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Dark Smoke Rising

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Abstract

A collection of short fiction set in and around Southern California.

Keywords: fiction; stories; short stories; short fiction; California; Southern California.

So Far Behind I Thought I Was First

I first came to know JJ after he became, of all things, a notable local figure. He took a job as a gas station attendant on North Pinehill Avenue and was quickly a favorite of the dropouts who frequented his establishment's parking lot. He'd comment on their bastardized cars and take bets on certain ruinous overland competitions. The joy of the world, JJ said. Many would drive drunk into trees before this curse ended.

Other mountain places a day out from San Francisco, they'd filled up with summer homes. Pinehill never filled up with anything. If I'd left years before, I already would've stayed too long. The ex had finally smelled death on me and skipped off with another man, a fresh-faced biker from the low-country. Most of my friends were by then mired in some kind of misery: loneliness, or addiction, or the god-fearing haze of American spiritual collapse, basic cable viewership, family life. I thought for a long time about eating a bullet, but ultimately decided I could do something about the youth. In my years of self-loathing, I'd come to revere the stupid young, the way they threw their lives into the void, fearless. Perhaps I could still learn. I'd been an educated man once.

Pinehill was founded by fortune seekers, old-timey gold hunters. To no one's surprise, it became a cynical place. Yosemite was just up the road, and there were always trinkets to sell: tiny plastic Half Domes, Ahwahnechee bobble-heads. Shops that sold healing crystals, jerky, and fudge. A century of history is not enough to provide a future.

When JJ came to town, he gazed with such love upon the locals' rusting muscle cars, I wondered which luminous hellscape spawned him. One night, after his shift at the gas station, I asked if we could become friends. He smiled and led me through the woods towards the Airstream he called home.

He told me things. Nobody had ever asked him much. He told me about a race he'd pulled in Baja California, looking upon the Sea of Cortez at low tide when the water receded for miles, disappearing eventually from sight. He told me about his family and about what brought him up the mountain. He spoke briefly about a boy he'd harmed in the wastelands east of San Diego, and this topic seemed to weigh on him.

One night we walked a country lane. A group of children, probably junior high, passed on bicycles. The can of beer they threw missed JJ but grazed my own skull.

"Pedal faster!" JJ shrieked. "They will catch up to you eventually!"

One glanced back, his expression carrying the confusion and fear of a coyote lost in town, but JJ sprinted in pursuit, scattering them like birds across the asphalt. I asked myself: does nobody notice the love he carries? How can he sustain a thing so pure among a people so fallen? Here was someone I could learn something from. I'd grown so tired of myself.

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Before I knew him, Joshua Janacek was a lean and deep-shouldered goon with black hair, born of a nothing family from Fontana, that desert town outside Los Angeles known for its warehouses and methamphetamine. His brother died in a blackout on the road to Las Vegas and his mother, who'd come to California in flight from the Soviets, unaware of the approaching Velvet Revolution, was long ago reckoned among the born again, god bless. His father drove truck for a time, before he disappeared back east, and was a man who worshiped speed above all else, the concept, not the drug. JJ came eventually to worship speed as well, difficult god though it was. He grew up riding motorcycles and by his seventeenth year was a minor contender in the trail riding circuits of Riverside, Kern, and Imperial counties. He had no interest in the acrobatics of the motocross racers and took to burning across long distances in a fugue.

During a grueling race beyond Superstition Mountain, near the bombing fields where the Blackhawks illume the Imperial Valley with tracer rounds, JJ crested a low hill and was nearly launched from his bike dodging a pack of sniveling hippies who'd hiked into the Anza Borrego to pick wildflowers. They'd thrown up their hands as if expecting a mugging and howled at his quickly fading silhouette, yelling that anyone had as much of a right to this trail as he and that all things were sacred.

These enduro races measured the time elapsed traversing vast tracts and were not sprints toward some ribboned line, flags waving, announcers babbling in their hut. Other riders were seldom encountered, so it enraged JJ when another man, or boy, difficult to tell with the helmets, materialized beside him in the sandy depth of a flash-flood wash and stole his line across a graceful bend, cutting our hero off and sending JJ floundering into a stand of catclaw brush. His machine subsequently stalled and flooded before starting fitfully again, a great dishonor. The two

riders found each other later, crossing a broad stony flat in the shadow of mountains worn smooth like river rocks. JJ, by then slavering with a vengeful madness, swerved suddenly to force their meeting. With his opponent close behind, wheels nearly scraping, JJ dropped from fourth gear to third and torqued his four-stroke motor, releasing from beneath his rear tire a great spume of dust, stone, and dried clay. One of these rocks, a piece of granite the size and shape of a blood orange, struck the enemy rider directly in the knee, dislodging the kneecap from its regular groove atop the femur and sending the competitor into an agonized heap on the ground.

No longer hearing another engine wailing alongside his own, JJ did not look back, and by the time he'd finished his trial and returned to camp would have forgotten about the meeting completely, if three men with wrenches hadn't been breaking the windows of his pickup truck and stabbing holes into his tires with Phillips screwdrivers. JJ assumed them to be the downed rider's teammates or meathead brothers and that the other man, or boy, had perhaps been crippled or killed. JJ had gas remaining in his six-gallon tank and quickly left in the opposite direction.

He was arrested finally, in a state of delirium, outside the dusty town of Brawley, where he'd been riding at speed across the front yards of a suburban street. That country is lousy with sunburnt crazies, so the police were not surprised when JJ began to gibber about being chased by three masked men wielding screwdrivers who would surely kill him. They were somewhere in these houses now, he said, his eyes darting like bugs at a light.

He was charged with misdemeanor vandalism for the damage he'd inflicted on neighborhood lawns but managed to avoid jail time. He sold the dirt bike to pay the fine, and never once returned to the site of the race, nor to his demolished pickup. Some months later, he

heard that a group of local miscreants had dynamited the rusted frame of his long-windowless vehicle, and some time after that, the wreckage, now brightly painted, became a regular spot for Coachella psychonauts to lust after infinity.

Living again with his zealot mother in Fontana, JJ was jumpy, prone to irrational fears. He often considered escape and believed he was being followed. Mrs. Janacek, who thought herself a great helper of souls, phoned a Pentecostal exorcist from a pamphlet she found in the lobby of her church. A week later, the minister arrived, disheveled, driving a rusty and once-white El Camino that rattled and groaned. He was of course a drunk and a charlatan and believed every lie he told. He found JJ sitting alone in his room, reading an automotive magazine. This man of god subsequently drew the curtains, tied our hero's limbs to the bedframe as if he were to be drawn and quartered, and began speaking of spiritual warfare.

"You are oppressed by a demon of fire," the minister said, brandishing a wooden cross. "It has entered your body."

"Is it the devil?" a meek JJ asked.

"Hear me, demon," spoke the holy man, "I will expel thee in the name of god."

He then straddled the boy, as a lover might, and raised the cross above his head.

"Hey man, can I ask you something?"

"I am a servant of Christ," bellowed the minister, "and I command you, Lucifer, to get thee from this child, to flee back to Hell."

"How fast can you get that Camino to run?" JJ asked. "I bet that baby just cranks."

“Out, demon, out!” the man cried and began to black JJ’s eyes and face with the cross, striking him as much with his knuckles and wrists as with the hardwood pommel of the icon itself.

Later, JJ lay immobile in his bed, his limbs still tethered. From the other room he heard the man collect his pay from Mrs. Janacek and leave out the front door. Our hero shuddered when the El Camino’s crankshaft finally turned over and the old clunker lumbered off.

“Fire,” he whispered, “a demon of fire.”

Uncommonly, for one obsessed with motion, JJ became interested, more and more, with immobility and delay.

The day after the exorcism, he sat icing his black eyes. He’d been exiled from the motorcycle community, that much was clear. He held the bag of ice a foot from his face and examined its form, the cubes inside. Thirty minutes later, the bag held only water. A drop of condensation stung the top of JJ’s foot. The cold soothed him, and he decided, through a logic entirely his own, that the proper cure for demonic possession was a visit to fields of solid ice. He vowed, that afternoon, to see a glacier with his own eyes.

So, JJ filled a backpack with his meager life, and left. That night he walked many miles across the begrimed netherworld of Los Angeles, arriving sometime before dawn at the art deco arches of Union Station. He purchased a ticket heading north, along the San Joaquin rail, to the distant town of Merced.

JJ expected the three hundred miles of crackly yellow hills to transmute, upon arrival to the Sierra Nevada, into mountains thickly matted with glacial ice. This did not happen. Merced lay in the center of a vast agricultural flatland smelling of broccoli and pesticides. Standing on a

patch of grass beside the railyard in the beating sun, our hero divined that he ought to head east, toward the mountains he'd seen from the train car. He began walking.

It happens that the Palisade Glacier, the southernmost glacier in the United States, lies almost due east from Merced. JJ did not make it to the Palisade Glacier. He followed a backwoods trail into the western Sierras until the trail branched and faded into the brush. There he found a cairn, a stack of stones, and fifty yards later he found another. This string of markers led JJ deeper into the mountains, and sometime before sunset our hero was deposited by this ragged path onto the desolate shore of a subalpine lake, where he made camp. Bivouacked alone in a remote valley of the John Muir Wilderness, without having found any glacier, nor any snow, JJ was afraid.

He'd heard his mother's tales of mad prophets wandering the wasteland; Jesus himself had once fought Satan in the desert. Muhammad too. JJ sat beside the lake's dark water, burning twigs beneath the stars in the manner of ancient astronomers, and considered his own demons.

In this valley there were no paths. How could one know their way? How could one prevail when there was no track? The last cairn before the lake had been a mile up the valley; he'd only found the shore after blundering through a thick stand of manzanita. He'd nearly tripped into the frigid waters.

JJ's little fire reflected off the lake's velvet face. A branch snapped; a fish jumped; something scattered in the brush. In the vague penumbra of light, JJ noticed three figures on the water's flickering surface. Three armed men, he saw, in pursuit. Perhaps they brandished screwdrivers. A familiar sight for our hero. They advanced toward him slowly. JJ stiffened, breathed deeply, then dove into the lake to face his attackers before they could catch him alone,

unaware, sitting on his ass thinking cloudy things. He thrashed in the freezing dark, his blistered feet barely scraping bottom. Above him, three jagged peaks were etched into the twilight, backlit by a rising moon. Their outlines flickered across the nameless tarn. A grave business unfolded.

Joshua Janacek emerged from his mountain sojourn a tattered soul. After leaving the lake, he'd never again found the trail of cairns that led back to the world. He'd been lost for days in those empty hills. He stumbled into Pinehill begging for water.

JJ slept in the woods around town before a local acid casualty offered him their busted old Airstream for next-to-nothing, at least clean the yard, they asked, referring to the uncleared acre of forest upon which the trailer moldered. That fall, raking pine needles to and fro, JJ decided to stay, perhaps to settle. This was all it took. He'd seen enough of the world to know he didn't need to see any more.

***

In those days, when I knew JJ, speed was the only real problem in town. By speed I mean methamphetamine. There was drink, of course, and there always would be. Opiates would come later and take their toll, but it was a simpler time when everyone was just up all night, grinding their teeth instead of killing themselves. I got mine from some high schoolers who hung out around JJ's parking lot.

These two were brothers, fraternal twins in fact. The Lawson boys. One with a walleye and the other with a snaggletooth. I never got the names right. The product they peddled was clean enough; one of their uncles cooked it up in tunnels out in the woods, protected by punji pits and centipedes. Not that I wouldn't stoop to smoking something rancid, something cut with mysteries from the mineral world, or the pharmaceutical case, or whatever was left in the cleaning bottles under the sink. I was not, not any longer at least, what you would call an addict. Regardless, I'd exhausted most branches of delinquency by then, and Pinehill didn't have many alternatives. I wasn't about to start singing in church, if that's what you're thinking.

JJ would watch the Lawson twins race. It was the only thing I ever saw him doing, other than work the gas station or talk nonsense with me.

They'd all go out to this stretch of highway in the dead of night. The way it worked, a little service one-lane splintered off from the main road and curled around a solitary hill. Eventually, a few miles off, it connected back to the highway, forming a loop. They'd unlatch the gate to the service road and race it all like a track, five laps, sometimes ten. One of the Lawsons had a radio scanner tuned to the state troopers' frequencies.

That night it was the four of us: Snaggletooth Lawson, his brother Walleye, JJ, and me. I hadn't slept in a while. I was pretty far into a good one at that point. One's decision-making suffers. I'd thrown a wad of cash down, betting on Snaggletooth. JJ counted the money, thumbing through it with the quick motions of a cashier, and accepted my gambit.

After a few laps, the race wasn't looking great. Walleye blasted around the corner in his hoodless '72 Plymouth Duster and skittered onto the service road.

"The way he takes that turn," JJ said, softly. "As if the rest of the world doesn't matter."

Snaggletooth Lawson came sliding into view in his blessed hatchback Camaro. He downshifted to hit the turn, but his twin was already out of sight. He wasn't going to win anything, and neither was I. The brothers gambled against each other worse than anyone else though.

"See how he countersteers when he hits the dirt patch?" JJ said, watching the Camaro. "Otherwise he'd slide out. Except, how can he see something like that on a night this dark? Those headlights won't do it."

I glanced around for what felt like the first time. He was right; we couldn't see anything. No moon, barely any stars. The vague shapes of trees were waiting for us to leave.

"He's made that turn so many times it's like a part of his mind."

"Then he must not know himself very well," I said. "I'm about to lose hundreds on this."

JJ laughed. I'd never heard him laugh before. He said, "We'll see."

I didn't know what that meant. I will admit that in those days of groveling and woe I saw JJ as a sort of prophet savant. His reverence for these two failures was astounding. I think he thought of them as unknown paladins serving a fiery god. Their deity, however, was a grim master, one who enjoyed sacrifice.

I never saw how it happened. Everything was too dark. Had JJ known, ahead of time? Had he known that the two brothers would come rocketing up the highway, one immediately following the other, their bumpers scraping, both engines fully engaged? Did JJ, with his maniac love of competitive physics, already understand that Snaggletooth would take the turn onto the service road too sharply, hoping to cut his brother off, and lose traction on the same patch of unpaved road he'd negotiated so deftly before? Did JJ know that Snagg wasn't wearing a seat

belt? Or that he would spin violently out of control and be flung from the passenger window into the trunk of an uncaring pine? Could he have predicted any of that? Was there some omen he'd already consulted? A certain flutter of birds or a childhood dream suddenly remembered? I've wondered about these things.

Whatever JJ guessed, I don't think he guessed how broken the boy's leg would be. It was an ugly sight, all that bone coming through the skin. He was already going into shock. There was a shred of meat hanging from the pine bark. He was lucky he didn't bonk his head.

The other Lawson had stopped his car with the motor running.

"There are two state troopers on their way out," he yelled. "It just came through on the radio."

That boy, that walleyed maniac, was surely holding and had no interest in any of this. He vanished in a hurry, before any responsibilities could fall his direction.

The nearest town with an ER was forty-five minutes out. JJ insisted on driving. We tossed the shivering Lawson into the backseat, and JJ eased the Camaro down from that wretched hill country.

"Your brother left with the painkillers," I said to Snaggletooth, not expecting a conversation.

We knew how this worked. Leave the wounded on the doorstep and disappear before anyone can ask questions. They'd patch him up, and our hands would be clean. It was a straightforward thing. But JJ seemed to be running a fever. Once the highway flattened out, he opened the throttle as far as it would go. The whole car started shaking.

"What does this mean for our bet?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He was staring into the night, his grip on the steering wheel forcing all the blood from his knuckles. There were towns out there, somewhere, and cities. Soon we'd see their lights glowing on the horizon like fires. JJ stared without blinking. The mood was becoming somber.

"You saw the way he hit that tree," JJ said. "You'll never see anything like that again." He spoke these words with a stunning power and clarity. I leaned forward on the seat. There was nobody on the road. The car had no speedometer, and the only way to gauge our pace was by its steady rattle. I glanced at the Lawson boy, shaking and pale behind us.

"Now it will get into his marrow," JJ said. "It will haunt him. He will run, but it will never stop chasing him. It is not fear and it is not love. It will drive him from himself. He knows, he knows what he's done, and he knows that he never had a choice. Nothing else could have happened. You saw. You watched it all unfold. It couldn't have happened any other way. You saw that."

The night was a blur. We passed smudges of light that could have been service stations or billboards but it was hard to say. I heard the younger Lawson mumbling *please please please.*

"It's been following him since he was born," JJ said, "and it will punish him until he finally stops running. And he knows what will happen then. We all do."

