



January 2016

# City Of Clans

Geoff Peck

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CITY OF CLANS

by

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A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

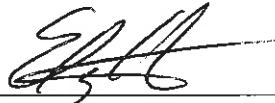
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Grand Forks, North Dakota

May  
2016

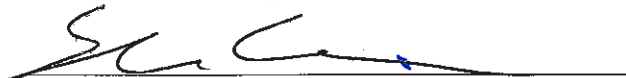
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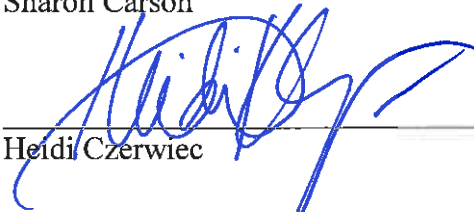
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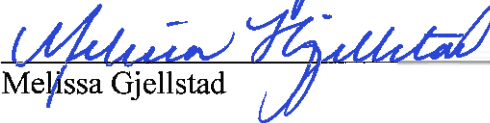
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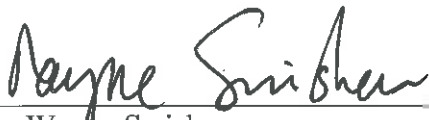


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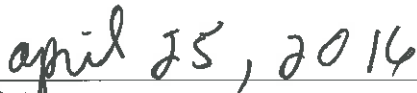


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This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank, first and foremost, my wife, Meredith, for her unwavering support during this journey.

I would also like to thank each of my committee members for their help in completing my dissertation, and especially Elizabeth Harris for her patience, wisdom, and guidance over the years.

## ABSTRACT

*City of Clans* is a novel that examines the sociopolitical issues in Pittsburgh following the 2008 economic crisis. The narrative follows a teenage male struggling to break away from a culture that discourages thought, and the work takes the common form of the coming-of-age novel, but one made unique by examining the confluence of athletics, sexuality and political consciousness in the twenty-first century.

*City of Clans* presents a number of complex relationships, which includes individuals struggling with sexuality, but the novel also examines familial relationships where feelings of love and loyalty are just as strong and often reinforce conventional views of gender and sexuality. *City of Clans* balances these topics against the broader sociopolitical issues facing Pittsburgh in 2009, issues that, of course, include gender and sexuality, but move further out to critiques of a globalized economy based on finance capitalism, and a local economy now driven by technology-based jobs and pop culture consumerism. The result is a novel that looks back at the history of the labor struggle in America in order to weave the larger contemporary sociopolitical issues into a narrative about the individual struggles that make us human.



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In simple terms, my dissertation, *City of Clans*, takes the initial concept of a teenager struggling with his identity, his sexuality, and situates the narrative in Pittsburgh on the eve of the 2009 G-20 Summit in order to discuss the sociopolitical issues relevant to contemporary society. But the novel feels much larger, more unwieldy, than something I can neatly pack into a thesis statement. I want it to be about love and loyalty. To be about post-industrial Pittsburgh. To provide a sense of history that is often glossed over, a sense of *unidealized* industrial Pittsburgh. I want my novel to be about the complexities of family, friendship and sexuality, about nascent sexual predators, the ways they can be enabled. I want my novel to convey the ways people can become locked in troubling situations that give them comfort. But I also want the novel to be bigger than its own narrative, to be aware of the broader sociopolitical issues of our time, for the protagonist's narrative to appear as only one that is moving in the same current as many, many others. And, in the end, I want *City of Clans* to be a novel about change, for the narrative to consider the way cultures evolve and the way individuals respond.

While certain characters and elements of the plot have been with me since I quit playing basketball and first thought about writing as an undergraduate at Vanderbilt, the novel has evolved immensely through my studies and subsequent experiences. My initial

literary influences of Norman Maclean and John Steinbeck can be seen in *City of Clans*, and more recent influences are too numerous to discuss in great detail: writers like Thomas Bell, Tillie Olsen, and Clara Weatherwax, who provided me with an introduction to Proletarian literature; N. Scott Momaday, Thomas King, and Sherman Alexie for their blending of the mythic with the historic, the human; Jonathan Franzen and Jennifer Egan for their beautiful crafting of character; and, of particular importance to this project, Don DeLillo, Denis Johnson, and Ben Fountain for their use of language. These writers along with my experience working in a party goods warehouse in Pittsburgh around the time of the economic crisis of 2008 have transformed *City of Clans* into the novel it is today: the story of a teenager struggling with his identity has been vastly complicated, with the protagonist's story now situated within some of the issues of contemporary society.

The setting of the novel, Pittsburgh, is key because of Pittsburgh's labor history and its masculine working class ethos that has been branded and commodified by a football team, but also because of the way the city has evolved. Following the economic crisis, Pittsburgh became the center of the global news cycle, if only for a day or two, in September of 2009, when the protests of the G-20 Summit turned violent. These riots were about individuals coming together to make their voices heard, to do what they could to bring about change. Rather than *City of Clans* being about these protests, I want them lie on the periphery, running parallel to the protagonist's narrative as he continues to withdraw further into himself and struggles to understand his place in Pittsburgh.

In this way, *City of Clans* takes on the natural form of the bildungsroman, and it would be easy for me to have a ready-made statement about how the novel is a coming-of-age story in post-industrial Pittsburgh or a twenty-first century Proletarian bildungsroman,

but my hope is that the novel can transcend these labels. I do want to acknowledge the history of Proletarian literature, particularly as it relates to the history of Pittsburgh's labor struggles, but my aim is to do this while naturally examining contemporary sociopolitical issues through character. This is similar to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which attempts to balance the economic and political issues of the Great Depression with the individual plights of the Joad family. With Tom Joad as the protagonist, the novel reads as an unconventional bildungsroman as it alternates between vignettes from the collective perspective and longer chapters that trace Tom's developing political consciousness. Proletarian writers were frequently charged with being too didactic, leaving readers feeling like they were being lectured, and despite all of the praise Steinbeck received, *The Grapes of Wrath* also received such criticism. But Steinbeck mitigated the didacticism by balancing the vignettes from the collective perspective that establish the setting and provide the larger sociopolitical context with those of the Joad family that humanize the narrative for the reader. I've tried to do something similar in *City of Clans* to avoid being too didactic while still raising important sociopolitical issues. Though the point-of-view is always tied to the protagonist, Jeremy, I situate him in different contexts, with different characters who try to educate him, make him more politically aware. But, for various reasons, Jeremy pulls away, withdraws into himself in these moments, and so while the commentary is there, the goal is for readers not to feel like they're being lectured. Or, if they do, for them to align themselves with the protagonist in the process.

In order to bring these different parts of the novel together, Jeremy is surrounded by a large network of characters. This begins with the introduction to his family in the opening scene. Jeremy, a nineteen-year-old college freshman, meets his family at a baseball field,

where his younger brother, Evan, is pitching in his first game. Jeremy arrives late, providing him with the outsider's perspective to the culture he voluntarily left a year before. It's the first of many times in the novel Jeremy finds himself in a space between as he's resentful of his father, the former professional baseball player, and immensely proud of Evan, the up-and-coming high school pitcher. This represents the larger conflict Jeremy feels towards the Pittsburgh athletic culture, which embodies the masculine ethos that has an alienating effect on him, but also keeps Jeremy drawn to it due to his family and close friends.

Complicating this dynamic is Jeremy's childhood friend Katrina Kovacs, who is two years older and politically active, and who therefore introduces Jeremy to pockets of Pittsburgh previously unknown to him. Having been close since they were young, the two struggle with the ambiguity of their relationship, largely hinging on the question of Jeremy's sexuality. As Katrina, a junior at Carnegie Mellon, introduces Jeremy to sides of Pittsburgh he hasn't experienced, ones more liberal and open-minded, the contrast alarms Jeremy as he's been conditioned to reject such a culture.

With the inclusion of Jeremy's closest friend, Scott Melloy, a hyper-masculine male who has a long history with Jeremy, *City of Clans* enforces a triangulated conflict while subverting the love triangle. Jeremy loves Katrina, though his sexual attraction to her is ambiguous at best. In turn, Katrina is overtly critical of Scott and his influence on Jeremy, which makes Jeremy pull away from her. Sensing Katrina's attraction to him, Jeremy is afraid to let her in, to discuss his sexuality. The same is obviously true of Scott, though with potentially more frightening ramifications.

This dynamic comes to a head in a scene where Katrina takes Jeremy to a bar in a working-class neighborhood where he witnesses two men kiss. Jeremy's "first instinct is fear

and he scans the bar while telling himself *This is Pittsburgh* and waiting for the slur he's heard so many times it has no impact anymore" (190). But there is no reaction, and even though he "knows things are changing, even here, he still can't stop thinking: *This is Pittsburgh*" (190). As the scene shifts to a secluded room on the second floor of the bar, Katrina confronts him over a long-standing feud between the two – the question of why Jeremy lied to Scott about him and Katrina having sex. And when Katrina begins to insinuate that Jeremy is gay, Jeremy kisses her hard only to be disrupted by the young men Jeremy had seen kiss downstairs. As he leaves the room, Jeremy refers to one of them as "hoss" and flicks a cigarette from his mouth (194). The environment seems wholly antithetical to his sense of the city and it causes him to reflect back on a moment a year earlier when he and Scott were drunk and laughing together and Jeremy "placed a hand on the curve of his ribs in a manner that made Scott's spine stiffen as he shrugged away and this instant had Jeremy at the brink of fight or flight until Scott pretended nothing happened and Jeremy let his fists uncurl" (196). These instincts towards violence represent Jeremy's complex positioning in evolving Pittsburgh, conditioned to react violently to what he fears and fearful that he will lose those he loves. The result is that he texts Scott to meet them at the bar even though this will ruin things with Katrina: with Scott, Jeremy has developed a level of comfort he's afraid of losing even though it is detrimental to his well-being.

This character dynamic extends beyond the triangle with the inclusion of Evan, who idolizes Jeremy, allowing him to use Evan as an anchor and a crutch. Jeremy also sees Evan as a version of himself at that age – the dutiful son and talented athlete, an admirer of their imperious father – with the exception that Jeremy senses that this world makes sense to Evan. He observes his younger brother maneuvering through a world constantly reinforcing

heterosexuality without hesitation or confusion, and that this athletic culture has no dislocating effect on him. All Evan sees in their father's proverbs is a logical manual for success. Like Katrina's attempts to pull Jeremy away from Scott, Jeremy finds himself attempting to wedge himself between Evan and their father, actions he senses Evan responding to negatively though this doesn't stop him. What he hopes Evan sees is that underneath the disparagement of their father is Jeremy's attempt to implicitly explain himself – the drugs and alcohol, the erratic, alienating behavior – to Evan, who has become the keeper of his older brother.

The network of characters extends beyond family and close friends, however, in order to broaden Jeremy's perspective. There's a college instructor who challenges Jeremy not just to accept things as they are, but to think critically about the world around him and who provides Jeremy with a source of working-class literature that makes him consider his own heritage: his assimilated Seminole grandfather, a by-product of a socialist rebellion in Oklahoma during the First World War, who grew into a career in law; his father's eastern European working class background and the history of remorseless workplace violence that followed them; the ostensibly illogical coalescing of his Reaganite parents. In this way, the history of labor struggle is traced through character genealogy, but through a form that emphasizes character.

In *City of Clan's* initial conception, I had thought of this integration of sociopolitical history through backstory as a product of my work with Jonathan Franzen's novels, but as I continued to write, I realized several Native American writers, most notably Sherman Alexie, held just as much influence. Though all of Franzen's novels have a political aspect to them, the author has been criticized by some for reducing his two most successful novels, *The*

*Corrections and Freedom*, to family dramas. This marked a noticeable shift from Franzen's first two novels, *The Twenty-Seventh City* and *Strong Motion*, works Franzen saw as systems novels that engaged with his postmodern predecessors. In *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, Stephen Burn describes Franzen's shift as one that emphasizes an investigation of character over the formal complexities of these predecessors, but Franzen also balances the role of politics in *The Corrections* and *Freedom*. The ecopolitical issues foregrounded in Franzen's earlier works are still present in his later novels; they have simply been subordinated to the development of character, which includes genealogical examinations of characters' origins. As Burn puts quite simply in reference to Franzen's approach: "Things that happen to you in the past make a difference to who you are in the present" (25). Burn's summation is concise but the implications become more complicated in terms of constructing a novel. Through this blending of sociopolitical history and backstory, I want to provide characters whose complexity extends beyond the dynamic of a particular scene, but Franzen's conventional style of presenting long interludes of backstory simply doesn't fit the style and pace of *City of Clans*.

Instead of having chapter-length digressions into backstory, I want this information to come as figurative snapshots for the reader as I find it more fitting of *City of Clans*' overall style. But photographs do serve as literal opportunities for backstory in *City of Clans*, with baseball memorabilia allowing Jeremy to reflect on his father, and I advance this technique forward to include more modern technology as Jeremy often uses YouTube to access films like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Oklahoma!* These films bleed into his actual memories of his family, and I use the opportunity to incorporate the history of the aforementioned socialist rebellion in Oklahoma and the history of labor struggles in Pittsburgh.

