the things they’d said. She’d tried listening to the symphony again to clear her thoughts, but it rang empty in her ears. Carter had gone to an all-night gym to work out, leaving Emogene with time to try to focus. When she got to the end of the dissertation, Emogene read the last few paragraphs before the conclusion again and again, trying to will something interesting to jump out to her. Her father had been right; she shouldn’t have gotten her hopes up. She turned on the symphony for one final listen through, but nothing came.

She picked up the phone and called her parents.

“Genie,” Fianna said when she answered, “your father said they found the wrong people.”

“No, Mom, it’s okay.”

“I hope you’ll get your money back.”

“They don’t give refunds.” Genie wanted to tell her mother the truth, but knew it would mean a long conversation she didn’t have time for, not with so much work to do.

“Do you think they can find the right ones?” Fianna asked.

“I’ve already got great parents. I don’t need any others.”

“But you wanted to know—”

“What does it matter? I’ve done fine this long without my medical history.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter? You’re starting to sound just like your father.”

“Maybe he’s right, Mom,” Emogene said. “Maybe I don’t want to know. And really, how many people get to pretend they’re from movie stars or millionaires and it might be true? Maybe I’m not ready to give that up just yet.”

The Mirror Twin

“You were a towhead?” I asked. A young boy with curly blond hair stared out from the photograph, a fishing pole in his hand and oversized overalls hanging off his bare, freckled shoulders. Even at 9, Kaleb’s body tensed with the wiry muscles he’d grow into. He looked like a Gap Kids ad from the late 90’s.

“Yep,” Kaleb said. “I didn’t go brown until puberty set in.” His rough hand rubbed my shoulder. The double bed creaked under us, echoed by the bare wooden floorboards. The online ad for the bed and breakfast we’d booked said it was quaint, but even for north Louisiana it seemed a tad more rustic than we’d counted on. At least it fit our budget.

“I guess I don’t know you as well as I thought.” I turned the crinkled photo over. *Kaleb, Grandpa’s farm, July, 1996* was scribbled in pencil on the back. “You were so cute. Those eyes!” I flipped back to see the same close-set eyes I knew so well staring back at me, eyes that made him seem a touch less-than-smart when he had his glasses off. But handsome nonetheless.

Boyfriends for three years, and he'd finally decided to show me childhood pictures. He'd seen mine before we'd even started dating, back when we were just friends.

"That's where we're going tomorrow," Kaleb said. "Grandpa's farm. Except they *all* live out there now. Well, except Grandpa." Kaleb rummaged through the shoebox he'd packed in his luggage for the drive up from New Orleans. "Hold on. I have another." He snatched the fishing photo from my hand and replaced it with a sepia print of two boys dressed up like miniature sheriffs, one of those cheesy pictures from a county fair. "It's me and Abe."

"Oh my god," I said. "He looks just like you."

The two boys seemed younger than the Kaleb in the first picture, both dressed in cowboy hats and vests with stars on them. Their smiles were almost identical, both missing a front tooth, but one missing on the left and one on the right. "You look like twins."

"Can you guess who I am?"

I could tell by the eyes. His brother's were farther apart. And the chin seemed broader than Kaleb's.

"You're the one on the right. Here." I placed my finger on the young Kaleb in the picture.

"That's right. Good guess."

"It's not a guess. You're obviously the more handsome." I turned around and kissed him, then rubbed my beard on his neck the way he liked.

He pushed me away. "Stop. I can't get sexual with my brother in the room."

"He's just in the picture." I leaned toward him, but he held me back, smiling.

"No, it's bad luck the day before meeting the family, Jessie."

That's when I knew for sure he planned on proposing. Seemed like not seeing the bride before a wedding, but we didn't have quite the same kind of traditions built in. I'd been waiting over a year for him to get up the nerve.

"I needed to talk about this first," he said. "Me and Abe."

I studied the photo, trying to figure out what he meant. "Because you and your brother look so much alike?" I glanced over at him, expecting a smile, but he looked sad, distant.

"The thing is, we are actually twins. Identical."

"You said he was your older brother." I felt uneasy, like there was something more he wasn't telling me.

"I didn't lie, he is older. Five minutes. It's just—" Kaleb stared out the window and cleared his throat. "It's just that I don't like people to know. He always screws things up. And there's all the questions and things."

My unease dispersed as I laughed, thinking up a joke, as I'm wont to do. "Like are you psychic? Do you feel each other's pain? Who's got the bigger—" I motioned to Kaleb's crotch and tossed the picture into the shoebox at the foot of the bed.

Kaleb glared at me. "He's my brother."

"It was just—"

"And he's straight." Kaleb's face settled into anger, the kind of anger I usually only saw when he'd done too many shots of tequila.

"It was a joke. Totally a joke."

He got up from the bed and walked to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," he said through the door.

“Fine. Nobody really wants to have sex with you and your hot twin, anyway,” I whispered, wondering why the joke had him so angry.

“What?” he shouted through the door.

“Nothing. Good night then.” I’d learned better than to try to calm him down once he got in a huff. He’d be fine in the morning. I turned off the lamp on the side table and cocooned myself beneath the ancient quilt the lady at the front desk had given us to stay warm. The quilt was covered in repeating geometric figures, something like starbursts that changed ever-so-slightly as they ran across the quilt. The quilt smelt damp, ancient. I remembered that she’d said something about Januarys being brutal in West Monroe, and listening to the water running in the bathroom sink, I wondered if she might be right.

* * *

The next day Kaleb twisted and turned our rental car along a winding road leading out to “the country” where his parents lived. I stared out the passenger window watching the trees blur by, occasionally picking out a detail, like a lone tree or a fence post to cling onto, watching it rush toward us, pause in my vision for an instance, then shoot behind as fast as it had come. I wanted to speak, but a powerful silence filled the car, and I worried I’d been wrong about things being right in the morning, worried I’d messed things up for good. We’d had our fights before, but I never felt such distance as I did in the first half hour in that car. The way his eyes stayed so focused on the road before us scared me.

Before his brother came up in the pictures the night before, I just knew we had finally made it, were going to be together for good. We’d been friends for almost ten years, since we

met sophomore year in a Hitchcock class at Tulane, and had been dating ever since he came out three years back. We'd only broken up once for a week because he thought he might need to sleep around. I figured I should let him try, otherwise he'd always resent me. One bad lay and he came right back to our bed. Before he came out, I'd been his wingman at straight bars. Since then I'd been his boyfriend at gay ones. The sex was the best I'd ever had, and whether we talked about politics or *The Real Housewives*, we agreed on most everything. We'd move to France if Trump was elected president. NeNe was the shit. Clinton was getting a bad rap because she was a woman. Phaedra needed to go sit down somewhere. We even agreed on a church, the Unitarian Universalists, so I could be an atheist and he could be a whatever it was when a boy from Catholic school smokes too much pot and reads books by Alan Watts. A neo-American-Buddhist? Didn't matter, really. It's just that we didn't fight all that often, and I wasn't prepared for one spilling over to the next day. The last time that had happened, we'd almost broken up.