Where did JJ think the hospital was? I'd assumed so much about him; I'd listened to him, been drawn into his world, but I'd never learned the truth – whether his pursuers were real, whether his demons were ever banished. I'd trusted we would help the boy, but perhaps JJ thought this was just another cosmic joke, another challenge to overcome on a hero's journey I would never understand? I'd wanted so badly to learn.

The road narrowed and crowned a ridge. I saw before us a great, empty expanse. There were no lights, there was nothing. I heard the wounded child hyperventilating behind me. That was when I realized we'd been going the wrong way for miles.

The Snowman Rout

Sometimes, I pretend I've built this invincible battle vehicle out of the old car parts Mr. Hatchman leaves beside his house. I'd add sophisticated layers of armor-plate, a system of levers for eight-directional steering, and, in case I encounter Jarrett after dark, a combination nightvision-sonar array, for accurate missile shooting. Slowly rolling down the hill, breaking through fences and crushing everyone's lame little cars, encased in my advanced cyber suit, five different gun options peeking out of my impregnable stronghold, I'll watch them, all the neighbors, like a smart, powerful god would, like one of the gods from the world history book, one of the hardass ones, one of the ones who makes decrees and has things sacrificed in their honor. I won't rain fire down on everyone though, not yet at least, not if they smile and bow and cower the right way. Not on Jarrett, if he does what I tell him. There'll be a flag flying above me, the new flag of the neighborhood: a red warrior arm, flexing next to a ninja star, something I drew a long time ago, back when I still liked to draw. The neighbors will all come out and stand in their front yards and watch as I circle the cul-de-sac, my flag whipping in the wind, all cool-like. And they'll know who runs this place.

Jarrett tells me I play too many video games. He's Mr. Hatchman's son, and he has a goatee. He's older than me; he's in high-school. He tells me I play too many video games, and I should do stuff to get girls. When I ask him what that stuff is, he tells me to be a man. He says this like he owns the whole street, like I already know what it means.

Mom says I play too many video games too. She never used to tell me what to do. She says I can't play any of the games with guns. Even if they're cartoon lasers, or magic missiles, or whatever and not real guns.

"But they're fun," I tell her.

"I think they're awful. You can play those at your friend's houses, but not here."

Dad got a new job downtown and is never around, so now it's mostly us, me and Mom. It's on me to take care of her now, except she just stays home all the time and tells me what to do. It's annoying.

I think about Jarrett a lot because Jarrett's a pain in my ass. He lives across the street and calls me a mama's boy. He's got a pickup truck and a job after school. I don't know where he works, but I've thought about it, and I've concluded he has to shovel trash at some trash place for work, big heavy piles of trash, back and forth, for hours, until he sweats through his crappy T-shirt and starts to smell like trash and sweat so bad that his bosses, who all eat tinned sardines and talk like scary Russians, have no choice but to send him home.

Sometimes, I see Jarrett at my school after the last bell rings, sitting in his white truck, waiting to pick up his little sister. I don't wave at him and, if he ever notices me, he looks at me like I'm a weird-colored snot smear until he looks at something else. He used to be nice, but that was a long time ago. Now he barely notices me. Sometimes I picture his truck crashing and how he would never bother me again. I feel wrong thinking that, but I still do it.

I don't know how, but I'm going to reclaim the cul-de-sac from him. Deep down he knows I'm cool. He just keeps forgetting.

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"Do you want to open a present early?" Mom asks, a few days before Christmas. She's being extra nice. "We can both open one."

"No," I tell her. "We should wait until Christmas Day to open all of the presents."

It's a cold day, and I'm on break from school. In the front yard, I ride my bike off the wooden jump Dad built. The screws are all rusty, and the wood creaks when I hit it really fast. I stop to take a drink from the garden hose. An earwig flies out with the water, which tastes like metal.

Jarrett's truck putters to a stop across the street. He gets out, and two of his older friends get out too, and all three of them are holding shovels. One of the friends has long hair, and the other friend has a shaved head. Did they all just get back from shoveling trash?

The long-haired friend says to the shaved-head friend, "So, last night, I listened to that album backwards."

"The whole thing?" the shaved-head friend says. "Did you hear the devil?"

"No, man," the long-haired friend says. "It just sounded like gibberish."

Jarrett climbs into the bed of his truck and starts shoveling snow into the air. It makes this wet shushing sound when it lands on Jarrett's front lawn. I watch him, amazed. I've never actually seen snow up-close before. Where we live in California, it's usually sunny, but sometimes, when it does get cold, I see snow on the mountains when Mom drives on the

freeway, but those mountains are so far away. Is that where Jarrett got it all? The snow in his truck has twigs and dirt and stuff in it. I thought it was supposed to be pure white.

"Dudes," Jarrett says to his friends, "help me out here."

"What's the hurry?" the shaved-head friend asks. "Is Sarah showing up soon?"

"Shut up, man," Jarrett says.

The other two laugh and climb into the truck, and now all three of them are shoveling. I pretend to keep drinking from the hose, scanning for vulnerabilities. I bet I could throw a snowball pretty hard. That's something.

The only Sarah I know in high school is Sarah Bell. Is that who they're talking about? She was my youth mentor in world history last year. She told me once I could be anything I wanted when I grew up. I told her I wanted to drive a tank.

"What about an astronaut?" she asked. "Or a detective?"

I shook my head. Who wants to be a detective? Even if she didn't understand me, I thought Sarah was nice. She liked the world history book too. When Jarrett tells me I need to get girls, it's her I think about. What it means to get her though, I don't know. I guess then I can ask her questions about what she wants to be?

A big pile of snow is building in the Hatchman's front yard. Isn't it going to melt? What if it all melted and a tidal-wave leveled the cul-de-sac? I turn the hose off and ride my bike really fast off the jump. I stick the landing, but they don't see how cool it looks. They keep shoveling. They're all starting to sweat, and steam is coming off the shaved-head friend's shaved head.

Mom calls me from the front door. I set my bike down and go see what she wants.

"I made lunch," she says. "Come inside."

I'm looking at my shoes and at the ground. There's this one long blade of grass growing from a crack in the driveway. If I wiggle my foot around, I can make the grass move in a circle like a propeller.

"What are they doing across the street?" Mom asks. "Is that snow?"

I start to move the blade of grass faster and, in my head, I'm making an engine noise, like a plane-with-a-propeller noise, but only in my head. Mom's talking to me, and if I start making the engine noise with my mouth, she'll know I'm not paying attention.

"Hey, Jarrett," Mom calls out. "Where'd you guys get all the snow?"

"Oh, hey, Mrs. Wasserman," Jarrett says. "They got a lot of snow on Palomar Mountain last night. We thought it'd be cool to bring some back down and, you know, make a snowman, or have a snowball fight, that kind of thing."

He laughs this short laugh, like *hah-hah*, but I don't get what's funny. My leg is starting to get tired. I need to slow the propeller down, but it can't lose too much velocity too fast, or disaster may strike.

"Well that's really neat of you," Mom says. "You boys have fun."

"Thanks, Mrs. Wasserman, you too," Jarrett says.

I manage to bring the propeller to an easy stop. Textbook. I stomp the blade of grass and smear it across the driveway.

Inside, I devour the grilled cheese and sit on the couch in front of the TV. I turn my video game on. Mom asks, "Don't you want to play outside in the snow?"

She doesn't understand. I can't go out now. I won't have an opportunity to prove anything. They're too focused, and losing more ground is the last thing I need.

"Not even for a little bit?" she asks me.

What do I tell her? That Jarrett Hatchman will probably throw a dirty snowball right in my face the moment I cross the street? That if I want him to respect me, I have to lay low and wait for an opening? I can't just walk over and ask to play with his snow.

"Well, I've never been in the snow before," I say. "It seems like it'd be pretty cold."

She unplugs my game system from the wall. "You should go outside and hang out with the older boys," she says. "Their snow will probably melt soon. I'll get you a jacket."

I groan. She can't be serious.

Now there's another car parked behind Jarrett's truck. Sarah Bell is across the street wearing a sweater and smiling. I was right; they were talking about her. She and another girl I've never seen before are building what looks like a snowman. It doesn't have a head yet. Instead of twigs, they've stuck fronds from the Hatchman's ferns into its torso, giving it these droopy green arms. The girls must have shown up only a few minutes ago. How, exactly, is Mom expecting me to navigate this new predicament?

I need to make a big entrance. It's the only way.

I triangulate a plan involving my bike and a high-speed run down the street, likely involving a series of intricate and incredibly dangerous jumps. If everything goes right, I'll land on the roof of the Hatchman house, the highest place in the cul-de-sac. From atop the chimney, I'll stand with my hands outstretched, like a sorcerer, magisterial, saying nothing, my dominance assured.

No. It's too risky. If I fail, it's gonna look *really* bad. I need something with more subtlety. Something I can salvage if the pieces don't fall perfectly into place. Maybe a plan

involving a decoy? Would Mom be willing to come out and ask Jarrett some questions, allowing me to maneuver into position? What if –

Something hits me right in the face. It's cold, and wet, and, in my shock, it takes me some moments to realize that, obviously, it's a snowball. Blinking and snuffling, I wipe away clumps of twiggy slush. Jarrett Hatchman actually did throw a dirty snowball right at my head, immediately. I knew this would happen.

"Oh my god, Jarrett!" Sarah says. "Why would you do that!?"

Jarrett's rolling another one. "C'mon *Wuss*erman!" he yells and jerks his twisted, stupid face in a way that says: *come over here, and let me peg you with slushy handfuls of ice, you scared little pussy.*

I don't think I have a choice here. I can't, not for any reason, turn around and go back inside. Quitting now is the first step on the path leading toward the kingdom of loserdom. Just be a man, he tells me. Being a man means being respected, being respected means being cool, and being cool means doing cool stuff, like jumping my bike onto the roof or defeating my enemies in a snowball melee. If I go inside now I'll never come back out.

But the element of surprise is no longer on my side, and I'm outgunned, big time. Do I just walk forth and receive this reckoning with open arms? Some of the other gods from the world history book did things like that. There was this one god, I remember, who got nailed to a tree and let birds peck him until he was a skeleton, but that's when he became the most powerful, when he was a skeleton. He just let them peck him because he knew it was for a greater cause.

I'm picturing it: my slow, solitary walk across the street, the heavenly barrage of snowballs I will endure. Perhaps, at the final moment, Sarah Bell will come to my rescue. *No,*

she'll say, *he's had enough; he's more of a man than you'll ever be, Jarrett Hatchman.* It will be glorious.

When I open my eyes, something remarkable happens. The shaved-head friend takes the lumpy snowman's torso, a sizable sphere of dirty snow, and, for apparently no reason other than it's funny, breaks it over the back of Jarrett's head. Jarrett then turns, slowly, and proceeds to huck the snowball, the snowball meant for me, directly into his friend's stomach. The girls gasp. A moment later, everyone is throwing snowballs at each other. The hounds of war, they have been let loose.

Never, not since we moved to this street, not since Jarrett got older and started acting like a dick, not since Dad got a new job, never have I encountered an opportunity as rich with possibility as this one. This is my chance to win the battle that turns the war. They will, finally, all of them, Mom, Dad, the Hatchman's, Sarah, Jarrett, all of them, understand how cool I am.

I take off across the street like an assassin and fill my hands with snow. Everyone scatters across the yard.

My first target: shaved-head friend. From behind the Hatchman's ferns, I quickly land a series of devastating strikes. My aim is perfect. Snow in the eyes, snow in the mouth. Shaved-head friend squints and grumbles. His mouth hangs open all dumb-like. Who has passed such a dreadful judgment on him? Target: dispatched.

Long-haired friend is next. He's across the lawn, taking cover behind a palm tree. I am a ghost; I am a ninja. I tear more ammunition from the snowman's collapsing body, and, weaving between denim legs, I hurl slush like a warrior from ancient times. Crossing the lawn in a

sweeping arc of mayhem, I nail long-haired friend right in the nards. Direct hit. He crumples like a tower of blocks.

I turn and look for Jarrett.

They're in a standoff, Jarrett and the girls. He's standing across the driveway, beside the mailbox and the curb. His snowballs have the girls pinned against the Hatchman's garage.

Something happens then. From across the lawn, Sarah notices me. It's been a long time since she was my youth mentor, but she makes a face like she recognizes me, a nice face, a happy face, a face hit mid-smile by a snowball from my now-mortal nemesis, the brute, Jarrett Hatchman.

"C'mon Jarrett!" Sarah yells, wiping the slush with her sleeve, "calm down, or we're leaving!"

This is it. This is the moment. I am a man. I am a man like Jarrett, like Dad. Men beat each other up. They hurt each other.

I slam into Jarrett's legs at full speed. It's like running into a tree trunk. He grabs the back of my shirt to pull me off, but I'm clamped on tight. I may be smaller than him, but this isn't going to end so easily. He steps back to get a better grip on me, but I square my stance and drive further into his knees. He's going to fall over, and when he does, I'm going to show him enough is enough.

Trying to regain his balance, Jarrett steps on a watery clump of slush. His foot slips. I feel our entire enterprise begin to tilt. I push and push.

"Get off me Wasserman," he grunts.

He steps again, but this time he steps off the curb. We both go down together. I land in a puddle of snowmelt in the street, and Jarrett lands on his arm. It's a heavy landing. His wrist curls under his body weird, and it makes this popping noise that reminds me of Mom accidentally stepping on one of my action figures.

Everyone comes rushing toward us. Jarrett's lying there groaning. I'm just lying there, staring at the clouds. They're very far away. Are you okay, someone asks, are you okay?

It's hard to explain this. I can't tell if I want to look at his wrist or not. I've crashed my bike and stubbed my toes. One time I split my chin tripping into the corner of the dining room table. The feeling wasn't just below my mouth but all around my head and down my neck, across my shoulders, sharp and hot. I got blood all over my shirt and even some in my shoes. Jarrett acts tough, but I don't always believe him. Of course I look.

His arm is not a good thing to look at.

"Oh damn guys," the long-haired friend says, "we gotta get to the emergency room. Jarrett's wrist looks like it has another wrist."

It is worse than that. I can't look again.

I'm in the street, lying on my back, staring at the clouds. I hear them helping Jarrett up. They open the door of his truck. One of them fumbles with Jarrett's keys; then the truck starts; then the truck drives away. I don't need to see the look on Jarrett's face to know I've won his respect.

Sarah stands over me. She wipes a tear from my cheek with the back of her hand.

"It's okay," she says. "I know you didn't mean to hurt him."

"But I did mean to."

She looks at me. “Not like that though,” she says, “you didn’t mean to hurt him like that.”

Should I tell her? Should I tell her about all the things in my head I’ve wanted to do to Jarrett? How many times I’ve pictured him getting blown up, or being hit by cars, or tumbling off cliffs? How else could I win this cul-de-sac back from him?

“It’s okay,” she says. “He knows it was an accident. He’s going to be all right.”

That’s not the stuff she wants to hear though. I shouldn’t tell her those things. She’s like Mom. She doesn’t want to hear about that kind of stuff.

She helps me up and brushes the dirt off my back. *He’s going to be all right.*

We sit side by side on the curb. We’re the only ones outside. Water from the snow runs beside the sidewalk, passed driveways and through piles of brown leaves, down to the storm drain at the bottom of the street. I don’t know where all the water goes once it disappears. Does it stay down in the dark forever? It’s late in the day, and the days are short now, and I’m getting cold. Everyone is gone except Sarah, and I want to ask her something, but I don’t know what to ask. I won the neighborhood back, but it doesn’t feel like I won anything.

Finally, these words bubble from my mouth: “Will you come back?”

It’s a long time before she says, “Maybe we can all make another snowman one day.”

After everything, I’m starting to shiver.

Mom starts calling from across the street, and I have to go. It’s too early for dinner, but maybe she saw what happened. Maybe she saw everything. I want to hide, but I know that won’t help. I won’t tell Mom about those things either, the things in my head. Sarah walks with me to the house before she gets in her car and leaves too. It’s just me alone on this street. I start saying *Bye Sarah bye bye goodbye Sarah,* but Mom's calling, and I have to go now.

He Must Have Lost Something Too

Summer was over, and the wildfires had burned. Adrian and I skipped sixth-period English to leave our mountain town and play a water polo game. This should have been normal, but it was strange. The sky was blue for the first time in two weeks. On the drive down, we saw freshly charred hills, where skeletal forests of blackened trunks stood.

Adrian's family had lost their home. My own was smoke-damaged but still standing. The All-Clear had gone out two days before. We'd only just returned, the front door creaking open to a dim living room which had, very nearly, vanished completely. I'd forgotten to grab what I needed before school, no books, not even an orange for lunch. We hoped the district would cancel this game, but who gets to be that lucky? The world goes on.