The result, I hope, is a style that blends Jonathan Franzen's more conventional style with that of Sherman Alexie, who incorporates the sociopolitical history of Native Americans into all of his novels. Alexie does so in his own unique style – whether it be *Indian Killer* where the college dropout, Reggie Polatkin, gives his victims pop quizzes on Native American history as he assaults them, or in the magical-realist *Flight* where acts of violence give the protagonist, Zits, the ability to travel through time and space to play a role in historic Native American battles. In *City of Clans*, I attempt to bridge the gap between Franzen and Alexie through technology as Jeremy uses YouTube to fall “into the world of forties cinema” in order to gain “some active, mobile piece of where his grandparents came from . . . to go beyond the grainy, fading photos” and he “cobble together the stories and photos with the depiction of place and time, finds room for his own memories so old and shopworn there's no way to fully trust them” (160). This technique allows for a digression into character genealogy and historical context while remaining true to the overall style of *City of Clans*. As one of my goals for *City of Clans* is to pay tribute to the social realist novels of Proletarian literature, this method also imbues the narrative with a more complex style and offers an element that can't quite be pinned down with a label.

This imprecise or elusive quality relates to the role of language in *City of Clans* as well, and I continue to return to Karen Russell's term “cardiovascular” when thinking about the pace of language in the novel. She used the term to refer to the pacing of plot, but it has always struck me as so appropriate for style. I want the sentences in *City of Clans* to have an elastic, flowing quality, for language to move the story as much or even more than a page-turning plot. I want readers to linger on character while being driven by the pulse of syntax. I want the language, at times, to have a breathless quality to it as though the narrator is



attempting to escape the limits of structure, the limits of narrative, and at other times I want the cadence of the language, the hiccup of comma or dash, to be just as revealing as a well-chosen verb.

This, of course, is a tall task, but what I hope I have produced is a quality of language that merges character, setting, and theme in *City of Clans*. An early example of this attempt occurs in the opening chapter when Jeremy leaves his brother's baseball game to pick up Scott for a party. Once on their way, the final sentence of the chapter begins with a staccato chop of red lights disrupting the flow of their drive, then continues on for fourteen lines to the conclusion, beginning with the red lights causing Jeremy to feel the "unavoidable sag to the momentum of it all, a drooping spasm that sends his fist over to Scott's shoulder and he's saying *fuck yeah*" in an attempt to stoke the energy (16). Once the two are on the Parkway, Jeremy is innervated by the city, enveloped in the way it "unfurls once you cross the Bloomfield Bridge and with the curve of road you have the lights of Polish Hill and the Strip District and downtown" and though he knows Scott will focus on the stadiums seen as monuments, between these Jeremy will also have "the blackness of the Allegheny and beyond this the blackness of the foothills and when they crest Bigelow and begin their descent into it all Jeremy feels electric and alive like things are in motion" (11). The emotions cause him to look to Scott, "and wish he could tell him all of this" (11). In this passage, I want the pace of the language, the characters, the setting – the collection of neighborhoods and landmarks – to merge into a vast, pulsing system that is a little unstable, a little out of control, while at the same time being harnessed by the limits of form.

The importance of style, the capacity of prose to reflect a narrative's complexity, can be seen in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*, where DeLillo attempts to replicate, through form,

the experience of being amidst the falling towers on September 11<sup>th</sup>. In order to represent the shock and trauma of the moment, DeLillo's sentences come in repetitive choppy bursts, periods and commas constantly disrupting the flow: "They had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths. They had shoes in their hands, a woman with a shoe in each hand, running past him. They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars" (3). The prose reads as confused, ungainly – a mimetic simulation that approximates the experience of September 11<sup>th</sup>, or comes as close as literature can.

The mimetic quality in DeLillo's prose can be found throughout Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke* as well. Johnson – whose prose has been described as "meticulously addled" (Dyer) – writes at times with the same staccato choppiness, while also building extended passages that unravel in a blinking cadence, a style that develops character through form. In a scene near the end of the novel where one of the central characters, James Houston, has returned home from Vietnam, Johnson details Houston's struggles reintegrating into society when Houston kickstarts a Harley indoors and crashes it into his living room wall. Following a set of short declarative statements where Johnson shows Houston reflecting on his drunkenness and failed bar fights, the paragraph unfurls in a frenetic rhythm: "But he enjoyed losing, enjoyed a sort of righteous lethargy while he curled in a ball and somebody kicked him in the head and back and legs, enjoyed lying with his face in his own blood while voices cried, 'Stop it! That's enough! You're killing him! You're killing him!'" because they were wrong." (538). The passage allows each clause to build on the previous one, the pause of commas working together with the series of conjunctives to create a pulsing rhythm that incorporates quotations rather than separating them off because it would disrupt the pace

of the passage. It's the meticulously addled prose that Geoff Dyer intends as a compliment to the writer who seems to "not know how to write at all – and yet [knows] exactly what he [is] doing" (Dyer).

Johnson's unrestrained prose is similar to Ben Fountain's style in his novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. Concerning the role of language in *Billy Lynn*, Fountain says that "from the very start, the correct rhythm, the correct sound for this book was going to have a headlong, reckless, full-bore kind of rhythm to it" (Fountain). He attempts to convey the "overwhelming sensory experience" that soldiers in Iraq face and that he "wanted to try to capture that, not just the images the language is evoking, but in the sound of the language itself. I didn't want to give the reader a rest" (Fountain). In *City of Clans*, I want the language to have this unrelenting, reckless feel at times to approximate the sensory experience of Jeremy's struggle with his identity. As he searches for his place in the world I hope the language will intersect with content as scenes juxtapose moving entities – water, cars on city streets, characters themselves – with the urgent cadence of the narrative.

This merging of content and language can be seen, for example, in chapter twenty, a sprawling one-sentence chapter that follows Jeremy as he drives to the climactic confrontation with Scott. I want the pace and language to reflect Jeremy's unhinged state of mind, beginning with the opening of the chapter: "The homes scroll by in the fluorescent buzz of porch lights, become a wash of linden and pine . . . and it's this movement, the chaotic *foom!* of speeding through quiet neighborhoods that make these homes furl up like mishandled photographs under his tires and Jeremy thinks, *that's it*, everything is so static" (255). The movement of the language, of Jeremy in his car, contrasts with his feelings of stagnation and as the passage continues, this contrast includes the river as Jeremy notes "the

Ohio to his left, and once again they're working against each other, the Bronco pushing against the silky black pall of the river at night" (255). As the momentum of the passage continues to swell, it merges with content by end of the chapter, with Jeremy suggesting his confrontation with Scott will inevitably lead to violence because it is "the natural end, the incredible, titanic rupture of a supernova" where they will "flow into the river of violence in America to burn out brilliantly" (256). In total, the single-sentence passage spans nineteen lines with variations of commas and dashes to disrupt the continuous flow in a way that I hope approximates the tumultuous mental state of the protagonist. I want the passage to be chaotic, to provide that sense of instability as the momentum of the chapter carries the reader into the climax.

At the height of the climax, I push formal experimentation further with the hope that the preceding chapter on Jeremy's drive has allowed the reader to accept such a maneuver. To return for a brief moment to that question of *aboutness*, I want, at least in a small way, for *City of Clans* to touch on the issue of gun violence in America and the role of violence in social protest. The confrontation with Scott and the subsequent scene on the banks of the Ohio illustrate Jeremy's final withdrawal before asking for help, and looming large in both of these scenes is the prospect of the unfired gun. This, of course, defies Chekhov's principle that if a gun is hanging on a wall in Act One, it absolutely must go off in Act Three, but I want the non-firing of the gun to be the figurative gunshot in both scenes. With the growing unrest of the G-20 protests running alongside Jeremy's narrative, Jeremy feels like his own destruction would mark the end of Scott, what he represents, and that destruction would breed creation in the same way the protestors put their lives on the line for political revolution. This verges on the melodramatic, but the idea is that while Kat continues to

become more immersed in politics, Jeremy pulls further within himself, and it's this detachment and isolation that brings him to the brink of destruction. But the gun doesn't go off. And Scott drops the splintered bat after a series of *ands* trail backward across the white space of the page until a new paragraph begins with "and just as suddenly as the bat had splintered apart, the moment has past" (260). What I hope this represents, working in conjunction with the final chapter, is that change can be brought about organically, without violence. That creation doesn't have to stem from destruction.

The novel isn't perfect. I'll continue to stew over word choice and sentence structure, the composition of character and context, decisions about what's left off the page and what's on the page *too* much. But I hope the result is a novel that captures the genuine emotion writers like Maclean have inspired while displaying the sociopolitical awareness of Proletarian literature in the twenty-first century. I've done my best to balance the role of politics in the novel, an issue that rightly or wrongly doomed the Proletarian writers of the first half of the twentieth century. But post-9/11 and Proletarian literature are more closely linked than one might initially suspect. All of the writers I've discussed navigate the line between art and politics, each in their own way. The list, of course, goes far beyond these writers – they are simply the ones whose style has had the greatest impact on my novel. But the setting of Pittsburgh is key here, too. As the site of some of the most historic and violent labor battles, Pittsburgh became the setting for several Proletarian novels, including Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace*, where he describes the relationship between the city and the people as "a hundred discords merged into harmony, the harsh triumphant song of iron and flame" (195). Bell wrote his novel after a series of union victories that, for a time, changed the face of the labor struggle, and his optimism might appear naïve in retrospect as at times it

seems like so much of life in America is marked by discord rather than harmony. But it's also marked by progress. And, in the end, what I hope *City of Clans* does is show how difficult it can be to see beyond individual circumstances, but when looking outward you see a world that, if only gradually, is moving forward.

## CHAPTER II

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CHAPTER III

NOVEL



## Chapter 1

Jeremy gets to the ballfield after the first inning, which ignites a familiar sense of disappointment since it's his little brother's first high school start, but Scotty Ballgame had come back from class with a handle of liquor and he of course knows Jeremy can't say no to him. It's only fall ball, the true varsity season not until spring, but still an important step for Evan and when Jeremy walks up the stadium ramp and sees him on the mound, cap pulled low around his eyes the way Jeremy used to wear his, that gnawing sensation of pride and regret localizes in his solar plexus. Evan nods at the catcher. Fastball, Jeremy figures – the kid's got an arm – and he swears Evan glances at him before he sets for the windup. The heater whistles across the plate for a strike and the paltry high school crowd claps passively as Jeremy turns to scan the grandstands for his family, finding them stationed at their usual perch along the top rows behind home plate with his old man cocooned by family and close friends lest anyone tries to chat with the former Pirates' catcher. He was the starting catcher the last time the Buccos won the Series and this makes things complicated for him when he watches his sons play ball. Makes it complicated for his sons, too, though Evan seems to handle it better than Jeremy ever could.

Jeremy's uncle is the first to notice him and gives a loud and friendly "Hello, Jeremy," which forces everyone else to acknowledge him. His father eyes him suspiciously as he tries to figure out what substances Jeremy's on, and it's partly because of this and partly because he's his old man that Jeremy maneuvers his way through the little cabal and

wedges himself between his mother, Dell, and the figure everyone knows as the Old Bulldog. Jeremy slaps him on the back and says, “Hey, Pop,” with the emphasis on the Pop. His father nods, says, “Son,” in return like everything is cool, but his eyes narrow and Jeremy wonders if he can tell the difference between the smell of mouthwash and Peppermint Schnapps.

The Old Bulldog is a man of few words, and that’s particularly true of his interactions with Jeremy since he’s *his own man now and has made his decisions that he has to live with* so the Old Bulldog’s *not going to interfere anymore*. More than anything Jeremy gets the feeling people walk on eggshells around him since he’s moved out and it’s instilled another paradoxical sensation, one of shame and power, that he wields against them. When Aunt Jo turns and pats his knee, says hello in her affable way, Jeremy tells her she would not believe the hallucination he had about her this morning. She chuckles uncomfortably, glances at Dell, who’s busy feigning a hearing problem.

Evan zings another pitch into the catcher’s mitt but it’s outside for a ball and the Old Bulldog murmurs to himself. He likes to focus in like he’s the one behind the plate, grumbling about the pitch selection, grunting with every ball, shifting around due to his reconstructed knees, the hip that needs to be replaced. The Man of Few Words prefers even fewer words directed his way, except, Jeremy has found, when they’re coming from his old pal Stan Kovacs who he’s known since double-A ball in Altoona. In his more rational states, Jeremy can step back and analyze their relationship, the pitcher-catcher combo with that odd-couple personality clash that made for heated exchanges on the mound and at barbecues as old washouts. Their bond into middle-age created a close friendship between Jeremy and Kovacs’ oldest daughter, Katrina, but Kovacs was also Jeremy’s high school baseball coach

at Sewickley Academy. That is, before Jeremy and Scott walked out on the team junior year, which seemed to align a little too closely with his parents' announcement that they could no longer afford private education. A shift that Jeremy assured Evan was saving him from *that dick Kovacs*, but that dick now shows up to all of Evan's games like he's his goddamn godfather.

