It's Good to See You're Awake

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It’s Good to See You’re Awake

A Thesis

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

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film & Theatre
Creative Writing

by

Maurice Carlos Ruffin

B.A. University of New Orleans, 2000
J.D. Loyola University School of Law, 2003
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At New Orleans, March 22, 2013.

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The Pie Man tells Baby that a man got to grab his own future for his own self. The City of New Orleans pays good to work disaster cleanup. Baby would do well to cash in before all the money gets carted off. A lot more sensible, the Pie Man says, than running around punching on Spanish dudes. The Pie Man walks across the living room in his chef’s jacket. He plops down on the couch, making himself at home. The walls have been stripped naked to the studs. Baby doesn’t know which way his future is, but he’s damn sure it’s got nothing to do with scooping mold out of some abandoned school.

Baby hunches at the plastic folding table in white briefs and shirtless, fingerling the dry skin around his bulky, plastic ankle bracelet. He plucks a Vienna sausage from its tin and tosses the wiener in his mouth. Baby eyes the Pie Man. The Pie Man doesn’t seem to get that he has no
claim on this place or anyone in it. Baby may be only 14, but this is his house. He’s the man here.

The Pie Man’s eyes are red. He kneads his face with both hands and looks around like he doesn’t remember why he’s there. Sauced out of his mind before noon. Probably spent the night with the winos back in Gert Town.

Baby’s mom doesn’t notice because she’s too busy flapping around the room like a hen with a case of colic. As she gathers her things for the day care center, she keeps clucking at him about making the right choices in life. Her standard rave.

She’s on Baby because a Latino day-jobber got jumped outside the package liquor last night, the latest in a string of black on brown beatdowns in retaliation for what happened to Baby’s boy, Chaney. Baby’s mom thinks Baby is part of the jump squad. He’s not. Yet. He doesn’t tell her this. If she and everyone else think he’s in on the attacks, it beats the alternative. Better to be feared than understood.

Baby’s mom checks her red hair in a hand-held mirror before leaving the mirror on the table he’s sitting at. It doubles as her dresser and the couch is her bed. Baby sleeps on the floor in his fleece blanket, wrapped up tight as a papoose. A portable stovetop makes the bathroom their kitchen. All their real stuff was destroyed in the flood from the levee breech after Hurricane Katrina passed nearly three years ago. They live in the front half of the house. The back is sealed off with blue tarp to keep the fungus odor out. It doesn’t work. Everything smells like old people’s feet to Baby.

Sanchez, the carpenter Baby used to gopher for, shot Chaney in cold blood, but the police called it self-defense—as if Chaney’s back had a chance against Sanchez’ .38. Baby’s mom called the Pie Man in to odd-job their General Pershing Street home three months ago because
Sanchez and the rest of the Latinos are afraid to work in Baby’s neighborhood. She can’t afford a contractor with papers or real tools.

Baby’s mom didn’t tell him the Pie Man was his pops until old man Sanchez quit. Baby told his mom and the Pie Man that it didn’t make any difference that the drunk was his father. The Pie Man has no business making any claims after all this time. Either way, Baby sometimes finds himself staring into the Pie Man’s face, wondering what life might have been like if the man had always been around.

Chin on the table, eyes clamped shut, Baby realizes the Pie Man and his mom have been jabbering at him the whole time. Who knew? He wonders what they were like when they met each other back in the Stone Age. During the time of Public Enemy and parachute pants. Back when the Pie Man’s uneven flat-top fade was in style. Back before they became voices in the wall.

They have a similar way of phoning in their rants. No commitment. They talk at him like they’re being watched. As if they’ll get in big trouble for failing to pay the right amount of lip service.

The Pie Man tells Baby he ought to respect his mom, man, because that’s the least she deserves for bringing him into this unbalanced world, and if Baby’s going to keep driving her every which way like he’s been doing, then Baby ain’t no kind of man. The whole issue could be that Baby’s not thinking, the Pie Man says, but he can start anytime now. He tells Baby to sit up and pay attention. Because he doesn’t know the Pie Man well, Baby does as he’s told. The Pie Man could be crazy or something, like Baby’s friend Touché.

“What, am I supposed to call you ‘Daddy’ or something?” Baby nudges the skateboard under the table with his bare foot.
The Pie Man’s slacks, shoes and neckerchief match his jacket, dingy white from head to toe. He mismatched the cloth buttons so that his collar is higher on one side than the other. To Baby the Pie Man looks like a homeless, chocolate Chef Boyardee. There’s no trace of the freckles Baby got from his red-headed mom. The ones he catches hell for at school. The ones he tried to scrub off after reading the *Dred Scott* decision in American History the year before. Yet, even though Baby’s freckles won’t come off, that doesn’t mean he can’t become the next great civil rights leader like Malcolm X, Tupac Shakur or Lil’ Wayne. Holding it down for the people. Real niggas.

Baby scratches the oval scab on his shin, thinking it’s going to leave a mark when it heals. If it heals. Maybe he’ll cover it with a black fist tattoo when Mom’s not looking. The tattoo is Touché’s idea. Touché wants everyone in the Mighty Black Ninja Krew to get black fist tattoos after they find and stomp Sanchez today. Baby’s heard through the grapevine that Sanchez feels bad about what he did to Chaney, and it might be true. Sanchez never held back telling Baby when he’d screwed up, but he was quick to give Baby props for good work, and he always gave Baby a cold can of cream soda at the end of the day. It’s too late for feeling bad though.

Baby gets up to leave. But his mom yells at him and makes him sit his rear back in that chair right this instant. He’s a target, she says, and Baby feels she’s right. The Latinos have been dishing out hardcore payback. Roshaun Thompson, the running back at Baby’s school, got wacked in the knee with a galvanized steel pipe the other day. Roshaun is out for the season, and with him any shot at the state championship. They say he never saw the guys that did it, but they had Spanish accents. Nobody’s safe, thinks Baby. Baby’s mom thinks she can protect him by sending him to the barber. She says his hair makes him look like a maniac.
But Baby’s afro is a matter of pride for him. It’s a fuzzy crown that radiates out six inches going from black at the scalp to reddish brown at the tips. Like a halo made of rabbit’s fur. Most of his friends think it’s pretty cool. It counteracts the freckles.

One thing at a time, the Pie Man says to Baby’s mom. Baby follows the Pie Man’s lips. The way they form words. Inner tube round one second, then flat like a pair of rotten bananas. The Pie Man says Baby’s free lawyer, Mr. Bates, already told them Baby was out of chances. The Pie Man says he knows Baby doesn’t want to go back on full house arrest. The Pie Man looks at Baby as if expecting a response, which Baby doesn’t give. Baby stares at those bananas.

The Pie Man tells Baby to get up because it’s time to get to work.

Baby looks out the window. Orange traffic barrels flank a “Do Not Enter” sign at the end of the block.

“Nope,” Baby says. “I ain’t doing your slave work. If that means I’m stuck inside, then so what.”

Baby’s mom sprays air freshener at Baby. She tells him she’ll turn him in herself if he doesn’t get that haircut and go work with the Pie Man. And he better be home before the street lights come on. If he’s more than a half-inch from the front door by then, the SWAT team will come after him, she reminds him for the umpteenth-and-a-half time. She kisses him on the forehead and leaves.

The Pie Man says he’ll bring Baby to the barber now but doesn’t get up from the couch. He continues to stare at the empty space behind Baby.

“I’ll get ready.” Baby rides his skateboard to the bathroom where he throws on his Chuck Taylors, a shirt, and a pair of brown plaid shorts before climbing out the window.
The outside of Lawrence D. Crocker Elementary isn’t much different from how Baby remembers it growing up. Lots of brick walls and stucco pillars. Plenty of rectangles. Gravel lot. The narrow Plexiglas windows faded opaque even before Baby and his friends went here, but the interior is totally different since Hurricane Katrina turned it out. Dried gack coats the tile and baseboards. Green paint curdles from the floodwater pox. Rivulets of mold syrup drool down the walls. Waterlogged books, tiny chairs coated in sludge, poster boards covered in blue-black fungus. The dump smells like anchovies pickled in urine.

Baby hasn’t cut his hair but figures skipping the job would be going too far. He does skateboarding tricks on the retaining wall outside of the school, knowing it will be some time before the Pie Man puts his brain on and figures out to come. But the van appears at the street corner within minutes. The clunker has one headlight and Nobody Starves When the Pie Man’s Around scrawled in faded orange letters across the side. Ever since the Pie Man decided he’s Baby’s pops again, he’s begun following Baby around in that death trap even when they’re not working.

The Pie Man used to sell gumbo ya-ya, greens, and bread pudding at barber shops and car washes. Sometimes he made pies—pecan, apple, and sweet potato—all with his own two hands. Baby can tell the Pie Man had been real proud of his business selling catballs to the citizenry. Baby chuckled when he remembered the web video he’d seen of a stupid toothless cat doing its best to gum a mouse to death. The mouse kept plopping out—pissed—but pretty much okay. The Pie Man said he got shut down when the health inspector caught him selling reconstituted meat. Baby asked him, reconstituted from what? Meat mostly, the Pie Man said.
Now, two-by-fours and tangled wires choke the van’s bay. The Pie Man must have had
breakfast, thinks Baby, because he looks sober. He managed to button his jacket right and comb
his flattop so that his head looks like an eraser.

“Why can’t they just bulldoze this hole and start from scratch?” Baby skates toward the
Pie Man, who is unloading sledgehammers in the lobby outside of the cafeteria. Sanchez’s tools
were for assembling things. Baby learned, to his own amazement, how to hang a door. It was
harder than it looked, Sanchez told Baby, because you had to make many little decisions to get
the right fit. Baby imagines whacking Sanchez’s head with one of those sledgehammers,
watching his noggin fly away like a baseball on a home run arc.

The Pie Man shrugs and tosses his jacket on a wheelbarrow. He has ink on his bicep. An
eagle, perched above an earth and anchor, flaps its wings whenever the Pie Man flexes.

“You ever shot somebody?” Baby says.

The Pie Man slings a wide shovel onto his shoulder and says he shot two people.

“Did they die?”

The Pie Man shrugs.

They work their way into the library where red wall pennants form a frieze near the
ceiling. Bookcases lean at odd angles, having dominoed during the flooding. All the books are on
the floor, mush. As little boys, Baby and Chaney filed these books for the librarian as
punishment after starting a food fight. Today, the books look like Cream of Wheat.

They both died, the Pie Man says, but he’s not entirely sure about whether he killed the
second dude. The second dude he shot was an insurgent with his finger on a trip wire. The whole
convoy unloaded on him and any one of them might have gotten the kill shot, he says. Or, he
tells Baby, maybe the hajji died of fear.
“What about the first one?” Baby asks.

The Pie Man shovels books into the wheelbarrow on top of his jacket. He says the first guy was his friend Fast Freddie Lane, the first person he met when he enlisted. He murdered Freddie dead. He tells Baby he’s not sure if either situation matters because at war it’s legit to kill, but if you kill one of your own you’d better have your reasons clean as a fresh latrine, which is what the Pie Man had. Freddie had flipped the fuck out and tried to mow down the boys in the mess with a fifty cal. The Pie Man capped him from behind with his M240, which took Freddie’s arm clean off above the elbow.

The Pie Man says Baby and his boys shouldn’t be so ready to go settle scores with that Spanish guy. Baby can go any way he wants, but that doesn’t mean he has too. The Pie Man says Baby should just sit on his hands. Baby notices a corroded picture of Nat Turner clipped to one of the wall pennants.

“People will roll you, if you let them,” Baby says as he points a finger from the Pie Man to himself. “I’m done getting rolled, you heard me?” Baby straightens to his full height. “We getting him tonight.”

The Pie Man pops a pill and says he can’t argue with that much. He says he can’t argue with much anything except that the VA could stop screwing around and send him better medication. The Pie Man’s face is scrunched up again like he’s confused. He says he ain’t slept since Kirkuk.

“What made you join the Marines?” Baby asks.

The Pie Man says it seemed like a good way to go. They needed a chef, and he needed a job for the future he had mapped out. A fair exchange he thought at the time. But he never baked
a single pie in the military. When he came home, he’d forgotten how to. Whether you get Sanchez or he gets you, the Pie Man tells Baby, you end up in the same place.

The Pie Man and Baby put on respirator masks. Baby thinks the Pie Man looks like a futuristic rat. Baby grabs a sledgehammer and zeros in on the face of Guy Bluford, the first brother launched into outer space. He swings and before long the walls are coming down all around him.

***

It’s an hour to sundown and the Pie Man left Baby once they finished work for the day. Touché and Turtle skate up the driveway in front of the school.

Touché does a 360 from a ramp angled over a mound of bricks. He stops near Baby.

“Welcome back to Genitalia.” Touché’s got a faux hawk and his striped hoody makes it look like he’s still spinning. General Taylor and Peniston are the streets closest to Crocker facing downtown. They’ve called the streets genitalia and penis ton since the sixth grade. Dry ass Street runs perpendicular to them both, a few blocks closer to the streetcar line. “You still got your Oreo ‘fro, little man?”

“Man, my mama can’t make a brother cut off his trademark,” Baby says, trying to ignore Touché’s comment. Baby hates it when Touché makes fun of his size almost as much as he hates when he makes fun of the fact he’s practically half white. It isn’t Baby’s fault his mom’s pops wasn’t black like everyone else. Touché seems to know where everyone’s buttons are. He’s like a video game champ who’s got all the secret codes memorized. X to kick you in the gizzards. Z plus turbo to take out your knees and dump you in Lake Pontchartrain. Sometimes you don’t
even know it was Touché who got you. Touché’s manipulations bug Baby sometimes, but, more often than not, Baby silently prays that he learns how to do it himself.

“Yeah, I asked your mama for a haircut. She gave me a blowjob instead.” Baby pokes his tongue against his cheek and pumps his fist. “The bitch still don’t understand English.”

“Your mama so fat,” Touché says. “I pushed that hoe in the Mississippi River and rode her to the other side.”

“I heard in Sunday school,” Baby says, “Your mama so old she was Jesus’s nanny.”

“Your mama so fat she went to an all-you-can-eat buffet and ate the Chinese waitress,” Turtle says, adjusting his thick glasses. “She be using Ethiopians as toothpicks.”

“Your mama—” Touché says, but he stops and punches Turtle in the shoulder. No one makes fun of Turtle’s real mom. Not even Touché. Not since the last time they saw her, dry-skinned and strung out, begging for change on Canal Street. She wore a tank top and jeans so small they could have fit a 10-year old, but loose enough to reveal her soiled lace underwear.

“We need to get that Sanchez and pop him. *Whap.*” Touché clutches his board and brings it down on Sanchez’s imaginary head. “Or drag him across town by a rope.”

“Kill that noise,” Turtle says. “We ain’t getting nobody.” Turtle grabs Baby’s shoulder. “I saw the Pie Man’s van earlier.” Turtle is nearly blind from getting his head kicked in.

Baby always thinks he’s staring at him from another world through those binoculars. A scarier world. Baby wonders how much of Turtle’s pops is inside Turtle. Turtle’s pops is one scary dude. He’s in Orleans Parish Prison for drugs and guns. Two life sentences. No possibility of ever walking around the neighborhood again.

“He playing camp counselor again?” Turtle asks.

Baby nods.
“Come on.” Turtle skates off with his glasses in hand. He doesn’t need them to get where they’re going.

All three boys glide to the lot behind the school. Scraggly grass forms a crescent along the edges of the fractured concrete. It reminds Baby of the Pie Man’s receding hairline. They enter a rusting cargo container where the Mighty Black Ninja Krew keeps the gas canisters.

The Mighty BNK is what Baby and his boys do when they’re bored. And for fame. Like the last time they went berserk-boarding. The Catholic church was by the house where Turtle’s foster family lives. Baby videoed the others zipping across the checkerboard floors and leaping from the altar. As Touché spray-painted “MBNK” on the wooden doors during their escape, Baby noticed statues of old men in the gallery above. They wore pink sheets, one statue dangling a key, the other a sword. They looked like they wanted to kick his ass. He gave them the finger, and the Mighty BNK got away clean that time.

Touché posted the video. It went viral on the web. The Mighty Black Ninja Krew was right behind a video of a white guy demonstrating stupid dance moves and that toothless cat trying to slurp up that mouse.