I was clinging to a passing pine when he finally spoke.

"I'm sorry. It's just the brother thing really gets to me."

I looked over at him, his hands gripping the wheel so tightly the veins popped out in his forearms.

"It's okay," I said. "That joke was out-of-line."

He shook his head. "No. It's fine. It was funny. I'm just—he's always been the favorite."

"How could he be the favorite? You're clearly the one with the best taste in boyfriends."

The corner of his mouth turned up a hair. "I guess that's true," he said. "It was just hard growing up under his shadow. It's like that with twins. There's always the popular one people like. That was Abe."

"Oh, c'mon," I said. "Everyone loves you."

He nodded. “He was right-handed, good at math. I was a lefty who liked to draw. Sucks when you’re a mirror twin.”

“A mirror twin?”

“That’s what we are.” He let go of the steering wheel and took my hand. Sweat coated his palm. “Sometimes the egg splits so twins are identical but opposite. That’s why my hair curls clockwise and his the other way. Or why I’m nearsighted in my right eye and he’s nearsighted in his left.”

“Or why you like boys and he likes girls?” I squeezed his hand.

“I don’t know. I guess.” He squinted, like he was trying to see something in the distance down the road. “But it’s just he’s always been the more normal one. You know, good at sports, better in school, all that.”

“You’ve always seemed a little abnormal, that’s for sure.” I pulled his hand to my mouth and kissed the back of it.

“And my parents always just liked him better.”

“Oh, please.”

“I’m serious. Even after Katrina when I went home—you remember—after spending two weeks in my flooded apartment building? They were all like ‘you need to get back to school’ when I just wanted was to take a break, recover.”

“You said you were itching to get back.”

“I don’t need the pity. Anyway, that’s how I know.”

“How can you be sure they wouldn’t do the same with him?”

He glanced over at me then back at the road, shaking his head slowly. “After he graduated Stanford, he went into the Army, just like Dad. Of course. And since he got back from

Afghanistan they've let him just live with them the whole time. All he does is play video games. It's like five years now or something."

"He's a gamer?"

"Totally into *World of Warcraft*. It's all he ever talks about. Doesn't even work."

"Wow. They pay for everything?"

"No, he gets some money. Plus he writes some vet blog. It's actually kind of big."

I knew Kaleb had always wanted to be a writer. That and a sculptor. But since Tulane he'd mainly been working at hotels near the Quarter. "I thought you said he was into math."

"He was. Or he is. It's just now he's writing, too. Honestly, Abe can do whatever he wants. Always could."

"So could you." I leaned my head on his shoulder and glanced at us in the rearview mirror. My red hair and pale skin contrasted with his dark hair and deep tan. His eyes darted back and forth, scanning the road before us. "You still can," I said.

"It's hard when you have to pay bills and stuff. He just lives with them without a care." Tears welled in Kaleb's eyes. "But when it was me, they just shoved me back out."

"Baby, I'm sorry." I squeezed his hand again as sadness choked my throat.

"There it is." He let go of my hand and pointed to a two-story farmhouse next to a weathered, grey barn. It looked smaller than I'd imagined, but then Kaleb had a way of putting on airs, like the way his Southern accent only came out when he had too much to drink.

I sat up in my seat, nervousness bubbling up from my stomach.

* * *

We sat in silence in the driveway for a good ten minutes, Kaleb drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. I wanted to urge him on, but it seemed rude, insensitive. After the confessions of the past two days, I wasn't sure how I should act with him. I felt like one step in the wrong direction and everything might blow up. Besides, I was a bit mad he'd left out so much about his life. I wanted to just tell him it would all be okay, but I was afraid how he'd react. I suppose that's what we all want to do when someone we love is hurting, whether it's true or not.

Finally, he got out the car and tramped through the grass toward the house, stopping to pull a hidden key out from under a large rock on the edge of a cement walkway leading to the front door. I waited in my seat until he turned around and motioned for me to follow. He jiggled the key until the door swung open. The stale smell of damp wood saturated the air.

"Mom! Dad! Anybody home?" he shouted, his voice echoing through the foyer. Electronic sounds beeped through the house, and I immediately recognized them as coming from a video game. "Hear that, Jessie?"

I nodded.

"That's Abe hard at work battling some world boss, I'm sure. Probably doesn't even realize we're here."

The sounds went silent.

"Kaleb? Is that you?" The voice booming from the other room sounded almost just like Kaleb's, only deeper.

"Got a friend here for you to meet."

"Friend?" I whispered.

Kaleb put his finger to his lips. "Watch this," he whispered back.

"Can you bring him in here? I'm a little tied up right this second."

See, Kaleb mouthed to me. “Sure, we’ll come to you then.”

We crept down the hall silently, as if we were sneaking in somewhere we shouldn’t.

Kaleb pushed open the living room door. The back of Abe’s head silhouetted against a large TV mounted on the wall, his hair bushy like Kaleb’s when he went too long without a haircut. The TV’s sound was still off, but on the screen a bunch of cartoon figures scrambled across the deck of a cartoon ship, as one of the figures pounded on a large, humanoid bull near one of the edges of the deck. Furious clicking came from Abe’s hands as he moved around a mouse and banged a keyboard on his blanket-covered lap.

“Fucking heal me, goddamnit!” Abe yelled, his hands moving faster. “Fuck, fuck, fuck . . . no!” He tossed the mouse onto the floor. “Fucking healers. And no more revives.” Abe craned his neck around and smiled at Kaleb and me. “Never can trust a fucking paladin to keep you up, you know?” He reached over his shoulder to shake my hand. “You must be Jessie. I’m the lesser of two evils, Abe.”

Shaking his hand felt odd, like shaking Kaleb’s, but not as rough. Just like in his younger picture, Abe’s wide eyes and strong chin made him look like a smarter, older version of Kaleb.

“Nice meeting you.” I pulled my hand back, afraid I’d seem attracted to him if I held on too long. I wasn’t, but I didn’t want Kaleb getting upset again.

“We’re going to get our stuff out the car,” Kaleb said. “Where’s Mom and Dad?”

“They’re in the city. Wanted to give us boy time before they come back.” Abe winked at me then studied Kaleb for a moment. “Want me to see if the boyfriend is acceptable or not. You look tired.”

“I didn’t sleep well last night,” Kaleb said. “You know how it is for me coming home.”

Abe nodded. “They just want the best for you; you know that.”

“I know they want something from me, that’s for sure.” Kaleb took my arm and pulled me to the door. “We’ll get unpacked then catch up.”