Jeremy takes it out on the Bulldog by asking him all kinds of questions during the game. Like *just how is Evan doing so far?* even though Jeremy can tell from the scoreboard that there are two out in the second and the other team doesn't have a hit yet. The Bulldog winces, shifts his head back and forth in consideration like a scale being balanced. He gets distracted by another pitch, another strike for Evan, but the Bulldog doesn't like the placement so he murmurs to himself, allows the question to float off into the ether, and Jeremy weighs the pride against the embarrassment that the Old Bulldog is so frustrated by him, his burnout son, that he can't even carry on a conversation.

"He's been great," Dell says, her hearing returning to form, and places a hand on Jeremy's back. He wants to be above the sentiment but he looks over because he's grateful. "Four strikeouts," she says, eyebrows raised and her chin length silver hair peeking out from her winter cap. At some point she stopped bothering with the dye and Jeremy always respected that – thought the silver beautiful – even though guys like Scott would make cracks about her being a GILF. Being an on-again off-again dental hygienist, she used to listen for Jeremy's faucet to run at night no matter how late he came home. If she didn't hear the water running through the pipes she'd question him the next morning about his brushing habits. One morning, not long before he and Scott got a place together he told her it was hard to

remember to brush your teeth when you're drunk *and* stoned. He didn't get the satisfaction out of doing that to her that he would've with the old man.

When Evan strikes out a batter to end the second inning Jeremy jumps off his seat to clap and holler at levels previously unheard of in high school baseball. Strangers turn towards him in all sections of the stadium and he knows his family is cringing, but he can see Evan smiling as he jogs to the dugout, which surely irritates the Bulldog since he thinks Evan should be impervious to such things.

He hams it up some more. When Evan closes down the fifth before he's taken out because they have his young arm on a pitch count, his line is one run on three hits, but more importantly zero walks – all about locating your pitches, as the Old Bulldog taught – and if the relievers do their job Evan should notch his first career win, a noteworthy landmark, Jeremy thinks, even if it is fall ball. Jeremy hollers like a banshee again when he leaves the mound, knowing it was his brother's last pitch of the evening. Evan looks again, this time shaking his head though his mouth still curls in a smile and Jeremy knows his little brother eats this stuff up.

The Schnapps and the pride of making his brother laugh have Jeremy feeling giggly, but once he sits down, the euphoria slowly recedes and the weight of his parents on each side of him might as well be the tightening jaws of a vise. Even Kovacs has gone silent and Jeremy cuts a glance at the Bulldog: elbows on knees, chin planted in his right palm, that steel glare watching over mid-inning warm-ups like he's the superintendent of a nuclear power plant.

The potential questions begin to tumble through his head, all those avenues of discussion that have been closed off. He remembers standing on the mound, glancing up between pitches to try and interpret the glare, never knowing.

Jeremy stands back up, tells the family he's going to the concessions but instead heads out to the car where he has some Schnapps in a plastic water bottle. But once inside the protective shell of his car, he only twirls the bottle between thumb and fingers, watches the liquid swirl, before he texts Scott for an update on the evening's plan. Scott replies that he's still at their place, getting ready for a party that someone in Amber's crowd is throwing out in this neck of the woods. His girlfriend Amber is still in high school and though it's only one year's difference, Jeremy has a mounting disdain for attending high school parties when he graduated the previous May. Still, he sends back, *I'm in*.

The September breeze is cool and he cracks the windows, leans back in his seat. He's reflecting on the coming evening that he dreads and loathes and wants no part of and can't live without, when Katrina shows up in his rearview mirror. He starts to open the door and holler but decides to wait, draw it out. Though Kat is two years older, now a junior at Carnegie Mellon, the two remained close even after she graduated high school until things went sideways between him and Kovacs, a rift that highlighted her Carnegie Mellon education while Jeremy was on the fast track to CCAC with Scotty B. It didn't help when Scott came home drunk from a party and sent her messages on Facebook asking for the details on her and Jeremy's epic carnal hookups. Messages made all the more confusing for Kat outside of their complete fabrication by the fact that even given the litany of opportunities – all those private nights and dark spaces – Jeremy had never made the slightest sexual advance.

Nearly eighteen months post-colossal-error, Jeremy still runs through the chain of events that led to the awkward interaction between him and Kat that had all the drama of a tragic breakup, beginning with the intense pressure he felt to justify his relationship with Kat to Scott, and so it started with a yarn about a non-existent blowjob which naturally escalated from there. This escalation included Jeremy's initial apologies that by the umpteenth time he'd manipulated into some warped defense and accusation. Because why couldn't Kat understand that it was just a necessary evil? Like, sorry, I made up some lies about you but, *hello*, this is what guys do, so what's really the problem here?

Scott. That is the problem here, Kat would say, and probably anyone else within earshot. But for Kat it wasn't outrage over her reputation, rather the overall attachment Jeremy has to the alpha male going nowhere. Scott. The youngest of three boys, sons to a high class junkie/orthopedic surgeon who frequented the owner's suite at Steeler games before getting busted for self-prescribing, Scott was able to provide Jeremy with an education far surpassing any advanced curriculum at Sewickley Academy. When Scott was fourteen he had two brothers at State College, a senior and perhaps *the* most stereotypical middle-child freshman ever, and the combination gave Scott a level of knowledge and access that wasn't all that fun unless he could leverage it into Sewickley Academy status.

The two began smoking together as freshmen and by junior year they were skipping practice to toké up and play Mario Kart. When Kovacs finally had enough, he lined them up on the first base line and planned on making them run gassers in front of the team until they puked. He was giving his grand speech about teamwork and unity and one weak link in the chain *blah blah blah* while Scott was in Jeremy's ear saying Kovacs was singling Jeremy out because of the Bulldog and in the middle of Kovacs' soliloquy Jeremy cut him off with "You

know what, *Stan?* This just ain't for me" and flashed a slanted peace sign at him as he turned and walked away, Scott in tow and not hiding his laughter. It became a classic Scotty B story he told at parties: *The day Big Jerm shot Kovacs the deuces.* That afternoon they went back to Scott's house and smoked in the basement to the numbing soundtrack of Mario Kart, while Jeremy drifted away, imagined that legendary Bulldog wrath.

\*

The air continues to filter through the cracked window. September in Pittsburgh. The afternoon heat and humidity ceding to an early fall front, the air brisk as it comes off the Ohio. Jeremy taps his phone to his chin, decides enough time has passed since Kat arrived, and as he walks back towards the stands, the smack of the ball against catcher's mitt and mild applause that follows catches Jeremy's ear, making those memories of when he was on the mound unavoidable.

Coaches described him as rangy. Tall and lean, he could intimidate right-handed batters with his three-quarter delivery that brought his arm out wide before the ball came whipping across the plate. Guys on the team called him *Fungo*, like the long skinny bat used for fielding exercises, but he always felt like they might as well have been calling him *Gumby*, like he was some flimsy excuse for a teenager who might be blown over on a gusty day the second he went into his windup. Scott was the first to call him Big Jerm and he always appreciated that, the imposing alternate version.

Jeremy spies Kat seated by her father, already bored and texting, her long dark hair pooling around a light sweater. Kovacs is pointing to the field, showing the Bulldog something, and Jeremy makes his way around the hive and queen bee.

"What up, girl?" he says and slides in next to Kat.

Kat rolls her eyes at the pretense but allows a smile. “Jeremy.”

A photography major at CMU, Jeremy feels like she’s become a Pittsburgh hipster clone and her striped tights make him think of *The Wizard of Oz*, legs curling into darkness. Her father is a billion percent Polack, Jeremy can hear it in the god-awful Pittsburghese way he pronounces his own name – stAN koh-VACS – but Kat has these strong cheekbones and olive skin that have always reminded him of his grandfather, his native ancestry.

“Thought you weren’t going to show,” he says. “You missed my little brother letting the other team know what’s what.”

“That’s what my dad was telling me,” she says and Kovacs takes the opportunity to turn in Jeremy’s direction, the two making eye contact for the first time, the hardened lines in his forehead making him look like he used to work the mills. It ignites that natural aversion towards judgment and authority and Jeremy turns back to Kat before he’s forced to speak to his former coach.

“So you got some special CMU party lined up tonight?”

“Nothing special,” she says and tilts her head, eyes him in a way he can’t quite place: not quite flirty, but an edge past curious. Her phone vibrates and she picks it up from her lap to read her text and with the break in conversation Kovacs turns back toward the two.

“So, Jeremy,” he begins in what Jerm can only hear as his grand patronizing style, “how’re things at the Community College of Allegheny County?”

When the Old Bulldog was a young pup he was good enough to get drafted out of high school but with the problems he faced after retirement he always stressed the importance of a college education to his kids, and Jeremy cannot conceive of this moment as small talk for small talk’s sake, an olive branch, Kovacs’ taking a genuine interest, a



harmless curiosity, something Kovacs would forget as soon as Jeremy opened his mouth to give a token response, or any of the possible meaningless explanations for the meaningless question, because he's certain Kovacs is fucking with him in front of Kat. He flashes him the deuces.

Kat elbows him and Jerm puts his hand down, pulls a smirk. "Things are outstanding at the *Community College* of Allegheny County, Stan."

Jeremy detects a rebound-smirk like Kovacs knows something he doesn't but he just turns back to the game without saying anything further. Jeremy finds Kat glaring at him, any potential flirtiness gone as though to tell him there are limits to his dickish act. She turns back to her phone and Jeremy takes out his to pretend text Scott, waits out the awkwardness of the moment.

"You know," he begins, "I wish we could hang out more but I understand how you have to big time me now that you're at CMU."

Kat smiles with what seems like admiration at his effrontery, the sheer balls it takes to distort their personal eighteen month drama around to snobbery. "Is that right?" she asks, the corners of her mouth broadening.

"Yeah. I hear that's par for the CMU course to give plebes like me the high hat."

"The high hat," she smirks and Jeremy can see the tension leaving, like it's a relief to just let the past year and a half go, since while she may not consider her position as petty, it's probably not worth holding between them forever. "Well, if you really wanted to hang out my roommate and I are having people over tomorrow night. I suppose it wouldn't *completely* ruin our time to allow a plebe or two into our sanctum."

Jeremy tries to downplay the offer, tells her he doesn't miss hanging out *that* much, and, really, he was just trying to be, you know, personable.

"I see," Kat says, "personable. I don't think you've quite mastered that definition, or at least, *you know*, how to use it in a sentence."

Jeremy smiles. The precise look is contrived but the feeling is genuine. It's the banter – a form of communication that would seem alien when juxtaposed with a transcript from an afternoon with Scotty B. He sighs, mulls over the offer like he's being tortured before saying that if she was going to twist his arm about it then, well, he might stop by, maybe.

"I'll be on pins and needles," Kat deadpans.

Jeremy reaches his fist out for a dap, a gesture Kat has claimed to hate since middle school, and she does her eye roll/smile before bringing her fist to his. He notices Kovacs glancing their way again and it makes Jeremy wonder how much the Old Bulldog tells him. Probably more than any non-family member should be privy too – he imagines parents talk about their kids with friends the way kids do their parents and it's the crystallization of this thought, in this moment – the high school baseball game, the lurking parents, the thinking of himself as a kid, still as someone's *child*, that makes him feel like he's walked up on a private conversation just in time to hear a punchline he doesn't understand.

The two continue to chat and Jeremy explains the apartment he and Scott got in north Oakland, takes the opportunity to tell her about his new job down the street in the PartyMart warehouse where he slogs through the endless amounts of party supplies and the Pittsburgh sports franchises' merchandise. He offers brief character outlines of his coworkers, inviting laughs from Kat and he senses the old intimacy creeping in, if only tentatively.

“Need anything for your party tomorrow? Princess Jasmine paper plates for you CMU princesses?”

“I think we’re all set,” Kat smirks.

“You sure? Maybe Ariel or Belle instead? I’ll have access to a few *thousand* tomorrow. Nobody would know the difference. They pay me so little it’s like they’re actually *asking* me to steal from them.”

It’s this final note, the insertion of money, that Jeremy senses the slightest withdrawal from Kat. Some microscopic change in the size of her pupils. By the time of the crash, Jeremy and Kat were already well into their personal drama and couldn’t bring themselves to talk about the financial upheaval that nearly ended their parents’ friendship. And though Jeremy knew he couldn’t have gone to CMU anyway, had fucked away any chance of that long ago, it was the fact that Kat still *could* that fashioned a dull resentment in him. Made it easier to separate from her, explain her absence in his life, and attach himself even closer to a group of males she saw as Neanderthals because of course her aversion to them had been about class all this time. Even though his logic wasn’t necessarily rational, it could have festered into something cancerous if Kat hadn’t received an unwanted fifteen minutes of local fame that winter, pulling Jeremy out of the fickle sense of resentment.