If he were being totally honest, Baby would admit he joined the Mighty BNK for the same reason as the others. To get laid. They hide their faces on camera with white stockings, but everybody at school knows who they are. It’s worked out great for the rest of the Mighty BNK. It hasn’t worked at all for Baby.

He doesn’t have the swagger of Touché or the brains of Turtle or the wicked determination of Chaney, shot dead when the Mighty BNK tried to loot Sanchez’s garage. Baby is fourteen, but looks closer to nine since he’s two heads shorter than the others and has no
stubble on his chin, chest or pubes. It’s caused trouble for him with the girls at school. When they call him Baby, they mean it.

Baby’s got a plan, though. He’ll lay some pipe on Trenisha, who plays center for the girls’s basketball team. That shorty is over six-feet tall and rough around the edges, but Baby knows he can smooth her out doggie-style like a Chihuahua on a Great Dane in the janitor’s closet or, better yet, in the back seat of Principal Colton’s Cadillac while the Mighty BNK cheers him on. The video would make him a legend in his own time.

But Baby doesn’t know the first, second or third thing about girls, let alone what it might be like to go to any of the bases with them. He listens to the rest of the Mighty BNK kid around and is sure they’ve all done it—even Chaney who would never do it again. Baby fears he’ll die without doing it. He wonders if dying without doing it means he winds up in heaven as a kid for all eternity. Or hell.

Touché sniggers in the corner of the rusty cargo container, having gone first. His arms are tight against his chest. Baby knows this pose means to leave him be. Baby and the Mighty BNK jacked the nitrous oxide from Sanchez because they were tired of sniffing airplane glue and Freon, which burned the ever-loving b’jesus out of their noses.

Turtle fills a blue balloon from the nitrous oxide canister and hands it to Baby. Baby’s careful not to let any gas escape. Touché’s face is wet. He always cries when they fly.

Turtle tokes weed in a crouch. He offers to Baby, but Baby shakes his head. Baby takes a draw from the balloon, as much as his lungs will hold. Then he sucks a bit of straight air on top to hold the gas steady. The nitrous is sweet on his tongue. Sweet like he’s just licked a birthday cake. Sweet and steady, like his birthday was yesterday, is today and will be tomorrow. Seated and holding his breath, Baby clutches the tips of his Chuck Taylors for dear life. A tingling rips
up his spine like electric spiders on parade. The spiders are angry this time. They rummage through Baby’s innards for flies, bad ideas and mildew, but don’t find enough.

Baby shoves the gas from his lungs. He feels like propeller blades are chopping him into finer and finer pieces. Every time he feels this, Baby wonders what it would be like to choose how he puts himself back together. Maybe in Atlanta instead of New Orleans this time. Bigger and stronger this time. Taller and darker this time. This time hung like a mutant ox. Maybe this time feared by men and loved like a widow’s diamond. Baby clutches his hair and falls onto his back, shivering.

They were good until the alarm in Sanchez’s garage went off. Baby saw Sanchez’s gun flash, and Chaney’s eyes open as full moons on his way to the ground. After Touché and Turtle ran away, the police found Baby frozen in place, his sneakers covered in vomit, the only member of the Mighty BNK captured alive.

Touché finishes the weed before Baby gets a second tug at the balloon. Touché is tapping the side of the cargo container with the thick tree limb he sometimes uses as a walking stick.

“They running a terror campaign on all the blacks around here.” Touché flicks the spent bud away.

The gas has different effects on each member of the Mighty BNK. It makes Touché paranoid. Well, more paranoid than normal.

“Them rednecks can’t just shoot any brother they feel like,” Touché says.

“That’s dumb,” Turtle says. “Sanchez ain’t no kind of redneck.” The gas brings out Turtle’s argumentative side. Sober, he would let Touché carry on until he got tired of hearing himself. “Old Sanchez is Hispanic.”
“I don’t care if he Jesus on the cross,” Touché says. “His people coming over the borders taking our space, our girls.”

Baby knows Sanchez didn’t come over any border. Sanchez’s son went to the same school as Baby’s mom.

“And what about you?” Touché asks Baby.

Baby toys with his ankle bracelet. It’s a hunk of plastic in the shape of a watch, a handleless, faceless watch that refuses to let him know what time it is. Baby wonders what will happen after they get Sanchez. Maybe Sanchez didn’t mean to kill Chaney, and it’s not like a smackdown will bring him back. Baby raises his eyebrows as if to say, “What about me?”

“You so fake.” Touché spits. “You need to man up.”

“I ain’t stomping some old dude,” Turtle says.

“He shot our boy. He got Baby with a tracking band on his leg, but he gets to walk around scot-free. This is our neighborhood. Shit, this is our country.” Touché started saying this a lot after Chaney died. “We about to get a Black president. People can’t screw with us like this anymore.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have tried to take his stuff,” Turtle says.

***

Baby skates past a one-way sign on Claiborne Avenue, his hair bouncing in the wind. A police car with its sirens going nearly sideswipes him. He salutes it, but trips to his knees in the process. That’s what the gas does to Baby. It kills his balance. Baby looks around to make sure no one saw him and picks up his board. He hurries past an abandoned double the Latinos tagged with
graffiti. He can’t accept that his own neighborhood isn’t safe anymore. The jerkholes are everywhere.

It’s almost dark, and Baby’s mom will start check-up calling for him from her night job scrubbing hospital bed sheets clean. She expects him to tell her he’s safe and sound in their box of old people’s feet.

Baby thought Touché and Turtle might fight over getting Sanchez, but Touché dropped it and skated off, muttering. Baby is relieved. He feels like there might be a better way to get payback for Chaney but doesn’t know what that way might be.

A Latino in overalls perches on a ladder, applying stucco to the side of a two-story house. Empty stucco bags litter the lawn. Baby hums a stone at the man, but misses. The man waves at Baby. Baby searches for another good rock, but the world disappears. His head is covered by a bag and he can’t breathe. Something hard whacks him senseless, and even though he’s defenseless, whoever’s on top of him is having too much fun to let up. He kicks Baby in the stomach and twice in the face. Baby pulls the bag off his head, but the attacker is gone. He knows he’s in trouble when he wipes his mouth and finds blood and tooth fragments.

When Baby gets home, the Pie Man is asleep on the side steps, using a paint can for a pillow. Baby goes inside and looks in his mom’s hand mirror. He’s glad she’s not around to see his smashed nose or that he’s missing half an eyetooth. Blood coats his chin, and the dust from the stucco bag makes him look like a spook. He doesn’t want to wash the dust off, though. He’s afraid water will activate the stucco mix and turn his head to stone.

Even his mom would agree somebody has to pay for this. If the Mighty BNK let this go, pretty soon Baby, Touché, and every other kid in the neighborhood would be swinging from trees like piñatas at Sunday picnics. Baby runs outside and fingers the van keys from the snoring
Pie Man’s pocket. Every color in the rainbow is on the Pie Man’s grungy jacket. Baby hops into the Pie Man’s van and cranks the ignition. The van is hard to drive since the pedals are so far from the seat, but it’s only a couple of blocks to Touché’s.

The van seems fake, like one of those 25-cent rides you plunk your kid brother into outside of a grocery store. The kind with two donut-sized steering wheels that don’t do anything.

Touché climbs into the passenger seat. “They rolled you like a blunt.” He purses his lips in a mock whistle.

He almost seems to be enjoying this. Baby rubs his mouth, but the sharp pain stops him. Although the bleeding has slowed, his jaw clicks when he moves it.

“Don’t say I didn’t try to warn you before,” Touché says. “It’s get or get got out here.”

They stop at a gas station in Gert Town. There’s a darkened church on the next lot. One of the neon cross arms is out, so it looks like a machine gun turned on its nose. Touché leaps out and disappears into the station. The station lights are painfully bright to Baby. Baby’s starting to think taking the van was not the greatest idea.

Touché sprints from the gas station, toting a bottle. He hands it to Baby. It’s a bottle of Goose.

“Let’s go get Turtle?” Baby says.

“We don’t need no pussies in the way. We mad dogs tonight.”

“You right,” Baby says.

Baby doesn’t let the vodka bottle touch his sore lips when he drinks. Tilting his head back makes him woozy, but he recovers as his insides swelter. He tastes ashes and rust and pours some onto the van floor.

“Why’d you do that for?” Touché says.
“That’s for Sanchez,” Baby says. “He’s going to need it.”

Touché chuckles and takes the bottle. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

They drive to Sanchez’s garage and climb out. Touché and Baby slip white stockings over their heads. Baby’s hair makes the stocking pooch out so that he looks like a light bulb. Baby immediately wants to tear the mask off. It mashes the swollen parts of his face and sandpapers the sweat-moistened stucco coating his skin.

It’s still early enough that Sanchez is bent under a hood like he’s praying to the engine. Water tings as it circulates in the van radiator.

“Yo, old man Sanchez! What’s up, amigo?” Touché calls out before they enter the wooden fence. Before Sanchez can see who’s coming. Touché says “amigo” wrong. Hi-meego, he says.

“Que pasa’migo?” Sanchez says, stuffing a rag into his overalls. He stops in place when Touché and Baby step into view. Baby figures Sanchez will take off running or go for a gun in his tool box, but he doesn’t. He rakes a hand through his thin, white hair. Baby keeps expecting the Pie Man to show up and slap Touché on the back and say they’ve had enough fun for one night. Instead, they stand in silence broken only by nature: crickets and toads rioting in the bushes.

Sanchez steps backward. He’s short. Not Baby short, but not much taller.

“Move.” Touché shoves Sanchez toward the van.

“You’re Reverend Goodman’s son?” Sanchez says to Touché. “The stocking mask smushes Touché’s features. It flattens out his cheekbones and tweaks his nose downward. Like he’s wearing a mask under his mask.

“You don’t know me, niño,” Touché says.
“Ian?” Sanchez says to Baby, calling him by the name Baby’s mom only uses when she’s about to lay down the law. Sanchez can see Baby’s face through the mask. “Why are you here to do this?”

Touché cracks Sanchez in the back of the head with the shaft of his stick. Sanchez is out cold. Baby smells copper. Blood.

“It’s on and popping.” Touché laughs.

Baby thinks it’s over, that they’ll drive off and put this behind them, but Touché stoops and wraps twine around Sanchez’ wrists and ankles. Within minutes, they’re speeding toward the levee on the back side of City Park. When they reach the muddy access road that shadows the levee, Touché nearly rolls the van. Sanchez clutches his knees on the bay floor. A dark landscape whizzes by as Baby grips the metal handles in the van bay.

The van pitches when they scale the levee, causing a box of nails to fall on Sanchez. He yelps. Baby wants to catch the next box to fall, but doesn’t. He feels like he’s on a conveyer belt, heading toward an open furnace. Touché stops near the concrete flood wall, which sits atop the levee. He takes Sanchez’ ankles, Baby his armpits, and they haul him from the van. Sanchez is heavier than he looks. They drop him in the moist grass at the foot of the wall.

“Maybe we can just leave him,” Baby says. Touché says nothing and switches on his video camera. The van’s headlight floods the scene so there’s no color. Sanchez prays into his bound hands.

“You first.” Touché hands his walking stick to Baby.

Baby steps toward Sanchez and water snakes in through the seams of his Chuck Taylors, sending a jolt up his spine. Sanchez looks up at him. The stick is covered with spikes. Touché added nails to it.
“Take your shot, little man.”

Crooked nails glisten like fingers in the moonlight. Baby brings the stick up high above Sanchez’ head. Some of the nails angle at the van. Other nails slant toward Touché, Sanchez, and the night sky. One points straight at Baby.
Mr. Face

Back when I was nursing at Touro Infirmary, I met the man who tried to rip off his own face. Nothing all that special about him except for the gauze around his head and straps holding his wrists to the bedframe. He’d been lucky, he said. He lost his real face in an accident, but a hot shot surgeon was at the hospital, and he could do things others couldn’t. The man’s last name was hard to say, Polish or something, so I called him Mr. Face.

The guy who had donated the face, Adrian, was from a big family that lived by the airport. Mr. Face said they were nice enough people, especially considering he never got any other visitors, but they wouldn’t leave him be. They showed up as soon as visiting hours started and wouldn’t go home until I showed up to shoo them away. They argued with the other nurses,
but not with me, I guess, on account of the fact that I was one of the only male nurses there and real tall, too.

“I acted like I couldn’t talk,” Mr. Face said. His skin was puffy, pasty, and stiff like it was filled with cottage cheese. The surgeon had done good work, but the fix only allowed so much movement. It took an army of muscles to frown, but only a couple of big ones to smile. So Mr. Face smiled a bunch when the family was there. They thought he liked them.

It got to be too much for him all at once: the old uncle snoring on the bench seat, kids crawling over each other like tomcats, Adrian’s mama who always called Mr. Face “babe,” which he hated. Mr. Face told them off, and they were gone for good.

A month after I met him, Mr. Face was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He said dying wasn’t the worst. Whenever he called that family, they never answered. So I called them on my cell, once, for Mr. Face. Somebody answered. I think it was the mother. I told her he was short for this world.

“If Adrian were alive, babe,” she said, “he’d take that face back.” Then she hung up.

Mr. Face couldn’t have heard the conversation, but maybe he read my eyes when I came back into the room because he seemed whiter than usual. I learned later, after he was gone, that the docs hadn’t hooked up his tear ducts. So even if he wanted to he couldn’t cry.
Mama tells me I got to help her quit drinking for good this time. She promised me twenty bucks. For every bottle of booze I find hidden around our apartment, twenty whole bucks, so I do it. I carry a load of bottles and drop them on her bed. I found a pint in an empty cracker box and another in the toilet tank wrapped in plastic. There are nine bottles in all. The bottle hunt is payback for what Mama owes me.

Yesterday, she raided my dresser drawer and took my money from grass cutting—a couple rolls of five-dollar bills—to the Time Saver and bought more whiskey. Some people buy gum or cinnamon toothpicks every time they go. She gets the Jim Beam. She says she must have
dropped the rest of my money coming out of the store. No telling with her. Am I looking like I care what happened? No. I just want my money.

“We’ll pour those bottles out later.” Mama sits at the vanity I found by the dumpster. I found it after my dad left a couple of months ago. Mama jabs her brown cheek with a brush that looks like a squirrel tail. “I didn’t think there’d be a whole party’s worth.”

“Thought there’d be a lot more, me,” I say. The baby in the downstairs apartment cries. That little rat never shuts up. I wonder how many little rats there are in New Orleans?

“Thought there’d be more? You a funny one.” Mama stands and pinches my cheek. “At least my period over.”

“Ugh.” A nasty taste washes up the back of my throat. I’ll never understand how she wasn’t born with the part that keeps other people from saying shit like that.

“Oh, my baby, you must be hungry.”

“Don’t call me that. It’s weird.”

“I guess you right.” Then she smiles big. “You still my baby though.”

I ain’t trying to be her baby. I’m trying to be the richest fifth grader at Lake Forest Elementary. The fridge is empty. The pantry is empty except for Mama’s nasty ass sardines. My stomach is empty. Something needs to change up in here.

“We’ll get something to eat out.” Mama stands and smooths her wrinkly skirt.

“Out?” I say. “Where you going?”

“I’m going to get me a job,” she says, “the only way I’m going to quit drinking that stuff is if I find something to do. You coming with me.” She puts her purse on her shoulder.
“No, I ain’t. I got money to make, yards to cut.” My dad always says summertime in New Orleans is a grass cutter’s dream. It’s hot as a skillet, if the sky ain’t pouring out. So there’s always funds for the taking because the grass never stops growing.

“I need you with me.”

“You can’t work,” I say. “You’ll lose that welfare you just got.”

“So? I went most of my life without it. I can do that again.”

“It ain’t smart to give up free money.”

“Welfare making me sick,” she says.

But I’m thinking that being broke is making both of us sick.

***

Mama swerves our station wagon onto the highway ramp. My mower rattles in back. I keep it back there since Mama won’t let me bring it in the apartment for safekeeping. She says it’s too rusty. It’s dad’s mower, but he left it for me to use. Mama says I’m too young to be mowing grass, but you think I’m listening to her? No. That’s how I make my ends.

“Say you proud of me,” Mama says.

“You proud of me,” I say.