* * *

We got our bags from the car and took them upstairs to a room with paneled walls painted white. Two twin beds covered in quilts sat on either side of a floor lamp, and I joked we should get used to an *I Love Lucy* marriage as long as we visited. Kaleb sat on the foot of the bed by the window, rubbing his fingers through his hair.

“You okay?” I asked.

He looked up at me. “This was our room. I hate coming here.”

“Because of the memories?”

“No, because they completely redid it. Let Abe do what he wanted with the old guest room.” Kaleb stood up. “They just do everything to make him happy.”

I wanted to tread carefully. “You think they don’t want you to be happy. Your brother said—”

“I heard what he said.” Kaleb stood up and looked out the window. “He’s rubbing it in. You don’t get it.”

“I want to get it. If you keep things like this from me, I can’t—”

“Let’s just get our stuff put away and go back down.”

After we emptied our bags into the closet and a whitewashed chest of drawers Kaleb told me had been in his parents’ room when he was a kid, we headed back down the stairs to the living room. On the landing, we heard Abe’s voice from the other direction.

“I’m in the kitchen.”

“All right,” Kaleb answered.

Abe sat on the far side of a long pine table eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when we came in. “Help yourself.” He motioned to two open jars and some bread sitting out by two paper plates.

“I got it,” Kaleb said, so I sat down across from Abe watching him devour his food.

“This is so fucking good!” he said, his mouth full. “PB and J is my favorite, ever since I was a kid. Right, Kaleb?”

Kaleb grunted agreement.

“Don’t be a bitch. You have a guest.” Abe took a big bite from his sandwich. “So what do you think of the place? Pretty rustic, huh?”

I looked around the kitchen, like I hadn’t noticed before. “It’s cool. Really rustic.”

“Fuck rustic. It’s a dump. In the middle of nowhere. But it’s my dump.”

“It’s Mom and Dad’s dump,” Kaleb said from behind me.

Abe shook his head, clearly exasperated. “Yes, it’s Mom and Dad’s dump. You’re so fucking literal.” Abe shoved the rest of the sandwich into his mouth, folding it to fit. The back of the chair he was sitting in was wider than the others, draped in the plaid blanket he’d had over his lap in the living room.

“So what was that game you were playing?” I asked, pretending I didn’t know.

Abe nodded, sped up his chewing, then swallowed hard. “It’s WOW. Cool game. Probably my favorite.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, hoping I could keep the topic on something they wouldn’t fight about.

“Because it’s like a squad, right, and you work together. You get to blow shit up and everything. And if you die, no biggie. You get a reset. Not like Afghanistan.”

Abe put his hands on the edge of the table and pushed, floating backwards from the table. My brain finally registered he was in a wheelchair.

“Oh my god,” I said, without a thought.

“What’d he do?” Kaleb asked as he put down a paper plate with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in front of me.

“Shit, Kaleb. You didn’t tell him?”

“Tell me what?” I looked at Kaleb as he sat down next to me. I felt a tight sadness in my throat.

“Didn’t tell you I’m a gimp.” He grabbed the wheels on the side of the chair and came around the table to me, then lifted a blanket off his lap. His legs ended just below his knees in small nubs he wiggled. “Got ‘em blown off when some fucking crow missed a goddamned IED. At least I still got my dick.”

“Just don’t, Abe.” Kaleb banged his fist on the table. “I don’t need my boyfriend freaked out by your war stories.”

“No, couldn’t have you getting your fucking panties twisted out, can we Kaleb?” Abe moved behind me, put a hand on my shoulder, and said, “Don’t worry, Red, you’re okay in my book. I’ll see you ladies later.”

The door slammed behind him.

The only sound for a few minutes was Kaleb’s chewing. My sandwich sat untouched on my plate as I turned over in my head what to make of this, trying to rationalize the emotions of betrayal and disgust seeping in.

When he finished eating, Kaleb finally spoke. “I hope you’re not upset about that. He’s a real ass with that shit, wiggling his legs and all that.’

“His stumps. Wiggling his stumps.” Looking at Kaleb, I shook my head in disbelief.

“Whatever. He does it for a reaction.”

“You’re jealous of a guy,” I said, “who lost his legs, Kaleb.”

“Fuck that. It started way before any of that.”

“He’s in a fucking wheelchair, Kaleb.”

“You’re on his side now?”

I stared out the window to the faded grey barn overgrown with weeds. I took a deep breath, and then picked up the sandwich and took a small bite.

Kaleb rubbed my neck. “I just needed for us to meet my parents before I asked.”

“Asked what?”

“I want you to marry me.”

I took another bite and shook my head. “I don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

The Shearwaters

Milo Bowers was watering the ferns on the balcony of the Pinnacle, a new bar in the French Quarter, when a bat swooped down and grazed his head. Swatting instinctively, he dropped the metal watering can over the wrought iron railing, sending it banging into the street, startling a homeless dog guarding a mass of dingy fabric, fabric made to look soft in the raw light of dusk. Milo gazed up at the stream of bats flopping overhead, a swirling channel arching and looping above, his head turned up to the sky like someone searching for a shooting star. The French Quarter bats came most evenings in the summer, something tourists often mistook for swallows. A longtime bird watcher, Milo could easily spot the difference between the sweep of a bird and the skitter of a bat.

“Milo!” The bar owner, Declan, came out onto the balcony. “What was that?”

“A bat.” Milo pointed at the sky. “Dropped the watering can. It hit the street and—”

“The ferns are plastic.” Declan shook his head, his face settling into disappointment.

“The watering can is for show.”

Milo had started at the Apex, the Pinnacle's upstairs VIP club, three days before—his first gig tending bar since undergrad at Loyola. His wife, Heather, hooked him up with the job after selling Declan some barstools the week before. She said getting Milo out of the house was good no matter, that he needed to stop marinating in the painting shed back behind their house. Milo hadn't looked closely enough to see the plants were fake, figured watering them would keep them green. He dug a finger in the dirt they were planted in; it was damp, real.

"Sorry," Milo said, "guess I didn't notice."

Declan smiled his practiced smile. "Don't worry. I'll get it. Just get back behind the bar. Can't have our local celebrity MIA when we're making NOLA a great place again."

"Making NOLA a Great Place Again" was the bar's motto, printed on the drink menus and blinking in neon beneath the bar's name on the sign hanging over the front doors. Declan liked to work it into as many conversations as he could, seemed to think it witty. Milo did his best to avoid using it himself. But then, Milo was from New Orleans, a born local; Declan had moved there six months before from California to open up the Pinnacle.

The Apex was made to look like a retro art deco jazz club, covered in mirrors and red velvet. Declan had flown in a famous bar designer from L.A., one he'd worked with back in California, to make sure the Apex had an "authentic N'awlins feel." Milo busied himself lighting candles on the tables while waiting for the bar to open. When the sound of soft jazz came up, the kind you hear when a character on a TV waits in a doctor's office, Milo knew the doors were about to open.