During her sophomore year, near the end of fall semester, her adjunct Modern Biology instructor requested a meeting with her to discuss her essay on cell biology. That was all well and good, but what transpired instead was the thirty-something post-doc opening his desk drawer to reveal a handgun, which he placed against his temple and told Kat that if he didn’t, at the very least, receive a kiss on the cheek from the most sensational creature he had ever laid eyes on, then the day would end very badly for both of them, along with the

janitor. Sensing her instantaneous panic, he tried to reassure her. He loved her, he clarified with the gun still pressed to his head, had since the day she took a seat on the first day of class, and he could never dream of harming her. But he also couldn't conceive of a life where he no longer saw her for fifty-minute intervals three times a week. And so, if he didn't, at the very least, receive a kiss on the cheek, then his brains, not hers, would wind up splattered on the office walls.

It was one of those local legends where everyone seemed to know the story without Kat ever needing to tell it: the whackjob at CMU who got canned for pulling a gun on *himself(?)* in front of a student. Just what exactly was their vetting process for adjuncts, anyway? The one time Jeremy did hear her recounting it to a group of people she did so with a yawning disinterest, the tale amounting to a deadpan punchline where Kat tells her instructor that passing up his offer would sort of be a win-win for her at the moment *so...*

It was a conclusion to the story Jeremy didn't believe, nor did he necessarily believe the versions of Kat racing through the halls with the psycho ranting about his love while awkwardly chasing after her with the gun directed at his head, but there had to be some ending and he regretted that he wasn't the person at that time who Kat confided in. Though she probably would have deflected it into a joke then, too. That was Kat. The coolness, the disaffection. Or it had become her outward projection in the last few years, anyway. A fairly common refrain of hers before they drifted apart had been her annoyance at attracting not only a type of guy she had no interest in, but the frequency with which these guys also seem to be chemically imbalanced. "It's my lot in life, *Jerm,*" she said, mocking the nickname Scott had given him. It was the beginning of her senior year and she had invited Jeremy to a small gathering her friends were having, picking him up to ensure Scott would not be joining

him. They stood on the patio, enjoyed the cool early spring air, and Jeremy couldn't think of anything to say to this particular story of how some kid in Western Civ would not stop writing her bad song lyrics? awkward poetry? random words strung together with sexual undertones?, so he just laughed and told her she should be flattered.

“It could not be any further from flattering.”

“Maybe you should try girls?” he joked.

“Is that *Scotty B* talking? The thing is, you have no idea how much I like guys, and how much I dislike the guys who like me.”

\*

When Moon closes out the game, securing Evan's first notch in the win column, Jeremy says goodbye to Kat with another offered dap that Kat declines, but tells him she's looking forward to tomorrow, and Jeremy heads down to the dugout with the family as they wait for the coach to finish addressing the team. When Evan finds his way over to them Jeremy's the first one to meet him. He grabs him by the neck and yanks him around, knocking off his cap to scruff up his hair while congratulating him on his first win. Evan's laughing and Jeremy's certain these moments mean the world to his little brother.

“That's enough, son,” the Old Bulldog says.

“All right, *Pop*.”

He lets go with a final slap on the back and watches Evan grow deathly serious when the Bulldog tells him he needs to get his arm on ice. But it's *Friday* and Jeremy steps in, cuffs Evan's neck again and says he's got plenty of ice over at his place so Ev can come kick it with him tonight.

“You need to get your arm on ice,” the Bulldog repeats.

Evan nods, tells his brother maybe some other time, and Jeremy plays it cool – *no skin off my ass, Little Brother* – but as he makes his way to the parking lot it feels like all the veins in his body are rising to the surface and itching to explode. He gets in his Bronco and when the ignition turns he rolls down his window and cranks the stereo before peeling out of the parking lot while howling like a wolf with his head out the window.

Out on the road he texts Scott to see where he's at, expecting him to be at the high school party already, but he's still at their place in Pittsburgh and asks Jeremy to come pick him up. Logistically this makes no sense with Jeremy already in Moon, but still pleasantly lit, he can't see beyond wanting to have Scott in the passenger seat, blaring their music, and cruising the streets like they own them. He tells Scott he'll be there in twenty.

The traffic on 376 is smooth, cars traveling the obligatory fifteen over the speed limit, and Jeremy fingers the old pennies in the cup holder, relics now irrelevant except for the urban legend that a thirty second copper mouthwash will throw off a breathalyzer. He cuts to the left lane to pass an old Nissan pickup struggling on one of the inclines, moving to twenty over.

When he turns down the narrow one-way Melwood Ave and stops in front of their building, Scott's already outside and talking on the phone, ruining the way Jeremy imagined their ride beginning. Scott's got his Pens hat backwards, a plain white v-neck tee, and the baggy pair of Arizona State sweats he got at Three Rivers Thrift. His arms are splotchy and swollen and Jeremy knows he's been doing pushups.

When Scott climbs in the Bronco Jeremy tosses his iPod to him and not so quietly tells him to *GET THE FUCK OFF THE PHONE* which invites a smirk and a raised middle finger. Jeremy sighs and slumps in his seat, feigningly oblivious to Scott motioning to the

open road. “The fuck,” Scott says when he ends his call. “This is what you’re waiting on?” he asks, holding up the iPod.

“Anything you want,” Jeremy tells him. Scott goes to work searching the library, not commenting on their idle position. He looks up just before an old emo-punk song comes through the speakers. The move surprises Jeremy – the music now striking him as whiny and childish and reminds him of their juvenile emo phase – but he also gets why Scott selected this one particular song, understands it for the night, how it’s reminiscent but also timeless for the two of them, and this tells him that things are in fact moving forward no matter how often it feels like western Pennsylvania sits on a treadmill belt keeping Jeremy at a standstill.

He cranks the stereo and guns the Bronco, says *yessir!* because Scotty B selected the song for this ride, for them, and he’s going to make it mean something. He guns through a yellow and turns to Scotty B for the first chorus – *here’s to us fools who have no meaning* – and when he’s forced to stop at a red one block later there’s an unavoidable sag to the momentum of it all, a drooping spasm that sends his fist over to Scott’s shoulder and he’s saying *fuck yeah* and inspiring a laugh out of Scott and they’re moving again, bursting up Bigelow instead of taking Fifth Ave back to the Parkway because Jeremy loves the way the city unfurls once you cross the Bloomfield Bridge and with the curve of road you have the lights of Polish Hill and the Strip District and downtown and he knows Scott will focus on the North Side with Heinz and PNC illuminated because those are the landmarks he thinks define the city and between it all you’ll have the blackness of the Allegheny and beyond this the blackness of the foothills and when they crest Bigelow and begin their descent into it all Jeremy feels electric and alive like things are in motion even though he’s in college on his

way to a high school party and he glances over at Scott, sings the chorus with him for a final time, and wishes he could tell him all of this.



## Chapter 2

*Suddenly the lights went out.*

Standing in the bowels of a century-old building originally constructed to manufacture automobiles, Jeremy feels like the shift to complete blackness has sucked the fluid out of his spine. Though the building goes three floors deeper, the PartyMart warehouse is still the basement and the loading dock doors with their four rectangular windows are the only light to the outside world, offering no help to Jeremy from fifty yards away. He stands muted and palsied between the candle and balloon shelves with a box of two dozen Dora the Explorer Birthday Candles in one hand and an eighteen pack of Transformers: More than Meets the Eye balloons in the other.

“Keep your butt plugs in,” Bob grumbles as he shuffles across the dusty floor. His pace seems incredible to Jeremy, who can’t conceive of movements outside of blinking eyelids in this darkness. Then he hears the stairwell door open, followed by Bob skipping down the steps, before the clang of the door shutting behind him echoes through the warehouse.

“You alive back there?” Rick calls out to him.

“I’m good,” Jeremy answers, but this triggers a nervous rundown in Jeremy’s mind of how the proper warehouser would react. He thinks about taking a step back towards the front of the warehouse, but can’t convince either leg to oblige. Surely Rick’s got a flashlight, but he doesn’t want to be seen huddling in the darkness. He decides he’ll start moving as soon as

he sees a flashlight pop on, or hears Rick moving in his direction. The space suddenly seems danker than before. The dust more present, active. And the darkness begins to compress like he's swimming to the bottom of a deep pool, reminding him that he works in a hole in the ground.

There's a synaptic buzz followed by the warehouse filling with light as suddenly as it had been wiped black and Jeremy relaxes and adds a box of magenta curling ribbon to his pile. He meets Bob returning from the depths of the building, who mutters something about the fuses and then hollers at Rick to tell him he's going up for a smoke. Rick wheels his seat around from the rebooting computer and nods, then places both hands on his knees in a dramatic effort to stand, and shuffles over to Jeremy at the distribution pallets. He wears jean shorts and a cutoff tee even though the temperature is in the mid-fifties. He's bulky and out of shape, paunchy in places that were once muscle, and Jeremy pegs him for a former high school wrestler or undersized down-lineman.

"I appreciate you coming in on a Saturday during your first week," he says. "We try to stay Monday through Friday but sometimes we get loaded down with an occasional seasonal surge." Jeremy waves him off, tells him it's nothing, his hangover keeping his words to a minimum. "He's a worker this one," Rick chuckles and leans against one of the pallets stacked tall with Kiwi Flannel table covers, an order they received late Friday afternoon and has yet to be jacked down to its proper place among its colorful brothers and sisters, somewhere between Hot Magenta and Luscious Lavender. Jeremy swears he's never seen a Kiwi Flannel table cover in his life and finds it hard to believe that he's staring at roughly, oh, ten thousand of them now in boxed and packaged form, waiting to be slowly distributed to PartyMart's seven locations in the Pittsburgh area.

Jeremy works at getting the pallets shrinkwrapped for delivery, a Tetris-like task where the variously shaped boxes are assembled well enough to not end up splattered all over the truck by the time they reach their destination. Rick explains how they're doing an extra Tuesday/Thursday run so he can learn the routes that he'll eventually do on his own. "You'll hit Monroeville first so load that in the truck last – that way it'll be right there to unload."

"So load up Robinson Crossing first?"

"Quick learner."

When he jacks McKnight's pallet up to the dock he finds Bob crouched low, still smoking a cigarette and gazing at the light Saturday morning traffic of Center Ave. He's started balding in the power alleys and with his slight frame and sunken eyes the word *skeletal* immediately comes to mind.

"Is that Robinson's pallet?" Bob asks in his graveled smoker's voice. Jeremy nods. "Terrific. Some new kids have trouble with this logic."

They take Craig to Bigelow on the way to Monroeville and Bob gives him all the directions, asks Jeremy if he needs to take notes with a needling sarcasm that Jeremy finds humorous. He tells Bob he's from the area, knows it pretty well, but doesn't mention he's been through every nook and cranny of western Pennsylvania for baseball.

Once on the Parkway Bob asks if Rick has told him about their fantasy baseball league. Jeremy shakes his head. "He will," Bob says and takes another Parliament out of his pack. He asks Jeremy if he minds, says he'll crack the window and Jeremy tells him he's cool either way. "Rick obsesses over these fantasy leagues," he says. "This warehouse and his leagues comprise his whole reason for living since his wife left him. That's a story right there," he says and shakes his head, taps some ash out the window. "NBA draft is next but

he's already in three football leagues – one college, two pro – he's in a couple of hockey leagues and of course there will be baseball in the spring. You into sports?"

Jeremy shrugs, nods, tells him sure. Some inveterate pull to be noncommittal about everything.

"What do you think? You in? Drafting is all online so you don't have to worry about getting together with us outside of work – not that I'd be doing that with Rick anyway. Guy is total T, and, well, I am *not*."

Though Bob has drifted off from his own question, Jeremy evades it by lying about the internet being messed up at his place.

"I like porn, too," Bob grins, drawing a chuckle from Jeremy. "The real debaucherous kind, which is not so good for my computer. Girls pissing on guys. Pegging when I'm drunk. Lots of viruses with those, you know?"

"Not really, no."

"TMI?"

Bob exits onto William Penn and they begin to pass outlet mall after outlet mall in the suburban sprawl. "*Mallville*," Bob mocks with a wave of his hand as though he's introducing Jeremy to Oz. "But...without Mallville there would be no *Us*. Think about it." Jeremy's uncertain what exactly *us* refers to and he nods noncommittally. "Don't be fooled," he tells Jeremy. "There's a deep thinker trapped in here."

"I never doubted it."

"He likes you, by the way," Bob says as they pull to a stop at a red. The non sequitur startles Jeremy, leaving him unable to recall who *he* could possibly refer to.

"Huh?"

“Rick. I’m not sure why, but he’s got some managerial hard-on for you.”

“Uh...”

“That’s a figurative hard-on, of course.”