Mama covers her mouth and laughs. I laugh too, but not for long. This ain’t the first time she’s talked about cleaning up, ain’t the first mention of getting a paying gig. Last time, she lasted a week at a gas station before they fired her for drinking up all the beer.

“You going to get a job that pays a lot?” I chew my grape taffy, and I like how it sticks to my back teeth. I give her one of my taffies. She eats it.
“It ain’t so much about the money.” Mama squints in the rearview mirror. “If you always fretting about money that makes you ugly.”

My heartbeat pumps in my cheeks. What does she know about anything anyway? It’s not like I’m trying to buy Adidas tennis shoes. When I hit a good amount, I’m going to send a money order to my dad in Atlanta. I want to show him that there’s money in New Orleans just like before the oil bust they keep talking about on the news. That’ll make him come back.

“Where we going?” I say.

“In town,” she says. “I’ll get me a job working at that sundry shop, the one by the Superdome. They sell your candy too.”

“The news says things are closing up in town.”

“A little faith, son.”

Poydras Street runs down the middle of town. We ride in the shadow of all the shiny skyscrapers. Mama parks in front of a brown and black building that looks like a tall man in a suit.

“You can’t park here,” I say.

“Says who?”

I point to the “No Stopping” sign.

“Aw, boy, they ain’t going to mess with this car none.”

We walk to the sundry shop that’s a couple of blocks from where we’re parked. There’s a bunch of cardboard boxes heaped on the sidewalk. Bright “closing” signs cover the windows.

I go into my pocket for more taffy, but I’m all out. I start to tell her I told you so about the store, but I don’t like how she looks. Normally, she has this look around her eyes like she’s
about to burst out laughing, even when nothing funny is going on—even when she’s mad—but I don’t see it now.

“I guess we too late for this one,” she says. “Quit that.”

I’m digging in one of the cardboard boxes. They’re full of brand new mugs that say *World’s Fair*.

“We don’t go through nobody’s trash, boy.”

“But this is all free stuff.” I pull out a mug. “We could sell these to people and make some money.”

Mama grabs my wrist and takes the mug from me.

“We ain’t that hard up,” Mama says.

“Lookit,” I say. Across the street there’s a place with windows that are shiny like mirrors. We look small in the reflection. The place is a temp agency called Sunshine Jobs. We’ve been there before, and they didn’t help us out at all. Mama bites her lip.

The waiting room is full of white folk, everybody in suit-and-tie suits and dresses. Mama glances down at her jean vest and pulls the edges together to cover up her glittery blouse.

“Did you bring a book for you to read?” she asks.

“No,” I say. I read all the time, but not in front of her anymore. She likes to call me her “college boy” or “little professor” because I read Maya Angelo and Mr. Ernest Gaines, but I don’t read around her because she don’t deserve to congratulate me, the way she run off my dad like a damn fool.

She fills out paper on a clipboard and leaves it on the counter. When Mama turns away, the lady behind the counter raises her eyebrow like she has palsy in her face. After we wait for a
while, the lady, who keeps calling Mama “babe,” says she didn’t think Mama would be back so soon, babe, and that all the positions are filled for the day, babe.

“There must be something out there,” Mama says.

“Nope,” the lady says, “we don’t have anything. Why don’t you come back in a month or so, babe?”

“You think y’all have more jobs in a month?” Mama asks.

“I don’t think anything.”

Mama thanks the lady and takes me by the hand. I know something is going on because Mama never pulls me around by the hand since I’m not a baby anymore. She stops at the door and stares back at the lady like she wants to say something, but she doesn’t. We just push through the door. The lady doesn’t say goodbye, babe, or anything.

We try a few other spots, a convenience store and a restaurant that smells like gumbo. We go into a jewelry shop with cases of sparkly rings and watches, but they don’t need anybody. By noontime, my stomach is growling so we can both hear it.

I wish we could go Auntie Rosamond’s, Mama’s great aunt, for some red beans and rice. She always had good beans and rice, but now she dead. She was into Hoodoo and used to say something bad was coming. Guess she was right.

Mama liked Auntie Rosamond a lot and gets sad whenever I bring her up, so I don’t bring her up.

“How about we go to McDonald’s?” I say.

“That stuff ain’t hardly no good.”

“We got to eat something.”

“I know, son.”
We’re back on Poydras, walking toward the river. A big ship, big as a skyscraper knocked over, floats by. It’s hauling metal crates. My dad told me those crates have anything you can think of inside, bikes, footballs, Ataris. When he comes back, I’ll ask him if any of them are full of cash.

“I thought we parked about right here?” Mama asks.

“We did.” I nod up the street. A white tow truck is pulling the station wagon away. It looks like an old man with a sack of potatoes on his shoulder. Mama and me lock eyes for a second, and the way she looks makes my stomach drop.

“I can’t afford to get that car from the impound.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, “sometimes these things happen for a reason.”

“You’re starting to sound like me,” she says, “it’s not the car I’m worried about though.”

“My mower!”

I run up the street a little ways, but that tow truck doesn’t slow down. I go back to Mama who standing with one hand on her chest.

“How we going to get it back?”

“I wish I knew,” she says. Mama tries to put her arm around my shoulder, but I spin away from her before she wraps me up.

“How am I going to mow people’s grass?” I ask.

“We’ll get it back.”

“How?”

“I’ll work it out.”

“No, you won’t.” I kick over a garbage can. It rattles and a red mess spills out. Up and down the street, there are garbage cans everywhere, probably all filled with red messes.
“You never work anything out,” I say.

I cover my face with my fists.

“It’s alright.”

“No, it ain’t,” I say. “Nothing’s ever alright. We broke, and now I can’t even make any money.”

“That ain’t hardly for you to worry about.”

“One of us got to. You ran off the man who used to handle that kind of worrying.”

Mama pulls back like she’s surprised. I think that most other mamas would have slapped me a good one, but my mama has never been that type. She roots around in her purse, but doesn’t take anything out. Then she walks toward the French Quarter like something is waiting for her. I follow.

There ain’t nobody inside Patty Chan’s Great Wall Restaurant but the people that work there. I don’t care because my stomach is growling, and Mama and me like to get our fill at a Chinese buffet. There’s a paper dragon drooping from the ceiling and a big water tank right inside the front door. The tank is full of dark brown lobsters. They tumble over each other like they’re playing tackle football. All I smell is salt.

“How much money do you have?” Mama says. I feel bad about what I said to her, so I reach into my pocket with no backtalk. She checks her purse. We can split yaka mein and a couple eggrolls, she says.

A Chinese man swears at the lobster tank. The corner of the tank is leaking. Water is dribbling into a plastic bucket. I don’t see any food on the buffet, just empty metal pans.
“I guess we can sit anywhere we want,” Mama says. An old lady rolls silverware into a cloth napkin by the kitchen doors. Mama picks a seat by her. The menus are already on the table, trapped under glass.

“We should get one.” Mama nods toward the tank.

“Those big crawfish-looking things. You kidding?”

“Those are lobsters,” she says, “and I’m so hungry I could eat anything, but I don’t want anything. I want me something nice.”

“Well, I don’t want nobody’s sea monster.”

“I bet you’ll like it. They a delicacy.”

“You had one?”

“Never have.”

I wish she would lie to me. I wish she would say that she had a lobster once, and it changed her life like a Hoodoo spell.

The old lady slides out of her seat with a dip, like she might start doing the Hustle any second. Her red shirt doesn’t have a collar. Her white hair curls around her face like smoke.

“We’d like some yaka mein,” Mama says.

“No, ma’am,” the lady says. “No yaka mein.”

“Egg rolls?”

The woman frowns a little, and then she smiles.

“Why not?” Mama says.

“We have a limited menu. This is our last day.”

“It seems like such a nice place to be closing,” Mama says.

“It was.”
The woman looks around the room like she’s trying to find something. All I see is cracked paint and these dusty, fake flowers on the table.

“I tell myself thirty-five years, time for something else,” the old lady says, “me and my husband are going to Alaska. I’ve never seen snow.”

The man from the tank walks over and wipes his glasses on his t-shirt.

“Did they order?” the man says.

“We was trying,” I say, “but y’all don’t have no food.”

“Don’t be rude, Gene,” Mama says.

“I like you,” the woman says to me.

“I like me, too,” I say.

“Pick what you want,” the woman says, “and I’ll give it to you free. I’m Patty. He’s John.”

I look at Mama. She winks at me. My dad always says that you never ever turn down free stuff because most of the time life give you less than you have coming to you. So catch what you can while you can.

“I want a lobster,” I say.

John glances back at the water tank. The lobsters are just sitting there now.

“You have to pick one,” John says.

We go to the tank, all four of us. Mama puts her palm against the glass. One of the lobsters jumps at her.

“You better do it,” she says, stepping to the side.
Most of the lobsters are hanging out in one corner, but one of them is all by itself on the side that’s leaking. He’s bigger than the others. Maybe they’re a family and he’s the daddy lobster.

“That one,” I say.

“Not that one,” John says. “He no good.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Mama says.

“He looks okay to me,” I say.

“John is right.” Patty leans forward and taps the pane. “He injured his thorax.” The lobster creeps backward. It has a hole in its neck.

“Claw fight,” John says, “but the band on his claw came loose, so he won.”

“I want that one,” I say.

“You can choose another,” Patty says.

“Why would I eat a loser?” I say.

John nudges his glasses up with a knuckle.

“They build up nasty things when they get hurt,” John says. “Other lobsters smell it and run away.”

“That one.”

“Poisoned.”

“Let them have it,” Patty says.

“They’ll sue us,” John says.

“We won’t be here tomorrow.”

John scoops the lobster out with his bare hand. Patty and John go into the back and a few minutes later, Patty brings out a couple of dishes of chopped beef and rice. The lobster comes out
on a long platter with a cup full of melted butter. The lobster is split right down the center so I can see all the white meat. There are red and black veins all over it, and I wonder if this is what a brain looks like.

Mama is staring across the room at nothing. I know she’s sad, and I feel guilty with a mouthful of chopped beef while she’s sitting there starving. It’s what I said about dad. I put down my fork.

“You not going to eat any of that lobster?” she says. “They cooked it special for you and everything.”

“I changed my mind,” I say, “I don’t want none.”

“Why?”

“I don’t deserve it. I shouldn’t have said you made my dad go away.”

Mama takes my hand. “It ain’t your fault he gone, and it ain’t mine neither. We going to move on. Just you and me and not think about him.”

“He ain’t coming back?”

“I don’t know, but that ain’t for us to worry about, you hear? That’s on him.” Mama reaches in her purse, pulls out her whiskey flask, and drinks.

“But we family,” I say. “Family can’t forget about family.”


I guess her drinking that whiskey means our deal is off, that I won’t be getting my twenty bucks a bottle. Am I looking like I’m surprised? No. After all, she ain’t find a job and we’re sitting here over a dead sea monster.
“I don’t believe things going to get better,” I say. I stare at the lobster, and it stares back at me. I bet it tastes like one of Mama’s sardines or worse.

Mama cuts a piece of lobster tail. She dips it in butter and eats it.

“You’ve got to try this,” she says.

“Quit it,” I say.

She rolls her eyes back and moans like it’s the best thing she’s ever had, but I don’t buy it. I remember being real small and she used to try to feed me creamed corn, but I wouldn’t bite. I never liked that slimy stuff. She always says I shouldn’t be able to remember that, but I can still see it all in my third eye.

Mama dips again. She holds out the fork with a chunk of lobster on it and butter drips on the tabletop. She wants me to take the fork from her. I do, but I ain’t looking forward to eating some smelly, old lobster. I sniff the fork and don’t smell much, but I turn my nose up anyway.

“Boy,” she says. “I ain’t trying to do nothing to you. Eat that.”

I put it in my mouth. That meat is so sweet and soft it’s like butter rolling down my throat. I grab a knife and get to work cutting my own pieces. Before long, there ain’t nothing left but the shell.
Keep It Dark

When I was on juvenile probation, the judge sent me to work with a caterer by the name of Johnson. Johnson wore a yellow flower in his suit pocket instead a hankie. I really hated peeling potatoes and hauling boxes of tomato sauce. Still, it beat being locked up.

Johnson was pretty successful. We got sent to all kinds of functions. I did the same thing at all of them: washed out empty bowls, took out the garbage. Glamorous stuff.

The biggest event of the year was for the mayor. All the politicians and money people were in the hall. I usually worked in back, but Johnson gave me a tux.

“I want you to go out there, Gene,” he said with this little smirk on his face. “Learn something.”

I’d never seen anything like Gallier Hall that night. A thousand people in their best and they didn’t look anything like me in my baggy rented tux. The men were clean. The women
wore dresses that tossed light all around the room. I wondered why I never saw women like them on my block.

I was refilling a punch bowl when a security guard grabbed my shoulder and brought me to an office with a bunch of closed circuit T.V.’s. They said I’d stolen some lady’s purse. When he didn’t find anything, they let me go.

The next morning I went to chill with my boys. They asked me if I was still working with that fruity cook and I told them no. I made up a story about how he’d fired me for joy-riding in his van, and my boys had a good laugh at that. Really though, I think Johnson wanted to keep me, but he caught flack from his clients for having too many troublemakers around. Now, Johnson was real good about things, even telling the probation man I worked my last days on the job without any trouble.

Still, sometimes I wish I could have told my boys about everything I’d seen at that gala though. About all those people just living, but I knew they wouldn’t get it.
I stay in the van while Sammy-O smooth-talks the tourists. He’s selling an idea: the green knoll we’re at is an Arawak burial ground where King Chumata gave his life to protect the tribe from the Imperialists. It’s not. Sammy-O himself told me it’s just a landfill they capped in the 80s, but we’re only doing our jobs. The fly-by-night, tour company we work for told us to make up stories at our leisure. So that’s what we do, anything to make the customers happy. I’m getting better at it.

I’m in the driver’s seat of the tour van looking at a hunk of rock. The nugget is golf ball-sized, craggy, and flecked with silver veins. It’s heavy in my hand, but sparkles in the afternoon sun. I found the nugget on the floor after Sammy-O got out.

“You looking well, me youth.” Sammy-O says in his fake Jamaican patois. He leans in from the van’s sliding door. Sammy-O is old, like in his forties. He’s dressed like a lion hunter in
a bush shirt and one of those safari helmets. His voice always reminds me of my dad, who was a
fast talker himself. It’s my dad’s fault that I’m in Kingston in the first place.

I haven’t seen Dad since I was ten. He just disappeared one night. My mama used to say
that he would come back. I believed her until one day years had passed and both of us realized
years had passed. I used to think that I didn’t care, but I guess I was lying to myself because here
I am, searching for him like I’m a lost puppy.

“They get their fill?” I ask.

“Probably not,” Sammy-O says.

“Too bad.” I twist the ignition switch and the van shakes to life.

The tourists—there are seven of them, a full load—buzz around the knoll. They’re like
flies on a cow pie, picking up pebbles and taking photos of the grass, the harbor, the dirt. They’re
collecting warm thoughts that they can take back home. They’ve been up there for a half-hour,
more than enough time.

The old Chinese couple, who haven’t said much, is at the top of the knoll, taking in the
view of the rolling Blue Mountains. Another tourist waves a metal detector over the grass. He
said he owns a transport company in Boston, so I figure he must be crazy. I mean, he probably
has a mansion and a yacht, but he’s using a piece of 1960s tech to search for metal crumbs left
by a stone age people who probably never hung out on this part of the island.

“With our busload of visitors we gwan make our pockets fat today, me youth.” Sammy-O
is from Tampa Bay, Florida—or so he claims—but his patois is strong. I don’t fault him for
acting. If there’s one thing I’ve learned since I got here three months ago, it’s that the day-
trippers shell out better tips if they think every brown-skinned person is a beggar with a litter of
runts to feed.
The tourist with the metal detector waddles downhill. In his knee-high, black socks and fanny pack, he looks like someone’s idea of a joke on us. He flips up his sunglass lenses and climbs into the van, practically pushing Sammy-O to the side. The man is grinning so hard his eyes are watering.

“All fruits ripe, boss?” I say in with a light accent. I sound pretty stupid if I lay it on as thick as Sammy-O. That’s why I let him do most of the talking, but this one guy has been in my face since morning. He chuckles into the first row behind the driver’s seat, carrying a sour scent into the van. He’s holding a nugget like the one I found. It’s as big as a piece of popped corn.