The way Adrian drove made me nervous. I glanced at the beginnings of sprawl far below, my calves tensed on imaginary pedals, the hills giving way to ranches, to citrus orchards. The lane would narrow and, in his drastic passing of eighteen-wheelers, of motorhomes chugging slow, Adrian's own lank hair would whip across his face in the draft. It always felt like he started turning at the last possible moment. He wasn't crying or anything, just quiet, like whatever he lost was never important anyway.

"This game should be easy," he said at one point, and I agreed. It was comforting to think about a win at least. We weren't the best team in the district, but we were good. We took it seriously. We always had water in our heads. Adrian even braved linebacker sneers in the weight

room. This team in the valley though, we'd never lost to them. Not once. I always thought it must be a sorry thing, playing on the losing side. I couldn't believe how little they cared. Why not just pull the Speedo budget and tell everyone to sign up for something else?

The hills gave way to edge cities, to arterial roads linking grids of cul-de-sacs neatly planted with saplings. I expected to show up late for the game, but after living in distress for days we managed to arrive before our opponents. The pool was in the center of a park in a sleepy neighborhood, deep within town. The water was surprisingly clean. Someone must have skimmed the ash and fallen leaves. Reflections of flaglines, their colors baked pastel by the sun, fluttered on the pool's surface. The place reeked of chlorine, which barely registered at that point in the season, though it was better than smoke. We were saturated.

Many of the varsity guys had their own cars at that point. They trickled in, and we all sat by the fence, looking haggard. Jack and Simon started with the hacky sack. Our goalie curled up in a corner and covered his head with a towel to get some sleep. He'd been staying on an uncle's couch for three days, where, he'd told us, the stupid dogs would sneak up and lick his face in the middle of the night.

There was a set of bleachers on the visiting side, only five rows tall, all empty. Adrian knelt beside these and ground his fingernails on the concrete. The ref would check this later, running a palm over our outstretched hands. A jagged fingernail under the water could cut and maim. Adrian maintained the unnerving focus he'd developed the last few days, his wrists circling steadily.

I borrowed two Speedos from Simon and tossed one to Adrian. I may have forgotten all my stuff, but he'd lost his, lost it forever. We didn't have keys for the locker rooms, and the other team was still on its way, so we deck-changed beside the pool.

"You all right man?" I asked as we shimmied the Speedos up our legs.

"I am," Adrian said, looking away, which I took to mean he didn't want to talk, and that I shouldn't have asked. It was strange knowing a friend who'd lost their home. One wanted to be there for them, to be a confidant, but also to be somewhere completely different, to be *able* to take them somewhere completely different. Somewhere normal, the way things had been, where we could tell stupid jokes, or talk about bands we liked, or talk about anything else, anything at all.

When our opponents finally arrived they were dancing. I squinted at a parade of cheap grotesques, plastic horns and furry vests, painted faces, the half-naked not-yet-man-bodies of a high school water polo team. I'd completely forgotten it was Halloween. They jumped and laughed together. Of course I thought they were mocking us. Clearly, this was all they cared about. They had no concern for the game, for this thing we'd come, very quickly, to resent. They'd never won anyway. Later, there might be house parties, snuck beers, angry fathers, carpet weed and heavy petting. What did any of us have planned? Fitful sleep among strange relatives in motel rooms? The joyless tallying of loss? We weren't even an inconvenience to them.

One guy in a cartoonish Devil costume (crimson horns, little plastic pitchfork, the remnants of red body paint and varnished nails) kept jigging up to the water and back to the locker room, a little flourish here, a whoop or holler there. He wasn't taunting us, I don't think; it wouldn't have been a good idea. But I still wanted to throw him in the pool, watch him sink, hold

his head down. We'd never lost to these guys. I liked them scared of us, the upcountry boogeymen. Our coming meant humiliation. I wanted to scrape that paint off.

Adrian stared at the ground, circling his wrists again. I thought his fingertips might begin bleeding. The Devil kook finally skipped away.

"I want to mess that guy up," Adrian said.

"Me too," I said, which was true but also a tough-guy lie. If I really had the chance offered, without consequence, I might do something, *might* strike to hurt.

Grassy fields surrounded the fenced pool. Some trees in Southern California lose their leaves in fall, and there were kids from the surrounding neighborhood gathering a pile, heaping them into the cradles of T-shirts and onto a growing auburn mountain. Some wore simple costumes already, the top half of a Spiderman suit, a latex wolf mask with burs stuck in the realistic fur. They took turns filling their arms and unloading each haul.

Coach had arrived, and he called us together. He never took off his sunglasses, and I appreciated that, in a disciplined way, as if seeing the pale rings around his eyes would be too vulnerable. He spoke encouragement, briefly acknowledging our distress, and talked up a familiar game plan.

"I know we all have lots to think about," he said. "But right now that doesn't matter. We are here to play. We can do that. You can do that."

I noted these words and the importance with which he delivered them.

While Coach talked, I fixed myself in the too-tight Speedo and slapped my arms crossways, palms striking opposing shoulder blades the way you'd see Olympians do. My chlorinated hair splayed like uncooked capellini, and no matter how I stood the Speedo cut into

the corners of my groin. Adrian was smaller. His borrowed suit barely fit and hung off his ass. Most of us tried to covertly fix uncomfortable crotches while the pep talk finished, then we all closed hands and gave as convincing a three-tiered chant we could manage, *rah rah RAH.*

This game was supposed to be like those we'd played here before: decisive and strong, so simple it was boring. I would not hold back, scoring from far, scoring from close. I would send marvelous passes cross pool and watch teammates drive their shots home. It would be a rout. It would be something to savor before we returned to unsettled lives.

Adrian may have been small, but he was fierce, rarely losing a physical confrontation. He wrestled too, in the winter, and knew how to use his body weight, even against larger opponents. We relied on him as a kind of anchor, holding the center.

After our late start, the ref barely checked our nails. He passed a weak palm over my own fingertips, a formality. We won the coin toss and managed a quick goal in the opening moments of play. Briefly, the trance of competition set in. The chlorine fumes, the ache in my sleepless bones, all of this evaporated. My arms cut through the water as we paced back and forth across the pool, closing aggressively on our opponent's mistakes. It did, for a few moments, feel as good as I wanted. Beyond the temporary success, though, our control loosened.

The other team managed scoring two goals in quick succession. They'd weathered our initial intimidation and swam faster than I remembered. Or we were slower. The Devil kid, squared-up against Adrian, shot from twenty yards. Our own goalie, who'd been staying on the dog couch, hadn't slept well. You could see it in his eyes. Both shots went right through his flailing arms.

Coach called a time out. I don't remember what he talked about. This was a confidence trick, I knew that, though it often worked. Up the ante, batten the hatches, noses to grindstones; it sounded fine, but we just didn't have the focus. It didn't matter what he said. We were bone-tired and anxious. Adrian stared without expression.

I watched the kids out in the park jumping into their leaves. They fell hard. The pile offered little cushion, though they didn't mind, leaping up again to regather what they'd scattered. Eventually, they threw handfuls at each other, explosions of burnt orange falling in slow arcs, the roughage sticking to their hair, to their hoodies, getting in their mouths. The time-out ended, and the game restarted. A minute later, the Devil kid pulled the same feint, playing around a wincing Adrian, and took advantage of his longer reach to score a third goal.

The ref didn't see it at first, but I did. After we regrouped in the pool's center and restarted, Adrian held the Devil guy's waist below the waterline, effectively sinking his nostrils and mouth below the surface. He was good at this. They grappled silently, away from the center of play. Eventually, the other kid managed to break off, spitting a crescent of mist as he did so, but his escape didn't last long. Adrian kept at it a minute later, increasingly frustrating him. This was dirty play, but not unreasonable without getting caught. Except the referee didn't catch anything. He must have lost something in the fire too.

It made sense to me when the two began fighting. It's hard to tell what's happening, who's striking who, when players treading water begin trading blows. Imagine two children splashing each other. That's what I saw. A whole lot of confusion. Adrian, who was not lucky, lost this contest. It was his closed fist emerging from the splatter and spray that visibly struck the opponent's cheek.

"What the fuck," the other kid yelled. The ref screeched his whistle. Adrian punched again, with more malice, his face contorting, before the other team began pulling him away, reaching together like a rioting crowd, tearing him off, dunking his head as they did so. I thought he might hyperventilate, fighting off three, four dudes. He kept spitting out water. The kid who'd been hit swam poolside, running a finger through his mouth, as if a tooth had loosened or a gum been cut.

Adrian was removed from the game, no appeal, no questions. The ref simply waved him out with a piercing whistle and the hand motion one might use to brush dust from a countertop. Adrian hauled himself over the pool's lip; he never used the ladder. His baggy, borrowed Speedo drooped as he stormed off, wet feet slapping concrete, retreating to the locker room, head hung, fists clamped into stones at his side. I noticed thin gashes running across his back, where the Devil kid must have jabbed him with his own unchecked nails.

We played the final two quarters without Adrian. The other kid was penalized for a few minutes, but not ejected. Once he returned to play, everything went badly. I don't remember many details, and I don't care to. We hadn't expected to win at that point, and losing gracefully was a mystery to us.

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After the game, I changed alone, huddled beside Adrian's car in the parking lot. Groups of children had begun roaming the distant sidewalks with candy bags. I took care to change quickly, out of sight. I didn't want to talk to anybody. I knew how oppressive it would be among the others. Most teams at our level shared locker rooms with their opponents. Some of the nicer schools had more than one room but not the public pools, which was where we often played.

Before and after contentious matches, shared locker rooms can become charged spaces. It's a strange place to be and carries a confusing air of secrecy. Some boys are more comfortable with each other. I've been in rooms where each player took turns changing, huddled in their own freshly laundered towels, nervous in secluded corners, eyes to the floor, frowning at, or outright scared of, any possible hijinks. I've also been in rooms turned to bedlam. Naked high school boys whipping each other's genitals with wet towels, tricking each other into *looking*. This could become another confidence trick, especially in view of one's opponents: see how little we're worried about you, about your gaze, about what kind of men you might be, or might become, or might be afraid of.

We'd always been relaxed but never zealous, playful at times but reserved at others. We'd seen each other's bodies. This was a rite of passage, though things had gone bad before. Adrian had once nearly broken Simon's face for jokingly pissing on his leg in the shower. I sometimes conned acolyte freshmen into peeking around a certain blind corner of our locker room, where I'd claimed a girl was changing, only for them to gaze into Jack's pimply ass. What was playful to one could incite rage or hurt or shame in another.

I finished buttoning my jeans in the parking lot and shook my wet hair so it splayed out. The sky, still shockingly blue, was turning now, like the leaves, going pink at the edges. I

breathed slow, savoring something of the oncoming chill, trying desperately to slow down the moments before I had to sit with Adrian again, in what would surely be a tense trip back to the damaged place we called home.

I considered offering to drive, if he allowed. Adrian could be proud and might be feeling self-conscious. Maybe, if he was forced to sit still, to watch the trees pass out the window, maybe then I could figure out the words to calm him down, to speak through the pain keeping his fists clenched. Maybe we could just talk about normal things, like normal guys.

The rest of the team began filtering out. I waved to Jack and Simon as they drove off. Some of the boys on the other team wore their half-baked costumes already as they left the pool. They laughed and shoved each other in the parking lot, surely headed now toward something warm, something loud and fun. I imagined the house parties, the impromptu meet ups on dim avenues, the ditch joints and sodas spiked with plastic-handle vodka, beers stashed all day in backpacks. It must have been easier in a bigger town, like this, to get booze, to find decent weed. Or, maybe, some of these guys were off to walk the neighborhood with their younger siblings, a final year trick-or-treating. Some of us would be leaving for college in eight months. Some of us would never be here again. I considered tagging along, going with them wherever the joy was. I certainly had no interest in being home. I was anxious about what awaited me there. Surely, all of us weren't still enemies, not after that equalizer of a game. It was all in the past now. But I had Adrian to wait for, and he was lagging.

Coach passed on the way out to his truck. "You're good?" he asked.

I gave a thumbs up. "I'm waiting for Adrian."

"He hasn't come out yet?"

I shook my head.

He held my gaze for a moment. “Do me a favor,” he said, “and ask if he’s all right. I know you two are close. He’s got it hard right now.”

“I will,” I said.

He nodded, satisfied. The parking lot was almost empty now. A couple of the guys from the other team hung out around a car with the doors open, listening to something with a backbeat. In the dark, I watched the cherry of a joint pass between them, glowing, fading, glowing again.

The park was dim. Tall sodium lights illuminated a ring around the pool. The water was still. Cars passed on the surrounding streets, and someone honked at a group of jaywalking kids. The trick-or-treaters yelled and skipped, streaming across the road en masse, their candy bags trailing like limp parachutes. It was such a small, stupid thing, some doofus honking at Halloween, the car stopped in the middle of the road, ten kids circling around it, ghoulies and ghosties out to get what riches they were owed. They swept onward again toward houses filled with pristine, sugary loot, absolutely certain about the world, and their place within it.

A rush of wind, following close behind the setting sun, knocked at a metal gate, rattling the old hinge. I flinched and whipped around, glancing at the shadowy park. For a moment, I thought it was Adrian, coming back into public view, kicking open the locker room’s rusty door, rage in his eyes. Maybe he’d crept through the bushes behind me. How long had he been inside? I pictured him alone in that sopping locker room, after the others had left, punching walls until he was ready to be seen again, his knuckles in ruin, sucking at the blood. I pictured what he’d done to that other guy and remembered the look on his face when he’d done it. I knew it would

be crystallized into my head, that extra punch, that malice. I pictured him hitting me, hitting anything, striking his steering wheel with both hands, crashing his car, driving it off a cliff, both of us smashing into the valley in slow motion, the fuel lines catching fire. I didn't want to go home with him. I couldn't do that. Whatever words I needed to say, I couldn't say them. I didn't care what was normal, what was fair, what he felt.

And going home? As if being there was a comfort. The whole house smelled like hell. Really, I thought it smelled like an underworld, like one of those caves where a coal vein sparks up and burns for a thousand years. Walking into the living room made my eyes water. Staying in my bedroom made me gag. It would all fade, sure, but not for a long time.

The guys in the parking lot were finishing up. They'd all gotten in the car and started rolling, the music cranked: heavy bass, skittering electronics. I steadied my breathing. Then I ran over before it was too late.

"Yo!" I yelled. "Excuse me!"

The car slowed, and the volume lowered. The driver poked his head out. He was another long hair like me, one of the ones we'd lost to. His eyes were puffy and red, either from chlorine or weed or both.

"You missed your ride?" he asked.

"I wanted to ask – well, I wanted to ask where you're going."

He cocked his head like I'd spoken another language.

"Is there a party?" I asked, louder. "Do you guys know anything happening around here?"

"Are you looking for something specific?"

"I'm looking for anything."

The guy in the passenger seat leaned across his buddy's lap and looked at me. "We're heading to something now," he said. "It's just at some dude's house. You really want the address? I don't know how long we'll stay."

I nodded, yes, I did want that.

The driver looked at me for a long time. "You're not planning anything weird?"

"No," I said, "I promise I'm not planning anything weird."

By the time they'd given me directions, cutting each other off and misremembering roads, Adrian was back by the car, changed, looking normal again. He shot me a curious look as I walked over. "Did I hear that right?" he asked. "You're going to a houseparty?"

"It seems that way."

"We don't know anyone there."

I shrugged. "It's a party," I said. "It's Halloween."

"Okay, true."

"You can just drop me off," I said, and I wanted him to think this was a good idea, dropping me off and leaving, ending our night together before things unraveled further. But seeing him, looking how he always looked, like a friend and someone I cared about, I forgot why I would have wanted that.

"And you'll, what, walk home?" he asked.

"I can take a bus," I said. "I just... can't go home tonight."

This was, of course, the wrong thing to say, and I hadn't really considered what I was suggesting. The silence just kept going. Cars passed and all of Halloween skipped down the sidewalk.

"It's cool," Adrian said. "Let's go to a party."

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The drive was further than I anticipated. Leaving the center of town, we crossed an empty drainage channel full of dry weeds and graffiti, a set of train tracks, and backtracked twice from unexpected dead ends before entering the affluent neighborhoods at the edge of town, where the mountains began rising. I tried recalling how close the wildfire had made it to these streets. It had descended from our country – we'd watched all of this on the news – but once the suburbs started the fuel supply dwindled. No more droughted oak, no more scrub. I couldn't tell how far anything burned because I didn't know, exactly, where we were. In the night it was mostly stop lights and gas stations, sometimes a flock of trick-or-treaters.