“Okay.”

“What I’m getting to is that, in my opinion, he trusts you way too much already.

Like, what do we really know about you? You know how many bullshitters we’ve had flake out on us after two, three weeks? Point is he wanted me to talk to you about Yo Mike while we’re out today. You’ve worked with Yo Mike already this week, right?” Jeremy nods, pictures the short, squat, pie-faced Polish kid with the tattoo of a ten point buck on his right forearm. “Twenty-four and lives with his mom. Fifth generation Pittsburgher – pretty sure none of them ever left Lawrenceville. Dad died awhile back from working in a carcinogen ridden hell-hole his whole life.”

“Sad shit.”

“Indeed. Here’s the point though: we think he’s into coke or heroin or something and could be dealing or getting high out on deliveries so we’re sending you with him next week. Now, if he’s not a total fucktard he won’t do anything when you’re with him, *obviously*, but do me a favor and let me know if you catch drift of something.”

“Sure.”

“I’m no moralist,” he says, “believe me. Can’t do that on company time, though. Those drugs will make you do kooky shit, you know?”

“Not really, no.”

“*No?*” Bob grins. “Gave up coke myself after crapping my pants at Burger King while standing in line for a Whopper.”

This doubles Jeremy over and he begins coughing as he tries to catch his breath.

“Hey, man,” Bob says, “you try staying awake for sixty hours on a coke binge.”

“No thanks,” Jeremy tells him. “I think you scared me straight.”

“It was the weirdest feeling,” Bob says with a sarcastic smile. “I could’ve gone to the bathroom right when I got to Burger King, but, I don’t know...I just really wanted that Whopper.”

There’s no dock at the Monroeville PartyMart so Jeremy stays in the back of the trailer to hand the boxes down to Bob, who balls up the hand not holding a cigarette and pounds on the backdoor like he’s caught in a fire. He takes a drag, looks at Jeremy up in the trailer. “Deaf as shit in there.”

A middle-aged woman wearing light denim jeans and baggy PartyMart tee opens the door and mock-beams at Bob. “Morning,” she says with an affected enthusiasm.

“Sure is.”

“And who did you bring with you?” she asks, peering at Jeremy for only a moment before turning back to Bob.

“Gloria, this is the new kid. New kid, Gloria.”

“Does the new kid have a name?”

Bob tosses his cigarette down, stamps out the butt. “Don’t care until I know they’re sticking around. For all I know he could disappear after today.”

Unable to get a read on Bob, Jeremy smiles awkwardly, introduces himself to Gloria before noticing Bob’s annoyance at the delay in their work. Gloria hangs around, using the delivery as a chance to light her own cigarette, bitches to Bob about retail’s side of the job that Jeremy doesn’t really understand yet, but he begins to get the employee dynamic, the

cynicism. She's tall and thin with poofed-out hair in the front that goes long and straight in the back in a fashion Jeremy can only identify with the eighties. A child of the early nineties, he has, of course, no actual experience with the decade outside of the litany of eighties movies, tv shows and music. But it also strikes him as so very Pittsburgh to find not just someone listening to Flock of Seagulls or ironically wearing an *Alf*-shirt, but an actual walking-talking anachronism. Someone who looks like they were pulled from the WPXI B-roll of the locals' reaction to Terry Bradshaw's retirement and it brings back that feeling in Jeremy that things are stuck in a never ending loop.

When they're finished with the delivery Bob lumbers into the cab and relaxes in his seat after he turns the ignition. "Only way to work on Saturday is with a hangover."

"I hear that," Jeremy tells him.

"College kid, right? Where you go? Pitt? CMU?"

"CCAC."

"Even better. Screw those pretentious fucks. You work with Miles yet?"

"Don't think so."

"*Miles*. Even his name bugs me. He's a *grad* student or whatever at Pitt. Shitbird thinks he knows everything."

Jeremy nods. "Don't have to worry about that with me. I readily admit I know very little."

"Yeah? So what's the story: you not have the means or were you just a fuck up?"

"No rich kid," Jeremy tells him. "Probably should've done better in school, though."

"I get that. School's not for everybody. Stick with it though," he says and turns to Jeremy, brow in faux-stern mode, face pale as bone. "Otherwise you'll end up like me."

\*

Jeremy hangs around the warehouse and helps Rick with anything he'll allow once the deliveries are done. As soon as the truck is parked Bob clocks out and tells Jeremy he's crazy for sticking around on a Saturday, but Jeremy's hangover has subsided and he could use the hours, plus he'd prefer to stay away from the apartment this afternoon. It feels good to work on his feet, especially when he knows Scott hasn't done anything except smoke a bowl or two.

Rick is sorting the last of the Halloween merchandise that will be delivered next week and he has Jeremy rummage through the rest of the boxes that were packed up last November.

"Can you believe all this?" Rick asks and holds up a generic witch costume with a black dress and green mask. Jeremy hears the pride in his voice, has a glancing sense of pity thinking about what Bob said about him. "Some of this stuff has been here longer than me and we keep dumping it off on the stores every year, thinking this year will be different. Put a big *Sale* sticker on it."

Jeremy finds a costume called *The Arab* that is just a white headdress and tunic though the picture on the front has a man wearing a fake goatee and sunglasses. Late eighties, Jeremy thinks, no doubt. "Not the most PC thing, huh?"

Rick smiles but doesn't say anything for a moment. "So you're one of them liberal college kids, huh?" It catches Jeremy off-guard and he stammers around a bit, unsure of why he's even getting defensive since he thinks about politics, like, never, but just the hint of accusation has him spinning out and wondering if he even used the term correctly – *or does he even know what it actually means?*



“I’m messing with you,” Rick says. “I’m the Republican around here and like to give people a hard time. Where did you say you went to school again?”

“CCAC.”

“What do you plan on doing after you get your associate’s?”

Jeremy shrugs. “Try to stick around and go to Pitt maybe.”

Rick tosses a child’s astronaut costume into Greentree’s pile. “My alma mater. What do you want to study?”

Jeremy shrugs again.

“Don’t shrug so much,” Rick tells him. “It’s okay to have an opinion. Just keep at it. If this work ethic I’m seeing is genuine and not some first couple days bullshit, just approach school the way you do work and you’ll be fine.” This comes off as a bit presumptuous to Jeremy and he has an instinct to shrug again, like, *who the fuck are you telling me not to shrug?* But it’s countered by an appreciation that Rick even thinks enough of him to say so.

“Majored in business myself,” Rick offers. “Suppose I always imagined grander things than being the manager of a party goods warehouse, but I was offered the job right after graduation and I kind of like the manual labor aspect. My father worked construction, and I did some part time stuff with him through college, so this type of work is more familiar to me anyway.”

“How long you been at it?”

“Boy,” Rick sighs and looks up at the ceiling. “Guess it was twenty-two years last May. You believe that?”

Actually, Jeremy can't – Rick appears much younger – younger than Bob anyway who he knows is in his early thirties, which Jeremy supposes is a testament to living a life that hard on your body and he thinks of his grandfather.

“It's an all right place,” he continues. “Definitely seen lots of interesting people pass through here. I wasn't sure what to make of Bob when he showed up looking for a job. He tell you much of his story yet?”

Bob's story, as far as Jeremy can tell, doesn't seem all that great even though he receives it through the glowing tones of a proud parent. As Rick tells it, Bob arrived in Pittsburgh ten years earlier with two-years' worth of student loan debt from one of the Penn State satellite schools. It seems the idea was to *GET OUT NOW* before he acquired anymore. He stayed on someone's couch in Friendship and went building-to-building asking if anyone was hiring. PartyMart took him on at \$5.15 an hour. “And look where he is now,” Rick said, “worked his way up to assistant manager and, sure, the pay isn't spectacular, but it's nothing to sneer at either. I suppose some people want something for nothing, but Bob's a testament to what you can achieve in this country through hard work. Guy had absolutely nothing...and look where he is now.”

Jeremy wards off his initial confusion over Rick's lack of irony, and nods to look like he's impressed. He supposes *something* is in fact better than *nothing* but there seems to be an obvious flaw in the setup of the equation. And this nascent cynicism, emerging as he stands dutifully at the sorting tables, begins to tumble through his mind as he continues to sort through the stream of Halloween costumes. Something he actually enjoys doing, but with his mind swirling he begins to question this, too, because who the fuck would actually enjoy doing something like this for so little money? He should have just left when they got back

from the deliveries, like Bob had said. But he didn't. And he isn't sure he wants to now. He steals a glance at Rick who inspects the packaging on a set of paper plates spackled with jack-o-lanterns and amoebic ghosts. There's a smear of dirt on the barcode sticker, probably a decade's worth of compacted dust. He licks his thumb and goes to work on the sticker, moves to his shirt, before holding it back up to light and, apparently satisfied, tosses it into Greentree's pile. Let the consumer decide.

\*

When Jeremy gets back to his apartment the door gets stuck on the towel that's supposed to keep the smell of weed from getting into the hall. He bends over, pushes it back, and hears Scott and Marcus' voices coming from the kitchen, knows they're doing knife hits off the stove.

"Big Jerm," Marcus says in welcome. "Missed you guys last night. Reggie says it was a blast."

Jerm nods and notes Marcus' Pitt hoody. Proud freshman. "For sure," he says and glances at Scott who tosses him an Iron City, or IC Heavy as Scott calls them. It's one of his rules that Jeremy adopted in the early days of their drinking – no Light beers and the non-lightness must be noted – *I'll have a Bud Heavy instead, thank you.* It's one of Scott's more subversive moves that Jerm appreciates, and though he's not ready to drink just yet, would like to shower first, there are the rules. He cracks it open and takes a drink before asking Marcus how the semester's going.

"It's cool and all," he sighs, "but they got our dorm on lock down. It's damn near impossible to get any booze or weed or anything up there."

“That’s why I told him he needs to be spending his time over here,” Scott says and leans back against the counter with a relaxed coolness that fits his glossy eyes. “No R.A.s patrolling these hallways.”

“I’m in,” Marcus says and rubs his hands together in anticipation. “I mean, damn, I still can’t believe your parents hooked you up with this place and I’m stuck in the dorms.”

Marcus has unintentionally breached a territory, one of the few, that Jeremy hangs his hat on – his financing his end of this apartment, while Scott’s mother currently pays her son’s end – and for the nerve it punches, Jeremy still manages it somewhat deftly. He subtly squares his body on Marcus with no distinct markers of aggression. “Well, when you’re the one *paying* for it, Marcus. Like, with your *job*, it’s not called getting *hooked up*. It’s just paying rent.”

“Alright, Jerm,” Marcus laughs. “Down, boy. I didn’t mean anything.”

“Shit,” Scott begins, playing mediator. “My parents *knew* I’d never make it in no dorms.” And they share a laugh. The pretext of the whole community-college-not-having-dorms thing sliding away with the laughter.

Like Jeremy’s slight distancing with Kat, it’s been a bit since Scott and Jeremy have hung with Marcus. They’ve been friends since those bonds were first being formed in early grade school, but the term Scott has always used for Marcus is *science nerd* and when the lines of their futures began to be drawn the previous year, a rift slowly broadened. Jeremy thinks of him as a good dude but he knows that Scott has reached back out to him now for one reason, though he hasn’t said it directly yet. He’s only trying to get involved in the Pitt scene and Jeremy can’t help but see it as a slight against him.

Jeremy slugs down the rest of the beer and tells them he needs to shower.

“Hold up,” Scott says and motions towards the weed. He gets the knives good and hot before he smashes the cannabis between them and Jeremy inhales and holds as long as he can. The weed and booze have a palliative effect on his nerves and he takes a long time in the shower. When he returns to the kitchen he feels refreshed and sedated but he also takes in the scene in a new way, observing their bloodshot eyes, the flakes of cannabis littering the counters. Marcus’ iPod is in the dock and playing hip-hop that’s unfamiliar to Jeremy. Scott motions to him for round two. When Jeremy exhales, Scott sets the knives down and begins rapping along to the music as the chorus rejoins – he’s eager, though a little uncertain: *and I will remember your name and face on the day you were judged by the funhouse cast*. He points to Marcus who joins in, arms pumping in unison: *and I will rejoice in your fall from grace with a cane to the sky like NONE SHALL PASS*.

It’s such an obvious show, one that Jerm can’t help but feel he’s the intended audience for, that he despises the natural question it leads to. He wants to withhold, pretend he could give so many fucks, but it’s the being made to feel an outsider in his own apartment that makes him give in.

“Who’s this?”

“Aesop Rock, man,” Scott says. “Don’t you know?”

“Guess not.”

“He didn’t know either,” Marcus says. “I’m educating this man.”

“Educating, huh?” Scott says but lets it drop.

“Well, guess we’re going to educate this fool tonight on CMU parties,” Jeremy says and points at Marcus.