“This is my lucky day,” he says. “None of the others found anything this neat.”

I reach out to touch the nugget, but Fanny Pack closes his hand.

“Our work here is done.” Sammy-O laughs.

Sammy-O and I drop the tourists off at the office, which is crammed onto the shoreline of Kingston Harbor with scooter rentals shops and money exchangers. I’m driving us back to the garage where the vans are kept. It’s a bright September day and tourist girls from the cruise ships are out in their bikinis.

Sammy-O counts a handful of Jamaican dollar coins in the passenger seat. He dumps some into the center console. I tut-tut him and pat his shirt pocket, feeling a coil of metal there. He smirks and pulls out the rest of the tip money. He’s trying to save up, he told me once, to invest in a restaurant he wants to open, but I’ve tasted Sammy-O’s cooking and it made me want to invest in health insurance.

“Can’t put one over on you, Gene,” Sammy-O says. He drops the patois when the tourists aren’t around. He plunks the rest of my share into my hand. It’s more than I expected. Fanny Pack must have been happier than I realized. Dad was a salesman for a while—knives, insurance,
encyclopedia sets—and good at it, too. He used to say that once you sold someone on a different way of looking at the world, they loved you until the day they died.

“You planted that nugget,” I say. “That’s the second tourist this week to find one.”

Sammy-O lifts an eyebrow. “I’d never try to put one over on a customer.”

“The rocks are magnetite, right?” I snatch the nugget I found earlier is on the dashboard and show it to him. “So the metal detectors can find them.”

“You were in my locker?” Sammy-O stares at the nugget.

“You spray paint them and throw on a little glitter,” I say. “They come out pretty nice. Almost like something valuable.”

“I didn’t do anything to them,” Sammy-O says. “That’s real gold ore. Low grade, but you can’t fake it.”

I glare at Sammy-O. He’s so full of it.

“Good one,” I say. “You don’t want this thing back?”

He waves me off. “I got more. Keep it as a charm.”

I know a fake when I see it. I may have been on academic probation before I dropped out of college—some days I just couldn’t force myself out of bed to actually go to class—but I was good in geology.

Not that I have a problem with Sammy-O faking artifacts. Guys like us provide a service to humanity. People come down to escape the lives they’re ruining back where they came from. They want a sliver of hope. Anything that makes them feel that life is better than it really is. We peddle hope.

“I shouldn’t be telling you this, but—” Sammy-O yawns. He takes off his hat and reaches into his other shirt pocket. For a second I wonder if the tip was even bigger, that maybe he was
holding out on me. He unfolds a blue flier for a bar we go to sometimes. There’s handwriting scribbled on the back side.

“Who would have figured your old man likes the Foxtrot Inn, too?” he says. “He only goes to happy hour though.”

On my off days, I wander around town stopping in wherever people are. I ask if they know anyone named Delroy Bates. No one does. Sammy-O thinks I’m a dumbass for wasting my energy. It’s the only time he gets serious.

“Why would you want to find someone who couldn’t care less about you?” he says.

“Lighten up,” I say. “You would feel the same way if you were me.”

“I never knew my father,” he says, “didn’t wreck me none.”

“Didn’t wreck me either.” I say.

“I’m saying you’re twenty years old,” Sammy-O pulls another nugget from his pocket and examines it, “and you got better things to do.”

“Like?” A jeep speeds by with a bunch of local girls in back. One of them waves.

“The young women, for one thing.” he says.

There are too many things Sammy-O doesn’t understand. How complicated things can get, for one. I know it was wrong for Dad to abandon Mama and me. I’m not stupid. It couldn’t have been an easy choice for him to leave us. What if he regretted doing it? What if the reason he never checked on us was because he was ashamed?

“When I find him,” I say, “you’ll see.”

“I already see.” Sammy-O tosses his nugget out of the window.

I fold the Foxtrot Inn flier. Happy Hour starts soon, and I can feel it already, how much better things will be once I find Dad.
When we’re done with work for the day, I go sit on the curb outside of the Foxtrot Inn. I tumble the nugget between my fingers. It’s something Dad used to do. He could run a quarter around his hand like a magician, never once dropping it. I wonder if I gave this nugget to him would he care that it’s not real? Would he tumble it between his fingers like a quarter?

I’ve been to this bar with Sammy-O many times, usually late at night so that he could stare at Valeria, who owns the place. He says he doesn’t love her.

Music trickles out of the doorway, great, bassy blobs of a Marley song I don’t recognize. Some guys are selling incense, jewelry, and rastacaps by the door. Graffiti scrawls the brick wall and rusty iron grates cover the windows. I’ve never noticed how much the Foxtrot looks like a repurposed prison.

“How does Valeria know my dad drinks here?” I say.

“I told her the name you gave me,” Sammy-O says, “and she asked around. He’s probably in there now.”

My throat tightens, and I put the nugget in my pocket.

“You want to know your problem?” Sammy-O asks.

“Yes,” I say, “please tell me, sensei.”

“You want an outside fix for an inside trouble,” Sammy-O jabs my chest.

“What do you know?”

“I have a master’s in psychology.” Sammy-O does a three-finger salute. “Scout’s honor.”

I smack my lips. Of course, I don’t believe him. He’s said that before. Sometimes I worry that maybe he’s telling the truth because then maybe he’s right about everything but, I don’t hold the thought for long. It’s not like he’s ever said anything that was true.
A couple of older guys walk out to a black, pick-up truck. Sammy-O and I go into the bar. It’s crowded with smoke and there’s a good crowd of people, too. A disco ball flings sickly, yellow drops of light onto everyone.

We step up to the bar counter. Valeria gestures that she’ll be over in a second. She mixes rum and lime juice and serves a Hispanic-looking guy with white hair. Valeria squeezes by a bartender and comes to us.

“I thought you wasn’t with this thing your boy want to do?” Unlike Sammy-O, Valeria’s patois is real. She wears cowrie shells in her braided hair and has a bundle of black hoops in one ear.

“I’m not with it,” Sammy-O says, “I thought this was my bedroom.”

“Hey, Gene,” Valeria rubs my forearm, “you keeping them duppies off you, boy?” She thinks it’s a good idea for me to find my dad because how can somebody know themselves if they don’t really know where they came from?

“I am the duppy,” I say.

“What you gwan do when you find this daddy man of yours?” Sammy-O pounds the bar.

“Me gwan break a bottle over him head.” I pound the bar.

“You gwan need a beer for that,” Valeria slides a beer to me, “this one on him.” She throws a thumb at Sammy-O.

“I’m just a poor working man,” Sammy-O says, “and I don’t get me copper coin till next week.”

“Sound like a budgeting problem to me,” Valeria says.

“I don’t drink beer anyway,” I say, as I sip from the bottle. The hops are bitter on my tongue. My mama had a drinking problem—Still does. She and my dad used to fight about it.
Sometimes, I’d grab a comforter and curl up under my bed, but I could still see their shadows flickering in the hallway, and hear their voices rumbling. One morning, I woke up and Mama was on the sofa snoring. I went to door and saw Dad in the driveway in his red baseball cap and the work overalls he wore to his job at the wharf. He had a duffle bag, too. It was tied with rope and over packed so that it looked like a sausage as he stuffed it into the trunk, but for some reason I focused on his baseball cap.

It was ragged around the brim and smelled like grease from yards away, but I loved to see it on his head, because he only wore it on weekends. On weekends, we played pitch and catch. I wasn’t that good a pitcher, but I was learning. I thought we might play later that day, but that morning was the last time I saw him. He saw me too through the windshield as he drove away.

I scan the Foxtrot for Dad.

“You see him?” Valeria says.

“No,” I say. “Do you?”

She looks around. “He was just here,” she says, “in a tank top and boots.”

I remember the guys leaving as Sammy-O and I came in. He could have been one of them. I go outside. Sammy-O follows me and Valeria comes out from behind the bar, too. There’s an empty space where that pick-up was parked.

“That’s okay,” Valeria says, “I’ll tell you a few things.”

The next morning the three of us ride in Valeria’s hooptie to a marina a good ways east of Kingston. I drive, and Valeria rides shotgun. Sammy-O is in back, staring at Valeria, even when he’s talking to me.
Valeria’s leads are solid. She’s spoken to my dad enough times at the bar to get good information: he’s a fisherman, he has his own boat, and it’s called the Catchman Three, the name on the flier Sammy-O gave me.

It turns out there are three marinas in the area. My dad wasn’t at the first two, but it took most of the morning to figure that out. Now, we’re at the third one. We walk the boardwalk. It’s clear that most of the fishermen are already out on the water, but a few boats cling to the dock like raindrops on a windowsill.

Sammy-O eats a jerk chicken pita wrap Valeria made for him.

“This sandwich tastes like horse dooky.” Sammy-O licks his fingers and takes another bite.

“Didn’t know you loved shit so much.” Valeria shoves Sammy-O from behind.

“Just the way you make it.” He shoves the rest of the wrap in his mouth and wipes his hands on his jeans. He talks with his mouth full. “But I could do better.”

“You could die trying,” Valeria says.

“I think we got here too late,” Sammy-O says.

“What makes you say that?” I say.

“I wrote a paper on self-defeating behavior in grad school.”

“What’s your problem?” Valeria says.

“I’m tired of watching him blame his jacked up life on his daddy issues,” Sammy-O says.

“You didn’t have to come.”

“You think your daddy is going to tell you he’s sorry for being a dickhead, don’t you?” Sammy-O steps toward the edge of the dock. He shades his eyes with one hand, and watches the water for a moment. In the distance, someone is parasailing and flapping their arms like a bird.
“I don’t know what he’s going to say.” I go a few paces up the boardwalk. I want to get away from Sammy-O’s judgment. “However it turns out is between me and him.”

Sammy-O shakes his head.

“At least I’m trying to do something for myself,” I say. “At least I haven’t made a career out of tricking tourists out of their money.”

“You do the same work I do.”

I get in Sammy-O’s face. “Maybe I won’t anymore.”

“Make yourselves easy,” Valeria says, “both of you.”

“If this half-idiot wants to keep up with this foolishness, let him.” Sammy-O stomps toward the hooptie.

“You can make it back?” Valeria says.

I nod. She gestures down the dock while walking away.

“Catchman,” she says.

Twenty yards away is a white boat with that name painted in block letters above the barnacle line. The owner is sitting on a bollard, drinking water. He looks like I might after twenty years of catching tuna on the sea. I see my eyes and nose on his face, but this ain’t my dad.

“What you want, my friend?” the man says.

“This is a mistake,” I say. “I thought you were Delroy Bates.”

“Oh no,” the man says. He steps into the boat and unwraps a rope from its stanchion.

“I’m Alton. Delroy me big brother.”

“Take me to him,” I say.

He stops untying the rope.
“I got fish to catch this morning,” he says.

“I have something for him.”

He squints at my face, and then he climbs onto the dock. He gently places a palm on my jaw. “Ah. You one of Delroy’s boys. A grown boy.”

I feel a prickle on the back of my neck. He makes it sound as if I’m just one of a dozen of guys to show up this month with the same request. I can’t help but wonder if maybe I am.

“Let’s go,” he says.

Alton leads me to his pick-up—the same one from the parking lot at the Foxtrot Inn—and we drive off. He tells me that Dad has done well. He owns a car dealership and some land.

“He gwan be glad to see you,” Alton says.

“You think?” I ask.

“You come a long way and you’re a fine one. Why wouldn’t he?”

Did that mean Dad would reject me if I only came a short way or if I wasn’t a fine one? I was starting to feel like someone had gotten me on a hook, and I was only just now feeling the fisherman’s tug toward daylight and death. Was this how this was supposed to go? Was I supposed to feel shame mounting with every passing second?

We ride into a subdivision. I never knew Kingston had neighborhoods like this one. It’s nicer than the one Mama and I lived in before we lost our house. In my months of living on this island, I’ve seen slums, whorehouses, jails, but never neatly divided plots of land, people mowing lawns, weather vanes on rooftops. We stop in front of a two-story house with an oval window above the door. The frames make it look like a target. An overturned bicycle with training wheels lies on the lawn.

“This is the one,” Alton says.
We get out and go to the front door. My heartbeat throbs in my cheek. No one answers. We walk to the back yard. The yard opens up to the neighborhood park where a bunch of families are out enjoying the weather.

“There,” Alton says.

I see one family in the middle of a mulch-covered ring. There’s my dad. He’s smaller than I remember, and wearing slacks and penny loafers. He never wore slacks or loafers, not when he was my dad, but it really is him. A woman is staring at a play set where three boys, the oldest around twelve, rampage around the slides and ropes.

The weird thing is that even though all the boys resemble my dad— the same thick eyebrows and stocky builds—they don’t seem that much alike. Two are darker-skinned than I am and one is lighter. One of the kids wears glasses and the oldest one moves like a running back, ready to bowl over anyone who gets in his way. I can’t help but wonder if they all had different mothers.

I take the nugget from my pocket. I press it into my palm until the skin burns, and I feel the nugget’s weight.

“Won’t you say hello?” Uncle Alton asks.

“No.” I stride back to the front of the house.

“What about what you wanted to give your father?” Alton says. “You can’t just disappear.”

I think that Alton is right. I should give Dad the nugget so that he’ll remember I was here. It’s smaller than a baseball, but just as heavy. I cock back my arm and aim for the oval window. The nugget hits the center of the glass—a perfect pitch—but bounces off and rolls to the ground.
The Sparer

I used to bully this kid. Braces. Always sick. Small for a boy and a whiner too. Carlos’s family lived in a shack lit by candles; they couldn’t afford to keep the lights on. I brought hell to that kid. His mom was a maid and left early on weekends to get to the hotels downtown. Those were my favorite days because we’d play in the field next to his house. He’d watch us from his bedroom. Eventually, he’d come out so I could bust him in the mouth. Sometimes his sister, Lametra, gave me the eye, but I never took any trouble over it from their mama.

One day in December, I came home from middle school and Carlos’s house was empty. The lights were on. I went up to the porch and sure enough the inside was cleared out down to the cheap tile, which made sense. After all, his mom was a maid.
After college, I caught fights on the TV at the corner bar. One night, my buddy jabbed me.

“Look like you seen the girl of your dreams,” he said, “the way you eyeballing that set, Luke.”

I told him that when I was younger I used to own Carlos, the wiry one in the red trunks. Everybody, my future wife included, was sure I would become a famous boxer before long. My buddy just laughed and poked my belly.

Years later, I was in Vegas with the family, just before I lost my good job. Carlos came strutting up the Strip, a full grown man. I recognized him even in his expensive suit with a fine woman on his arm. I stopped him and asked if he remembered me. He gave me the once over and said he sure did.

“We used to spar together,” I told my kids. My wife looked at me with this real hopeful look on her face.

The boxer gave us each a nod and cracked his knuckles. I stepped back.

“That never happened,” he said, and walked off with his girl.
Heroes and Villains

The first time Ian hits his wife is after watching a bootleg slasher movie. They’re sitting on their two-toned vinyl loveseat when he notices Jaye staring at him, the soft glow of the television moonlighting her face. He reaches for a bag of kettle corn. She hasn’t had any corn, which she used to love, but nurses a glass of bourbon instead. Her second of the last half hour. He’s only had soda. He stops his leg from shaking, recalling that it makes Jaye think him afraid.

“Care for any?” Jaye waggles the glass of bourbon at Ian. Something’s wrong with the heating system, and she says the liquor keeps the chill from getting to her bones. Every day for the past several weeks, she’s been on the sofa when he leaves for his nursing job at the hospital and when he returns. He worries she’ll be rooted to that spot for the rest of her life.
“No,” he says. The coat rack near the front door is a scarecrow. Only Jaye’s black, plastic-brimmed hat sits on top of it. He doesn’t know where her badge or service revolver are. She could have thrown them out with the thrash for all he knows.

“What’s eating you?” Since she’s been on leave, Jaye wears socks on her hands to warm her fingers and a slouchy, knit hat she used to call her Lazy Sunday hat. Now, she doesn’t call it anything, maybe because she wears it every day.