A slight woman, hunched by a mass of Mardi Gras beads draped around her neck, came through the door first, a water bottle in one hand and an unlit cigarette in the other. Milo looked to see who'd follow, but she was alone. She looked mildly familiar to Milo, like someone from

one of the shows they'd been shooting around town. She had on a white wife beater, splattered here and there with a bright blue liquid, and her shoes were those expensive heels covered in so many gems they looked cheap, the kind that had become popular of late. They weren't shoes for walking in the Quarter.

She stumbled to the bar, plopped into one of the barstools on the balcony side, and leaned over to one of the candles, lighting her cigarette.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Milo said, "but you can't smoke in here."

"Ma'am?" The woman squinched her eyes at Milo, then shook her head. "Aren't you that artist guy?" She took a drag from her cigarette and blew the smoke straight up.

"Yes, but you can't smoke in here."

The woman laughed a throaty, deep laugh. "I paid enough to come up here to smoke a cigarette if I want." The woman studied Milo with an unsteady gaze. "So what happened to you anyway. Haven't seen your art around much. Painter's block?" The woman laughed again, as if she'd said something witty. "Slinging drinks to pay the bills?"

Milo had heard it before. *What happened to you? Producing anything new? What happened to your old style?* But the embarrassment of being behind a bar while hearing it flustered him.

"I'm looking for inspiration right now," he said. "And for the last time, put out your cigarette." He picked up a large plastic cup and began to fill it with water for the woman to drop her cigarette in.

But before he could place it down for her, she mashed her cigarette out on the wooden bartop, a wry smile crinkling her face. "Happy now, mister artist formerly known as talented?" She stuck her middle finger in her mouth and sucked up and down before popping it out at Milo.

He didn't think to throw the glass of water in his hand at her; he just did.

Ten minutes later Milo stormed down the stairs, past the bouncers, and out into the street, curses flung at the woman and Declan still echoing through Milo's brain. He didn't want this job and he didn't need this hassle. No one needs to put up with some drunk-acting fool. And Milo wouldn't work for a spineless wannabe savior from California who refused to back him up. Milo had a degree. Milo had a wife. Milo had been somebody. Besides, that's not how it was done in New Orleans. Declan and his bar needed to learn that.

The feelings of the moment wore off as Milo trudged home to the Bywater, those mixed emotions of excitement and anger replaced by regret as he marched silently down the dimly lit streets leading away from the Quarter. Heather would be angry that he'd lost another job, this one in under a week—a job she'd found for him. That was a new record. He'd have to hear about the bills again, and his mental health, and all the other things she'd throw at him when he told her in the morning. He thought about turning around and going to get a drink at Buffa's bar, but figured that would just make things worse. When he finally got home he snuck past his wife sleeping in their bedroom, closed the bathroom door behind him, and washed his face with hand soap, trying all along to push out the tension of the night.

When he was done drying his face, Milo emptied a dollop of Rogaine foam onto his open palm, then rubbed it on his scalp. It was supposed to stop the thinning hair, but he didn't think it was working. After washing his hands, he squirted two globs of testosterone gel onto each shoulder and massaged deeply; in the mirror it looked like he was hugging himself. *I've become a sponge.* The gel was the doctor's latest attempt to help with Milo's sex life. He washed his hands again and squeezed out some his wife's eye cream, stolen from her drawer, dabbing it onto

the dark bags drooping below his eyes. It was too late to floss, he decided, so he flipped off the light switch on his way to the king bed where Heather lay on her stomach, snoring.

“I’ll be better,” he said to her slender, naked back as it rose and fell with each breath.

* * *

The next morning Milo woke up just after ten, three hours after Heather had left for her job managing the books at Keil’s, a giant antique store in the Quarter. Keil’s was the type of place stuffed with Spanish and French colonial heirlooms passed down through generations of monied New Orleans families, the walls crowded with a mix of Realist paintings from the 1800’s and contemporary stars of the New Orleans art scene. Heather had gone to work there two years ago, a few months after the last of Milo’s art had come down from Keil’s walls.

Determined to finish a painting he’d started the week before, Milo brewed a large pot of coffee and tromped through the overgrown backyard garden to the shed he used for his studio. The weather-beaten, wooden building leaned a bit to the right, surrounded by wild bunches of holly plants and a slew of dahlias. Ivy covered one entire side of the building. The garden had been Heather’s, before she’d gone back to work. Milo found the crooked shed oddly comforting, reminding him of life after Katrina, when so many buildings seemed to tilt on their foundations.

That’s when life had been good for Milo, right after Katrina. He’d just gotten his master’s in architecture from Loyola the May before the storm, and married Heather that July. And if he’d wanted to, he would have been able to really make a go of it as an architect. The city sat poised for a huge rebuilding after the flood. But something better came along.

For three months after he graduated, Milo had played around creating artwork, paintings made of architectural renderings of the city done in faint pencil, glossed over with thinned-out oil paint. He was practicing his art, his real passion, while trying to find the right job with the right architect—something prestigious that paid a lot. A good portfolio meant he didn't need to settle, and he was still coasting on some money he had in the bank when the hurricane hit. He didn't need to rush.

Somehow, a miracle perhaps, his paintings avoided the water and the mold that crept over and through the city. Though they couldn't get back in for six weeks, the second-floor apartment he'd shared with Heather in the Irish Channel hadn't gotten wet. After recovering his paintings, he used his brushes to flood the streets with watercolor, placing alligators on Canal Street and sharks in Jackson Square. It was dark; it was silly. The people in New Orleans loved it—the faint pencil lines of the buildings covered with splashes of translucent color, the streets around them full of rising water and absurdity. For three years Milo's *After the Flood* series was ubiquitous in coffee shops and galleries from Uptown to the Bywater, from Midtown to the Quarter. But as the hipsters from L.A. came in to fix a city they thought was broken, Milo's paintings lost favor. Something a bit too real, not ironic enough. Or not ironic in the way the transplants wanted. For the past six years he'd been searching for a new hook, but nothing seemed to work.

Art nowadays needs a good hook, and Milo knew this. Harouni has his heads. Rodrigue had his blue dogs. And Milo had had his flooded city. But that was gone. He'd tried an abstracted pelican. He'd glued plastic frogs painted gold on top of some ethereal swamplandscapes. He'd tilted and morphed the houses uptown. But none of it worked. His friends said they were nice; the critics said they were unoriginal. One gallery owner even said it all looked reductive.

All of this swirled in Milo's mind like one memory, one line in a song set to repeat, keeping Milo frozen as he sat in front of the giant canvas in his studio, paint brush in one hand and joint in the other, trying to pull inspiration from the abyss. Nothing would come.

After an hour or so of staring, he headed back into the kitchen. Heather, in a navy pantsuit with her hair pulled back in a severe bun, sat at their tall breakfast table, reading a newspaper while eating a salad.