It occurred to both Adrian and myself that our directions might be bogus, a cruel trick, and that we were perhaps being led to a nowhere place or even a dangerous encounter. We agreed to knock only on doors where teenagers were behaving poorly and in plain sight, in half-opened garages, or side yards, or seen from upstairs windows.

"You're sure this is okay?" I asked.

"I'm sure," Adrian said.

"I didn't want to change your plans or mess up your night. I just had this idea all of a sudden."

"What plans do you think I had?"

"I don't know," I admitted, and I thought about Coach, speaking directly, not flinching, not lying. "I wouldn't want to assume. I care about you."

"I have no idea what I would be doing tonight," Adrian said, "and that doesn't matter. What could I be doing? I don't have anything to *do* shit with. I don't have a TV, I don't have weights. It would be boredom. It would be waiting. I would just go to sleep. This, though, this is something to do. And if it sucks, we just leave. It's not like anyone will be worried. It's Halloween; people expect us back late."

The neat rows of houses abutted rambling brush canyons. At the base of a slope, the night began smelling sickly sweet. There must have been a creek nearby. I wondered where the water came from. Our destination was supposedly a block away.

"What happened," I asked, "in the locker room? You were inside for a long time."

"I sat with myself," Adrian said. "I knew I needed to calm down. I didn't want to do anything stupid."

"Like what?"

"It scared me, what I did. It happened so fast. It wasn't fair but who was going to give me the benefit of the doubt?"

"Somebody should."

"Sure," he said. "I think we're here."

He parked the car, and we approached a house gone sideways. Beers in the yard, cigarettes in the potted plots. Trick-or-treaters visiting this place would be disappointed, or terrified, or perhaps just unruly enough to join. I'd always assumed moneyed neighbors would

put a halt to an old-fashioned keg-and-bottle rager, but maybe not, maybe this entire night was a lost cause from the beginning, offered up as a sacrifice, a hormonal release valve, like the bacchanalia of ancient days. Or maybe this was a numb, empty, anaesthetized place, and nobody cared. Some of the water polo guys from the other team were there, proudly shirtless and tan, acting stupid as hell right in the living room windows. It looked fun. We let ourselves in the front door.

Around this point things went slippery. The memories come out of order, with gaps and strange moments of confluence: myself in a laundry room hitting a clove cigarette, the pulls I took from a handle of some colorless astringent liquor, seated with strangers on the carpet of a family's computer room, petting an abnormally calm housecat. I hadn't eaten, I hadn't slept. I kept asking myself why we'd driven all this way if not to go all out. When would we be here again? We deserved this, and Adrian deserved it most of all.

I wandered the house, glancing in bedrooms and around corners, looking for the Devil kid, but I didn't find him and was thankful for that. There must have been ten or fifteen high school parties in this town for him to enjoy. I didn't expect anything to go down, but then again I wouldn't want it to either. Now we were without friends or support if violence broke out. I trusted Adrian. Something about his demeanor had stabilized, but I didn't necessarily trust the others.

In the garage they played drinking games. The air was stuffy with too many bodies and the sadness of spilled beer. On the wall hung a chalkboard with a numbered queue for two-person teams. A little bit of friendly competition. I saw Adrian's scrawl near the top. He'd signed us up, together.

One of those guys who'd been listening to music in the parking lot recognized me and came over, clapping a hand to my shoulder. He sloshed his beer against mine, and we both took a long, warm sip.

"Holy shit," he said, "I didn't actually think we'd see you here."

"And here we are," I said.

"I think you're up next," he said, motioning to the game on the table, red cups ready for refills. "You're buddy's here too. He seems to have calmed down."

"I'm sorry about what happened earlier."

He looked at me. He wasn't drunk, I don't think, but he wasn't sober, his eyelids hanging above scarlet capillaries. "It's all good," he said. "You fire boys haven't had anything easy lately."

I tensed at this. He offered his hand, and we shook.

Adrian nodded from across the room, and together we squared up at the table's edge. We tried practice throws. Toss the plastic ball into your opponent's cup, drink the beer when necessary, talk appropriate shit, keep your cool. It gets easier the more you've imbibed, so the thinking goes.

"We will have our revenge!" Adrian yelled, laughing.

I leaned toward him. "Did you hear what they're calling us?"

"It's not our party," he said, shrugging. "Be cool."

Another round of shots, a bong circling the room, the lighter's little flame licking at the bowl. Someone changed the music, and this prompted a disagreement. A dude fell into the

aluminum garage door and rattled everything. We all chuckled when he pointed, grinning, to the full beer which hadn't spilled.

The game started, and we tossed our shots, both balls glancing off the table and onto the cracked cement floor.

"You gotta work on that aim," one of our opponents taunted.

"Focus," Adrian said to me.

They sunk a cup, which forced me, by the simple logic of that game, to slam a beer, something which became increasingly difficult to do. I struggled and caught my breath. The stuff bubbled in my throat.

"Drink up dude," they yelled, and I did, flipping the bird. I placed the empty back onto the table, and we took our turn. Word had gotten around who we were, and half the other team must've been in the garage, crowding around in various states of costume and undress.

"Fire kids trying to take it back," another asshole yelled. Had they been calling us that all day? Certainly not to our faces.

We went drink for drink, settling in and starting to land shots, but we were falling behind. It could go long; we were ready. There was a clarity in that place. We were far from home. I wanted very badly to win.

They sneered, the other players; they scowled and talked shit. Which, of course, was their job and our job too. But I couldn't help the rising snarl I felt. Motherfuckers didn't know anything, didn't know anything at all. What had they lost? I just wanted to have a normal night, like a normal guy. If the Devil kid showed up, I thought about how I would follow Adrian's example and clock him too, for the sleeze he'd pulled back at the pool.

“Losers on tilt!” someone yelled. The taunts were getting darker, more personal.

Another missed shot, a bounce shot, one cup down, two down.

“Pour it out! Pour the flames out!”

As our chances began closing, some of the others in the garage waved lighters in slow arcs, as if to a silent ballad. I crumpled a red cup into a ruin of plastic.

“It’s just a game,” Adrian whispered.

It was just a game, but I'd sunk pride into it. It became difficult to make eye contact.

“Send them packing,” another said. “They’re out too late already.”

Adrian took a long time steadying his aim, sighting down his elbow and focusing his breath, before missing an important throw. The ball bounced and came to rest harmlessly in the table's center.

Someone must have seen the look on my face and took pity. “Shit, man, I understand,” the stranger said, leaning in and exhaling vodka. “We all understand, but you know how things get. I’m sorry about these idiots. Don’t take it so hard. We’re all just having fun here.”

I took my final shot, the one that could save the game, but I missed too. We’d been so close, closer than that afternoon. The ball caromed off the garage door and rolled onto the ground, gathering flecks of dirt and pet hair as it went. They were grinning, all of them; they were so happy to see us fail again.

One of them held our prize, the rest of the beer left on the table, poured into a heavy glass stein, all of it just for us. I took the glass from him, and just as I reared back to throw it at his face, Adrian grabbed my wrist with both hands. The stein fell from my fingers onto the concrete and shattered.

Adrian dragged me from the garage, through the kitchen, into the living room.

“We don’t deserve this bullshit!” I yelled, at everyone.

“Shut up,” Adrian said.

People stared at me from the stairwell. They stared at me from the couch in the living room. Adrian was so much stronger, something I often forgot, and held me firm by the neck as we stumbled toward the front door. I thought I saw the Devil kid at the end of a hallway and tried heading that direction, but Adrian wouldn’t allow it. He wouldn't let me look back.

“This guy right here,” I said, jabbing my thumb toward Adrian, “doesn’t deserve this shit. Fuck all of you. None of you get it.”

“Shut the hell up,” Adrian said, shoving me outside. “We’re leaving. I’m taking you home.”

Adrian let me go, and I ran a hand through my hair, hocked a gob of beery spit onto the lawn. The street outside was cold and quiet. Gooseflesh pricked my arms as a crosswind swept the neighborhood. It would rain soon. There were no more kids on the sidewalks. They’d all gone back to their own homes, heaping spoils on rugs and dinner tables. The holiday was over.

“My bad,” I said.

“Are you good to drive?”

“No, but we can wait it out.”

“Okay.”

We returned to his car and sat inside, locking the doors.

“If we came back tomorrow,” I said, “it would be like this never happened.”

Adrian cocked his head.

“I mean nothing will change. The lawn will get cleaned up, everyone will be back in school, everything will be fine. I bet they’ve forgotten already. What did they have to lose?”

“You can’t know what anyone remembers,” Adrian said, “but I do hope they forget.”

I tried finding the right words for that, but they never came. What was left for us was going home and facing what was there. After a long time Adrian started the car and began driving.

Split Mountain

I'd lent Chaser some money to help him buy a sliver of platinum, from the internet. He gets obsessed with strange things like that. That's why I liked him. Bird watching, chemistry sets, the writing of rock operas. I was a patron, following each development. This treasure came in a glass vial. He kept it in a place of honor upon a tilting curio shelf which also housed several creased paperbacks on continental philosophy, a plastic submarine in the manner of Nemo, and a vibrantly healthy miniature fern. He was twenty-five, and I a year younger.

At this time I worked a job with computers and made some money, though nothing made me happy. I came to Chaser's after work one day to see the platinum. I wanted to witness his excitement, to feed on it. He nursed a terrible, lingering cough. Steadying his breathing, he pulled the thing gingerly from its jar with a pair of rusting tweezers. I winced at this incandescent needle, at its despoiling. Anything could ruin it: the tainted air, our hungry gaze. If it fell from Chaser's grasp, surely the little dagger would slice through the patchy carpet and dive into those curious regions of the inner earth, gleefully escaping our stewardship forever.

Chaser stared, sullen. The platinum twinkled there, like a magnificent hope. We both sat in silence for a long time.

Chaser said, "I went back to the doctor today."

I hadn't realized he'd gone in the first place.

"It's lymphoma," he said. "The tumor is too close to my heart to be cut free. I'll have to take the chemicals."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"It's the size of an apricot."

I put my hand to his shoulder. The muscles tensed; he felt vulnerable. Ill-health in youth is shocking, I suppose, though I was not shocked. That brooding day made it clear much in the world was tilted and wrong.

It was a long time before I returned again. My mother had survived breast cancer, and the disease was an unwelcome guest in my life. Many times I'd seen her silhouette in the doorway at night, the corona of fuzz atop a backlit skull. I was an impressionable child, prone to nightmare. She survived, but I had a sense of psychological damage done, to us all, to family and friends, to her only son. I suppose this fed the paralysis I felt over my friend's illness. Chaser was a person I wanted to be happy for, but I did not understand how to be humble instead. I knew I was not any better, nor vital, than he was. He didn't want my pity, and I didn't want to watch him wilt.

Some months passed, numbly scrambling from bed to office. Driving to the city early, leaving only to sleep. I noticed, occasionally, the note I'd tacked near my computer's monitor, quickly scribbled at a slant. *Chaser owes you Sixty bucks, for the platinum. Go see him sometime.*

I purchased several things during that time and two of these became very important to me. The first was a houseplant, some kind of smooth and lush cactus which resembled a cluster of stones. I've heard the variety referred to as a lithops, a type of exotic succulent. This I kept beside a window near my desk at work. I thought the light would be sufficient, obscured in the mornings, full and bright during the day. The second was a seven-shot revolver, a .22 from a

reputable manufacturer, with a long silver barrel and old-fashioned wood boot grip. This I kept close: near my bed, in the glove compartment of my car. I thought these things would help me feel human again. It was springtime. Wildflowers began blooming.

That bright city, where I was born, is a place where people live openly, joyously, climbing jagged rocks, riding atop thunderous waves sent six-thousand miles by typhoons lashing Japan. The strangers in my office could recite the names of a hundred bars and lounges. Once, a man on a skateboard stopped at my residence to offer free tickets for a local street festival, some sort of raucous musical event. I closed the door, gently.

When I purchased the plant it had three bulbs. At first I wasn't sure if this represented three individual organisms or a single, multifaceted being. The cashier at the nursery had told me, simply, to water it enough. During the first month, none of the segments grew at all. They did not shift toward the light, nor did they open to reveal a sprouting member. I sprinkled them once a week with tap water poured from a Styrofoam cup, as if I knew what they needed.

They resembled a trio of smooth river stones, arranged in a vaguely geometric pattern. This made me think of faraway places, of different customs and ancient domiciles. Gazing at them between tasks, I was reminded of art from the Islamic Golden Age, of Celtic crosses carved into mossy ruins, spirals and patterns in honor of an undepictable god. It filled me with a gauzy sensation of being elsewhere, of having access to a different life, and I was calmed, for a time, looking at their arrangement. I once dreamed of them and in the dream they pulsated, glowing like the crystals in a warlock's cave.

I never fired the pistol, though I often kept it in my car. Sometimes I considered bringing it into the office, concealed of course, for the comfort it brought. Not because I disliked my

colleagues or wished them harm, but simply because of its potency. I craved its presence, as if it were a phantom limb of great strength. There was much I lacked, love and purpose among them, though at the time I didn't think these were important. The pistol however, in its looming power, shrank and overtook the yawning cavities in my days. Craftsmen rely on patches to mend worn components. The .22 was mine, a form of psychological splint. If I could've carried it everywhere, I would have.

The notes on my desk piled up, stacking two, sometimes three layers deep. The company I worked for began hemorrhaging money. The office thinned from layoffs. There were, occasionally, spectacular burnout resignations, full coffee mugs hurled against cubicle walls, unreasonable admissions of guilt. One man, a shy and spindly programmer, returned to his desk a week after being dismissed. He played online video games for several days, ten or twelve hours at a time in what appeared to be a catatonic state, which may have simply been his manner. I never learned his name.

I began working six days a week, sometimes seven. I kept my bedroom incredibly cold and installed blackout curtains. I dreaded the drive to work. On most days I could see the ocean from certain wide turns. At my desk, the sun whimpered through skinny windows. I lived in fear of the phone ringing. The note, about Chaser and his platinum, sat beneath several layers of urgent scribbling affixed to my computer's monitor.

One morning I hid the gun within a vinyl pouch and tucked this into my leather bag. I brought it into the office. After an hour, I was restless. I poured myself another coffee and slung the bag over my shoulder. I took a walk around the building, passing each desk at a stroll. No one looked at me. No one's eyes met mine. I sat for a long time at the head of the boardroom's

long mahogany table, alone. My coffee was tepid. I couldn't stop my fingers from tapping. No one suspected the secret I'd concealed.

If there is anything I promise, it is this, that I never wished anyone harm. But I liked watching them. I liked watching the innocent little things they did, never suspecting their colleague carried on his person a seven-shot, .22 caliber revolver, just within reach. It was something I could latch myself onto, this watching. What else did I have?

I returned to my desk and discovered one of the three bulbs had died. It was just a withered little crust, like a deflated brain. The others looked fuller and healthier than I remembered, though I couldn't recall the last time I'd paid them proper attention. How long had there been two instead of three? Were they cannibalistic? How quickly and gleefully had they absorbed nutrients from the fallen sibling? I rotated the ceramic pot so the two remaining plants were closer to the window's smudgy pane.

For the rest of the day, I thought about that dead plant more than was reasonable. I'd felt confident about my watering schedule, about the available light. I researched lithops and learned that they originate from arid regions in Africa, near the southern capes. They live in deserts, atop crags and escarpments. In my own country, rosemary grows wild in parking lots. This I will admit is a beautiful thing. Lithops are similar, requiring little in the way of nourishment. Disguised from foragers by stony camouflage, they survive with relative ease. I had nothing to offer. That was why I'd chosen such a strange, resilient plant. And yet, I could not even steward three hardy bulbs through a mild, pleasant spring. I was wracked with guilt, which upset me further. Why care?

I accomplished little that afternoon. Leaving the city, I turned toward home and braked for an unexpected wall of traffic. Ahead was what appeared to be a DUI checkpoint. Police officers hailed some cars and waved others through. Their faces were inscrutable, like clay masks. My pulse quickened. Was it Friday? Who would be driving drunk at this hour? I didn't know what people did, honestly, nor did I much care, but that wasn't my concern. The gun sat beside me on the passenger seat, encased in its vinyl pouch. These men were firearms enthusiasts, trained to read the neuroses of others. They would recognize my discomfort. I began sweating. Heat rose to my face and hands.

The street was too small to escape. They would see me backing away. I had no choice but to wait in line, calming my eyes and hands, which darted uncontrollably. Perhaps, I thought briefly, I could leave this world in a spray of shrapnel. The weapon was within my reach. The thought appalled me, but I had no defense against it. My head was unwell. Forcing the image from my mind, I took three deep breaths. I watched a pigeon perched atop a streetlight necking its squalid feathers. As calmly as I could, I slipped the vinyl into my bag and laid this on the floor.