Ian glances up when something thumps against the top of their apartment house. Wind must have knocked the tarp loose, he imagines, leaving it to quiver like a blue flame. Hurricane Malecia was the worst storm to hit New Orleans since Katrina did when Ian was a teenager. Malecia didn’t flood any of the houses in their Central City neighborhood, but the storm ripped off a section of their roof tiles. A man was supposed to fix the hole last week, but he’s been delayed. A lot of people need his services.

“You and I both know you miss it,” Ian says. Light from the television plays across Jaye’s cheeks, turning her mahogany skin the color of Spanish moss. “You can go back tomorrow if you want.”

“Why don’t you please please please keep your thoughts to yourself?”

Bourbon trembles in her hand. He wonders what happened to her passion.

Near the end of the movie, a freak in a St. Bernard dog mask kills one of the main characters with a sledgehammer. He had been disguised as their friend. But that scene is over, and the survivors have escaped from the sewers into daylight after a week underground. They gaze at the cityscape, which has transformed since they were chased into the tunnels. Now, the city is all futuristic spires and skyscrapers, extending into the clouds. Ian scoops the last kernels of kettle corn into his mouth.
“You’ll feel better,” Ian says. “You can call your sergeant and tell him you’re back to normal.”

“Is that what I am?” Jaye pulls the hand socks off and rubs the shrinking scab on her upper arm. After the shooting, Ian cleaned and dressed her wound daily. It’s healing, but she continues to have night terrors.

“You can put on your supersuit, and I’ll drive you over in the morning.”

“It’s just a uniform,” she says.

“It’s a supersuit to me.”

Chief Compass gave Jaye a medal of valor following the incident. This was no surprise to Ian. She began starting getting as soon as she earned her badge five years ago. He sometimes called her a superhero, and referring to her police uniform as a supersuit always made her smile, but he sees no sign of that woman. Her mouth is a hyphen.

Ian caresses Jaye’s bare knee, but the coldness of her skin sends a shiver up his arm. Their relationship has been in trouble for some time. There’s no affair or great betrayal, just the growing realization of who the other is. No one’s ever made the mistake of calling Ian brave or bold, and he is concerned that she may be repulsed by her new understanding of him—that he’s a coward. She may have even recognized herself in him. They haven’t had sex in months.

Jaye tosses her socks onto the floor and stalks to the kitchen. By the time he reaches her, she’s dead-bolted the bedroom door. He jiggles the knob.

“Go away,” she says. “I’m so sick of watching your sick crap.”

Ian has always loved horror films, especially where the villain gets the last word. Their first date was to a midnight screening of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Ian snuck them into the theater on Canal Street, and Jaye watched the movie through her fingers, leaning against Ian’s rib
cage. Ian found this endearing because she was a black belt in karate and graduated first in her class from the police academy a few days before they met, but Jaye was terrified of monsters.

After a few minutes, she opens the door.

“You don’t even have a real job.” She leans against the doorjamb. “You change diapers all day. Don’t tell me what to be.”

Ian wanted to be a pediatrician, but the thought of the intense competition he would find in medical school along with the expense scared him off the idea.

Ian steps to Jaye. “They need you—”

She slaps him, and Ian feels a strange kind of love. He’s reminded of his parents, with their nightly scuffles, of the small scar on his chin his dad, Luke, gave him, and, for some reason, of the first time Jaye demonstrated a straight-arm bar takedown on him. At the dojo where she trained, she pressed his face against the dirty linoleum. And Ian felt that was where he belonged.

“You should have joined up with your father,” Jaye says.

Ian freezes. He wants to stop her so that he can respond, but Jaye brushes past him into the hallway.

“At least he’s a real man,” she says.

Ian’s face flushes. He turns toward the living room where the television light is flickering like a campfire. Of all the buttons she could push tonight, none stings as much as this one. Luke, like many of the men in Ian’s family, is a low life. He and Ian’s uncles were burglars who masqueraded as a home improvement crew, looting family homes for fun and profit. Luke even tried to bring Ian along a few times when Ian was a teenager. But Ian was a nervous klutz and tripped over his own feet whenever they broke into a place.
Luke has started appearing recently at Ian’s job, like an unexorcised spirit. Ian often asks himself what Luke would do in a situation, and does the opposite. This was why Ian chose medicine as a career. Luke never cared for anyone but himself.

Still, Jaye seems to admire Luke. Luke has spent almost half of his life in prison, going back in almost as soon as he got out each time. But Jaye once said that criminals like Luke at least have character. When they get caught, they take their licks like men and move on. It’s only the weak ones who complain about their lot in life.

Jaye touches Ian’s shoulder, and time jumps in his mind. Even as his fist connects twice with the side of her face, he sees his hands wrapped around her throat, his reddened thumbs pushing into her trachea. Jaye’s tongue thrashes like wildfire.

Ian has never felt a rush like this: he’s totally in control. Powerful. The notion makes his stomach plummet. When he lets go, Jaye falls to the floor. Her cheek is darkening and the corners of her eyes run. Ian hears something like a growl.

“Is that all?” Jaye yanks her hat off and gets up from the floor. “Jesus, you hit like a wet nurse.”

“I’m—I didn’t mean to—”

Jaye grabs the back of Ian’s head and bites his neck. He backs away, feeling for blood. And he’s dreading she will hit him, but Jaye shoves him against the wall and unzips his jeans with one hand. Ian tries to block her hand with his. He’s afraid of the way her brown eyes blaze, and of what she might do to him.

Ian recognizes the Jaye he hasn’t seen in months. He reaches underneath her sweatshirt and feels the warm fabric of her bra cup.

Then somehow he’s inside her, and she’s clinging to him like a bougainvillea vine.
Law enforcement has been stationed around Children’s Hospital where Ian works since the babies started dying. Two infants have died in the past three weeks as well as a four year old in the critical care ward. The authorities labeled all of the deaths questionable, which is another way of saying a killer is on the loose, but no one knows the who or even the how.

It could be anyone. It could be the really tall, guy nurse in the coma ward. It could even be the volunteer who sits with Ian’s patients, sweet Mrs. Bates, who walks with a limp and always has grape candy in her beanbag chair-sized purse. Ian wouldn’t be surprised if he did it himself, in his sleep.

Angela, Ian’s supervisor, says she doesn’t know how long she can put up with all the death. She’s been an infant nurse for over twenty years, and she said that a person can only take so much gloom before it becomes too much. If someone like Angela, who won the National Nightingale Award for Excellence in Nursing twice before Hurricane Malecia struck, can start to break down, what hope does Ian have?

Near the cafeteria doors, a herd of deputies gather, hands propped against their utility belts. Ian tugs up the collar of his turtleneck. He wishes it was a hoodie. The large hickey on the side of his neck throbs, and the back of his hand is too swollen to close completely. His knuckles are fuchsia. He’ll have to find some pain meds if he’s going to get any work done today.

Luke laughs with the deputies seeming for all the world like he’s on duty as well. Luke nods at Ian. Ian doesn’t acknowledge him. Luke showed up a few days after Malecia, helping to clear fallen tree limbs and other debris from the hospital entrance. Ian doesn’t know how Luke
conned the hospital into giving him a steady position, but Ian knows that Luke only came here as a way of exerting control over him. Luke has no one in his sphere of influence since Ian’s Mom raised her hand and cursed him. When Ian reaches the elevator bank, he hears a voice.

“You can’t keep running from me, kid,” the voice says.

It’s Luke. His voice is so close, it’s almost like it’s coming from Ian’s own mouth. The hairs on the back of Ian’s neck stand up.

He stands yards away from Ian with his arms extended as if he expects Ian to run away like a frightened child. “Don’t you remember we were like beans and rice before things got crazy?” In his white maintenance worker coveralls, Luke looks like a wolf in a rabbit suit.

When Ian was little, Luke beat him any time he cried, which was often. It was Luke who gave Ian the nickname Baby. Ian never let anyone call him that anymore.

For a while, Ian’s Mama lied and told Ian that Luke wasn’t his real dad. Ian never faulted Mama for that. He liked it better when he thought Luke was just Mama’s sometimey boyfriend. In his salad days, Luke could clear three houses and fence the valuables before most people started their second cup of coffee at the office.

“How long before you’re arrested for stealing from the supply room?” Ian says.

“I saw your place took a lick from the storm,” Luke says.

“I don’t want you lurking around my house,” Ian says.

“We’re not so different,” Luke says.

Ian and Luke are both light-skinned and sparrow-boned, but Luke is missing a chunk of flesh beneath his left cheekbone. It gives him a skeletal appearance. Ian wishes he was the one who had done it, but it was Mom. Mom who had always been willing to forgive Luke for the hurt he put on them. Until one day she found something inside herself.

“Somebody must be proud of you,” Ian says, “somewhere.”

Ian checks the time on his cell phone, grimaces when he uses his sore hand to put the phone back in his pocket.

Luke punches the elevator button. “We don’t have to talk about us, if you don’t want to. How’s my girl?”

“I gotta go.”

“I saw that thing in the paper about the shooting. Was sorry to hear it.”

Ian had never seen his dad as happy as the day Ian married Jaye. Luke called her a girl who knew what she was and said she might help Ian grow some backbone, at last. Ian still thinks Jaye’s the only thing Luke has ever really liked about him, the one thing Ian got right. Ian doesn’t disagree.

Luke grabs Ian’s bruised hand before Ian can pull away. His dad’s touch is soft, almost comforting. Ian yanks his hand away.

“Like I said at your wedding,” Luke partially rolls down Ian’s collar and strokes the bandage covering Ian’s neck, “you grabbed a dragon by the horns when you found that one.”

The elevator dings its arrival. Ian hurries into the compartment. He thinks Luke will follow him on, but he doesn’t.

“You still think you’re better than me?” Luke throws a peace sign at Ian as the doors clamp shut. “I love—”

The elevator lurches upward, and Ian becomes aware of his own shuddering chest. He’s hyperventilating.
After getting a handful of Percocet from a co-worker in the pharmacy who owes him a favor, Ian enters his work space on the top floor of the hospital. The pain in his hand is subsiding. Ian is the only the male nurse in the NIC-U, the neonatal intensive care unit. Sometimes he thinks this should make him stronger than the women he works alongside. If only that were the case.

He walks along the narrow aisle between incubators. It’s a small unit now. Since the hurricane, many of the relatively healthy children were moved to the cities where their parents relocated. The seven remaining very sick babies wrapped in pink or blue blankets look like a carton of broken Easter eggs.

There had been nine, but now there are only six and Pia Patin.

That is not Pia’s real name. Ian gave it to her because he thought being nameless made her like a crab without a shell, vulnerable. The day after Malecia arrived seven weeks ago, Ian was part of a group of medical volunteers working out of Louis Armstrong Airport. Families were scurrying onto choppers and planes bound for points all across the U.S. Pia’s parents didn’t want to leave the newborn who had nearly drowned in oil-filled water near the Superdome, but Ian assured them that Pia was in good hands. He was wrong.

Everyone, including Pia’s parents, thought Pia would be flown in a separate medical transport to Oklahoma City where a crisis team waited. She wasn’t. After Pia’s parents left for Oklahoma, the triage doctors said she was too sick to travel. In the confusion, Ian lost her parents’ contact information. No one has heard from the parents. Either they are searching the country for Pia or they’re dead.
Pia has dark brown skin, like Jaye’s. She’s only wearing a small, flimsy diaper. The plastic crib is mated to a machine made of canisters and tubes. Tubes crawl over the crib rim and into Pia’s chest, arms and mouth. She looks like she’s being eaten by a Portuguese Man of War.

The machine should make her stronger, but her lung capacity has decreased sharply in the past forty-eight hours. Ian wonders if God is trying to siphon back the smidgen of life he gave her. It may be for the best. Most of these babies won’t live long enough to fall off a tricycle. Those who do will live short, painful lives.

Jaye’s face. The shock on her face after Ian punched her echoes through his mind. Before he left that morning, he watched her swallow a few aspirin. The blow left a welt on her cheek, and there were faint medallions on her throat where he grabbed her. She didn’t mention any of it.

“Nurse Villariago,” says Angela, the charge nurse. She has crow’s feet that look the same whether she’s laughing or frowning. “We don’t stare at the children. We treat them.”

“Sorry,” Ian says.

“What is all this?” Angela gestures at Ian’s wounds. “You’re not the one are you?”

Ian looks at Pia silent in her crib. He’s not sure if Angela is serious.

“No,” he says.

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Five days after he punched Jaye, the shadows outside of their window come alive. It’s two a.m., and Ian stares at the ceiling while Jaye sleeps next to him. She rolls toward him and groans, her face uglied in the gloom. Their bedroom is on the second floor of the townhouse and sits near the head of a tall evergreen, the fingers and forearms of which spread across the window panes. A
ripping sound comes from the roof and something crashes below the window. Ian smells bourbon and peppercorns. He imagines the tree fingers stretching onto the bed and squeezing the life out of them. Jaye screams.

The sketchy police department incident report and brief newspaper article painted a blurry picture of what happened to Jaye during the hurricane. Like something one of the palsied adolescents on the physical therapy unit might have drawn and colored.

On September 24, six days after Hurricane Malecia, Jaye and her partner and mentor, Mitch Benoit, arrived at a nursing home in an unflooded area of New Orleans East. The residents were in bad shape, having run out of food and water. The back-up generator had failed the humid day before, and one woman was in a heat-stroke coma. Mitch told her it was just like Katrina where he and some deputies had to guard a couple hundred inmates on an overpass while the city drowned around them.

Three armed men appeared at the gate. Shots were fired, and Mitch and Jaye chased the men to a junk yard behind the home. They lost track of each other. One of the attackers shot Jaye in the arm, but she stayed conscious and chased the men away. Eventually, she found Mitch face down in a ditch filled with hubcaps. He’d only fallen three feet, but that was enough to break his neck and kill him.

Jaye leaps from the bed, naked as a flame, and snatches the bedspread, uncovering Ian.

“You’re worthless.” Jaye throws the hear no evil monkey figurine from the nightstand at Ian.

Luke gave it to them along with see no evil and speak no evil as wedding gifts. The figurine hits the headboard, and showers Ian with fragments. He tastes blood. His lip is busted.
Jaye’s father beat her, too, but she didn’t crumple like Ian. She became a protector. Ian became a healer, but he doesn’t know how to heal Jaye. The only thing he’s certain of is that he won’t touch her again. She can kick him out the window if she wants to. He won’t become Luke.

She shoves Ian, but he doesn’t move. Then she pushes again, and he trips, banging his head on the high dresser. When he’s on all fours, a glint catches his eye. Her badge. He picks it up and climbs to his feet.

“You’re going back,” he says, holding the badge out.

She smiles.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she says.

Jaye snatches the badge from him and jams it into his face. The badge falls to the carpet. Ian realizes that this time and last, she hasn’t used any of her skills against him. Nothing she learned at the police academy. Nothing she would practice at the dojo. If Jaye wanted to, she could have knocked him out cold, tied him up, and had her police buddies finish him off in an abandoned warehouse.

“What’s the matter?” Jaye pauses. “You’re not crying are you?”

He is. So is Jaye.

“I know you want to hit back,” she says.

“I’m never doing that again.”

“Hit me!” Jaye grabs Ian’s arms and squeezes so hard it feels like hooks going through his biceps.

That’s when Ian accepts what is happening to Jaye, what he has to do if he loves her. He remembers how it felt to hold her hand as they left the theater the night of their first day, the way it made him feel like he was floating on bubbles. Ian smiles.
He wraps one hand around Jaye’s throat, and cocks back the other.

***

The next morning Ian goes looking for Luke around the cafeteria and doesn’t see him. That’s fine with Ian. He’s been handling his and Jaye’s situation. Last night, sex with her was good—better than he can recall it ever being—and he feels that Jaye might snap back to her old self any day now. He might even wind up better than he was.

Most people in the halls are hurrying toward the ambulance bay. A couple runs past him. He yells for them to stop. They don’t, but it’s clear they recognize him, too. He falls in behind them.

“They caught the baby-killer,” the man of the couple says when they reach the rear ambulance bay.

Ian self-consciously shields his face when the man talks to him. Ian has a bruise around his right eye that makes it look as if he’s wearing half of an old-timey robber’s mask.

A bunch of people crowd in the ambulance bay, doctors and patients, administrators and janitors. Police cars and a large security van are parked just beyond the canopy surrounded by officers with walkie-talkies and shotguns. Blue lights twinkle on the roofs of the police cars and a TV news truck pulls into the parking lot. The officers warn the crowd to keep their distance.