"You're home early," he said, and poured himself another cup of coffee.

"It's lunch. I wish you wouldn't go traipsing around in your robe all day. It looks ridiculous." Heather shook her head, and looked up to Milo with a slight, forced smile.

He kissed her cheek. "You love my robe."

"Oh, god, you haven't even brushed your teeth." She pushed him away with an elbow. "There's an opening at Loyola. Architecture professor. Right here." She tapped on the paper, opened to the classifieds.

"What?" Milo grabbed the paper off the table, as if he needed to confirm it for himself. "I wonder why Neil hasn't called?"

Heather shrugged. "Well you call him. You always were his favorite T.A."

"Research assistant. I was his research assistant."

"Whatever you want to call it. I'm sure he can get you on. How's it going at the bar?"

Milo stared at the classifieds, pretending to read.

"You lost another job? Already?"

"No, I'm still there. I just—" Milo folded the newspaper in his hand. "I just think we can agree something like this here is more suited to me."

* * *

An hour after Heather left back to work, Milo made the call. After some awkward small talk he convinced his former mentor, Dr. Neil Thomas, to let him come by for an interview that coming Friday. For the next few nights Milo slept well. With Heather's urging, he reluctantly took some money out of savings to buy a new suit, and showed up to Neil's office, résumé in hand, with what was left of his hair slicked down at the sides. He was sweating, having taken his bike from their house in the Bywater, and felt confident. This job meant Milo would be able to be a husband again. An honest-to-goodness, bread-winning husband. Even as he thought this, Milo felt its hollowness. He pushed that momentary doubt away and confidently lumbered past the receptionist with a wave, knocking on Neil's door with authority.

After letting Milo into his office, Neil politely took the résumé, laid it on his desk and offered Milo a seat. Neil was a tall, thin man, his limbs angular and sure, quite the opposite of Milo's clumsy roundness. Milo had once imagined Neil was what a grasshopper might look like if it were human. Even Neil's hands darted quickly when he talked, the same way insects' limbs do when they eat. But on this day Neil kept his hands still, held together atop Milo's résumé, as if waiting for Milo to say something.

A sudden fear lurched through Milo that he shouldn't be here at all. It felt like the same panic you get waking from a dream where you've done something wrong, but you're not sure what it was. Had he been brash when he came in? Had he forgotten something?

Neil smiled and said, "Milo, I am glad you came by. It is just that we are looking for someone with a little more experience. You have never even taught at the graduate level."

Milo's shirt stuck to the sweat in the small of his back as he sat up straighter. "But you know me, Neil, I have tons of experience. I helped you for, what, three years. And my grades were stellar."

Neil nodded. "Most grad students have stellar grades. If they do not, they flunk out. But that is not the point, Milo. The point is you have no real-world experience. You spent the last decade as a painter."

"You have two of my paintings. You know they're good." Panic surged up Milo's back as he said this. He knew he sounded desperate, out-of-place.

"Milo, you know how much you mean to me. You were a great student. You have been an honest, decent friend. And Dolores and I love the paintings you gave us. It is just—" Neil took his glasses off and laid them on the desk in front of him, rubbing his eyes. "Milo, it has been almost ten years since you got your master's. This is architecture. Do you know how fast things change? We do not even use the same CADD programs you know. You never even tried for a doctorate."

"But Neil—" Milo said, interrupted by his former mentor lifting a hand.

"If you wanted to be an architect, if you wanted to teach architecture, you would have to go back and get a new degree at this point. You never even interned professionally." Neil thumped his hand against Milo's résumé. "Look at this. Not one thing I would need to even bring you before the board. You are not an architect, Milo. I am sorry, but you are not."

Milo managed a smile and some thanks, asking some weak questions about the two kids and Dolores' health before excusing himself to head home. But instead of taking his bike, Milo got on the streetcar. And instead of heading home, Milo went to his favorite bar.

* * *

Buffa's bar, on the edge of the Quarter and the Marigny, was one of those dives that managed to survive even after Katrina shut down some of the even older bars around town. Milo loved it because it served better food than some of the city's more famous restaurants. The burgers were his favorite, dripping with grease and a kind of authenticity shared by the live music coming out of the back room. The lights were always low, the music was always loud, and the people were always locals. When Milo was there he felt at home, one of the only places left in the city that felt that way to him.

On the way to the bar Milo had texted his best friend, Jake, to meet him there. Jake made his own hours, running a tattoo shop in the Marigny under the ironically tough pseudonym "Jāk the Snāk." Jake was a self-proclaimed "lover not a fighter." At 5'6" and 120 lbs., that was probably a good thing. An avid bird watcher in his spare time, Jake was covered in tattoos of different birds, their scientific names inked below. Full sleeves of cardinals and doves, peregrines and swifts decorated both of his arms. He even had a mockingbird, *Mimus polyglottos*, just behind his left ear like it was whispering to him.

They'd started bird watching as a hobby together years ago in high school, part of their stint in Boy Scouts. Milo still went occasionally—three times one year, twice the next year—whenever he felt the urge. He could recognize a spotted owl or a ringed turtle-dove; he just couldn't spit out *Strix occidentalis* or *Streptopelia roseogrisea* on command the way Jake could.

For the past month Jake had been pushing Milo to come with him on a bird watching trip, but Milo wasn't too keen on the early hours and the long car rides. His legs stiffened up now in a way they never did when he was younger. If he went, Jake would just brag about how many

birds he'd seen that Milo never had a chance at. That, or he'd brag about how many girls he'd hooked up with lately. Or he'd just hook up. Jake liked to say he was a "cunnilingus connoisseur," and often spent too much time trying to explain to Milo just the right way to get in there and find the right spot, going into detail about how each one was different from the last. Usually this happened after they were drunk. And usually this happened in a completely inappropriate place. To this day it astounded Milo how many girls Jake got with. If Milo was going bird watching he wanted it to be real, to be about the birds.

* * *

By the time Jake made it to the bar, Milo was working on his third Jack and Coke, firmly planted in front of a poker machine in the otherwise empty bar, feeding it a steady stream of five dollar bills. The caution Milo had about getting money out of savings took off with his second drink. Jake wore his ever-present white tank top and cargo shorts, the same thing he wore whatever season and whatever setting. He pulled Milo from the poker machine to the bar, ordered them both a shot.

Jake smiled a jubilant smile, then raised a glass of tequila the bartender had set next to him. "To being the biggest pervert you know." He drained the shot without wincing. No lime. No salt. Then called for another. "Anyway compadre, what's got you day drinking? Heather not putting out again."

"It's not that," Milo said.

"Can't get it up no more?" Jake made an exaggerated look of shock.

“No. I mean, sometimes, but—” Milo shook his head. “I tried to get a job at Loyola. Teaching architecture. They said I’m no good.”