The policeman directing traffic waved me through without a second glance. I lurched forward, entering the regular flow of traffic, exhaling. To him, I was just any other nervous face, a mechanism for turning a steering wheel toward home. I was not a threat. Of course I wasn't. I was reminded of my coworkers, sitting at their desks, unaware of the power I held. Except, there was nothing to that power. I could barely drive through a traffic stop without panicking.

A week later, the second lithops was dead too. I couldn't understand it. The more attention I paid them, the faster they died. At first it went soft at the base, like overcooked

asparagus, then the entire body wilted and became translucent. There was nothing I could do. The rotting bulb sucked back into itself, its withered shell receding into the soil. Plants die; this is something that happens, regardless of proper care or intentions, I knew this. Businesses fail, people go mad, close friends fall ill. I knew all of this, but my thoughts didn't reflect what I knew. I wouldn't carry the gun in public anymore. I didn't trust myself. And I would let the third bulb die, intentionally or not. There was nothing for me to hang my days on. It felt, more and more, like I lived within a shrinking room.

I cleared the notes from my desk, most of them long out-of-date. *Chaser owes you Sixty bucks,* I read, *for the platinum. Go see him sometime.*

I stood outside his home within the hour.

I figured I could take him shooting, that this was something he needed. I'd never pulled the trigger myself and wondered what he would do with a gun in his hand. If holding an instrument of immediate fatality made one feel powerful and alive, surely he, who must have thought much on his own mortality, would benefit from such an outing. Maybe there was something I could glean from watching.

He opened the door and looked as I hadn't seen him before. Thin, pale, peering. Like my mother in the doorway. The air within Chaser's home was stale and still. Images of darkness came to me, of myself holding a candle, its light illuminating the stalagmites emerging from an abyss, one we'd both sensed. Chaser smiled. We hugged. He felt so thin.

"How are you?" I asked.

"I'm okay," he said. "I can get your money, tonight, later. I'm sorry, I didn't think you'd be here."

"No need," I said. "Would you like to get out? I understand you're beginning recovery."

Chaser nodded. I knew he couldn't say no.

At the grocery we purchased several bundles of wood, two folding chairs, a loaf of bread, sandwich meats, two gallons of distilled water, and a rack of beer. Chaser said he felt too ill for alcohol, though I was more interested in shooting the aluminum cans than drinking them. Then we left town and cut our way through the emptiness surrounding that city, into the wilderland mountains and yawning desert, where the stars are always ready to fall.

Chaser had hardly left his house in six months. He told me about chemotherapy, about its corrosion, how he'd lost his curiosity and been wrenched into daily submission.

"You feel terrible," he said, "but you think worse."

A jackrabbit hopped across the broken asphalt, two hundred yards ahead and not quite a mirage, bouncing towards some inexplicable destination in that barren land. I didn't slow, and the creature hopped off the road at the last possible moment.

"I think I understand what you mean," I said.

An hour out of town the mountains turned to stone. Green trees transmuted into barbed stalks of ocotillo, streambeds desiccated, and the scattered towns all appeared to have gone paranoid, barely more than grids for telephone poles. Just clusters of trailers quivering in the heat. The desert stretched to the furthest mantle of the sky. I wasn't sure if it was the Salton Sea I was witnessing or if my head was bad. We turned onto the dirt road leading to Split Mountain, off in those mud canyons.

I'd done some research when I purchased the pistol. During fire season, Split Mountain is one of the few places in this vile county a private citizen can shoot legally, for free, in peace. It's

on public land, within BLM purview, some miles west of the Salton Sea, near the now-depleted gypsum mine and beyond those freight tracks which seem only to connect a vast network of grisly, haunted crossings.

The trail followed a sandy wash, the path of flash floods, as it carved between sloping clay hills. Formerly jagged coral outcrop, now humps and mounds that look from certain angles like naked bodies, these were the remnants of ancient seabeds, studded with fossil shells.

"This is going to sound stupid," I said, "but I killed a plant, in my office. I let it die, and I can't stop thinking about it."

"A plant?"

"That's how little I've had," I said, "how alone I've been. Why should I feel so guilty?"

"It makes sense," Chaser said, "feeling guilty."

"Did you bring the platinum?"

"Oh," he said, "I think I lost that."

"You lost it? I was hoping to see it again."

"Really?" he asked. "I'm sorry. My room is a mess. I haven't had the energy for anything. Who knows what I'll find in there when this is all over?"

I parked. A gentle zephyr wafted our vehicle's dust across the shooting field, and I saw it was strewn with wooden pallets, sun-eaten tires, and heaps of ancient metal. We were alone. The sun hovered overhead.

Chaser wasted no time. He was like a dog let loose on a beautiful day. He carried four beers toward a stack of desiccated plywood and carefully set the targets up, sighting down the line, ensuring an even distance between them. He savored this, and I sat back into one of the

folding chairs we'd brought, with my own can to drink. I would allow myself this indulgence. In the desert's stillness, the tab's hiss echoed off the stones, and I whispered some secret back. The beer tasted like a miracle.

Chaser found the carton of bullets and carefully loaded each of the seven chambers. He listened to my brief instructions on the pistol's specifications, then paced thirty yards from the targets. I could barely stay seated, such was my anticipation. I couldn't help but think of the platinum, buried somewhere in his sorry den, waiting for his passionate interest to return once more. Oh, the things he would find. If watching his strange excitements highlighted my own life's void, I didn't mind. I would never neglect him again. We all live however we can. He stood with one knee forward, both hands steady on the wood boot grip, and began aiming down the silver barrel.

"Wait!" he cried, and I nearly spit out my beer.

He'd paused to take off his shirt. His body was pale like a marble statue but not well-built. He stood defiant and scrawny amid the gneiss and scree. He smiled at me then and squared his stance before firing all seven shots in rapid succession.

A great chime rung deep within my skull. The muzzle flash was lost among a brilliance of sunlight. Particulate from the sun-bleached plywood floated like pollen across the sand. The cans were destroyed. It was beautiful.

With a gentlemanly gesture, Chaser handed me the revolver. "Your turn," he said.

The gun was warm in my hand. I'd never experienced this before. In all the times I'd held it, the power contained within had always been inactive, coiled, tense. This warmth represented a

living danger. It frightened me. I could point it anywhere. I cautiously reloaded each of the seven chambers while Chaser positioned several targets on the platform.

"Okay!" he called.

I took aim. Raising the gun was much heavier than I remembered. I noticed a column of dark smoke rising, very far away, toward the west.

Its cracking buck swallowed the world. There was a gasp of time between the first shot and the second, when I still felt my fingers wrapped around the grip and my feet somewhere on the Earth, but after three shots, there was nothing. The ringing cleared and sour smoke rose from my hand.

I'd missed every target. I handed the gun off again and slumped back into the chair. Better him than me.

"That's all?" Chaser asked.

"I don't think it's for me," I said. "You go again."

And he did. He fired, and fired, and fired.

I could have watched him forever.

The Siege of El Capitan

Overlooking the parking lot of the El Capitan Resort Casino, Rodney and Tatiana split a cigarette while a red glow crept over the mountains. They'd been inside for hours, pulling slots and learning which cocktail waitress arrived fastest. Within the breast pocket of Rodney's saffron flannel sat a small felt-lined box, and within this box lay the value-priced engagement band, a hoop of gunmetal titanium, he'd purchased the week previous. He touched it nervously, glancing toward Tatiana when she looked away, the little plumes billowing from her lips. Their room was paid for one more night, but that night was ending fast.

"We're floating even," she said, "nothing lost, nothing gained."

"We still have time," Rodney said.

The resort sat within a mountainous bowl. A thin road wound between sheaves of granite and live oak, cresting a pass before descending onto the minor plain upon which the casino sat like a castle from olden times. It was flanked by an executive golf course, several pools, and the neon spike of a hotel. This sprawling compound was in turn ringed by sharp hills and canyons that ached for water in summer but summoned waterfalls in spring. Ranches dotted this landscape, and on some patches of flat ground crops would grow. Rodney didn't care for any of that. He'd ridden a horse once, but the act had terrified him. What was to stop such a massive animal from kicking a person to death? Combustion engines were much more agreeable.

“You haven’t done well,” Tatiana said.

They stood among a party gathered outside, a ragtag collection of humans in all manner of dress and affect. Over the growing clamor, Rodney said, “Not really,” but Tatiana did not respond, nor did he repeat himself.

Earlier that evening a peculiar crowd arrived, a gathering band of crewcut Marines, chisel-jawed and dopey, to attend their annual soiree. They’d floated between craps tables and buffet lines, many holding a cavalcade of spectacular women hooked on their arms, dates for the military ball, girlfriends and wives and all manner of escorts. Others of the men sat by themselves, draining cocktails by the tray, and others still butted heads in the parking lot outside like stegosauri. All those big faces and crisp uniforms put Rodney on edge.

Tatiana ashed onto the shoulder of his favorite flannel, the one she'd bought him. She did this when the background noise of their quarrelsome love went quiet.

“You know,” Tatiana said, “I’m not having the worst time.”

It was deep midnight, and the military ball was in chaos. They watched the brawny young men stalk the parking rows, squawking each other down.

“Good,” Rodney said.

“Why is the sky red like that?” Tatiana asked, lighting another lung dart.

The nightclouds above their private wargames were tinting rose. Two leathernecks tackled a third.

Rodney had been drinking, that weekend and throughout his life. It took a moment to pivot and comprehend the crimson glow illuminating the valley, a burn some distance away that would surely spread. Smoke, apocalypse. A torrent of fire engulfing the land. With each new

calamity he maintained a tally, in continual anticipation of the gambler's fallacy, that long stretches of bad luck prophesied a turn towards the good.

"If it's a wildfire," Tatiana said, "should we go? Are the roads still open?"

"I bet we're safer here," Rodney said, "surrounded by concrete."

She smirked. "You bet? Aren't you just trying to watch what's left of your money burn?"

There was a time when this might have angered Rodney: her wanton disregard, her vocal contempt. Instead he'd come to accept such treatment, even to love it. Tatiana was much like a woman he'd known many years before: headstrong, irresistible, prophetic. The two women sometimes became confused in his dreams, a body from one angle suddenly turning to have the other's face, or voice, or some other bizarre mutation of features, eyes instead of nipples, disembodied limbs, patches of wildly colored hair.

With this other woman he'd had, then lost, a child, a daughter. The memory was a blur of drink, of isolation, of living in rooms that smelled of cat urine and spilled beer. The day social services came knocking, Rodney had fled. Thinking of that time brought him a shuddering shame, the kind which propels one back into the world, or down into the grave.

He'd met Tatiana during his longest and most recent upswing, a clearheaded time of intentions and early mornings. At first, he'd a sense he could do no wrong with her. Things fell into place that should never have worked. During their first dinner together, a waiter carrying a platter of banana splits tripped and hurled them across the room. A single cherry, spiraling through the air, landed neatly among the fine-edged ice of Tatiana's rocks whiskey. She sipped and said *ahhh*. It took Rodney a long time to realize she was the lucky one, not him.

So when Tatiana, after a year of dating, very charming, herself mentioned children, Rodney had balked. He was then a forty-five-year-old motorhome mechanic, divorced, still handsome, in recovery, perhaps, but the thought of children was a thought of pain. It was not a reality he'd considered in years, though perhaps the possibility could open again. But she'd already seen it in his wince, in the way his glance fell, and Rodney knew what she saw. Maybe things should have ended that evening?

"Well, if we're staying put," Tatiana said, "we may as well get back to it. Last one inside is a –"

"Sack of shit," Rodney said.

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It soon became obvious that fire was bearing down on the valley. The roads would be thick with killing air, and the surrounding ranches scorched in a deadly conflagration. Residents came to El Capitan with their animals in tow, as if in flight from an enemy army. All were welcome in that place of worship. Telephone poles burst into flame behind them.

There was a nervous row of horses on the casino floor, heads wrapped in T-shirts and towels to keep calm. Rodney considered sprinting down the line, snatching each covering as he went. What a sight it would be, the beasts kicking loose from their handlers, rearing above the

nitwits hunched over the blackjack tables, the flailing hooves launching chips in great flurries like thrown roses.

Instead, he dropped another coin into the slot and pulled the machine's long brass lever. The reels spun like turbines, and Rodney saw a bindle of grapes, a woman's face – the fierce Knave of diamonds – and the letters B, A, R, written in cartoon red beside the clanging lights. Nothing, bust. The dazzle played across his graying visage like the reflections on a grotto wall. He pulled the lever again. Somewhere, a shrieking animal stamped its hoof, the bloodshot eye circling.

Within his head fought two impulses: the heroic and the cowardly. The hero in him wanted to continue its string of rash decisions and present the engagement ring to Tatiana, his friend, and lover, and sometimes-enemy. The coward in him winced at every improbable success she wrenched from the world and wanted desperately to give up and sink back into nothing. He didn't think he could bear her refusal, if it came. Rodney counted at least four valid reasons his plan had already gone awry: the fire, the military ball, the fleeing horse ranchers, their thinning pocket change. And the more he counted, the more reasons he found.

Who's to say what that first reason was? Maybe the day in third grade when Rodney discovered a rip in his pants, standing before the class presenting a diorama on the historic Mission San Luis Rey. The monks of Capistrano could not save the Luiseños from their freakish illnesses, nor would the children of Lakeview Elementary stifle their honking laughter. Or had it occurred even earlier, in the unremarked dreamtime of young childhood, and Rodney had long forgotten the moment which soured his life? A dropped ice cream, maybe, boiling on the asphalt or a balloon floating skyward? Not that it mattered.

A taupe stock horse clopped behind the slot machines. Rodney wouldn't look. He finished the last salty gulp of martini and glanced around for a waitress, a lonely olive resting within the crater of glass like a meteorite.

"They're so calm," Tatiana said. "It's amazing."

She ashed into the tray between them, watching the horses, the nest of her black curls trussed within a lilac kerchief. The whole room reeked of smoke, from many years of tobacco abuse and from the brush fire raging in the hills outside.

"This is the one," Tatiana said and confidently pulled her slot.

The machine erupted into a fever of bells and flashing lights. The digits ticked up, nearly two thousand dollars. What luck. Her jumping and laughing startled the animals. Rodney held his head in his hands. The ring in his pocket was something so insignificant it might have been undetectable, just another electron quivering stupidly.

A waitress approached Tatiana's blinking machine, alongside a spindly casino employee with a mustard tie. In this, the age of gold, Tatiana's tray overflowed with ducats.

"Mr. Champagne-taste here," she announced, gesturing toward Rodney, "would like a glass of your finest bubbly to celebrate my victory. And I would like something... maybe with Chambord? On ice, with mineral water."

Rodney accepted this new insult without remark. Instead, he considered everything he'd seen in movies that spooked horses. Snakes, loud airplanes, sudden gusts of wind. Perhaps if he threw his empty martini glass the entire caravan would stomp like monsters across the floor, clearing the last patrons from their perches and giving him victorious solitude. One by one, the

line of snorting beasts disappeared into an adjacent ballroom. Each of their handlers looked drag-assed and grim, not unlike chimney sweeps. Rodney envied the horses their humility.

"We hear you've had the beginnings of a lucky run," the casino man said. "I have your winnings here."

He held, curled within a bundle of irregular knuckles, a stack of hundred-dollar bills. Tatiana eyed him suspiciously.

"Or," he said, "you can keep your coins, keep gambling, and receive payout whenever you please."

Tatiana relaxed. She glanced at Rodney, who flinched, reflexively.

"I have something else to offer," the casino man said and made a sweeping gesture in reference to the surrounding bedlam. "As you can see, we have a full house tonight."

"Good one," Rodney quipped.

"The roads are closed," he continued, "and no one will be leaving this evening. We believe the lucky deserve reward and are offering a suite, free of charge, all-inclusive, for the night, and for as long as your luck holds."

"You won't let us leave?" Rodney asked.

"I'm afraid that time has passed," the man said. "The fire department is laying a perimeter now. We will be completely surrounded soon, if not already."

Rodney watched the final horse's shivering rump disappear into the ballroom's double doors. Its tail whipped one last swish, as if waving goodbye.

"What about the jarheads?" he asked. "And the ponies?"

“The military ball has concluded,” the man said, twitching at his mustard tie. “And the livestock will... have to make due. Please, my friends, we insist. Accommodations have been arranged, here in the hotel. The room is ready for you.”

“I hope you’re prepared for us to move in,” Tatiana said, “because my luck… Honey, my luck is going to hold.”

The man bowed, very slightly, just as another slot machine began to panic, and during this chaos he slipped away.