A chill runs through Ian. What if it was Luke? If his dad were somehow responsible for the deaths, what would that say about Ian? Was Ian capable of doing such a thing?

“You took care of Melissa at the airport.” The woman of the couple rubs Ian’s shoulder.

“Thank you.”
Pia/Melissa’s parents found their child. Melissa’s father says someone stumbled on the murderer hovering over Melissa’s crib.

“That’s her,” Melissa’s mother says. The crowd parts as several men lead Angela out of the hospital. Her wrists are handcuffed behind her back.

“What are you looking at?” Angela says. “I’m doing His will.”

“Why?” Ian asks.

“The strong will thrive if we cull the weak.” Angela looks directly at Ian as the officers drag her by. “Cull the weak.”

The officers place her into the back seat of a squad car.

“But who caught her?” Ian says.

Melissa’s mother points. At the far end of the invisible line streaming from the tip of Melissa’s mother’s finger, through the middle of a group of policemen in windbreakers, rubbing the back of his neck and gesturing toward the hospital, is Luke. It was Luke, searching for Ian, who had spotted Angela through the observation glass. He found Angela prepping a syringe full of air for Melissa.

“Heroes and villains, kid.” Luke says after the police are finished taking his statement. “Sometimes life makes you one. Sometimes the other.”

“But Angela was the best nurse in the hospital,” Ian says.


The police convoy pulls away and Ian wants to sprint after them to ask more questions, but he walks away from Luke.

Ian doesn’t want to talk because he has work to do. He walks into the hospital without looking back. He wants to check on Melissa and her parents, to do all that he can to ensure that Melissa survives long enough to say her parents’ names, at least once.

***

When Ian arrives home late that evening, the house is still a wreck from the previous night. The refrigerator is overturned. The transom window to their bedroom is shattered. Clothes that were ripped out of the drawers are strewn into the kitchen like seaweed and peppered with shards from the figurines and flower pots they smashed.

Most of the damage happened during the lovemaking, not the fighting.

Ian knows it’s not over. He’ll have to prod Jaye until she finally wakes up from her nightmare. He wonders if Luke thought he was doing something similar to him all those years ago.

When Ian enters their bedroom, he finds Jaye standing by the full-length mirror, which cracked down the center during their brawl. She’s dressed in her complete uniform, hat on head, revolver and baton slung low across her hips. Her sky blue, button-down shirt is pressed, and her badge shines as if sunlit. She never looked more beautiful to him.

“I don’t want to,” she says, “but I called in. The department is still understaffed and they need me.”

Ian knows that there’s a better reason; the flicker inside of her that disappeared in that junk yard is back.

She unclasps her revolver, and Ian backs away, but Jaye doesn’t grab the gun.
“I can’t come back,” she says, “to us, I mean.”

“We can work this out,” Ian says, “you and me together.”

“Not after the way things have been.”

“I—I know.”

Jaye rubs his chin and kisses him.

Ian doesn’t move. He’s frozen by the fear of what’s happening in front of his eyes, so many things coming apart all at once. Jaye’s footfalls travel down the steps and out the front door. The car engine revs, and gravel pings against the side of the house as Jaye speeds into the night.

***

Luke knocks on Ian’s door at daybreak. He’s placed a ladder and a box of shingles near the foot of the steps that lead into the house. A hammer juts out of his coverall pocket.

“I’m here to fix the hole in the roof,” he says.

“What do you know about fixing things?”


The blue tarp lies on the grass, tangled in a weathervane.

“But I never told you about the hole,” Ian says.

“She did.”
Ian glances back into the house as if to ask Jaye why she called Luke, but he already knows the answer. She always said that he shouldn’t avoid Luke, that only a coward would run from his own dad. Ian invites him inside.

At midday, Ian and Luke finish fastening the last of the shingles to the roof. In the driveway, they pile splintered roof decking, debris from the repairs. Luke gives Ian a lighter. Ian tosses Jaye’s Lazy Sunday hat onto the pile and burns it all.
It’s Good To See You’re Awake

It was terrible and nice to end up in my soon-to-be ex-wife Lametra’s ER. This was Children’s Hospital, and I waited on the edge of the exam table, paper crinkling under me. A light buzzed overhead. The room was cold, and my finger throbbed every time my heart beat.

“This is going to be pretty painful.” Lametra held up the x-ray to the fluorescents. “You might wet yourself.”

I winced at the film. My hand was normal, except for the top half of my middle finger. It veered left forty-five degrees from the others.

“Look,” I said, “I’m not one of your kids.”

“Bitchy much?” Lametra rotated her shoulders to loosen them, a habit from an old volleyball injury. “I can give you more anesthetic, if you need it.” She wore a sea foam green lab
coat. The room was done in pastels too, butterscotch and pomegranate. Everything was the color of Easter, and I felt like a cracked egg.

I had fallen off a fake mountain wall just before I got to the top, my first time at a climbing gym. I was bored of doing freelance web design at home, bored of cooking crockpot meals, bored of scowling at the honey-do list on the fridge. Lametra always says I should go back to school, maybe major in pre-law, but I don’t want to do that. I’m done with sitting in chairs and having people talk at me like I’m a vegetable.

It seemed like a good idea at the time to give climbing a shot, but my finger caught in the harness on the way down. After I landed, a pizza-faced Eagle Scout asked if I could do it again if I tried. I told him to stuff it, and his troupe leader told me it wasn’t right to talk that way to a kid. I gave them my finger, the crooked one.

Lametra grabbed the hand of the plastic skeleton in the corner. Blue rubber bands clamped the finger joints in place. She tugged one of the plastic fingers out of joint and let it flop around.

“This is your digitus terdis.” She pinched the plastic bone. “I give it a soft yank and—”

“I get it.” I yawned. “Then I’ll see Smurfs and unicorns.” My finger twinged, and I bit my lower lip. It was amazing just how much hurt such a small part of me could make. “You’ve never done this before, have you?”

“Twice yesterday,” she said. Her dimples deepened. It wasn’t a full-on smile, but it made me smile back though, and I hated myself for it. I hated the hospital, too. I hated the sick kids and sick parents moping around. I hated having to explain to the registration clerk why a grown-ass man was at a hospital for kids. And I hated that I could have gone anywhere else, but that I chose to come here.
Lametra pulled on see-through gloves. The see-through material made her brown skin seem dunked in egg whites.

“We should hurry, sweetheart,” she said. “I’m the only one on call, and there are a lot of patients in the waiting area.”

A long time had passed since the nights when Lametra slipped into bed on the wrong-side-of-midnight and sighed the day’s mishaps. That was before talk of kids and before our disagreements about whether or not to have some. She would lie on her elbow, her words pulsing across the bed sheet. She was so close that her cinnamon breath tickled the skin on my throat and—even though I was tired—made me feel fully awake.

But there were so many small tragedies in a day: sprained ankles, forehead contusions, second-degree burns, and the occasional, unexpected bruise that required a call to child protective services. These were problems that Lametra and I would never have to deal with. We wouldn’t have to deal with any of that because Lametra didn’t want kids.

“Maybe I could fix this myself,” I said. “It’ll give me good material for the blog, and—”

Lametra gripped my hand in her palm and wrenched my finger back into place. A wave of heat shivered to the back of my brain. She placed my hand on the silver instrument tray next to the bed. I wiggled my finger.


“The adjustment is painful in the short run,” she said, “but worthwhile over time.” She brushed away colorful building blocks from the stainless steel countertop and wrote a script for pain meds. She unzipped the backpack I’d come in with. I started. I worried she would see the large brown envelope inside, which I’d kept on me for weeks. I worried that the envelope would pique her interest and that she would ask me about it. I kept the divorce papers in the envelope.
She didn’t know about the papers, didn’t know that I wanted to move on. Maybe to someone I didn’t even love or like, but who would give me the kids I wanted. It would be the worst day of my life if she signed those papers, but I needed her to sign them.

If she noticed the envelope, I couldn’t tell. She slipped the prescription into the bag and rezipped it. An alarm bleeped in the hall. Voices shrieked then fell quiet. A pair of nurses ran past the door. Lametra’s sea foam lab coat billowed as she ran out.

I removed the envelope from the bag. I could have torn the envelope in half. I could have crammed it into the bright, red medical waste container. But I put the envelope back in the bag, and she didn’t sign the papers that day.

Lametra never liked me visiting her at the hospital. She thought I couldn’t handle all of the sick kids. Once we toured the hospital hand-in-hand, the Fracture Clinic, the heart surgery suite, the Developmental Disorders Center. No problem. Yet, at the maternity ward, I pressed my forehead to the glass and wondered out loud where those babies would wind up and if the world would be as unfair to them as it was to me.

We strolled through the therapy ward. A white boy leaned to one side in a wheelchair. He was about twelve or thirteen years old. His upper body was healthy, but his legs were scrawny like a puppet’s. There was a big puzzle on his table, and he monkeyed with a toy horse. When I stopped behind him, I saw that the puzzle made an image of a hillside covered with dandelions, stallions romping way back. The boy kept tapping the horse against the poster like he was trying to put his horse into the picture with the other horses. I wanted to smack that toy out of his hand. I wanted to tell him to wake up.

I went back to the hospital a few days after Lametra set my finger. I wore a blue splint, and my finger still hurt plenty.
A seven-foot tall nurse lumbered down the hall. He was the one who had splinted my finger. I had asked if he got tired of people asking if he played basketball before he was a nurse. He told me he still played basketball all the time, but only when he wasn’t splinting my finger, and I wasn’t asking him about basketball. I told him it was bad customer service to get smart with a patient.

When I saw the giant coming my way, I ducked into a room and closed the door. I didn’t want to get into another tit for tat with him.

I wasn’t alone in the room I ducked into. A boy lay under a sheet. I recognized him; he was the one with the toy horse from months earlier. I hadn’t been searching for him, but I’d found him, and the coincidence of our second meaning made me pause, even though I wanted to leave.

The boy’s chest didn’t move much, but he wasn’t dead. A stream of wires extended from his body and into a monitor. His chart said he was in a medically-induced coma. I smelled poo and warm flesh. Taken together, the room reeked like one big diaper. I dropped my backpack on the windowsill. The second-story window overlooked Napoleon Avenue, where cars waited for the light to change. Four boys rolled by on skateboards. I sat and pinched Coma Boy’s cheek. He didn’t flinch. I pinched his hand, and, for some reason, I flinched.

I told the Coma Boy about the envelope, and about how I was willing to dump my wife of four years for what she wouldn’t give me. I asked him if that made me a bad person, if that made me evil, but Coma Boy wasn’t home. His lips were drying out. Little red cuts striped the skin. I took a container of balm from my pocket and rubbed it on his lips.

“If you knew the secret of life, you would tell me, right?” I said.

“Family friends?” I heard a voice say.
I almost jumped to my feet, but I didn’t want to look guilty or like a weirdo, even if I felt like a guilty weirdo. The giant nurse swooped in with a bedpan.

“What’s your problem barging in like that?” I said to catch him off guard.

“Sorry,” he said. “Thought I heard two people talking.”

“Do you think I was having a conversation with a kid in a coma?” I said. “That’s silly.”

“Wouldn’t be the first, mister,” the orderly said, “I see all kinds. Ain’t worried about you though. Ain’t like you can hurt him. You can kill him dead but you can’t hurt him none.” The nurse glanced at the boy’s face. “Guess I shouldn’t say that. It prolly hurts his feelings. It’d hurt mine.”

“He can hear me?”

The nurse said the boy and his family took a tumble from the Highrise Bridge a few months ago. The others were lucky because they had only died, but the boy, who was seemingly on the path to recovery suffered setbacks, and was now trapped in his body. He could watch the world from the couch of his mind, but he’d never be able to get up and stretch.

“Hell,” I said.

“Yeah. Neuro say it’s all from a lil’ bit of chewed up wiring in here.” The nurse tapped the back of his own head. “If he was a house, they could rip that shit out and replace it with the good, insulated copper stuff. Can’t do that with folk though.”

I did come back the next day, and I came back several times over the next few weeks. Sometimes, I popped in on Lametra and hoped that she would be gone, having abandoned me for volunteer work in Africa. But she was always there, always on call, daring me to man up and give her the divorce papers. More often than not I passed time in Coma Boy’s room.
Once, I sat next to his bed and read the entertainment section of the newspaper. I wanted him to know that people were out in the world doing things, and that he should be doing things, too. When I got to an article about a child star winning an award, I thought I saw the boy’s eyelash flutter, but when I stared dead at him he didn’t move at all.

Another day, I was in the spare room at home. My finger was healing well, but it still twanged when I tried to bend it. Fresh, white paint coated the paint roller in my hand. All I had to do was step to the wall and roll that white paint over the pale, yellow paint we’d put up months before.

Lametra and I painted the room when we thought she was pregnant. It was a shock for both of us because we’d agreed we didn’t want kids. Lametra thought the world was too dangerous for children, and I didn’t even like being a kid when I was a kid, but we both got caught up in the moment.

It was only a fire drill though. She hadn’t been pregnant. And she was shocked when I didn’t seem happy that she wasn’t pregnant. Really, I was surprised too.

I put roller back in its pan. The yellow was too much of a baby color, we agreed, but instead of painting over old paint, I sat on the hardwood floor and did sit-ups. I picked a scab on my elbow. When the Pie Man’s bell rang outside, I went out and bought a mini-pecan pie off his food truck. I hadn’t had one of his pies in a while, but this one was stale. They were a lot better in my memory.

I heard Lametra’s car pull into the driveway. I heard her footfalls on the gravel. The front door opened and closed. She would be on me any moment. I couldn’t decide whether to run to the kitchen and fake like I was making dinner or run to the bedroom and fake like I was preparing our taxes. So I stood there, where I was, and that was where she found me.
“How’s the painting going?” She stopped short. She looked from the yellow wall to the paint roller in my hand. “Oh.” She wrinkled her nose. It was something she did when she had a bad day in the ER or if she was upset with me.

“I was just about to make dinner,” I said. “Or do the taxes.”

“What did you do all day?”

“You know how much I hate painting.”

“What’s so hard about it?” She took my hand with paint roller in it, and she worked my hand up and down the wall. “Painting is the easiest thing in the world.”

I yanked my hand down from the wall. “You’d be a great mother,” I said.

Her face tightened. “You’re kidding,” she said. “We talked about this before. We agreed.”

“People have kids all the time,” I said, “even when they think they don’t want them.”

“I’m not one of those people,” she said. “If you opened your eyes, you’d see that.”

She tried to touch me like she wanted to make sure I was there in the room with her, but I didn’t let her touch me. I threw the wet brush against the wall, and it left a white streak across the yellow.

I walked into the ER the next day. I felt bad about where Lametra and I were, and I wanted to steal her away for dinner in the commissary so we could talk. Maybe I could get her to see things my way. But I wasn’t confident, and I hadn’t slept at all.

The ER was packed. Children cried, and a girl with a big, red bruise on her cheek sat on her mother’s lap. A red-headed woman sat with her son. Blood dripped down the boy’s calf to the skateboard his foot rested on. I kept walking. I wanted to see Coma Boy, but I was afraid to
see him. It had been awhile, and I felt guilty that time would have taken great scoops of life from him.

But he was just like he was before. Even though I knew the staff must have turned him and cleaned him a dozen times since I last stopped in, he seemed the same way he was the first time I saw him. I sat and read him a story from the sports page about a basketball team that won a game with only two players after the rest had fouled out, and I kept reading into the dreary real estate listings. For a while, I read prices and square footages, but my own voice lulled me, so I closed my eyes for a moment.

When I looked up from the paper, I was shocked to see Coma Boy looking at me, that he had sat up and was finishing a dinner roll from the food tray next to the bed. He’d cleaned his plate and his cheeks were red like he wanted more.

“I thought you were going to sleep forever, mister,” he said. His voice was raspier than I expected.

I wanted to run away, but I nodded at him. I wanted him talk again. It all felt like some kind of miracle.

“I was starting to think you’d sleep forever,” I said.

“Thanks for all the reading you did,” he said.

“You got all that?” I said.