“What do you mean you’re no good? You’re the best architect I know. Even if you’ve never built a house.” Jake winked, then downed another shot. “Besides, you’re living our dream. You’re the big artist now. I’m just some guy with a tattoo parlor inking up drunk tourists and trustifarians from the Bywater. You made it. You are Milo Bowers, Artiste Extraordinaire.”

“People don’t want my stuff anymore. It’s old news.”

Jake nodded. “Well, that’s what you get trying to profit off disaster.”

“Fuck you. You’ve flipped, what, four houses since Katrina?”

“That’s different,” Jake said. “Real estate’s not art. Art actually matters. And you, sir, are the artiste.” Jake poked Milo in the chest. “The artiste living the dream”

Milo figured Jake meant well, but his words did nothing. It was true in a way; Milo had been living their dream. They’d met in art class, both determined to be the best painter at Jesuit High. Jake had been the one with the fire, the passion. Milo had been the one with the precision, the technique. A drunken thought came to Milo, the deep kind that creeps in with clarity just before you get too drunk to make sense. The same kind that’s usually gone in the morning. That’s why Jake did tattoos. He was all passion and fire. And that’s why Milo should have been an architect. He had the skills, but not the inspiration. He never should have given it up to be a painter.

“Snap out of it.” Jake clapped his hands before Milo’s face. “This shot’s not shooting itself.”

* * *

Midnight had come and gone by the time Jake got around to offering advice about what to do about Heather. Milo was complaining she'd texted him three times in the past hour, when Jake grabbed Milo and pulled him close.

“Dude, just give Robin a booty call. You'll feel better.” They were huddled in a booth at the corner of the bar, which had gone from empty to full, brimming with kids almost half Milo's age laughing and talking. Jake put his arm around Milo's shoulder, whispering in his ear. “It doesn't even count. You were banging her before Heather, so it's a freebie.”

Milo laughed, shaking his head. “That's not how it works. Married is different. You don't know.”

“Fine, but at least come to the coast with me next weekend. There's supposed to be some birds down from New England, shit we only get once a year.” Jake hugged Milo to him. “I'll even let you use my special binoculars with the built-in camera. Eight whole megapixels of crystal clear clarity.” Jake rubbed his chin against Milo's neck.

Milo winced, pushing Jake away with an elbow. “All right. Fine. I'll come bird.” Milo cocked his head sideways and straightened his posture. “But you better make good on the trip.”

“What?” Jake shook his head, confusion on his face. “I always make good on our trips.”

“No. Make good for me.” Milo poked himself in the chest. “I want to see birds. Not girls.” They both laughed together. Milo slapped his hand on the table. “You always want to chase girls.”

“C'mon, I'm not that bad.”

Milo looked sideways at Jake and they both laughed again.

Jake stopped first and said, “Okay, maybe I am that bad. But I swear, it’ll be just us. I promise.”

On the walk home from the bar, Milo’s drunken tilting seemed to match the crooked sidewalks of the Marigny. Then the Bywater. Every time he stumbled, it was like the ground came up and caught him, moving him along. As he passed over the train tracks a few blocks before his house, Jake’s words about Robin splashed through Milo’s brain. He got out his phone and texted her a quick *WHAT’S UP!* before noticing a series of increasingly desperate texts from Heather, wondering if he was okay. At home he flopped down on the couch in the front room, knowing he didn’t want to chance waking her.

* * *

The next morning, Milo woke up with Heather standing over him, a note in her hand.

“I was just going to leave you this note,” she said, “but that would be letting you off easy.”

His head throbbed. He dug the sleep out of the corners of his eyes. “Sorry, I met Jake at Buffa’s and—”

“You quit your fucking job.” Heather crumpled up the note and threw it at him. “I was up until 2 a.m. before I called Declan. Figured you went into work after your interview. I was worried.” She smoothed her hair back with both of her hands. “But no. No. You didn’t go in because you don’t have a fucking job.”

“It wasn’t right for me.” Milo sat up on the couch.

Heather kicked Milo’s shin. “You fucking lied to me.”

“Don’t fucking kick me.” Milo pulled his legs up onto the couch.

Heather balled her fists up and pressed them to her forehead, shaking. “I am not going to be in a marriage with some loser who can’t even keep a job as a bartender.”

“Heather, please.”

“No.” Heather spread her hands out, as if she were pushing away his words. “I’ve put up with you and your fucking failures for too long. We are done. I am going to Mother’s house, and I will have my attorney contact you.”

Milo jumped up from the couch, dizzy. He reached out a hand toward Heather but she batted it away.

“Don’t fucking touch me.”

“But—”

“You will never—” She put a hand over her mouth and took a deep breath. “You will never touch me again. We are through.”

“But Heather.”

She shook her head. “Never. Again.” She walked to the front door and stopped. “Do not,” she said, her back to him, “think about calling me at work, or bothering me at my mother’s house.”

The door slammed behind her.

Milo picked up the crumpled note she’d thrown at him and smoothed it out on his knee. *Called Declan. Gone to Mom’s. We’re through.* He wadded it up and put it in his pocket, realizing he still had on his clothes from the night before. He went into their bathroom, stripped down and took a cold shower, something to try to jolt him awake.

When he had dried off, Milo put on his robe and brewed his pot of coffee like usual, ready to get back to the shed and try to do some work. So he wouldn't be an architect. Or a teacher. But fuck it. He was an artist. That's just it. He needed inspiration. He needed late nights in dive bars. He needed to push the limits. That's what artists do. Heather didn't get it. She couldn't.

The bright sun when he stepped out back was dizzying. Milo put down his mug by the door and heaved what was left of last night's burger onto a large azalea. They'd eaten burgers. He'd forgotten that. Before heading out to the shed, Milo chugged the coffee and waited to see if it would come back up. Once inside the shed, he dug a joint out of the metal Thundercats lunchbox he kept his weed in, and was just sparking it up when his phone buzzed.

I'M GOOD. WHAT'S UP?

It was Robin returning his text from the night before. He'd forgotten that part. Milo knew he should ignore it; knew he shouldn't text back. But he'd been seeing Robin on and off since they were both 19, even back before he knew Heather. If anyone asked him, especially when he was drunk, he'd tell them Robin was his first love.

Occasionally, once every two years or so, they'd hook up. Even since he'd been married. It wasn't something he was proud of, and it wasn't something he could explain. It's just how it had always been. There wasn't any set schedule to it. And it's not like Milo was a cheater, exactly. Robin was his one and only weakness on that front. Even after he'd started taking the blue pills for his ED, he saw Robin and didn't even need one. Something about her made things right. Excited him in a way Heather just didn't. He texted back.