The waitress, returned now with their drinks, handed a tumbler of carmine fizz to Tatiana and to Rodney, a flute of golden-straw effervescence, only the finest bubbly. He took a slurp, quickly, and nearly shot the liquid from his nostrils, so sickly sweet it was. Whether through ill-will, or confusion, the waitress had brought him a glass of sparkling apple cider. Perhaps she was new to the job and distressed by the circumstances?

Or, perhaps, she disliked him too and wanted to make abundantly clear the extent of his many failures. Rodney briefly considered shattering the long-stemmed glassware on the paneling of his slot machine and using the shards to gouge from their sunken sockets his own eyeballs. How they itched in this weather. Instead, he tilted the flute back until the cider was finished, dramatically wiping his chin with a greasy sleeve.

“Are we ready to see the room?” he asked.

***

When he first began calling after Tatiana, Rodney was conscious of himself as an older man, perhaps as a man who'd once been broken but had found some sliver of moonlight to illuminate his path. He was proud of that, to have emerged onto new plateaus. He'd felt lucky to visit her sometimes, where she worked as a hairstylist, and knew the other women who worked with her were examining him closely. Just who was this Rodney? Where did he come from? Where was he going? He hadn't minded then. He was happy to be an object of interest once more, flattered. He'd brought bouquets and smiled broad smiles.

In the dim halls of the hotel, however, whatever flattery he'd once felt, judged beside this woman, became a miserable doubt. Here she was, resplendent, exuberant with riches she'd summoned, as if by sorcery. And him, a husk, a simpering shuck of a man, contemptible, deserving of scraps, maybe. He scurried behind her.

They navigated a labyrinth of near-featureless corridors, punctuated by octagonal mirrors and thin tables supporting singular ferns. Whatever powerlines ran through the Cuyamaca Mountains had melted, and the casino was now operating on reserve generators. In the half-light, groups of frenetic Marines passed with their dates, many of them still blitzed into a hooting frenzy. Molten rage boiled within Rodney when a particular gaggle of men whistled at Tatiana as she rounded a corner.

He stopped to confront them, both fists balled; he'd struck men before; he'd held his own. But once he squared his shoulders, they were gone, around another corner, whisked away on legs of hooch to whatever mysterious destination they could possibly be seeking. The hallway before him curled toward ominous, empty places. An alarm meeped somewhere, like an itch.

"Rodney!"

Tatiana had opened a door down the hall. "This is it," she said, hanging on the frame. "Come inside!"

They had been promised a suite and, strangely, were not disappointed. Two beds, a separate nook with dinette set, a deep bath, jetted and seashell pink, portents for an evening of romance. Tatiana flung herself onto the striped sheets while Rodney headed for the window.

"We'll have to get our bags from the old room," she said, "but that can wait."

There was a warmth behind the curtains, not unlike what transpires during a summer's day spent indoors, shutters drawn, in retreat from a world of burden and woe. Rodney pulled the heavy linen back, only slightly, and in the shimmering interplay of darkness and gleam, met his own goggle-eyed reflection. He rubbed one hand across a pitted chin, then refocused – self-reflection wasn't his forte – and beheld the mayhem outside.

Whorls of sparks rode a murderous wind. He hadn't expected to see flames, but there they were, taller than buildings, lashing at the night. The casino complex, its radiating concrete, for parking, golf, and lounging poolside, was an island within a sea of fire. Yellow figures passed to and fro before the glass, firemen with their axes and masks. A line of them broke from the building carrying a length of hose toward a fenced structure some distance into the lot. Rodney noticed the peaking white domes of tanks filled with propane or natural gas.

"There's no point," Tatiana called. "Why watch that stuff? We are safe in here."

Lugging their hose like a massive boa, the firefighters wove between rows of sedans and pickups. They looked like scouts advancing into an alien dimension.

Rodney had once seen a propane tank flare, though it had been much smaller. A friend had set a twenty-gallon tank onto a campfire in a fit of drunken bravado. From afar, they'd watched it gas off, sending a torrent of pinkish flame into the evening sky.

"In all seriousness, Rod," Tatiana said, "we've been very lucky today. Wouldn't you like to celebrate?"

He glanced at her in the window's vague reflection. She fished a bottle of sparkling wine from the minibar and cradled it with both hands. For a long time, she rocked on her heels, holding the emerald vessel. Rodney sighed and closed the curtain.

"Okay," he said, "let's celebrate."

Tatiana smiled. She snatched two tumblers from the dinette table while Rodney popped the bubbly, carefully withdrawing the cork. It launched from the bottle and rubber-balled off the ceiling with a *fwap,* ricocheting below a cabinet.

"Leave it for the cleaners to find," she said. "Do you think we could order room service?"

At this, Rodney nearly laughed. It welled from the core of him, like a thermal spring, but at the point of emission he tamped down the indulgence. He carefully poured each glass, the liquid perfectly even between the two, and set the chilled bottle upon the tile floor of the dinette.

Tatiana raised her drink. "To our luck," she said, "today and for the rest of our lives."

"To our luck," Rodney repeated, and they clinked.

Within the pocket of his saffron flannel sat the ring, waiting. Sometimes he felt the little nub of pressure on his chest, dizzying with possibility.

At this moment, a searing explosion rocked the hotel wall. A burst of heat filtered from the window, the room's corners shook, and thunderous drumfire from an enormous combustion

rollicked the structure. The tanks had caught fire and detonated, mushrooming burning gases into a hellish world.

Tatiana dropped her glass. Rodney watched its turning, the liquid beginning to spill as the tumbler tilted, the thick glassware shattering on tile, a spreading rash of tiny fizz as sparkling wine pooled at their feet. She screamed and sat down onto a dinette chair.

Rodney knelt before her, watching rivulets slip into the grooves between tiles. Would he reach into his pocket and withdraw the little box? Could he focus enough to slip a titanium ring onto her quivering finger? There were already so many reasons to quit. Would there be a better moment? Rodney took a sip from his own glass. Yes, he thought, there would be a better moment.

"We need to go," he said.

Tatiana wiped her nose with the back of her hand, smearing lipstick. "Our bags," she said. "What if we need to evacuate?"

"We need to be ready to leave. We'll get them."

"We can't drive through fire," she said.

"No," Rodney said, "but we can't say here either."

***

Through the halls they went, lost among wrong turns and windowless stretches. Strange sounds echoed about, distant howls and malfunctioning electronics. Beneath all of it growled the ominous rumble of the fire outside, the sound of a gargantuan consumption, millions of tons of drought-stricken flora converting into a stinking cloud of fumes, visible from the moon. They searched for the old room, but casinos are built like mazes on purpose.

At a dead end, where not one but three ice machines sputtered, Rodney held Tatiana by the shoulders and said, “There’s something I need to tell you.”

The box in his pocket pressed against his heart.

“Please,” she said, “we have to get through this.”

“It can’t wait much longer.”

“We’re almost back,” she said, “I’m sure of it. Just a little farther.”

He chased after her, and they sprinted halfway across the casino floor before noticing the change in surroundings. Both were short of breath. The front door was only a few steps away, but what lay beyond? As elsewhere, the lights were dimmed, and the machines were deactivated, disappearing into the gloom in even rows. Dust hung in thin bands of tangerine glow creeping from the edges of pulled curtains.

Rodney put a hand to the brass handle of the great double doors leading outside.

“This way,” Tatiana said, gesturing toward another wing of the hotel.

He expected the metal to sear his hand, as if the fire were immediately outside, but the brass was oddly cool. He pushed it open, just a crack, and gazed upon a world ablaze. Everything beyond the parking lot had caught. A column of light pierced the room. The heat was unreal. Nothing could survive that.

A sudden drumming filled the chamber, echoing wildly from the broad walls and many metal surfaces, followed by a brazen, toneless hooting.

“Now what exploded?” Rodney asked.

A naked man, head-shaven and muscular in the manner of military servitude, came galloping toward him on the back of a jet black American quarter horse, spitting and laughing as he spurred the animal onward. With one hand he wielded a dice stick, the hooked baton used by craps dealers, and with this saber swung at poor Rodney, attempting to scourge him, and struck a glancing blow.

Rodney ducked below a roulette table, a welt rising across his face. He began crawling across the aisle, toward a line of poker tables forming rows too narrow for a steed to navigate. The rider circled back, urging his mount onward again. He would ride poor Rodney down before he could reach sanctuary.

From across the room, Rodney watched Tatiana grab an ashtray the size and shape of a tea-saucer. Without hesitation, she hurled it over the gaming tables toward the oncoming assailant. Cigarette butts spun from the glass in powdery spray as it whirled across the room like a frisbee, and in this moment it occurred to Rodney that she’d meant exactly what she said, about luck, that they could be lucky together. The projectile, heavy as a stone, struck the side of the rider’s head, knocking the failed cavalier to the ground and leaving the great black horse to gallop off, back into the depths of the gambling den.

Rodney couldn’t think of anyone he would be luckier with.

Minutes later, after they’d found their old room, he slid the magnetic key into the locking mechanism. The light flashed a miraculous green, and he pushed the door open.

“Help me pack,” Tatiana said, heading for the closet and their bags.

“Hold on,” he said. “Slow down, for a moment.”

“Rodney?”

He went to the windows and threw the curtains open. They watched the fire, that inconceivable thing. It had already taken so much. Heroic or foolish, there would never be a better time.

Rodney went to one knee. From the breast pocket of his favorite saffron flannel, he produced the little box. Coyly, he opened its tiny hinge. With the steadiest voice he could manage, he asked Tatiana, in all her splendor, if should would like to marry him.

“Rod,” she said, “you really do pick the perfect moments. Of course I will.”

And You Wanted More

D's old beater doesn't have a passenger seat, so you're sitting in the back. The car's cutting through shreds of midnight fog when he really punches it. Your necks lurch, and he laughs. He laughs, and the tires squeal, and drops of whiskey spatter the leather.

"Could you kill someone?" D asks.

You say you probably could, if you knew they deserved it.

"Dogmen," D says, which means guys he doesn't like: cops, coaches, stepfathers. "You could kill them."

You say you're not sure. If they really had it coming, you could do it.

D turns hard onto the freeway, and your head vaults like a gear sent looping. Eight gaping lanes either way, and all of it dead. All of it gray and the little rings of fog around the streetlights. You see stars, but they are moving. Airplanes and satellites. All the junk in your head. One day there will come a cold dawn, when the problems are real, you know this, but D lays into the throttle and whatever you know evaporates.

D's this guy you used to get high with, junior year. Maybe it all started up again after Ashley left, but who knows; it's been a blurry couple of months. You don't remember whose idea it was to drive out to her house. She's still got something of yours.

D's car reeks of burning oil. You keep expecting him to ask if you could shoot Ash in the brain. He's that kind of grinning asshole. Everyone can guess he drowns cats. You will say this:

you can swing the hammer if it comes to that. You will speak slow and strong and tell him that you can, that you can do it, so he knows.

“Kick my seat again,” D yells. From the backseat, you kick and kick and the car swerves over empty lanes. The back of D’s fist hits your face like a thrown stone. You taste iron. He is laughing. You fill your mouth with whiskey, and it burns your splitting lip.

The freeway's desolation, the shape of each overpass on its way to other suburbs, it's all a vast emptiness, malls and mountains and clear cut forests, a windblown wasteland peopled by a species of peering, skittering exiles.

“Ash's old man is legit brass?” D asks. “Real dogman type?”

“I grew up with him always up the road,” you say. “Him washing his car. Him mowing his lawn.”

“With the napalm cologne and real tall checkered socks?”

“Guy's got lots of guns. Knives,” you say.

“I like knives.”

“He wouldn't like you. You're what his knives are for.”

“What's the name?” D asks.

“Chuck, with the crewcut, the ice-blue eyes. Be gone for half the year when we were kids and Ash hating him for it.”

“He still pulls that shit?”

“Yeah,” you say.

“Off bombing folks?”

“Brass got his soul forever.”

“So tonight he's gone?” D asks.

“He's gone all weekend. Nobody home.”

“Nobody home,” D says.

D exits the freeway and careens through grids of industrial lots. You pick at the trash stuffed into the cupholders. D dryswallows another pill. You run your tongue over a busted lip, how grotesque it feels. Are you a kid who *can* do anything but doesn't believe it? Or a kid who *can't* do anything but doesn't believe it?

It's January, and there are still some homes with their Christmas lights ablaze. Gaudy fake snowmen waving hello. You stick your head into the rushing cold. The air is wet on your dry eyes. You blink. Strangers are shooting fireworks from the hills above town. Sparks of orange and green diffuse into the fog like battlefield artillery. They can’t be real. Nothing to do in this town but drugs and vandalism. When you don't know how to build anything you only want to destroy what's come before. You watch a flicker of police sirens winding away toward distant cities.

D stops the car to piss hot whiskey, and you take over driving. Now he’s in the backseat. He’s singing. You crank the stereo, but the speakers are blown, and it’s just caustic electricity. You take a long pull from the bottle and toss it back to him. You switch the brights on and off. D starts kicking the driver’s seat with his black boots, the kind of shitkickers meant for stomping cigarette butts and roaches. You swerve so hard to make him stop he tumbles across the back.

You and Ash were never royalty in school, but you’d been together longer than most. Strange to think about her now. Everything she was, you can't let her be that way anymore. *It's*

you or me, she said. *I break your heart or I break my own*. You didn't see it coming. Everything she was to you is locked away, and you don't know where she hid the key.

Out of town, there are no streetlights, and the air smells like sage and rain. The shapes of fences are sharp in the headlight glare. Behind you, D's yelling. You glance in the rearview as he throws the empty whiskey bottle out the window, and you expect to hear a shattering, but there is nothing.

D's howl: "Ashley cheated on you man."

You don't answer. You're getting closer now. The tires squeal and break loose as you shift into fourth.

"She cheated on you man. You gonna string her up. Hang her high."

Why respond to this?

"She slept with someone else, man. She ain't yours no more."

"She didn't cheat on me," you say.

"No," D says. "She dumped you to fuck some other guy. She's a nice girl."

"You don't talk about her."

"What if I fucked her? I bet she's a *real* nice girl."

You lay on the brakes, and the car shudders to a stop. You get out, throw open D's door, pull him from the backseat and kick him once in the gut. Him grunting and vomiting on your old sneakers.

D jumps to his feet with a snarl and tackles you to the ground. You both roll from the cracked asphalt into muddy grass. He lays a right to your face, and you spit out a twiggy

mouthful of weeds. Your lip tears open again. You think about the little time you've spent with D and how much he's hurt you.

***

You drive onward in your cloud of burnt oil, passing the dim silhouettes of craftsman homes. No music now, you're too close. Both of you are black-eyed and completely loaded when you roll into Ashley's neighborhood.

"You could kill him though?" you ask.

"Who?"

"Chuck."

"Who?"

"Chuck, Ashley's dad."

"Yeah. I can kill a dad. Not my dad. Someone's dad though." And D thinks for a moment. "Nobody's a real dogman like a dad is."

The town's stale orange venom glows over the hills. There are patches in the clouds and you can see stars, one or two. You pass a house with its porchlight gleaming and the door too perfect, the welcome mat swept clean, the dust motes immobile forever. Somewhere behind that door folks are sleeping under flannel blankets with their white curtains drawn. They'll shiver when moonshadows creep across their bedframes.

“To stand strong, above the tides of melancholy, like a lighthouse,” you say.

“Yeah?”

“You liked that one D?”

“Didn't really hear.”

“A poem I wrote.”

He says *huh* like he understands, but he never heard.

Matters have become more serious. Your lights are off. You park the car. D hands you a black mask, and you pull it over your face. You look at each other, and D’s eyes are hard. “You. Tonight. You ante up. She ain't yours.”

You nod.

No cars in her driveway and you’re relieved. The neighborhood is silent. This has always been the point in the night when D ceases to be a predictable variable.

“I’m thinking about what we’re doing,” you say.

“Don’t wig out on me.”

“What are we doing out here?”

“She took something of yours in the breakup, and you’re taking it back. Simple,” he says.

You watch D with his hazy eyes and his lizard-throat and think for a moment.

“Simple,” you repeat.

“Attaboy.”

You notice your thrumming heartbeat. For some reason you check the time. You can’t tell if the fog is lifting or getting thicker.

“You know what you're looking for?” D says.

“Yes. A necklace. My necklace,” you say.

“Where is it?”

“Has to be in her room.”

D puts his hand on your shoulder in a gesture that is too friendly for tonight.

You hop the fence and stand teetering in Ashley’s backyard. The windows are dark. Nobody home. You know the whole scene. The pool, the barbecue, Chuck’s horseshoe pit, the bottlebrush where you and Ash used to make out. You have this crystalline memory of walking home with her after high school, and she’s holding a cherry-red branch of bottlebrush.