“Sure.” He licked a crumb from the corner of his mouth. “I was pretty bored till you showed up. People talked around me, but they didn’t talk to me. I guess they were afraid I’d learn about what happened in the accident.”

“You know about your family?” I said. He nodded.
“We went through the guardrail,” he said. “I saw the front of our van hit that water.

Nobody else had their seatbelts on.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“My folks would be happy I’m still here,” he said. “I can’t wait to get back to school. I
miss my friends a lot.”

“Really?” I asked.

“You’re sort of old for this place, aren’t you, mister?”

I stared at my finger. I wasn’t wearing the brace anymore. I was healing fast. Except for
the stiffness, my finger felt OK. “My wife works downstairs.”

“She must be nice,” he said. “You are, so I bet she is, too.”

“She’s okay for a girl.” I grinned, and the boy cringed.

I yawned and covered my mouth. When I uncovered my mouth, the giant nurse was
standing over the bed, hanging a bag of saline solution.

“You okay?” the nurse said. “You were mumbling in your sleep.”

“I wasn’t asleep,” I said. “I was just talking—”

Coma Boy hadn’t moved. He was still flat on his back.

I was in bed when Lametra came home that night. She threw her sea foam lab coat on the
recliner. I pretended I was knocked out under the blankets and pillows. My eyes were closed, but
I was wide awake. She crawled into bed. We were face to face. I’d put the divorce papers in the
nightstand behind me. I would talk to her in the morning. I would get her to sign them. Some
things couldn’t be negotiated, and I had to do what was right for both of us.

She propped herself up on her elbow and frowned.

“I feel so useless,” she said. “Everyone died today.”
I grabbed her shoulder. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d massaged her. She smiled, but I couldn’t smile back. Even though my finger flamed with ache, I didn’t stop until well after she dozed off.

I climbed out of bed and walked to the spare room where the roller brush lay under that streak of white paint on the wall. I poured fresh paint into the pan and dipped the brush. I didn’t sleep that night.
My job was to make sure Mercury Forges didn’t escape. He was a stocky, black guy in for life on drugs and guns. He’d gotten out of the Orleans Parish Prison twice and no one knew how he did it. Funny thing is he got captured within a few blocks of the prison both times.

“I get turned around when I get out there, Deputy Mitch,” Mercury said once, “but I’ll get free for good, just you wait.”

When the hurricane hit and flooded everything, we brought the inmates out to the Broad Street overpass. I wasn’t too panicked because one of the other deputies, Ronnie Dismas, said our families made it out of town safe before the water came. It’d be easy to look after myself with them out of harm’s way. Of course, Mercury snuck away as soon as I turned my back.

He was in a pirogue about five blocks away, bobbing like an apple. I ran across the overpass and climbed down some scaffolding to his boat.
“Where do you think you’re going?” I asked. I had a hand on my sidearm.

“Got to find Humanity Street,” he said. “That’s where my pops lives.”

I can’t really tell you why I didn’t make him bring us back to the detention area.

After a while, we floated up to a yellow house with flood water almost to the awning. Mercury yanked a metal pole from the water, broke through the attic window and climbed in. There was shuffling inside and I wondered if I should go in after him. I thought this might be part of his big getaway plan, but soon he grunted out of the window and pulled his father’s body out wrapped in a heavy blanket. The old man hadn’t had a chance.

“Bring us back, dep” Mercury said. And that was what I did.
The associate slips into the office tower gym, and straightens the tie around his thin neck so Lyman Hebert will think he’s been in the office all morning. Lyman squats at the center of the gym catching a misshapen, gray medicine ball against his chest. A thick, fleshy scar peeks out of the top of his V-neck T-shirt. His face is red.

The associate just left the condominium where Lyman’s paralegal lives. Pursuing the paralegal was Lyman’s idea. The associate, however, doesn’t want to know how Lyman would react if he found out the associate was late because he bedded the paralegal repeatedly over the past forty-eight hours. When the associate left the condo, the paralegal’s beige coupe crouched in front of his new luxury SUV. He and she were in the same position minutes before—he still feels the afterglow. In fact, he feels every part of his body as if lightning struck him, and he survived.
Orange and black bats and smiley-faced, gap-toothed pumpkins decorate the gym bulletin board. In the loft above, a group of women in leggings huff in place on the elliptical machines. The associate smells the scent of iron dust and sweat carried on the cool air.

Repeatedly, a trainer tosses the medicine ball at Lyman. Perspiration pops from Lyman’s wooly, brown hair on impact. After each hit, he grunts and heaves the ball away. The trainer has bulky shoulders and a taught waist, but Lyman is burlier. Every time Lyman catches the medicine ball, it appears to shrink to grapefruit size. Lyman’s fingerless weight lifting gloves make his hands look like paws.

“How’s First Wife?” Lyman says. The associate knows it’s a rhetorical question, but he would respond if he had a comeback. First Wife is what Lyman calls the associate’s wife—the associate never told Lyman about his earlier failed marriage because it shames him. And too, why unnecessarily complicate things with the truth?

Lyman once told the associate that his wife must be proud of him becoming the first lawyer in their circle, but he changed species on her, and it was only a matter of time before something gave because cross-species relationships didn’t work. She probably thought she was marrying a bunny rabbit: a future law professor or maybe a pro bono attorney at worst. She couldn’t have predicted she would wind up with a wildcat, which is what six years of corporate law practice would turn any talented attorney into.

“Just make sure First Wife and that paralegal never wind up in the same room. They can smell it.” Lyman tells the trainer it’s time for a break. He pitches the ball at him with more force than necessary. The trainer winces when he snares it, then wanders away.

“Pardon?” the associate says.

“You went belly to belly with my staffer.”
“No, I didn’t.”

Lyman scowls. The associate wants to scurry away, but keeps a blank stare.

“Good.” Lyman slaps the associate on the arm. “That’s strong. You might actually beat me in a game of poker one day.”

Lyman ran Henican and Hawes, the law firm where they both work, until a year ago. The firm’s policy is to decommission chieftains at the age of sixty-four to make room for younger, more zealous partners. When Lyman turned sixty-four, he lobbied and failed to prevent the powers from sending him into semi-retirement, but before they could vote him out, Lyman disappeared.

By the time he returned two months later, a new managing partner was in charge, and Lyman had the ugly, Y-shaped scar branded into his skin. Lyman has been fighting for a way back to the top since. He goes to the gym every day at noon so he can work out and plot new ways to boost his fee intake. He’s convinced things will go back to the way they were if he can find the right client to help him bloat the firm’s coffers.

Last night, Lyman sent the associate a text message saying he convinced one of their former clients to come to town on short notice. Humera Corporation produces thirty percent of all the pest control products in the world. The recession caused them to fire Lyman and go with a cheaper lawyer across town, but they’re not happy with the new guy. It’s time to hunt, the message ended.

“Dinner at the hotel,” Lyman says. “We’ll do it up just like we did with those execs from Coca Cola.” He drapes a towel around his shoulders.

“Tonight?”

“Tomorrow evening.”
“I can’t tomorrow.”

“Not even going to let her recover? I’ve created a monster.”

The associate won’t be with the paralegal tomorrow night. Yes, his wife thinks he’s on a business trip until tomorrow afternoon—that was his cover for spending the entire weekend with the paralegal—and, yes, he will spend tonight with the paralegal as well, but he promised to be home tomorrow evening in time for his daughter’s recital. She’s a sunflower in a fairy tale.

Lyman lightly grabs the associate’s lapels. “Whatever you have going on will wait. If you help me bag Humera, you’ll make partner, and you can buy First Wife a fur coat.” He smooths the associate’s lapels with his fingers. “I hope you’re ready for the strip club.”

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By the time Lyman spoke to him for the first time, the associate was already in his fourth year at the firm. It was late on a Friday afternoon just after Lyman fired The Winston. The Winston was a junior partner, and Winston wasn’t his real name. Everyone called him that because of his short, pudgy physique, which reminded some now-forgotten wisecracker of the legendary prime minister of Britain.

The Winston collected Civil War weaponry and received the firm’s charitable services Man-of-the-Year trophy twice. He was a moderate biller in the firm until he got on Lyman’s bad side and Lyman yanked his best cases. For weeks, rumors about The Winston’s pending elimination floated around the firm, a curious aroma that elicited giddy chatter from the firm’s Greek chorus of non-lawyers. Whenever the associate walked into the break room for water, he
could tell the secretaries and court-runners only quieted down to be certain the associate wasn’t
The Winston. Once they were sure, they went back to it.

Lyman lay on his side behind the great oak desk in his corner office. His chair was
overturned, and most of the adornments of his bureau—picture frames, paperwork, a potted
plant—littered the carpet. It would take the associate weeks of eavesdropping on the lay staff to
piece together the following: Lyman fired The Winston. The Winston seemed to take it well, and
left to collect his things, but then returned and tackled Lyman. Lyman pummeled The Winston
senseless. By the time security arrived, there was nothing to do but drag the hogtied man out of
the office. Lyman had roped The Winston with a telephone cord.

The associate helped Lyman to his feet.

“You get his office,” Lyman said.

***

The afternoon the Humera executives arrive in town is Halloween. The associate needs to
hydrate, so he chugs water. The last time he and Lyman entertained potential clients the associate
had drunk too much and vomited during the dessert course. He wasn’t a drinker before he met
Lyman. He’s still not, but making the marks comfortable goes with the job, and doing his job is
the only way to move up.

The associate flips through a stack of documents from one of their smaller clients, an
insurance company located in the same suburb as his house. He ordered one of the newer
associates to flag any references in the thousands of pages of emails, interoffice reports and
handwritten notes that might indicate the company unfairly denied property damage claims
following the last big storm. He’s not sure what will happen to the flagged documents once he
sends them up the chain to Lyman. He imagines they’ll get shredded.

Reviewing the work of subordinates is a step up for the associate, a symbol of his
ascension in the firm. He was in their position once: at the foot of the mountain, but his
preparation—twelve years of primary and secondary schooling and seven years of post-
secondary education, nineteen years of gargantuan effort—gave him a path to the chalet at the
top of Mount Olympus and the right to earn more in an hour than most of his former friends
made in a day of driving streetcars or selling heroin. So what if he’s running around with the
bodacious paralegal. That’s his right. He sacrificed to get here. He bled and came a long way.
When he was a kid, this skyscraper was still under construction. He never imagined back then
that one day he’d have an office near the top floor.

The associate isn’t rich yet, but he could now almost single-handedly pay his and his
wife’s car notes, the mortgage of their new gated-community home, and the tuition to send his
oldest daughter to the tony French immersion school she deserves. This is the dream that he’s
living. He feels like Atlas carrying a whole galaxy of planets on his shoulders and not even
breaking a sweat.

The trick now is to get more, ever more. Lyman said that’s what he likes about the
associate: the associate understands that if you get content with what you have, something will
eat you.

“Que pasa, Daddy?”

The associate looks up. His wife and his two daughters are at his door. The associate’s
oldest daughter, at age six, already knows how to greet him in eight languages. Lyman has two
sons and a daughter. His daughter was state tennis champ. She’s in southern California now, training to be a heart surgeon.

“How long have you three been there?” he asks.

“Not very long.” His wife enters carrying his youngest daughter on her narrow hip. She has bags under her eyes, and she’s gained a few pounds recently. Her brown face is lumpy like a hunk of dough cooked at a high temperature.

The associate’s youngest daughter is almost two. The toddler doesn’t sleep and cries all night and doesn’t recognize herself in a mirror. The doctors suspect she has a learning disability. The associate’s ex, a pediatrician, said it’s the bad kind, not something that will ever get better. The toddler is biting the sleeve of her puffy, magenta jacket.

“We’ve been here forever and forever.” Oldest daughter runs around the desk to him.

“And you didn’t even see us.” She’s wearing a crown of floppy petals.

The associate picks her up under the arms and sits her on his knee. “I just wanted to see how long you could keep quiet, honey bunny.”

“That’s a baby’s name,” oldest daughter says.

“You are my baby.”

“No, I’m not.” Oldest daughter giggles. She’s even more buck-toothed since some of her baby teeth fell out. “I’m your boss, so I can tell you what to do. Mommy says your boss can make you jump out the window.”

The associate’s wife grimaces. The associate looks at the window. It’s covered in a light frost. It shouldn’t be this chilly in New Orleans in October. He feels a tingle in his loins. His wife and daughters are like extras from a movie he once enjoyed.
“You forgot, didn’t you?” The associate’s wife fondles the corner of a stack of papers.

“The recital.”

He’s thought this through. It’s better to act as if he did forget. “It’s been a long day. I didn’t even stop for lunch from the airport.” The word “lunch” makes him think of the buxom paralegal, her solid hips probably cantering as she prowls the class action file room at this very moment. The associate’s wife frowns.

“This is paying for her next trip to the dentist.” The associate gestures at the papers on his desktop.

“The dentist is mean,” his oldest daughter says.

“You’re not coming are you?”

“You gotta come, Daddy.”

“Gaba.” The toddler sucks the associate’s wife’s face.

“Mr. Lyman would like to speak with you in his office.” It’s Lyman’s senior secretary. She’s wearing a nun’s habit.

“One minute,” the associate says. He tells his wife about the client dinner and that it’ll be a late night for him. She deflates a little. The associate remembers what it was like when somehow they didn’t seem to need money. Before their daughters were born, and before he went to law school, back when they lived in the roach-infested walk-up atop a convenience store in the hood where dogs barked and gunshots cracked, and to calm himself he would imagine the animals were shooting the guns, bloodhounds with Berettas, tabby cats with Uzis. He and his wife spent a lot of time rebuilding houses as volunteers and eating quick prep noodles out of coffee mugs. It all felt right, and his wife was mostly full of air back then.

“I’m afraid it’s quite urgent, sir.” The secretary tugs her habit.
“You better go.” The associate’s wife picks up her purse from the chair. He pecks her on the cheek. She and his daughters leave.

Of course, Lyman is not in his office. The senior secretary sneaks into the room and leans against the door after she closes it. She’s one of the reasons the firm wants to boot Lyman all the way out. He hurts efficiency.

Everyone in the firm shares secretarial staff, two or sometimes three lawyers to a secretary, but not Lyman. He has an administrative pride: a file clerk, the paralegal, and his senior secretary, who’s been with him since he was a young associate. She watches his back. They all do. If he goes, they all go. It’s no different for them than for the associate. Lyman’s the reason their kids have a basic understanding of long division and can quote Rudyard Kipling at the dinner table.

“A lawyer of your vintage should be faster on his feet.” She peeks out of the door and exits.

***

“So you actually live in this hotel?” The regional claims agent anatomizes his bread roll with a knife and fork, prying the tawny shell from the soft center.

“I do.” Lyman finishes his second glass of straight whiskey.

Lyman and the associate picked up the regional claims agent and his assistant from the airport in the associate’s SUV because Lyman’s Italian sports car is barely big enough for Lyman alone. Now in the lobby restaurant, the quartet encircles a table near picture windows,
and the air smells of charred garlic. Every few seconds, swinging doors to the kitchen swish open and wetly slap together again like seal flippers.

The agent handles Humera’s legal claims from Texas to Maryland, but he’s not who Lyman and the associate were expecting. They expected the portly general counsel who used to come to town quarterly before the restructuring. The general counsel loved a good dinner, but not as much as he loved to get well on Lyman’s dime.

The agent is the quiet type, and he and the woman he’s brought along are both dressed in dark suits like the associate. The woman is tight-lipped too, but she’s donned one of the sparkly purple and gold nurses’ hats that the hospitality rangers at the airport were handing out. (They were giving out sailor hats to the men, but none of the men in the associate’s group took one.)

The associate can tell Lyman is trying to figure out how to impress them.

“It’s because my place is under renovation.” Lyman pulls a cigar from his brown, checkered sport coat. “We’re adding a second story.”

“They allow you to make such big changes to old houses like that?” The agent picks at a black napkin. His fingers worry the associate. They’re too skinny, almost skeletal.

“You have to have the right contacts. Tug on a string here and a string there, you could cure cancer in New Orleans if you wanted.”