Typical Marcus, Jeremy thinks, he ignores the slight, just says he's looking forward to Kat's party as Scott gets another hit ready. Marcus' dad was born in Ghana and still speaks with this French African lilt, which really freaked Jeremy out as a kid, because he never knew what the man was saying half the time and it amazed him how Marcus could understand him perfectly. His mother was born in the states but her parents were from Beijing, and this combination gives Marcus a lighter complexion, almond-shaped eyes, and hair that since middle school he's always kept in a short, tight afro.

The older they get the more interesting Jeremy has found Marcus. He speaks in this dead-serious doctor-patient tone but mixes it with adolescent jargon and inflections and he's always loved rap, but back during sophomore year he tried to explain the difference between gangsta rap and hip-hop to Jeremy and Scott, and he differentiated it even further down to the branch of hip-hop he listened to that he called *erudite*. Jeremy had no idea what erudite meant, and his penchant for not asking questions made it difficult for Google to figure out what he was looking for.

And with Marcus entering his terrain the way he did tonight, it's this very aspect of Marcus that Jeremy finds so interesting even as he finds himself wielding it against him, trying to draw out and prick those pressure points of Scott's he knows are lurking.

"Is Aesop Rock erudite?" he asks Marcus, masking his sarcasm just enough that Marcus doesn't catch on, and Jeremy tries to cut a glance to Scott who just takes a long drink of his IC Heavy and waits for Marcus to answer.

"Oh hell yeah, man," Marcus says, his words and tone creating a paradox. "His lyrics are just so *dense*, man. Like he's cramming all kinds of metaphors into his songs. Just so mother fucking verbose."

“Verbose, yeah,” Scott says, eyes down as he prepares another hit, making it hard for Jeremy to read him. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Jeremy’s phone vibrates and he fishes it out of his pocket, see it’s a text from Kat:

*Bubbles!*

He laughs and Scott asks what’s up but he shrugs him off. It’s a joke he and Kat have shared since middle school, a line from a Bush song in the *Mallrats* soundtrack – *mid-nineties*, Jeremy laughs to himself – the two always cracked up at the urgency that Gavin Rossdale burped out the word during a guitar riff. They would work it in wherever they could – awkward pauses, ends of conversations – and Jeremy got the feeling the oddness of it annoyed everyone else, making him like it even more.

But Jeremy slides his phone back into his pocket, wanting to draw out his response. Not because of some all too typical fear people have of responding too quickly – like, *oh no they might think I have nothing better to do!* – that Jeremy swears keeps everyone from responding to texts. But because it’s Kat. Because it’s complicated. Because though he’s missed her friendship recently he also has this rankling sense that things are already moving too fast and that this will only lead them to where they ended before.

\*

Jeremy tells them he’s cool to drive but Scott wants to listen to more Aesop and snags Marcus’ iPod out of the dock, says he’ll drive. They head down Center with the iPod in Scott’s lap while he has one hand on the wheel and one holding his iPhone. Jeremy can’t see the screen but knows he’s texting Amber.

“Who you texting over there?”

“Who do you *think?*”

“Just watch the road, friend.”

He finishes the text and taps the phone against his chin. “I just never know what she’s doing these nights I’m not with her,” he says but then turns the Aesop up before anyone can respond.

Jeremy knows this statement says more about Scott than it does Amber, or, at least, is equal parts revealing. Tumultuous is a fitting word for their relationship. With Amber going to Quaker Valley the two have always existed on different social planes: they’re both attractive enough to garner a lot of attention from the opposite sex, and they both appreciate that attention. The difference is that Scott is actually attracted to this attention Amber receives in a sort of primitive caveman-possessive way. It seems so transparent, the valuation based on what others think, what others want. It’s the combination of these factors that Jeremy thought would literally turn *fatal* for somebody, possibly himself, a few months prior when they were cruising the drag by Moon High, out on University Blvd, in Jeremy’s Bronco when Scott spotted Amber at a convenience store getting into Phil Buckmaster’s Jeep.

That was all. Maybe there was something Scott hadn’t told Jeremy, some rumor about the two, but Scott erupted, thundering at Jeremy to turn the car around and pounding the shitty-ass-nineties-Ford dashboard with his fist so hard it left a permanent dent. Jeremy was frozen – stuck between a lunatic and a two-ton machine traveling forty miles an hour in steady traffic. All he could say was “*Dude?*” The *What do you actually expect me to do here?* hopefully implicit. But after so many shoulder-shrug *Dudes* Scott took the wheel with both his hands and drew them onto the shoulder, assuming correctly that Jeremy would slam on his brakes when he did.



“Get it together, mother fucker,” Jeremy finally yelled at him. And suddenly their roles were reversed. Scott had gone calm and controlled – a frightening intensity lay just beneath – but his exterior had steeled itself.

“You’ve gotta let me drive,” Scott said.

*“Are you shitting me?”*

But Scott was already out of the car and walking around to the driver’s side.

“We’ve already lost them, man,” Jeremy pleaded when Scott opened his door.

“Jerm,” Scott said and it was his name in this tone that caught him. “You’ve gotta let me drive.”

Scott shot across two lanes of oncoming traffic to take a left, steadily increasing his speed until they were well past an acceptable amount over the limit. He didn’t even slow down when they approached the convenience store, just cut a glance to make sure they had left and kept going down University as it slopes down towards the Ohio. When Jeremy spotted Buckmaster’s Jeep, knew that Scott had too, the silence is what terrified him first. The perfect silence in the car as Scott maneuvered the Bronco along the Jeep in the right lane. Jeremy felt obligated in some way to do something and he assumed some sort of glare void of emotion as he imagined Scott was doing beside him. Scott had to swerve once into their lane to get their attention, and when he did Jeremy could see alarm in both their faces.

Scott swerved again and this time Amber leaned over and yelled something unintelligible. Jeremy never took his glare off them, a conscientious objector, but once he was in it, there could be no confusion where his lines were drawn. But what happened next left Jeremy unable to do much of anything except plant his fingers into the dash and hold on.

The Jeep veered off University into the sloping tangle of residential communities, and Jeremy felt the slightest lateral tilt and shift in weight distribution, as though the driver's side wheels had come off the ground to make the right turn. Scott shifted down to catch up and when he saw them making a left turn he left the road altogether and shot across the corner home's lawn, the soft wet earth tilled by the tires as Scott maneuvered around one tree before jumping back onto the street and missing sideswiping the Jeep by an uncomfortably close margin, leaving Jeremy thinking that Scott would've just flat-fuck t-boned them if he could have.

The absurdity continued through the circuitous channels of the neighborhood until they reached another University intersection and the Jeep took a left through a red while the oncoming traffic forced Scott to stop at the light. The immediate release of tension brought the silence back to mind for Jeremy, and he listened as Scott's heaving breaths slowly abated. Jeremy didn't ask about it the next day, nor anytime after that, the enormous weight of the potential for sudden violence some holy of holies that wasn't to be touched.

The memory of that night, the awesome sense of fear of the moment but also Scott himself, carries Jeremy to Kat's apartment at the Spinning Plate Artist Lofts. The street lights illuminate the Presbyterian Church with its imperial cast of spires that loom over East Liberty. The limestone exterior has been spraywashed but he can still see traces of soot, a reminder of Pittsburgh's previous age.

Kat and her roommate had to submit photography portfolios to rent in the building and Jeremy feels this pretension when they get to her apartment. A western plays on the ceiling. Clint Eastwood meanders through the desert on his horse, the scene distorted because one corner of the projector rests on a paperback. A few people sit reclined against

the walls and counters and stare up at the ceiling while a bong circulates the apartment. The main room is full of plaid and skinny jeans and glasses that try too hard and Jeremy is relieved when Kat spots them. She holds a cocktail glass that's down to ice and she saunters over and hugs Jeremy.

“And Marcus Osei,” Kat beams. “I didn't know you were coming.”

“How's it going, Kat,” Marcus says, an awkward oh-jeez-a-pretty-girl's-talking-to-me smile on his face.

“C'mere,” Kat motions and the two hug. “Scott,” she deadpans when she turns to him. “You're here too, I see.”

“Katrina,” Scott says and does a half-bow. “I'll be your Brom Bones.”

“Gross.” She turns back to Jeremy and Marcus, does an exaggerated *awwww* show of affection. “This reminds me of your freshman year of high school when I would take you three to lunch, and now look at you, a different kind of freshman and all grown up, sort of.”

“You have no idea, Kat,” Scott says and points past her to the kitchen, the drinks. And Scotty Ballgame is reanimated, this aspect of him that awes Jeremy the most. It's the sheer unadulterated confidence that Jeremy sees in him in these social moments that make Jeremy want to curl into himself. That other education he got from his older brothers, not just the booze and weed, the parties, but the confidence, the attention he got from girls five, six years older than him purely because he was somebody's cute little brother, how distorted these things can be for a teenage male.

There's beer in the fridge but Scott grabs three Solo cups, says they should stick to the harder stuff and swipes a bottle of Wild Turkey. He pours three drinks and asks Kat if any girls are at the party who aren't the biggest nerds on the planet.

“Just us dweebs,” Kat says. “Why? Are you not with what’s her name anymore?”

“Amber. Her name’s Amber. But I don’t see what one thing has to do with the other.”

“Of course.”

Jeremy supposes he can see how Scott comes across as obnoxious to people – the way he’s publicly possessive in that Neanderthal way and acts like he’s single when Amber’s not around, like he’s the walking-talking essence of what’s wrong with everything male. But it’s just a part of being social for him. And throughout high school, with all the time spent at parties when Amber wasn’t around, Jeremy has never seen Scott actually cheat on Amber, because that’s just who Scott is. Jeremy’s sure it would sound ridiculous in this context, with all of Scott’s talk that people could cite about tits and ass that don’t belong to his girlfriend, but if someone were to force Jeremy to condense down his best friend into a single word, and this word had to encapsulate all of the faults and eccentricities that make up his being, Jeremy wouldn’t even hesitate. He’d pull the word immediately: loyal. Strip away all the pomp and pageantry of his Scotty Ballgame persona and you have loyalty in its naked form. *But but but!* Jerm can hear Kat objecting, and he’s fine with it, because they don’t understand Scott like he does.

And now Kat, who’s moved on to people she finds more tolerable, turns to Marcus and asks how he’s liking Pitt. “I like the classes and everything,” he says, “but it’s just tough being in those freshman dorms, can’t get away with shit.”

“That’s why we’re getting the band back together,” Scott says and cuffs Marcus’ neck. “I’m telling you it’s going to be off the chain at our place this year. Smoking,

drinking, and..." he holds up a finger, then reaches into his pocket and retrieves a Ziploc bag with two long, thin pills. "Some Zany bars if you're down."

Jeremy realizes that he's been cut out of this and it cuts him deep even though it strikes him as a ridiculous time to take Xanax.

"Scotty *effin* B," Marcus laughs. "I missed this guy."

"Scotty *effin* B," Scott repeats. "I like that." He hands the pill to Marcus and the two do the tiniest toast ever.

A girl with pixied brown hair joins the circle, tells Kat she needs a pair for a beer pong game they're starting in the back corner of the loft. Kat introduces them to her roommate Rachel, another photographer who has a tattoo on her right arm that she tells Scott is her own distortion of her family's Scottish family crest: a blending of sword, shield, fire and a lioness, which intrigues Jeremy because of his own heritage. Under normal circumstances Jeremy couldn't imagine Scott being into her, but she seems interested in him, and Jeremy can already get the scent of an odd couple synergy.

"So are you in?" Rachel asks Kat, who shakes her head, says no thanks. Scott takes the opportunity to sign himself and Marcus up and the three head off to the back of the apartment.

"I guess it's a date," Kat says and peers at Jeremy over the brim of her glass as she takes a drink.

"Guess so."

"I'm feeling like a smoke," she says, "that is, if you still partake."

Jeremy tops his drink off before following Kat out to the back alley where the spires of East Liberty Presbyterian loom over them. It's cool again tonight and Kat shivers slightly

as she lights her cigarette. She wears black tights and sleeveless black dress that shows off her own tattoos, a new development since college.

“Are tattoos a requirement to live here, too?” he asks.

“Yes, Jeremy, and now I feel conned. I mean, *what will they look like when I’m sixty?*”

“Kovacs know about them?”

“You honestly think my dad cares about tattoos?” she laughs. “You forget how *unlike your father he is,*” she says and leans in close to Jeremy, her leg pushing deep into his. “That’s why they’re such good friends – my dad can get in there and find the lighthearted side in *I’m-so-serious* Michael.”

“I guess,” Jeremy says and pulls away just slightly. He can tell their roles have flipped from last night when he was good and lit while she was sober. Though he’s not exactly sober now, he can tell she’s feeling it more, and it makes him want to withdraw. A mutual quietness ensues and he finds himself staring up at the church spires when the paper burns down to his finger and he drops the cigarette to the pavement, squashes it with a toe.

“So, *Quiet Man,*” Kat says, taking a full step back. “What’s new? How was work today?”