“Nice place,” D says.

“Gotta take your shoes off when you get inside.”

“Chuck’s a rich cocksucker with a pretty daughter.”

“His little darling,” you say.

D searches the yard and finds an old brick behind the air-conditioner. You glance at the sleeping neighborhood peering over the fence. All those silent homes. All the blinds shut tight. With one strike, D neatly breaks the bay window and reaches inside to unlatch it. You watch the neighbor’s houses for any signs of life. Someone switching on a lamp. Someone sneezing. But everything is hushed. There’s a soft electric hum from the streetlights in the fog.

D's already opened the window and crawled inside. His black boots disappear into Ashley’s home. Everything around you is so still. This ordered street with its textbook cul-de-sac and clean black asphalt, the neat chaparral hills. You and D are entropy walking. You take a breath and climb inside.

D's in the dining room. He's already shuffling through the junk drawers beside the phone.

"Go find it," he tells you.

"Okay."

"What are you worried about?" he asks.

You walk into the front room. Dust hangs in the dim slats of light filtering through the blinds. Near the door there's a family photo of Chuck and Ash, all dressed up and looking charming and trying desperately to hide their dysfunction.

You take a breath. Because the walls are too close. Your shoulders are clenched leather cords. Your gut is twisted from the weight of how wrong this is. Everything is so tense in the dark. All the furniture, all the frames on the walls. You run two fingers over the soft felt on Chuck's pool table and swallow your nausea. You could have been anywhere else tonight.

D walks in from the dining room, and you realize he isn't hitting you anymore. He isn't reminding you that you're weak. He doesn't mention who Ashley's with. He seems quiet. Maybe you're both starting to come down.

"D, are you scared?"

"Don't wig out," he says, and he watches your eyes. "What is there for me?"

"Plenty."

He stares at you through his black mask for a moment, like he's going to say something, but he doesn't say a word. You're breathing so hard the mask is already wet around your mouth. D disappears down a hallway. You take a breath. You take another. You hear him rifling through cabinets. The Christmas tree is still standing in the front room. It's been there so long it doesn't

smell like anything. You think about popping one of D's reds but decide against it. You start up the stairs.

The door to Chuck's office is open when you step onto the white carpet of the second-story hallway. Inside the office, on the wall, his collection of antique, exotic knives look like all the thorns of hell's pale garden. Oiled leather handles, blades curved and serrated and so deadly, all of them. You wonder where this guy gets them all. That's the room D should be raiding. Guns, knives, every kind of danger.

Ashley's room is at the end of the hall. There are frames down the walls, diplomas and prized certificates and photos of grandparents. A picture of Ashley's mother at the oldest brother's graduation. Chuck with a dumbass smile holding an enormous trout by a stream. Ashley in dresses, looking like summer, looking like spring. You hear D in another room. He's stealing bullets; he's looking for wristwatches. By now he's already filled his pockets with fresh prescription pills.

You come to the door into Ashley's room, and you think: it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission. You slowly push it open and step inside. Her bed is made. You expect to see a big pile of clothes by the closet, but she's keeping the place tidy. It smells like her.

You start digging through her things. All of her shoeboxes and all of her drawers with broken handles full of bobby pins, and sunglasses, and torn envelopes. You find an old worn suitcase, but inside there's only a single blank piece of notebook paper all folded up. What are you expecting to find?

There is nothing here, nothing at all, that you need.

What did that necklace mean to you? Anything? What it means to you now is that Ashley took it, and she has it, and you don't have it, and you hate her for that. You open another cabinet and find nothing. Another, nothing. You slam the thing closed and the whole dresser shakes.

Earlier today, you thought you knew what was wrong. You thought you needed to turn some corner before you could get her out of your head. But what if you don't find anything and you don't turn that corner? It scares you to think about. This is the moment when you expected to realize something, anything, but it's only the anger inside, the bitter uncontrollable snarl. How proud would she be, seeing you like this?

All the drawers are open, all the lids to all the boxes are strewn around the room. You've yanked the sheets off her bed. You've dug through her trash like a dog. Her closet is flung open. You're tearing skirts off hangers. You're breaking the hangers. Where is the goddamn necklace it was never yours to keep why did you take that you took everything why did you take that too. No luck with her jewelry box. No luck finding anything in her shoes. You hurl a vial of nail polish, but instead of shattering it punches a dent in the drywall. You kick her bedroom door closed. You're tearing posters off the walls. You're ripping pillows in half, and goose feathers are falling everywhere. There's feathers everywhere. You're screaming. Where is it? Where the fuck is it?

"Hey!"

You look at D with your bleary eyes.

"Jesus goddamn Christ. Did you find it yet?"

You shake your head. No, you haven't found it yet.

"What does it look like?"

You look at D. He's standing in the doorway. You watch him.

"What does it look like?" he asks.

You clear your throat. "It's silver," you say. "It's a silver chain."

"Okay."

D steps forward. You catch your breath while he starts sorting through debris. You look around at Ashley's things and realize it's not the same place you used to know. This is hers. It's all hers now. It's always been hers.

"This is rough, man," D says. "Needles and haystacks. We should be seeing a little glint of silver somewhere."

"Yeah," you say, and you take a sorry, ragged breath.

You sit beside Ash's closet and hold your head. Everything in your head. You feel terrible. Day after day you wake up, and you're a wreck. Someone the other day on the street tried to give you a dollar, and you took it; you took it so fast. You're never finding anything in this room.

"Needles and haystacks, man," D says.

You stand up, too quick, and the blood rushes to your temples. You lean back against the wall. Then there comes the terrifying flash of headlights at Ashley's window, and something loud rolls into the driveway. He's home early, you know it, and your heart starts again.

D stares at the glare as a cave dweller might. Feathers have settled everywhere. D's yelling: "You said nobody was home! You. Said. No. Body. Was. Home."

"I thought he was gone for the weekend."

"You fucked up, man."

"I don't know. All I heard was Chuck's gone for the weekend. That's all I heard."

D punches you so hard you fall. Your lip tears open again. You stand and hit back, but D has that strong right. The room spins. It's all fists. You go down, and you're wrestling in a storm of goose feathers before you just straight kick D in the jewels and say, "Gone for the weekend! That's all I heard. This isn't my fucking fault."

"No?" he chokes.

"You boosted everything you wanted?"

He nods, yes.

"We need to go. Now."

D's doubled-over holding his junk. "He's gonna notice the broken window downstairs."

"Maybe he calls 911 first. Buys us time."

"Maybe he just kills us."

"That would solve a lot of our problems."

D points to Ashley's bedroom window. "Can we jump?"

You can jump, you think, but it's a legbreaker. You look at D. "I thought you wanted to take him," you say. "Nobody's a real dogman like some girl's Marine dad."

"No way," he says. "This is smash and grab. I'm not messing with that guy."

"No?"

"No way in hell. The window?"

"Yeah, open it."

D nods. Matters have become so much more serious. You take a plastic folding chair from Ash's closet and prop it up under the doorknob. You glance back at D, and he's already

opened the window and broken the screen with one, two kicks. There's noise from downstairs. You hear Chuck's voice calling out, but you don't hear what he's saying. Your heart is a mallet in your chest.

"We've made a friend," you say to D, but he can't hear you. He's already crawling onto the slate roof outside. You look around. You don't know why. This is the last time, absolutely, the very last time, you will ever see this place.

"Ashley!" you hear Chuck yell, and it's the worst kind of deja-vu. He has exactly the barking voice you'd expect. "Ashley! What's going on?"

"Nothing, Dad," you yell, and you're out the window.

It's wet and cold out there. The fog has turned to rain. You're kneeling just beyond the window, holding the side of the house with one hand, trying to find your footing. Ahead, D's scrambling hands-and-knees on the thin shelf of slate roof. He edges up to a corner and stands, about to leap onto the front lawn, but he's put too much weight on a roof tile, and it cracks. A stone shard slides into the driveway. There's a shattering sound that can only be the sound of Chuck's windshield, freshly broken. D tumbles off-balance in a skelter of limbs – there's nothing for him to grab – and pitches off the roof. You hear the dull clamor of plastic hitting concrete because he's fallen onto the trash cans.

Dude's dead, you think. Has to be.

Behind you, Chuck's kicking down Ashley's door. Two or three more kicks from now it's all going to be splinters, plastic chair and white door and everything. When that happens, if you're still here on this roof, it won't be long before you're so much more mangled than D. The door breaks, and Chuck's yelling so loud.

“You scumbag!” he screams. “You’re dead!”

You sort of just take a breath and squint your eyes and run for it. You run to the edge of the roof where you think the lawn is and somehow make it without slipping and jump as far as you can through the wet air. Fifteen feet down at least. There’s the sudden cracking flare of gunfire behind you. You need to land right or something’s broken bad, but you’re not thinking about that.

“You’re fucking dead!” Chuck yells.

You hit the ground, and a sharp pain rips through your shins. The lawn is muddy and slick. Coughing and holding your legs, you get up quick and look for D, who's picking himself out from the tumbled garbage bins. Trash is spewed across the sideyard, beer cans and rotten leaves, the ribs of a chicken carcass. D’s got a fresh gash across his face. He looks at you, and you look at him, and you both know. You break towards the car at a dead run. Chuck shoots again from the window, and the bullet sparks the sidewalk like a firecracker and echoes off into the night.

“Goddamn punkass scum!” he screams until his voice breaks. Windows are lighting up all down the street. D spins the tires on wet asphalt, and moments later you’re doing sixty down that dark road.

***

“Feel any better?” D asks.

You’re in the hills again, between towns. It’s all night behind you, nothing in the rearviews.

“About?”

“Ashley fucking some other dude.”

You laugh.

“Do you?”

“No, man,” you say, “I don’t think so.”

There’s a stop sign ahead, and D isn’t slowing. The engine hums onward. Your heart hasn’t quit pounding. There’s a clarity inside this car, to the scentless palm tree dangling from the mirror, to the carpet of trash beneath your feet. He’ll never clean it, and you’ll never help. D blows through the stop as another car enters, its own lights flashing suddenly as you avoid collision, the horn fading to nothing.

You watch the night rush by. Dark roads again. You could both be dead, just like that. What is there to say? D turns off the main road and heads into the silent rows of industrial streets.

After a while, he mutters, “They say it’s only up from here.”

“They say a lot of shit.”

“And you didn’t even find the damn necklace.”

“No,” you say. “It’s gone now.”

“Gone forever,” D says.

You want to convince him that… That what? That everything's fine now? You know there's another bottle of whiskey somewhere in this car, and you start digging around for it. Nothing will be fine, not anytime soon. You both know it. You find the bottle and take a burning swig, and it is exactly what you wanted. D turns down an alley and parks in a vacant lot to wait out the night. You take turns with the bottle until it's spent. Then you sprawl across the backseat's smudged leather. Sleep hits you like sucker punch.

When you wake it's morning, and D is driving. The sun shines on your tired eyes. You're about to ask where he's heading, but you stop yourself. The clouds are low in the pale sky. They look like the clouds in storybooks. You sit up, and clear your throat, and watch the street signs as they pass.

Stormin' Norman's Ferry

Stormin' Norman, broad of chest and red of neck, is fishing off the Mexican coast when he feels a great punch on the line. This jolt from the sunken world rouses him from lassitude, from a floppy-hatted contentment atop the Sea of Cortez, barely within sight of the town of San Felipe. His noonday blood sets to circling. The sky is a cloudless and gracious blue. To the north, the white tooth of Isla Consag juts from the sea, its colonies of birds flying together in spirals resembling volcanic smoke. Norman steadies himself against the boat's fiberglass side and begins heaving upon his pole. The laugh lines of his bronze cheeks strain taut.

What creature of the deep is savaging his nugget of bait squid? What sleek prey might he soon mount, lacquered and wondrous, above the mantelpiece? Norman is alone this day and feels it, the freedom and the ache. Deb and Esperanza, his wife and her best friend, lounge together back on shore, their tequila snores synchronized amid gardens of flowering yucca. It was Deb's idea to bring Esper to Baja, so great was her belief in the restorative properties of Mexican sunshine. And why would Norman stay moping with his wife away? A man must fish when he can.

It will please Deb, his catching the fish. If he is happy, then she will be happy for him. Or so he hopes. She's becoming harder to please. Just how well does he know her these days? Esper certainly seems distant. For years he'd earned the Stormin' Norman mantle, up at the crack of

dawn, ripping through a thirty rack, tossing fish into the cooler one after the other, but now he just feels like Norman, old and tired.

He'd been so excited for this day. He'd woken early, negotiated a good price on the boat, rented gear. This was the most passionately he'd felt about anything in months. What had happened to bring him low? He worked; he loved his wife; he paid debt. He supposed, ultimately, nothing had happened, and this became the problem. Drink never helped. That became clear afterward. Deb's concern for him, and she was concerned, tracked as condescension, as resentment, and might become such. Eventually, her love would exhaust. She'd lose respect if he kept sinking, and then what? Nothing he'd like.

Today, Norman has much to prove, to Deb and to himself. His rented boat is small, pleasantly so, and the breakers, driven by hot winds from the south – Mazatlán, La Paz, and Jalisco – keep him in motion, undulating atop an azulean shimmer.

He wrenches on the line, and the boat begins moving. This fish is a big one. It churns fin, muscular and proud. Norman's breathing becomes irregular, stopping completely as he begins to reel, escaping in grunts and gasps. Through the deepwater rod's handle, the creature's every move reverberates into Norman's palms, thrumming like the beat of a strange heart. He squints into the curious depths, toward his prize.

The beast is there! The shape of it, slick and dark below the water, thrills Norman. Deb will be stunned when he docks with this monster. His pole bends wildly now, the droning reel becoming a piercing whine. The fish nears the surface and – yes! – it is a billed and bladed thing. It spears out like a singular slash of switchgrass, and Norman worries that it may jump and that if it jumps, the hook may loosen, and all proof of his great skill will shimmy back into the sea.

It’s so powerful, Norman thinks. It could pull this little boat like a tug. And what a sight that would be, Stormin’ Norman returning to shore with such a legendary catch.

All at once it rushes beside the boat, and Norman reaches frantically for his spear while the creature begins launching heavenward. He lances at it like an outrageous hero, trying somehow to pierce what is all happening too quickly, much too quickly. The enormous swordfish flashes toward him, emerging from a prismatic spray of seawater, its tail arcing as it smacks the boat’s side. The swordbill skewers Norman’s chest, just below the collarbone, and the creature’s momentum carries it over the rail and down into the hull.

This violent impact knocks Norman from his seat and into the boat’s puddly bottom, where, for some delirious moments, he stares into the sun, breathing ragged, body-shocked and pained, struggling even to inhale. He’s aware of his own heart beating. He’s aware of a flock of seabirds passing overhead. Blood pulses from the wound in his chest. He watches the beautiful swordfish he’s just angled, flopping about in the boat’s fiberglass bottom, the spear stuck into its tailfin slapping rail. It gasps at the midday air, its flops slowing, its gulping maw opening longer now. And longer.

***

At the timeshare, Deb awakens before Esper. She brews a pot of coffee and drinks too much of it. By the time Esper shakes off her own hangover, Deb is on the patio smoking a cigarette. This remedies her jitters at the cost of a mild nausea.

"You aren't waiting for Norman," Esper asks, "before you make the margaritas?"

Deb had been waiting for Norman, though she realizes her error. He left early that morning, while they slept. He'd talked about going fishing for weeks, but Esper had talked about these margaritas even longer. Neither will be waiting for the other, and Norman will be out of touch for the rest of the afternoon, which has become his way. Deb begins slicing the limes.

This trip across the border, to San Felipe, is a concession of quiet misery by the three vacationeers, a healthy and unspoken compromise to the fact that each of them feels outside previously comfortable lives.

The day before, they drove a ragged motorhome south across the deltas and deserts of Baja California. Not knowing, apparently, what else to do, Norman attempted playing a damaged Jimmy Buffett compact disc, though neither of the women allowed this to continue for very long. They arrived at sunset outside their adobe timeshare, ten minutes beyond town among arroyos that funneled sporadic rainwater from the hazel crown of Picacho Del Diablo into the sea. A country of stone and sharp plants. San Felipe hugged low on the horizon, swollen with early summer tourism, a brightly huddled place beside the bay: lighthouse, flag-draped chapel, seabirds. Somewhere, underground streams pulsed with briny water. The tile floors of their rental were painted the color of carrot bisque.