The associate watches the way Lyman gestures to sell the story. It’s almost as if he’s sewing fabric together. It’s amazing how fiction and truth are the same if you don’t know any better, if you don’t know that Lyman is recently divorced for the second time in less than a five years, and that he’s kept a suite at the hotel for as long as the associate’s known him. Lyman’s impotent. He texted that to the associate once, also.
“You’re probably more comfortable living here than you would be in a house,” the woman says. Her nurse’s cap is too small, more like something a child would wear while trick or treating. Plastic jewels cover the cross. A jewel floats on the surface of the water in her glass. The associate doesn’t tell her about this.

“It’s easier,” Lyman says, nodding.

“In terms of having people clean your living area and feed you, I mean. It must be hard on your family, though.”

“You can’t imagine.”

The waiter, a skinny kid whose nametag says his name is Ian and who the associate only notices because he never makes eye contact, ferries a tray of drinks to the table. Lyman and the agent clink their glasses of straight whiskey together. The associate avoids looking up at the gold, honeycomb-coffered ceiling because the pattern makes him dizzy. His head is swimming from his third goblet of Malbec. At least things seem to be going well. The agent is opening up. He’s made favorable comments about a spike in North American infestations and litigation load increases. The associate isn’t surprised when Lyman makes his move.

“People always assume I was born into a rich family.” Lyman swishes his glass around and drinks. “They see Lyman Hebert the fourth and make all kinds of assumptions, but I’m from lower Plaquemines Parish. You’ve never been down to lower Plaquemines Parish, I bet.”

“Never,” the agent says. He’s using a knife and fork to dissect a quail wing.

“How about you, little lady?”

The woman sips the glass of fino she ordered with the appetizers.

Lyman uses his personal history to impress people. He says nobody ever made good from lower Plaquemines, but he did. Lyman toured the country with a traveling circus in his twenties,
but he found the life of a cage boy, feeding the big cats, boring. When he returned home, he went to law school, flunked out, gained reentry, and finished in the top half of his class.

After Lyman finishes his story, he tells them there’s a jazz band he likes to hear play at one of the clubs in the French Quarter.

The woman dips her finger into her ice water, and the plastic jewel sticks to the pad of her fingertip.

“Who wants to hear jazz?” She pokes her finger into her mouth and when she removes it, the jewel is gone. “Where are all the nudie bars?”

***

This is the associate’s first time at the Rodeo. The strip club they’ve brought clients to in the past, the Squirrel Cage, burned in a fire that swept through the French Quarter a month ago. The fire only caused minor damage to a few of the gimcrack shops tourists liked to frequent, but the associate thinks the fire must have had something against the Squirrel Cage because there’s nothing left of the pleasure palace except for the neon painted cage that hangs over the charred doorway.

Inside the Rodeo, two women dance around separate poles. They gyrate, switch sides, and gyrate again. Leopard spots cover one of the women from ankle to crown; the other wears nothing but a few lines of floss around her pelvis.

The agent hovers at the foot of the stage with Lyman. They’re both wearing oversized cowboy hats now. The agent stuffs a five-dollar bill into a hollowed-out pumpkin crammed with bills. Lyman slaps the agent on the back. The associate guesses he was wrong about the agent.
He’s not uptight. It just took Lyman to draw him out. The associate has never seen Lyman laugh in a way that causes his whole body to quiver.

The associate and the woman wait in the VIP area, an elevated platform just to the side of the stage. He sniffs his orange juice. He’s been drinking that and water for a while. His vision is clear again. The woman reclines on the plush velvet love seat, checking email messages on her phone, the nurse’s hat crumpled on the velvet next to her.

“You didn’t come here for the girls, did you?” the associate asks.

“Did you?”

“I’m on the job.”

“That makes two of us,” she says.

The associate’s thoughts are on his wife and daughters. They would be in bed now, but earlier, because it was Tuesday, his wife would have prepared a dinner of lean cuts of chicken and a green vegetable, maybe fresh spinach or asparagus. She would bathe the girls. There would be rubber ducks and the tiara his wife wore while cleaning his daughters. She wears the tiara at his oldest daughter’s request because his wife is the Queen of Clean. The toddler would whimper the whole time. Afterwards, his wife would tell a bedtime story. His oldest daughter would wonder out loud why Daddy couldn’t tell it, or maybe she wouldn’t wonder tonight. Maybe she wouldn’t wonder tomorrow either.

The woman tells the associate she’s the new Humera general counsel. She replaced the old one.

“You lied to us?” the associate asks. “That’s entrapment.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic,” she says. The woman says Humera should have kept Lyman as its local attorney since he’s gotten respectable results in the past, but that she and the agent are
in town to meet with a half dozen firms. It came to her attention that Lyman’s way of handling affairs was incredibly inefficient. She just wanted to see with her own eyes where the money went. After all, Humera ate some of the costs of nights like this one in inflated invoices from Lyman.

“You’re not going to reinstate the contract are you?”

The woman puts her hat back on.

The associate finds Lyman near the bar. He’s sitting on another man’s chest, and his hand wavers above the man to strike. The man is The Winston. The Winston wears a large beak held on by a rubber band, and dark feathers festoon his clothes. The associate imagines Lyman landing a blow that rips The Winston’s body into jagged halves.

“Man, that was crazy,” someone in the crowd says.

“The fat guy in the turkey suit jumped on the other guy’s back,” another says.

Lyman climbs off of The Winston and pushes past the associate.

***

The associate and Lyman have walked to a bar in a quiet section of the Quarter. The bar was empty at first, but a group of costumed women, about a dozen of them, are gathered around the radiant jukebox. It’s too dark to see the women well, but one of them wears a bullet-shaped helmet with metal wings affixed to the sides. The associate told Lyman about the woman from Humera. Now, Lyman is drinking from a nearly emptied bottle he bribed the bartender to give him.
The associate asks Lyman why he didn’t fight The Winston, why he let him go. Lyman says The Winston is just another injured sweetheart. Lyman fired him in the first place because doesn’t have the fierceness of a corporate litigator. The associate catches the odor of whiskey and tobacco whenever Lyman speaks.

“You should get out while you can.” Lyman balances an unlit cigar between his fingers. He never got to share one with the Humera officials. “No good people in this game.”

“What about the chief judge?” The chief judge was one person Lyman seemed to respect more than himself, the one person Lyman never said a cross word about.

“The chief judge? That low-life? I’ll tell you about him.” Lyman rolls the cigar between his hands. “I had this stupid nothing case. A pair of buffalos said they were almost crushed to death getting out of an elevator when the doors closed on them. Crushed by elevator doors! My mentor, Jack Simpson—your loss you never got to meet old Jack—died in his office the week before. You know that sorry SOB judge wouldn’t give me four hours leave from trial to go to Jack’s funeral? I can see him on the bench now. His fat face and wearing that robe like a tent. Looking like a big fat cherry cordial. Turns out he had a vacation coming up. Trip to Aruba with some hot Miami piece. Didn’t want the trial to last into the next week and ruin his good time.” Lyman’s face darkens. “You know why people tell lawyer jokes?”

“Because they’re true.” The associate drinks a glass of water. He wishes the bartender wouldn’t have put ice in it because the temperature outside has continued to drop.

“No,” Lyman says. “That’s what makes them funny, but that doesn’t get at the reason guys think of lawyer jokes when they see one of us walking to court downtown. It’s because they’re all jealous. Every layperson on earth. Jealous of us.” Lyman puts his hand on the associate’s shoulder. He grips the associate’s shoulder and squeezes. “Did you want a fire truck
when you were a kid? Wait, I bet you wanted a boom box. No, you’re a smart mother. You probably wanted the Encyclopedia Britannica or a signed Mapplethorpe print or some shit like that.”

Lyman gasps awkwardly, somewhere between a burp and hiccup. The women by the jukebox walk out onto Decatur Street with their lassos, go-cups, and spears.

“I wanted a mint condition copy of Giant-Size X-Men number one,” the associate says.

“A giant what?”

“A comic book.”

“See? That’s what I mean. Every living body on earth wants something. Want, want, want. People fight because they want. People fall in love because of it. That’s why they have kids and screw around and drink too much and get divorced, but none of that’s enough to get you to where you want to be. You want because you want. The answer’s the same as the question. They make fun of us because that’s what we do. We go into a court and argue over things that have nothing to do with anything, and we do it like it’s the most important thing in the world because we’re the blade of fucking want, the cutting edge of the thing.”

“You’re talking like that’s a problem.”

Lyman gulps the last from his bottle, which makes a clunk when he puts it on the bar. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, still holding the cigar between his forefingers.

“When I was not much older than you, I fell apart. It was the year I was up for junior. I worked seventy-five, eighty hour weeks most of that year. That’s not including showering, and eating and doing my first wife because I didn’t do any of that. One day, I walked out of the office, went to the savings and loan down the block, cleared out my account, and caught a plane to Nassau. A buddy of mine from undergrad had been trying to get me to buy this little breakfast
spot just off the water. That’s what I wanted when I was a kid. To have my own restaurant. So I flew down, dumped a bag of cash in his lap and told him to beat it. Prettiest place you could want. Small enough to fit in your shirt pocket. Had these yellow storm shutters that swung out.” Lyman throws his arms up like he’s conducting a symphony. “I cooked. Did dishes. Served tourists. I ran that place.”

“I bet that was pretty great.” A fire truck quietly rolls past the entrance of the bar.

“After two weeks, I locked it up and never went back.”

“But that was what you wanted.”

“I’m lying. I did go back. When I left last year, I went there to see what had happened to the place. It was gone. Just a few pilings sticking out of the sand. Bought a crate of grappa because it was all I could get nearby. Sat on the beach. Woke up in the hospital a few days later with this on my chest.” Lyman unbuttons his shirt and opens it so the associate can see the upper arm of the Y-shaped scar. “Maybe a giant crab attack.”

***

The streets are quiet. Lyman and the associate amble down Decatur Street where some of the hardliners are still hunched on stools inside bars that never close. Above, a thin layer of clouds obscures the starless sky. The associate’s arms are stiff and straight, his hands shoved in his pockets. The associate looks over his shoulder every few steps to make sure they’re alone. Nothing gives him the jimjams like walking through the old city in the small hours. Too many shadows, too many ghost stories. Lyman seems fine, but the associate is thirsty and shivering.
The wind keeps whipping up his pant legs, and in through the cuffs of his jacket, and through the tiny button holes of his shirt. It gets into the long bones of his body.

“What are you so nervous about?” Lyman says.

“Nothing.”

Lyman chuckles. “You’re the worst liar I’ve ever met.”

“Thanks.”

“Forget what I said.”

“Done.”

“All that jabbering about our profession. I guess I let the old man get inside me. Christ, he was a whiner.”

“You’ve never mentioned your dad before.”

“Dad? I’m talking about old Jack Simpson. Whenever he lost a case he’d talk about how he was ready to quit, but we’re not going to quit. First thing Monday morning we go back on the attack. There are other whales out there. A few phone calls, emails. We’ll be good.”

They cross out of the French Quarter and into the well-lit Central Business District where skyscrapers frame the associate’s peripheral vision. He can see everything under the bright street lights, divots in the black pavement, dark smudges left by passing vehicles. Metal street car wheels screech in the distance.

“Sometimes you have to vent a little you know,” Lyman says. “Take a step back to get a running start.”

“Absolutely.”

“Don’t be such a yes man.”

“I won’t.”
“Would be nice to be on that veranda again looking out over the ocean.” Lyman drags the unlit cigar under his nose. “I won’t lie about that.”

“You’ll see it again.” Later the associate will think it’s a lingering effect of too much wine or maybe his frayed nerves that make him believe Lyman is throwing his voice like a ventriloquist. He’ll hear the voice echoing just off the tip of his ear for a long time to come, the sound of a wasp before the sting.

“I’m right behind you,” the voice says. The Winston is clutching a Civil War rifled musket.

“We meet again, huh, buddy?” Lyman says. “Why aren’t you at home with your family by now?”

The Winston pours a packet of black powder into the muzzle. “Don’t patronize me.”

“That was a pretty funny scuffle we had,” Lyman says. “You’ve got to admit that is one fruity costume you’re wearing.”

“You said that I wasn’t aggressive enough.” The Winston pours musket balls into the rifle. He’s using the rubber turkey beak as a funnel. “You said that I didn’t have the killer instinct.”

“Okay. I get it. You’re going to shoot me with an antique gun. Why don’t you get it over with then?”

“What are you saying?” the associate asks.

“The guy is a collector. That gun could probably put his kids through college. If he shoots, he’ll ruin it.”

The Winston aims the rifle at Lyman’s chest.
“That thing must be, what, a hundred and twenty, hundred and fifty years old? There’s no way it can even shoot. It’s probably full of rust.”

The Winston cocks the hammer.

“If you shoot,” Lyman says, “I swear I’m going to kill you dead!” The associate sees a flash of anger in Lyman’s eyes. “What do you want? Your job back? Well, forget it. I didn’t think you had it in you then, and I don’t think you have it in you now.” Lyman taps the end of the muzzle with his cigar.

Light and smoke flare from the weapon. The rifle’s discharge is incredibly loud, but Lyman’s scream howls above it. The two noises crash together so loud the associate sees stars. He’s holding his hands over his ears when his vision returns and the world smells of gunpowder. Lyman lies flat on his back. A few people have come out of Lyman’s hotel, the bell man, some guests newly returned from Halloween parties.

“Oh sweet lord,” The Winston says. “It wasn’t supposed to go off. I just wanted to scare him.”

An ambulance arrives. The paramedics rip open Lyman’s shirt, revealing a chest covered in gray and brown hair, but no blood, no wound, not even a scratch. Just the scar that ran from below the collarbone to mid-torso. As the paramedics load Lyman into the ambulance, the associate sidles up beside one of them.

“Can I ride with you?”

“Sorry. Family only,” one of the paramedics says.

The paramedic, an angular-faced woman with a crew cut, pauses before closing the rear ambulance doors. She smiles an unexpectedly sincere smile.
“Hey,” she says. “He just whacked his head when he fell. His pulse is strong. He’s just going in for observation.”

***

By the time the associate arrives at the emergency room, Lyman’s already been dead for fifteen minutes. The ER doctor wasn’t certain, but he suspected a brain bleed. Some people take a blow to the head and sustain no serious injury, the ER doctor said.

The associate chooses several locations on the hospital map—the commissary, the pharmacy, the maternity wing—and visits them all. He’s waiting for Lyman to appear at the end of any of the white hallways and tell him there was a mistake. If not Lyman, perhaps old Jack Simpson will pop up or maybe even the associate’s older, wiser self. Eventually, the associate leaves.

He perches on the hood of his SUV and feels warmth from the engine flow into his thighs. He’s parked in his neighbor’s driveway across the street from his house. His house and car keys dangle from his pinky finger. The associate’s lawn glimmers with dew.

Through parted dining room curtains, his wife and oldest daughter move about in the morning sunlight. His oldest daughter hands his wife a cereal bowl. His wife puts it in the sink, walks over to the toddler in her high chair, and wipes her mouth.

The associate’s oldest daughter snatches an orange from the fruit bowl on the kitchen island. She peels the rind and, in that peculiar way of hers, bites into the flesh as if it were an apple.
The associate climbs back into his SUV and glances at the rearview mirror. He rubs his reddened eyes. None of his superiors will blame him for skipping work on a Saturday given the circumstances. He can use last night’s chaos, which is already receding like a cold front across a savannah, to spend the day with his wife and kids. Yet, there is a stack of papers on his desk that will grow if he doesn’t tend to them, emails that must be read, briefs drafted. And he will need to find a new mentor or risk running out of work within days. He cranks the SUV’s ignition. The engine purrs to life.
Vita

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Maurice’s work has been published in the Apalachee Review (“Mercury Forges”/fiction, and “Cheating the Muse”/non-fiction), Regarding Arts & Letters (“Mr. Face”/fiction), and the University of New Orleans’s Ellipsis (“And Then I Was Clean”). A short story called “The Pie Man” appeared in the South Carolina Review (Vol. 45, No. 1); “The Pie Man” previously received the University of New Orleans Creative Writing Workshop’s 2011 Ernest Svenson Fiction Award, and an earlier version of the story was first runner-up in the short story category at the 2010 William Faulkner-Wisdom Competition. Other stories were also finalists in 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012. His short story, “The Winter Lion,” was selected as one of the top ten finalists in the 2012 Tennessee Williams Festival fiction contest. Maurice has freelanced for the Times Picayune. Maurice is currently working on a collection of short stories and a novel.