He shrugs and thinks of Rick, something about the story Bob told him. “Tell me about your tattoos,” he says and nods toward her shoulders.

“I don’t know,” she sighs, “I like my last one.” She points to her left shoulder at what looks to Jeremy like a frumpy old woman in full body armor riding a bucking horse with a battle axe raised high above her head like she’s about to amass some serious carnage. “Kind

of combining an old work of art with Carrie Nation. Can I assume you don't know who she is?"

"You assume correctly, Kat."

"No? the Woman's Holy War? The Temperance Movement? She was famous for walking into bars, sometimes alone, and laying waste to anything she could with her hatchet. Her *Hatchetations*, she called them. My favorite quote of hers, maybe my favorite quote ever, was to other members of the Temperance Movement: *you ladies have no idea how good it feels until you begin to smash, smash, smash.*"

Jeremy nods. "Can see how you really identify with the Temperance Movement."

Eye roll. "Uh, it's more about what a badass woman she was, *Jerm*, in case you didn't pick up on that. An agent of change during a time when women were told to know their place."

Jeremy snickers.

"But the other one," she says and looks to her right shoulder, sighs, "got this fleur-de-lis thing first just because I was ready to get a tattoo and didn't know what else to do. Kind of rushed it. And of course everyone around here just asks why I'm a New Orleans Saints fan."

"Right," Jeremy laughs.

She shivers again and he motion towards the door.

As soon as they enter the apartment Jeremy can hear Scott and Marcus above everyone else. They're laughing hysterically at something in the game and Rachel and her partner look nervous. It's the fleeting moment where the Xanax goes oppo with the booze and weed – they'll be comatose soon, though. He and Kat find a loveseat and she plops

down next to him. But Jeremy is watching Scott. The game has resumed and after holding the ping pong ball poised to shoot, Scott giggles for ten more seconds before letting go. The ball disappears into a cup and he and Marcus slap hands like idiot children while Jeremy thinks about Yo Mike, wonders what exactly it is he deals.

And it's not long before Jeremy and Kat are standing over Marcus and Scott in their differing stages of passing out. Marcus is toast, head back, mouth open in full collapse on the couch and Jeremy grabs him by the front of his hoody and pulls him forward.

"Wake up, idiot," Jeremy says and gives him another tug.

"Yeah, *idiot*," Scott laughs next to him. He's just conscious enough to turn his head and parrot what he hears like a three-year-old smart ass.

"Get the fuck up," Jeremy tells Scott and punches him in the shoulder. "I'm driving us home."

By the time Jeremy gets them in the car, the shit-show is grating against Jeremy's last nerve, and as much he doesn't want Marcus in their apartment anymore he can't imagine dropping him off at his dorm in this state, so he offers up his couch to Marcus. After coaxing and prodding them up the stairs to the apartment, Jeremy only has to say *there* and push Marcus in the direction of the couch for him to fall onto it. Jeremy thinks about it and places the bin beside the couch. Then he finds the mop bucket and pushes it into Scott's gut who doesn't seem ready to go to bed, just follows Jeremy around like a forlorn zombie puppy.

"That way," Jeremy says and directs Scott to his room at the end of the hall.

Dealing with the two of them in far more inebriated states makes Jeremy feel sober, but as soon as he lands in his own mattress he feels his own cells give way and he quickly



falls into a half-state of lucid sleep that causes him to have no concept of time when he feels the weight of someone at the end of the bed.

The dull gleam of a streetlight cross-sectioned by Jeremy's blinds reveals Scott slumped in Jeremy's direction, murmuring as his hand seems to search for something to stabilize him until he finds Jeremy's leg.

"What the fuck, man?" Jeremy groans but when he sits up something in Scott's demeanor, his garbled tone, causes him to pause. Jeremy remains next to him, listening to Scott's *but onlys* or *if onlys* until Jeremy puts a hand on his back and Scott follows Jeremy's lead off the bed and back to his own room. Jeremy stands in the doorway for a moment, waiting for Scott's breath to grow heavy, then slowly closes the door, then his own, making sure the latch catches.

### Chapter 3

The walls in Jeremy's room are white. This is his observation upon waking. It's not some PartyMart induced thought on shade – not about whether they're ivory or bone or *ghost* – but rather that they're bare. It's the first time he's thought how he hasn't had the slightest pull to decorate the room, make it his. He thinks of his room in Sewickley, the manic sports obsessed child's basic room that he never bothered to change. But, *if* he were to add something now, some personal Jeremy flare to say *Hey! Check me out! This is how I feel!* he can't even imagine what it would be.

The fact that it's Sunday, the first NFL Sunday of the season, and, Sunday, as in second straight day of waking up feeling like shit, propels Jeremy out of bed long before he'd normally rise because the thought of spending another day in the apartment fills him with a low-lying nausea that he can't quite place. He just knows he can't allow himself to be wrangled into watching football while smoking or drinking or otherwise fucking away his day and so he grabs some stuff for class and heads out to Sewickley and his old home.

In proper Pittsburgh fashion it's another overcast morning with a noncommittal, spitting drizzle that leaves Jeremy adjusting the wipers every three or four minutes to avoid the gnawing rubber squeak. When he gets home the Bulldog is mowing the lawn despite the weather, and Jeremy laughs to himself, thinking the grass doesn't even need it, that it's just about the routine for his old man – it's Sunday morning and he's off work, better make

himself useful. Inside, Evan's on the couch watching Steeler pregame. Jeremy gives him a head nod.

"Check it out," Evan says, motioning to a tri-folded piece of paper on the kitchen counter. Jeremy picks it up, notices the Beaver County Athletic Association's logo, his father's name. "Dad's getting inducted into their Hall of Fame."

Jeremy faux jacks-it and tosses the letter back down. "Big fucking deal," he says.

"It is a big deal."

"Aw, c'mon, Little Brother. You're better than that. This ain't Cooperstown calling."

"Dude," Evan says, "Mike Ditka's in the Beaver County Hall of Fame."

"I don't give a shit about Mike fucking Ditka—"

"Hey," Dell says as she enters the living room. "Language." She stands between them, hands on hips. "What has you coming home so worked up on a Sunday morning?"

"Jeremy's too cool for Dad's Hall of Fame banquet," Evan says.

"Fuck off."

"*Hey*," Dell barks and pinches a wad of skin on Jeremy's forearm, hard. He pulls back, makes a face. "We're not heathens," she says, "though the NFL has somehow become more important than church in this house." She moves to the letter. "Don't you want to go?" she asks. "It would mean a lot to your father."

Jeremy snorts. "Why? So he can prove he was a big fish in a little ditch once upon a time?"

"Jeremy," Dell scolds, shakes her head. "You know that's not what it's about."

"Sure," he says and grabs his bag, heads upstairs.

Up in his room he turns the tv to Steeler pregame out of reflex but keeps it muted, lies back on his bed with a book for his first year writing course. He likes the instructor and finds the first novel they've been assigned pretty interesting – *Out of This Furnace*, written by an actual Pittsburgh steel worker. With the Old Bulldog's father having died in a mill when Michael was still young, the book has a special significance for Jeremy, though he realizes that playing the *I have a relative who was an actual Steeler* card is sort of like saying *Hey! Check out my Adam's Apple!* when you grow up in the Rust Belt, but it definitely makes him consider the book in ways he wouldn't have before. Like, say, the frightening fatality rate. An alternate title could be *One Thousand and One Ways to Die in a Steel Mill*. Subtitled: *Including Standing Outside the Mill – Brought to You by Your Local Police Department*. Slightly different than PartyMart. He imagines his own obituary: *His life was cut tragically short when he was crushed under the fatal weight of ten thousand Red Gingham Rounded Table Covers. Another young soul taken from us all too soon by the indomitable Picnic Season.*

And now a football team has somehow been confused with that labor history, Jeremy thinks. It seems like every home game the announcers, during a shot of the crowd decked out in their black and gold and drunkenly waving their Terrible Towels, have to give the obligatory line about *No fan base in ALL of American sports does a team epitomize, represent and honor the city they play for like the Pittsburgh Steelers*. Okay. Maybe it should be amended? Represent the *history* of the city? He supposes it might have been different in the heyday seventies – not just because of the team's sudden rise to the top of the NFL food chain that gave the city something to cheer about – but because the players were much closer to normal citizens then before the media explosion led to astronomical television

rights and a mindfucking exponential rise in player contracts. They had to endure the smog and filth and freeze like everybody else too. Not really the case anymore with players living half the year in La Jolla and being so unhappy with a contract ready to pay them eight mil a season that they threaten to sit the entire thing out if the organization doesn't renegotiate. Who can identify with that? *I won't deliver another Glittering Gold Knife, Spoon and Fork Set until I get my \$9.75 an hour, PartyMart!* Though at least there wouldn't be a Pinkerton agent waiting for him outside with a Thompson.

Jeremy turns from the muted analysts and scans his old room. His parents haven't touched it since he moved out and with him giving up on decorating it four years prior, his room stands as a relic to his childhood and early teenage years: the various trophies spreading across an armoire, posters of rock bands, including one of Nirvana, he admits, and even that was acquired in their late nineties boom long after Kurt pulled trigger, and the Sports Illustrated covers that he would cut out and plaster to his wall. The original idea was that these covers would intersperse with the posters to eventually cover every inch of wall, but they abruptly end in one corner where the pattern awkwardly comes to a halt.

It was around that time he became disconnected from the culture – thirteen, fourteen years old – he still had a knack for baseball and he kept at it for another few seasons, but it wasn't the same to him as when he was kid. Some of his earliest memories are of coming home from school to Gran and Papa's and going over the previous night's Pirates box score with his grandfather. It was '97, the Pirates first run at the pennant since '92 when Jeremy was a toddler and it would turn out to be their last to date. But it was this aspect of the game that drew him in, the analysis and debate, the statistical data that seemed to be limitless in the ways to sort and distinguish from player to player. During televised games he'd sit in front

of the tube with his own notebooks and create his own boxscore with his own notes before the witching hour of bedtime was announced. This was far more interesting to Jeremy than the actual *playing* of baseball, but the early training he received from his father, which Jeremy at times found terrifying, provided him with a distinct advantage over his peers. He was good at something. At something others wished they could be. And it became like a drug, a lifesource at the time when identities and trajectories were being determined.

Jeremy understood from very early on that there was a certain code you had to live by – not just for baseball – but essentially for being male. And that even as a child, he wasn't measuring up. There were the moments of spontaneous shadow boxing where the Bulldog would leap up from the couch and move to full boxer's stance fists raised, prancing from right to left. *C'mon. C'mon. Watchoo got? C'mon.* Followed by the soft jabs. His instinctual response was to turn away. Then the full on wrestling matches when Evan was old enough and barely able to contain the teeming rambunctiousness that sent him caroming off walls, furniture and floors for no reason whatsoever. He'd send himself flying at full flying leap at Pop, who'd inevitably wrestle him to the ground and goad Jeremy to come help his brother. He'd have Evan pinned with one hand, while he squealed and squirmed in delight, and Pop would playfully taunt Jeremy with the other. *C'mon. C'mon. Watchoo got?* Then the underlying insistence. Why aren't you like this?

And it was equally understood that the code was just as crucial as any ability to play the game itself. There would be the night they'd get together with the Kovacs for one big game or another, and the old baseball cronies would huddle and talk, easily observed by Jeremy because they held all the secrets after all. Rumors would come up – Kovacs' hearing from one source or another on the Pirates about so and so's night activities on the road. San

Francisco. The Steelers' Super Bowl in '96. The new rumors about their quarterback Kordell Stewart. The showers. Certain clubs. Nights at Schenley Park. The shaking of heads.

These things would coalesce at times during Jeremy's early career in various sports as the Old Bulldog felt it wasn't good to isolate in a single sport too early and wanted his sons to play them all, that it helped developed a broader athleticism. Jeremy never stood much of a chance in football, but he grew into a slightly above average basketball player by the time he was a freshman. Near the mid-season point in a scrimmage versus the jv and varsity their coach blew the whistle mid-play and came shambling onto the court in Jeremy's direction.

"Damn it, Starcevic, I never pegged you for lasting anyway so maybe I'm wasting my breath, but if you ever want to be anything more than a scrub you're gonna have to stop playing like a goddamn tampon." The team broke out in stifled chortles, hands and jerseys brought up to cover smirks as Coach came to stand eye to eye with Jeremy. "You've got size and you've got some touch with the ball in your hand but you shrivel up out on the court to the point of uselessness. You've gotta play *big!*" he said and jammed his hand into Jeremy's inner right thigh, pushing it out wide. "*Big!*" Then his left thigh. "*Big!*" He went for his lower abdomen and Jeremy knew he meant for him to lower his hips, dig his rear-end into the player guarding him, a senior who reacted with a grunt. "*Big!*" Now the right arm, grabbing just above the arm pit and swinging it wide and high. "*Big!*" And finishing with the left. There was a moment of complete freak-the-fuck-out where Jeremy thought the final move was going to be a full on crotch grab, a farcical uppercut and snag that would leave Jeremy with helium voice for a week. It never came but that's how shockingly invasive the moment felt, pornographically obscene, like he was being gutted and splayed for a snuff film, and he

cut a glance to Scott along the sideline who also had his jersey covering his mouth and bugged his eyes out as if they were sharing a joke.