For months, Norman had been cheerless: eating poorly, neglecting friendships. His lovable complaining over decades working at Rohr, the aerospace manufacturer, had dropped

neatly away. He still returned home greasy-handed but lacking vigor. The empties piled up. Deb wasn't sure what was wrong but imagined a snapping to come. He was looking bad. He spent many hours watching televised depictions of offshore fishing. Sometimes he would mimic their reeling, his eyes glassed.

Esper, perhaps her closest friend, had also been sad. Her long-unhappy marriage, to a manic and well-groomed general contractor specializing in masonry, had finally ended: irreconcilable differences, many years of intimacy slowly eroded, etc. Her interests were evolving, she claimed, and hinted at mysterious new recreations, speaking in hushed tones about herbal tinctures and cosmic synchronicity.

Deb was concerned Norman was entering that dreaded phase, the midlife crisis, and that he would return suddenly from many days away with a bespoke convertible, a ditz girlfriend, a visible tattoo. Perhaps, she thought, some time in Mexico would help. And perhaps, by spending time away, Esper would rediscover an inner validation after the separation. *And* perhaps Deb, by proxy, would be among the living again, so that she too could live.

She finishes cutting the limes and stirs the margaritas. They watch the palms sway until noon. Drinks in hand, they begin walking toward town.

"Maybe we'll see Norman at the dock," Deb says.

"Maybe."

"Maybe we can walk up the beach and find some shade," Deb says. "I'd like to watch the tide go out."

"Maybe."

"Well," Deb says, "maybe what would you like to do?"

"We can do anything," Esper says, which is something she's repeated often this trip. *We can do anything. We can go anywhere. We can drink and dance and have whatever fun we want*.

Deb wants to believe this, though she wouldn't mind if Esper thought more about Norman.

From a ridge they gaze upon the Gulf. Deb squints at each speck sailing the blue expanse, wondering where he might be. No, she thinks, he'll come back when he's ready. That's what this trip is about, relaxing, letting go in order to reconnect. I've got my own places to be.

The two of them approach the entrance to an old ruined cemetery lying atop a bluff.

The previous night, they'd walked this same road from their rental to town. The flatulent rumbles of ATVs carried from distant hillsides as if packs of strange groaning quadrupeds were frolicking in their secret meadows. Stars appeared in the soft twilight, and the sea, at low tide, receded for miles, lost entirely from sight.

Inhibitions eased, and the three of them trod sandaled as pilgrims, pale fingers cradling lukewarm bottles of lager. Deb didn't know what to do about her husband. He'd been quiet all day. He was not a man whom trouble found often, yet he acted a battered soul. They hadn't spoken easily for how long now?

Esperanza flitted across the path on her toes. She strode in the starlight before a jagged stand of wild agave and tossed her hair. They would certainly dance tonight. Deb had no idea what Norman would do instead.

At the edge of town lay the same graveyard, and there Esper stopped.

"Walk in with me," she said.

Norman skulked behind them.

The tombstones were old. They leaned in many directions. A short fence of splintery pine looped the graves. Within the greater grimness of the desert this scene was particularly stark. Deb hesitated.

"Just a few steps," Esper said.

"We should keep moving," Norman called.

"Don't listen to him," Esper called. "Old Stormin' Norman is afraid."

Deb was afraid too. Her heart yelped when Esper took her hand and tugged, the two going loping across the burial sands. Norman looked sad, alone beyond the fence. She waved to him, but he wouldn't meet her.

Later, standing outside a bar on San Felipe's main street, Norman looked that same kind of alone, until he was gone. This was the last time Deb saw him. She knew he'd slipped away. Esper barely noticed him go, and Deb thought that was fine. The two of them ordered drinks, found live music. The town was humming, and so were they.

Now, in daylight, Deb and Esper pass that cemetery, but its magic is sour. Deb kicks at a rusty nail outside the gate. She sips at the margarita, but the ice has melted. Why would she ever want a strange rendezvous with Norman there, in that rickety place? She can't blame him for keeping distant, but she doesn't know how the gap will close. Beyond the hill, the Gulf of Cortez stretches to the furthest horizon, gleaming under the noonday sun like a sheet of jewels.

***

Lying in the bottom of the boat, Norman's heart thuds against its cage, faster and faster. His skin is pale and damp with sweat. His eyelids flutter, and minutes pass, maybe hours. His mind moves into ethereal regions, halls lit by distant lamps, where the overwhelming sensation is one of calm dispersal, as if the boat were sinking, gently, into a warm sea, the water rising around him. A ringing comes to his ears, like distant bells, then a coursing, like the sound one hears holding their head against a pipe carrying swift currents. A lone seagull passes above him. Eventually, Norman loses consciousness and remains sprawled across the fiberglass, unmoving as a corpse.

In this position he awakens after what seems like eons, groggy and stiff, as if coming alive after anesthesia. The throbbing in his chest has ceased, as has the blood flowing from his wound, and he knows the injury has begun clotting properly, that his body has stabilized. Above him, clouds sail across the sky at an alarming rate. He rubs his eyes and scans the boat, searching for the swordfish. His lance is lying there, its tip caked with gore, but the prized catch is missing. Could it have sprung back to life?

He mounts the bench seat. Leaning over the boat's side to splash water on his face, he dips a cupped palm into the sea, and his fingers leave behind a wake. Norman glances around and notices two odd details: that the vessel is moving at a stately pace and that his fishing pole is still leaning on the prow, its nylon line stretching into the sea. Some force tugs the boat onward, as if it were a chariot.

His sunburn must be devastating, certainly cancerous. Deb always warns him about melanoma. But where is the sun? The sky is a strange virulent red, shot through with veins of

blackening cloud. A twist of fear ripples his gut. Where is Isla Consag? Where is the shore? The Gulf can draw far upon its tide and quickly. He could be miles from anything.

For a moment Norman wonders if the world ended, if he's the last man returning now to rebuild civilization. Often this thought comes to him in times of duress. He's intrigued by the idea of a hard restart. He'd like to do things right for once. He sniffs at the air, testing for any residual tang of nuclear holocaust. What would a mushroom cloud smell like? He doesn't know, though he notices a faint waft of something burning.

He follows the line of nylon and notices how it bends his fishing pole, how it goes taut between boat and water, and how, ten feet below the Gulf's surface, the hook is lodged, still, within the jaw of a great silver shape, what could only be the enormous swordfish. Norman watches it twisting forward, swimming with great steady motions, the spearbill wriggling as it propels itself. He did not truly appreciate its size and strength until now. An apex predator, it reminds him of some kind of muscular submarine, iron-willed as it traverses great sunken tracts, diving deep and pulling hard its entire life.

But where is it taking him? Norman's gaze passes from fish to sea and finally to the far horizon, where something is wrong. The place to which he is being taken is not where he wants to go. If there were thunderheads, he would have thought it an ominous storm. But there are no clouds, no lightning, not even the blur of rain falling. Only a growing and enveloping darkness, as if deepest night emanated from that part of the world, with Norman chugging steadily on. It sits on the horizon like a hole in the sky.

Of course it is a terrible storm blowing across the Sea of Cortez. There is plenty of strange meteorology in this world. Norman's problem now is the fish and his tiny boat. It is

likely to capsize in rough water, and if that doesn't happen, then the fish, with its tenuous hook, will certainly escape when the waves begin chopping.

Deb, he must return to her, as soon as he can. He hasn't lost the fish, not yet. He must show her what he's accomplished. He still has time to reach land if he can outpace this weather.

Norman decides to try the boat's motor. He reaches for the engine's draw cord and pulls with all his might, bracing his feet on the stern. Without turning the crankshaft, the cord pops in half like a joke prop, and he flops onto his back as the other half rubberbands away. Has he been out here long enough to sun damage everything? Deb must be incredibly worried. He pictures her pacing the timeshare, chewing her nails.

From the prow, Norman watches the swordfish. It keeps swimming in the wrong direction. He begins tugging on the fishing line. He must do something. Maybe he can get near enough to spear the fish again and recapture it. Maybe he can even steer this strange thing.

He pulls and pulls, trying not to dislodge the hook from the creature's jaw, at first wincing at the cruelty of digging a metal hook deeper into the flesh of a living being. After tugging and tugging without success, he leans back, pulling with all his weight. If he could just get a little closer things would become so much easier.

As he yanks to the right, the swordfish arcs its trajectory, towing to the left instead. Norman attempts pulling back to the left. Maybe switching to-and-fro will help close the distance? But the fish alternates in response, bowing sharply right and taking the boat with it. The whole enterprise, Norman tugging one way and the fish swimming opposite, not unlike the reining of horses, shaves across the sea in long, S-shaped curves.

He relaxes, holding the line as a coachman might. Now that he can steer, he needs to find his way back to the bay of San Felipe, and his worried wife. Without a working motor, this odd relationship is his only hope of getting back to shore before the storm arrives.

He travels for seemingly miles but without reference cannot tell. The water gets rougher, and the boat begins bouncing on the chop. Eventually, very far away, the shoreline appears as a hazy bronze line, and Norman settles in for the ride. How impressed will Deb be, seeing him cruise into town like this?

The night before, when Deb and Esper continued on, he “lost” them. Off they went, following their bliss. They flicked sand from the backs of their heels while he crept toward the rental to prep for his early morning. He knew if he stayed out drinking he wouldn't return in time to fish at dawn. He wasn’t concerned so much if this was good or bad form. Folks were out, bars were filling. They would love it.

It is surprising, then, how barren the shoreline appears as Norman approaches. He guides the boat perpendicular with the harbor, scanning the empty market. The evening previous he’d seen cantinas and fruit carts, cloth and leather merchants, shops selling wormed mezcal and sugar skulls. But all is empty now. The doors are shuttered, the umbrellas closed. He squints, and for once is thankful the sky turned such a baleful shade of crimson, because he isn’t blinded by sea glare. Nope, nobody. No cars, no other boats. The streets stretch in even rows until parallax, all empty. There are two explanations for this: some new tourist function he didn’t anticipate, maybe one of those yelling spring break parties, or a religious ritual the entire region observes, unknown to folk from elsewhere.

The storm must be sending wind now. The seaweed along the beach flutters. A ribbon of pink neon lettering sparks up along the market. At first it's too bright for Norman to discern the name of the establishment, but he's relieved something has opened. Some club deciding to flout tradition. He could really go for a cold one.

He glances back to see how long before the storm breaks. The seaweed keeps flapping. Looming behind him, the great black sky has followed. Ominous shreds of cloud blow in with the wind.

No, it's too empty onshore. Deb and Esper wouldn't be there. They go where the life is. The neon sign flashes lime green. *The Last Call*, it reads, now pink, now green again. *The Last Call*. Norman swallows his thirst. They must be elsewhere. He'll have to come back for that drink. He sets the fish swimming up the coast and does not look back.

The beach slides by. Straw palapas sway and rustle as gusts blast across the sand. There are homes with empty windows, some distance from the water, one and two and three stories, surrounded by swinging palms and tall sedgegrass. There, the skeleton of an old van, here, the mouth of an upcountry arroyo, leaking rainwater into the basin; and up ahead, a low promontory with a naked rock face. Waves slap its bottom. Norman is beginning to wonder about these empty regions. He hopes the timeshare and motorhome are close.

Atop the headland is their rendezvous from last night, that old sharp graveyard. Is the wind moving away from shore now, toward that great hole in the sky? Nature abhors a vacuum. Norman scans the stony landscape for Deb and Esper. They loved that burial ground, even though he didn't understand why. Dancing and frolic seemed pointless, though he now longs to celebrate. This fish is one for the ages.

Norman sits astride the skiff's prow, searching the shore. The wind lashes his passing, and he shields his eyes from the salt spray. Now the coast arcs toward the Colorado River's delta, the apex of the Sea of Cortez. Rocky inlets slash across tracts of silt and pumice. Up a reedy passage, the adobe timeshare waits. He's getting closer.

On a desolate stretch of beach several miles beyond the town of San Felipe, Stormin' Norman spies a shabby motorhome, and beside this, Deb and Esper, carrying something together. It looks like a heavy rug. Between the two of them, they haul this object up the motorhome's rear ladder and set it atop the roof. There is another boat, a fiberglass vessel like Norman's, resting at the water's edge. It is steady there, in the surge. The two women embrace before climbing back down the ladder and taking their seats in the cab. Norman begins yelling and waving his arms. The motorhome's tires spin in the wet sand before catching traction. Do they genuinely not see him? The vehicle sputters back up the beach onto a dirt road. Norman has no choice but to follow. He flicks at the line, urging the fish onward.

Has there been trouble? Could they be fleeing? Norman regrets abandoning them the night before. Perhaps they angered the wrong person or failed to pay for some favor? Things like this happen in tourist towns. It is all so strange. Have they been getting into dangerous situations and keeping them from him? It's worrisome to think about such a rift growing. What do they know that he doesn't?

The mouth of a tributary yawns beside the road. He guides the boat into this brackish channel, avoiding sandbars and the pilings of long ruined structures. He pulls on the line, urging the fish onward. It begins leaping as it swims, launching from the water in the manner of river dolphins, its swordbill lancing cleanly through the stream. Norman stands with his foot upon the

prow, one hand gripping the line and the other shielding his face from the thrashing wind. He will not lose them.

The miles grow longer. The road stretches across a vast bottomland. Norman keeps the vehicle in sight. The channel runs parallel to the highway. The landscape changes, the mountains grow sharper. He's been at this for hours. He expected eventually to come into the agricultural plain south of Tecate and Mexicali, where the All-American Canal seeps into fields of lettuce and cotton. How far is he from the border? Streaks of blue lightning snap at the edges of the sky.

On a certain long passage reaching into the hazy distance, Norman finally catches the speeding motorhome. He keeps pace beside them and begins waving frantically. He calls their names, leaping like a fool. Deborah! Esperanza! It's me, Norman!

The boat begins slowing. The road dips, and he's at eye level. Norman waves and waves, but they don't see him. They're staring straight ahead, hand in hand, their images divinely clear in a world growing dimmer by the moment. Losing pace, Norman takes the spear and, with everything he has left, hurls it toward the motorhome. It pierces the spare tire above the rear bumper and wobbles there, a pole without a flag. The motorhome continues but, his boat flounders in the remnants of its own wake.

They will return eventually. They won't forget about him. How could they? His chest begins aching again. With one hand he compresses the wound and with the other tugs on the nylon line, but the fish seems, finally, to have been exhausted by its task.

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When they found him that afternoon they had no idea, at first, what to do.

"A dead man," the fisherman repeats.

It is Norman, just like Esper said. It looks like he's been struck by the sharp end of a swordfish and floated in with the tide. They are both dead in the bottom of the boat, man and fish together, rocking gently with the waves on a beach some miles from town. Deb is impressed by the size of the catch, but otherwise her emotions are bleak. The last time she saw him, he left without saying goodbye, and she didn't consider following. She never wanted the rift between them to remain so long, but now it will remain forever. She always expected, eventually, to meet him back in the middle.

"We have to take him back," Esper says.

Deb hesitates.

"It's not practical," Esper continues, "dying in another country. Think of the transportation fees alone. I had a friend who snuck their uncle back by tucking him in the spare-tire cubby in their trunk. Just folded him up. Once we get Norman to the border, everything gets a lot easier."

"Are you sure?" Deb asks.

"I am sure," Esper says, "I think it's what he would want."

Something about the plan intrigues Deb, and she thinks might have intrigued Norman too. It seems a strange and brazen way to honor such a man, a gesture he would appreciate. So,

before anyone else finds out, they wrap Norman and his final catch, together in a sleeping bag, and lash the two of them to the roof of the motorhome.

The drive north feels like a transition between divergent dreams. Deb doesn't recognize anything she saw on the way down. The spiny ocotillo look like plants on postcards, the mountains like oil paintings. She thinks about Norman, up there on the roof, and she wonders how long they struggled, he and the fish. She decides, ultimately, that it must have been an epic showdown, one for the ages. She wanted life to change after this trip, and it has. That final goodbye could never be spoken, and she will have to live with that. At the very least, she will mount the swordfish somewhere nice.

The first thing the border agents ask is how a fishing spear ended up stuck in their spare tire. Deb and Esper have no idea what to say.

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The swordfish finally frees itself from the hook. Now it swims back the way they came, and Norman watches it go. He knows he did everything he could to catch it.

The boat rests mid-channel, at a crossroads. A single low building sits beside the intersection of two tributaries. To the north, where California should be, the sky is burning. The land behind him grows dimmer, more skeletal. Crackling blue licks of lightning illuminate barren plains and broken mountains.

A neon sign above the building buzzes to life, and the crossroads flashes pink, then green, then pink again. *The Last Call*, the sign reads. The rusty door squeals open. Echoes of an old jukebox, of bottles clinking, waft across the plain. Norman really could go for a cold one.

VITA

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