WONDERING IF YOU WANT TO HANG

* * *

Two hours later Milo stood at the door to Robin's place, an old, Uptown mansion on Napoleon Avenue cut into a half-dozen or so apartments. She'd been renting there since college and didn't seem like she'd ever be moving, no matter how much paint peeled off or how much the porches sagged. There was a constancy to Robin that Milo loved, something real he could never quite explain, even if it didn't always make him feel good. Her apartment was a lucky spot, close enough to the river that it hadn't flooded. Robin actually stayed behind for Katrina, one of the few people Milo knew brave enough to try. Robin was one of the bravest people Milo knew, unique in a way the blue-haired hipsters riding their bikes through the Marigny never would be. She played the saxophone on the weekends with a jazz band and read tarot during the week in Jackson Square, so her staying behind made sense. Robin was about as New Orleans as you could get. If it was going under, so was she. That's why Robin stayed behind. That's why Milo loved her.

The distinct, spicy smell of Nag Champa met Milo when Robin opened the door. She always burned incense. She was wearing a tattered blue and green kimono he'd seen her in years ago, a frayed belt holding it together across her belly. Her hair was up in a casual knot on top of her head, held in place by two chopsticks. He could see her breasts had gotten bigger, drooping beneath the silk fabric. He wondered if his body had changed in the past two years as much as hers.

"Well don't just stand there gawking. Come on in," she said, yanking him by the wrist. He sat down on a tattered sofa halfway covered by a crocheted throw, and watched her saunter to

the kitchen, swinging her hips a bit too much. “I’ve got tea and beer and some milk.” She opened her fridge and peered in. “Okay, the milk’s a no-go. What’ll ya have?”

“Beer is fine.” A white kitten ran out from her bedroom and attacked Milo’s ankles. He picked up its slender body and it purred, batting its paws at his face.

“I see you’ve met Catimir Putin.” Robin placed an Abita Amber on the coffee table. “He’s my newest addition.”

“What happened to Meow Zedong?” Milo put down the kitten and swigged his beer. The tiny cat darted back into the bedroom.

Robin settled on the couch next to him, her kimono falling open in the front. “Oh, it was a tragic accident during Orpheus last year. He jumped out the window and ran into the street chasing after doubloons. Head got squashed by a purple and pink float shaped like a dragon.” She chugged her beer, then wiped her mouth with the loose sleeve of her kimono.

“Sounds terrible.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She looked out of the window, doing a fair impersonation of wistful. “The worst part was watching his little body push against the pavement, somehow unaware that his head had been crushed.” She downed her beer in one gulp and patted Milo’s knee. “Guess there’s worse ways to go, huh?”

Milo was dumbfounded. “My god. That’s just terrible.”

“Oh, please. I’m only kidding, jackass. I had to put him to sleep. Feline AIDS. But the float story gets more traction.” She picked up her empty bottle and headed back to the kitchen. “You ready for another?”

After they finished a couple more beers and the crumpled joint Milo had in his pocket, Robin dropped her kimono to the ground and slid her hand up Milo’s leg. Within minutes she

was on top of him, pushing her breasts against his face the way he liked. Even with the stretchmarks they looked and felt right to him. He fit inside her in a way he never fit inside Heather, so it was less like two people fucking and more like one person grabbed by his other half. He watched her stomach bounce when she leaned back, the scar from her C-section dimpling in as she moved up and down. She gave the baby up; never told him who the father was. Sometimes he wondered.

When they were done, she laid across him. Their naked bodies pressed together, slipping from sweat. They panted in unison. She smiled, the corners of her eyes showing the wrinkles setting in. He reached up and brushed the hair away from her face. He wanted to tell her he really loved her. That she was beautiful. That picking Heather over her had been the wrong choice. But he knew it wouldn't come out right.

She hopped off of him in one smooth motion. The cold air hit his body, making his skin prickle with goose bumps.

“Now that was hot,” she said, grabbing a towel off the floor and wiping between her legs. “We need to do this again soon. Not wait two years.” She walked off to the bathroom in the hall. Milo noticed a large bluebird tattooed on the small of her back.

“That tat's cool,” he called from the couch, sitting up and zipping his fly. “When'd you get it?”

“Jake did it, I don't know, a few months ago. After we fucked.” She came out of the bathroom wrapped in a robe. “He's so tiny, I never knew his dick was so big. Fucking wowza.” She smiled at Milo, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. “And the things he can do with that tongue.”

Milo forced a smile back at her. “Yep. It's one of his specialties, that's for sure.”

“Oh my god, I’m just kidding. Do you really think I’d fuck Jake?” Robin came over and sat next to Milo on the sofa, rubbing his head. “You’re going bald.”

“I know.”

Robin leaned in and kissed the crown of Milo’s head. “I’m sorry things aren’t going well with Heather.”

“She doesn’t get me. She never has.”

Robin stood up. “No one ever gets anyone, Milo. That’s the real catch. And unfortunately, now I have to get to the square, try to make some cash. Rent’s getting close. I’m gonna hop in the shower unless you want to wash up first.”

“Nah. That’s all right. Gotta get home and get to work myself.”

“Great.” Robin smiled a big smile, then shut herself in the bathroom. Milo left as soon as he heard the water running.

* * *

“Have you been fucking Robin?” Milo paced inside his shed in front of the giant canvass he’d been trying to work on, cellphone pressed hard to his ear. “I mean, I’m here trying to work and all I can think about is you on top of her.”

“No way you get to do that. First, you’re married.” There was a pause. “Second. I love you. And third—”

“What’s third?” Milo asked.

“Did you even notice the bird on her back?” Jake asked.

“Yes, it was a bluebird.”

“No,” Jake said, “it was *Sialia currucoides*, the mountain bluebird. The kind Robin saw with us when we all did that trip to the Grand Canyon back in high school.”

Milo remembered the trip, how happy Robin had been to get to go with them. He felt tears building in his eyes. “Listen,” he said, “I think I need to get off the phone.”

“Milo, I know you’re going through it right now. Let’s just forget about all this bullshit and head down to the coast Friday. Have some boy time. Okay?”

Milo stepped out of the shed and looked up into the empty, cloudless sky, searching for something. He only found a grand expanse of blue. “All right man. Boy time.”

“Sweet!” Jake shouted through the phone. “I will be there bright and early, so don’t make me wake you up.”

* * *

The drive from New Orleans down to the condo Jake had rented in Orange Beach, Alabama, flew by, with Milo falling in and out of sleep most of the way. Jake listened to some obscure darkwave most of the trip, and Milo couldn’t be bothered to stay awake and listen.

After they picked up the key and dumped their things in the condo, they took off for the Flora-Bama Lounge, Jake’s favorite bar on the Gulf Coast. He called it his favorite because it straddled the Florida-Alabama state line and he could have a conversation with someone at the same table but sitting in another state. Milo thought it absurd, since things like state lines were arbitrary, but he played along. No need to start things off griping.

The bar, if you could call it just a bar, was more like a series of bars built together in a compound, some of the bars indoors, some of them out. It was like a cheap, rundown version of

one of the places in Key West Milo had visited on his honeymoon. One bar even opened up to the beach, so Jake and Milo grabbed a couple daiquiris and headed to the shore to watch the waves come in. They'd made good time. It wouldn't be dark for a couple hours.

"So what kind of birds are you hoping for?" Milo didn't like small talk, but he needed to say something. He hadn't felt right since seeing Robin, and the stress was spilling into everything.

Jake stared out across the waves. "I don't know, something down from Canada. Or over from Europe. I hear there were some *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* this way last year."

"Some what?"

"Oh, forgot. Some black-headed gulls." Jake nodded, the corners of his mouth turning up into a smile. "You used to be so determined to memorize the names."

"You don't have to be a prick."

"We're supposed to be having fun."

Milo stood up and stretched. "How about you find us some drinks that aren't watered-down Icees, and I'll find a place to take a piss?"

"Now you're talking."

* * *

A few hours and twice as many shots later, Milo and Jake sat at a high-top with some girl from Tallahassee, arguing about the virtues of bird watching. She might have been eighteen or nineteen. She might have been twenty-two or twenty-three. However young she was, she was much younger than Milo and Jake. And she knew nothing about birds.

“No,” Jake said, “the thing is, you’ve gotta find as many birds as you can. Get ‘em all down. That’s what these are.” He indicated his tattoos with his hands. “These are all the birds I’ve seen. You just can’t top that.”

The girl nodded in agreement.

“No,” Milo said, waving his arms in the air, “that is absolutely not the thing. The thing really is that moment, you know, when you see a bird you’ve never seen before. And it’s astounding. And it’s beautiful. It shocks you and it takes your breath away.” Milo pointed at Jake’s arms. “All that is just shit. What matters is that feeling, like you’re falling in love.”

The girl looked at Jake who nodded along with Milo’s words.

“Fuck,” Jake said. “Just fuck! You are absofuckinglutely right. God fucking damn it. Dude, you are fucking right.”

“Of course I’m right.”

“And you never fucking know if you’ll ever see it again or feel it again. Just never.”

“But you just gotta keep trying to find it.” Milo clasped his hand on the back of Jake’s neck and squeezed. “See, man, I’m not always wrong, you know.”

“I never said you were.” Jake put his arms around Milo and they hugged. “You know man,” Jake whispered in Milo’s ear, “you’ve already found it.”

Milo sat back and looked at Jake, confused. “Jake,” Milo said, “you’re not—”

“Not me, asshole,” Jake said, then punched Milo’s chest. “Robin.”

“So,” the girl said, “like how long have you like been together?”

They both looked at the girl for a moment, then Jake said, “Too fucking long, sweetheart. Just too fucking long.”

* * *

The next morning Milo woke up before Jake and decided to take a walk on the beach. He grabbed the binoculars in case he found some birds, and was heading out the sliding glass door at the back of the condo when he saw an enormous flock swirling high overhead. He called Jake's name, then jogged out to the shore.

The massive swarm of birds spun and rotated about, a convoluted tornado of bodies flying through the air, darkening the sky. Milo pointed the binoculars up at them, snapping pictures as best he could. Without any warning, the birds shot straight down toward the water, then darted through the waves clean and straight as bullets. Occasionally one bird would shoot up into the air, a fish in its mouth, then plunge back down to join the others. Milo's finger steadily pressed the button on the binoculars, taking pictures of the whirling mass.

"Jake!" he screamed across the beach. "Jake, you have to see this!"

The birds continued for almost ten minutes, becoming a giant, pulsating swirl plunging down into the water then up into the sky. Milo felt like they were pulling at him with some invisible force, trying to drag him into the air. He looked down, but his feet were still on the sand. Some of the birds flew around him, the warm air pushing from their wings against his skin, a loud, rhythmic flapping in his ears. Their feathers brushed against him. He put his arms out to the side and closed his eyes. The smell of ocean, salt, and fish flooded in, and he felt his feet lift just a hint off the ground.

Then suddenly, without warning, it went quiet as the birds shot up into the sky, a giant mass quickly disappearing down the beach. Milo, shaken and stunned, stared after them.

After the shock wore off, Milo ran into the condo, shouting. “Jake! Jake! There was this crazy flock. Thousands. Hundreds of thousands. There were millions. There were millions!” He went into Jake’s room, but no one was there. “Shit.” Milo ran out the front of the condo, but the car was gone. “Shit.” He ran back inside, checked Jake’s room again, then grabbed his cellphone. There was a text from Jake.

DON'T WORRY. MET BACK UP WITH TALLAHASSEE. BE HOME IN THE AM

* * *

An hour later when Jake got back, he didn’t believe a word of Milo’s story.

“No,” Milo said, “I’m serious. There were thousands. Hundreds of thousands. Millions, even. I’ve never seen a flock like that before. It was amazing. I swear they tried to lift me off the ground.”

Jake shook his head. “Dude, they were gulls. Didn’t even know you were there.”

“No, they weren’t gulls. They had brown backs and a cap on their head. They flew too gracefully. And they touched me, man, they touched me.”

“Where’s the binoculars?”

“What?”

“The binoculars. You took pictures, right?”

“Yes, tons. They’re on your bed.”

Jake came back from his room with a look of shock on his face. He shook his head, like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing. “This is *Ardenna gravis*, the great shearwater. I’ve never seen one. They almost never come here.” Jake shook his head again.

“But they were here. Everywhere.” Milo stood behind Jake, looking at the pictures. He pointed out a bird to Jake, as if he couldn’t see it.

“You got one,” Jake said. “You got the great shearwater.”

“Ha,” Milo said. “I got the Adriana Gravitass.”

“It’s *Ardenna gravis*, asshole. Looks like you’re getting a tattoo.”

Milo shook his head. “Nah, man. That’s your thing. I have something else I’ve gotta do.”

* * *

Almost three weeks later Milo Bowers stood in front of a giant canvass in the crooked shed out back of his house, his left hand fluttering freely in front of him, leaving color in its wake. Blues and tans dominated the background, with shocks of white and brown bolting across the painting.

Lost in the furious movement of his hands, Milo wasn’t worried about Heather or the divorce papers that had shown up the day before. He wasn’t hoping he’d find a job so he could pay the bills stacked up on the kitchen counter. He wasn’t bothered that his hair was getting thin or that his waist was getting thick. Milo had found what he’d been looking for, the only thing that would sustain him.

Milo stopped, put down his brush and stood back to take a look at the canvas before him. He chuckled, a smile stretched across face.

This would be the tenth painting he’d finish since visiting the coast. The shed was filling up.

VITA

J. Michael Norris was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, but spent most of his childhood in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. After spending many years as a bartender in the French Quarter, he got an A.A. in Interior Design from Delgado Community College. A few years after Katrina, he decided to go back to school to get a B.A. in English Literature and Creative Writing from Louisiana State University.