But in the locker room after practice when a junior was extending the laugh at Jeremy's expense, continuing a metaphorical riff on *all* the ways Jeremy could serve as a tampon, it was Scott, sitting naked from the waist up with a pair of tape cutters in his hand, who broke in with a mocking laugh and a *hey, you're pretty funny, tough guy*.

The junior stood up at the sheer audacity of a piddling freshman mouthing off to him. "You wanna come find out how tough I am, or just hang out with your girlfriend down there?"

It was just what Scott was waiting for and he sprung from the locker room bench and slung the tape cutters to the ground. "Let's toss some knuckles and figure it out, fuckface." And it was right about then Jeremy could see it on the junior's face that he had somehow bitten off more than he could chew. It was a scene now – the room erupting in *Daaammms* and *Oooooohhhs* with no one wanting to break up the surprise post-practice entertainment. Scott, though only fifteen and five-foot ten, was a compact wad of muscle. Having been one of the first of his age group to go through puberty, he came back from summer break at the age of thirteen looking like he had been held back two years, and now with the whole summer and fall in the high school football weight lifting program, though he was the same height as he was in the seventh grade, would never grow another inch, had developed a preternatural mass, along with a reputation on the football field that peers knew not to mess with him. He was a tightly wound bundle of don't-give-a-fuck and he looked, in that moment, like he was begging for this upperclassmen to figure it out on his own. And the junior, Jeremy could tell, was carefully weighing his options – *suspension? kicked off the*



*team? irrevocably humiliated by this freakazoidal freshman?* – before he stood down, waving it off and saying a freshman wasn't worth it. Scott calmly walked back to his locker with a new level of confidence in his strut and finished cutting the tape from his ankles.

It wasn't long after that when Scott first used the moniker Big Jerm, and Jeremy cut him a glance, looking for traces of mockery, ready for the catastrophic disappointment of Scott circling back to that moment where he felt so nakedly vulnerable, unable to de-connote that everyday word from the way coach seemed to wield it like a cleaver – *Big!* – and Jeremy had initially thought Scott was sharing in the laughter. But he wasn't. And the name stuck. Jeremy eventually feeling like Scott did it on purpose, an almost therapeutic bestowing of a nickname. He knows if he ever mentioned this to someone now, Kat, for instance, she'd roll her eyes and say Jeremy was giving the meathead *way* too much credit. That Scott was in it for *Scott*, not Jeremy. That he was just testing the reach of his territorial spray. But Jeremy doesn't think so.

The moment came just two months later when Jeremy made his first varsity appearance on the baseball team, called in for middle relief in the seventh, where he retired six straight batters, striking out four, before they turned it over to their senior closer for the ninth. Scott was there in the dugout to cuff him around the neck, give him the good-job shoulder punch, and amid everyone else still rolling with the *hey not bad out there, Fungo*, Scott was the first one to say forget all that, this here *Big Jerm*.

And even now, resting on his bed as he watches the muted tv and the frenzied scene ready to unfold at Heinz Field, Jeremy can't fully trace through the tangled path where athletics had dominated every aspect of his life, to where he is now. It was two short years after his first varsity appearance, a time when the college recruiting letters were coming in

bunches, when he took the mound for the last time. He had come home to rest before a start that night when he noticed the cabinet doors to his armoire closed awkwardly, the wrong end shut first, blocking out the other. Already on edge, Jeremy opened the doors carefully when he noticed one of his notebooks was out of alignment in its stack, as if someone had been too rushed and reckless putting it away, shocked by what they had seen.

He had nearly a dozen old spiral notebooks, most of them filled with various baseball statistics and the box scores he kept during games, but he knew which notebook this was, knew as soon as he saw the spiraled coils askew. He pulled it from the stack and flipped it open to a spot marked by a rumpled page.

He moved to the bathroom, palms on the counter, and stared at himself in the mirror as he tried to level off his breathing. *This is NORMAL*, he thought, trying to convince himself the paranoia was unwarranted. *EVERYONE did something like this as a child.*

But, *NO*, why in the hell would someone randomly go through his old notebooks? *Sentiment?* The feeling of loss when a child grows old? He couldn't see it. Not the Bulldog.

And yet he took the mound that night saddled with an impending sense doom, like the game was just foreplay for some epic humiliation that awaited him afterwards. He walked the first batter on four pitches. Locate your pitches, he kept telling himself, repeating the Bulldog's aphorism. Locate your pitches. He walked the next batter, too. Then the next. Kovacs called time and came out to the mound but Jeremy couldn't process what he said, the words whitewashed by some electric buzz, and when Kovacs turned to leave, Allen Crutchmer, their senior catcher, grabbed a fistful of jersey. "Get your shit together, Jerm."

His next pitch was close enough to the strike zone that the batter crushed it into left-center, driving in all three runners. His breathing was getting heavier and heavier,

dangerously close to hyperventilation. He brought his glove to his face and cursed himself. He was weak, had been his whole life.

He pretended to wipe his brow with his sleeve, while he took as deep a breath as he could, exhaled slowly. The stadium lights, the clap-happy parents and smattering of students in the stands, all congealed into a distant, humming backdrop, foregrounded by the other team's dugout which had seemingly morphed into his own personal jeering section. And there, along the top row of the stands, sat the Bulldog.

He sent the next pitch towards the batter's head with so much velocity that it caromed off his helmet and into the stands. The batter stumbled, fell to one knee. A woman shrieked. The umpire tossed him out of the game as the opposing dugout now really did hurl insults. Jeremy made an obscene gesture and left the field.

The Bulldog came up to his room that night wound to a froth. Jeremy lay back in bed, pretended to watch tv. "Chicken shit," he said with his index finger directed at Jeremy. "That wasn't competing. Things got tough and you cashed in your chips. Just quit. You've got nothing in here," he said and pointed to his own chest. "You might as well quit for good if that's your approach."

*"Might as well,"* Jeremy said as sarcastically as he knew how.

The Old Bulldog looked at his son like he no longer knew who he saw. He raised a hand, began to speak, then waved the whole thing off and left the room. Jeremy sat there spiraling down the well of his thoughts until the buzz of his phone drew him out of it.

*Evan: Don't worry. Dad'll chill and you'll get'em next time.*

But there wouldn't be a next time. Jeremy told Kovacs off a week later. As he sat in Scott's basement, smoking and playing Mario Kart after they had walked off the field in the

middle of Kovacs' lecture, he kept waiting for his cell to ring, but it never did. When he finally drove home that night he found the Bulldog sitting on the couch watching Fox News, expression locked in the trademark snarl. Jeremy moved to the fridge, lingered, waiting for something, anything.

\*

Once the game begins Jeremy keeps it muted, gets the gist from the reactions downstairs: Evan and Dell on opposite ends of the couch overreacting to every play while the stoic Bulldog sits between them. At half time there's a tap on his door, followed by Dell peeking it open.

"Oh, you're reading," she says and lets herself in. "I was going to say you should come down and watch the game with us, but I'll leave you to your book," she says, but instead sits down on the bed. She looks at her son, brings her lips together in that familiar way that's neither smile nor frown, just acknowledgement. "It's weird," she begins, "seeing you read always reminds me of my father - Papa." She pats his leg. "The two of you are an awful lot alike," she says, though he's been told this his entire life. Still, he doesn't mind. His favorite story is the one of him at four: stewing over a puzzle when it's past his bedtime. Pop telling him it's time to hit the sack but he doesn't respond, puzzle piece swiveling between index finger and thumb the same way his grandfather held his cigarettes when deep in thought. "My god," the Bulldog supposedly says to Dell as he climbs into bed that night. "He's your father."

Dell sighs. "It's good having you home – you know I think that – and as has been discussed in great detail previously, you're grown, you're nineteen, and you're paying your own rent now. But I'm worried about the decisions you're making."

“Mom,” Jeremy groans.

“It’s not good, Jeremy, the way you were behaving.”

“Jesus Christ, what did I come back here for? I thought it would be a good place to study, but—”

“You’re right,” Dell says, raises her hands in retreat, “I’ll leave you alone. But you were *driving*, Jeremy—”

“*Mom.*”

“Do I need to start sending you emails with all the examples of how driving under the influence has destroyed lives?”

“I swear to god, Mom.”

“I’m going, I’ll be out of your hair, I just need you to know where I stand. You need to think long and hard about the decisions you’re making.”

“Loud and clear.”

“Okay,” she says and gives him her *you-better-mind* look before rising from his bed, only to stop at his door. “Hey,” she says, “Gran’s been asking about you. Think there’s some time this week you could go see her with me?”

It strikes a chord with Jeremy, gives him a pang of guilt, because he hasn’t been by to see her in awhile, but he just hates to see what she’s become, and that place they have her in makes him feel surrounded by death.

“Sure,” he says.

She nods, then pauses again. “You’re grown and I can’t command you to do anything. But you need to come to your father’s ceremony.”

“I’ll think about it.”

He tries to read a little more but his mind begins cycling through memories and stories of his grandparents, that part of his childhood when he spent so much time with them. Then his father's parents, who he never even knew, and just the labyrinthine circumstances that brought his parents together from such vastly different backgrounds, and eventually he has to put the book down. He watches the muted game for a bit before he gathers his things and heads downstairs.

"Hey, bud," the Bulldog says when Jeremy enters the living room. "Watch the game with us?"

Jeremy pauses, finds the gesture odd, and then says he needs to head back to town. His father nods, lets it be. In the kitchen Jeremy grabs a drink of water, sips it slowly and mills around, fiddles with his bag, and then quietly thumbs the Bulldog's letter open to catch the date of the ceremony. Thirteen days.

\*

Once in his car he texts Kat to see what she's up to and she tells him she's studying at Kiva Han, just a couple blocks down from his apartment, asks if he wants to stop by. He tells her he'll probably come down in thirty. He finds the game on the radio: needs to be able to talk about it when prodded, whether with Scott or the next day at work.

The Steelers won the Super Bowl the previous year and that adds to this year's usual opening day maniacal festivities, an excuse for fans to go ape-shit crazy. Jeremy figures there will be a few arrests, probably were some drunken-disorderlies before kickoff. Jeremy and Scott had come down to Oakland for the second half of the Super Bowl. Anxious to be in the college riot crowd but afraid to try and buy drinks with their fake IDs at an actual bar, they hung in the back of Peter's Pub and cheered with all the fans during the fourth quarter

and then rushed out with the frothing horde to Forbes where the bar crowd met the dorm students and residents of South Oakland in a sea of expectation. They were supposed to do something. That's what happens when your team wins a championship – you do something – the culture had told them this, and at first there was a general milling and yelling and the cell phones were already out to record the something, uncertain if it was something yet, and the police were already out as well, closing down streets to allow for the something to mature and develop in all its chaotic glory.

The crowd surged down the urban sprawl of Forbes to the Cathedral of Learning where the campus opens up and soon people were climbing street lights, scaling them like wild animals, while other packs had torn limbs from trees and removed their shirts to create the flammable end of a torch. A chorus of lighters were smashed on top to soak the shirts in lighter fluid and *POOOFFF!* there was fire and much rejoicing about the fire. A shirtless male held the makeshift torch proudly in the February night and the chanting began with the Steelers "Here We Go" theme. Other packs opened up with their own torches, but eventually these were cast to the ground as the fire burned down the stave and so kindling was collected to fuel the flames until the sea began to open down Forbes with a collection of pallbearers hustling as best they could with a *hut-one hut-two hut-three* comedic gait like they were firemen sent from Tammany Hall except what they were bearing instead was a couch from the south slums and a galvanized tank of gasoline. They slid it down in the intersection of Forbes and Bigelow, which had somehow become the nexus of the riot, and after the dousing and igniting there was much dancing and chanting and more clothes were removed to feed the fire and more cell phones stood watch to record what was surely something.

In the car on the drive back to Sewickley, still basking in the afterglow, still feeling the warmth of fire on his skin, all Scott could say was “That. Was. Fucking. Awesome. Oakland is the goddamn tits.” And it didn’t matter that they wouldn’t be attending Pitt or CMU, that’s where they needed to live.

When Jeremy gets to Kiva Han he looks around the tables but can’t spot Kat anywhere, until he hears an exaggerated *Psssttt!* sound coming from above and finds Kat peering down at him from an upstairs alcove. There’s a line for coffee, and these kinds of shops that Jeremy can only identify as *hipstery* intimidate him in the vague way the New York City subway did the first time he was there, like all he would want is a black coffee but since he doesn’t know the protocol he’d somehow wind up on the Path Train to Jersey, so he foregoes coffee altogether and after locating the staircase, finds Kat with a notebook and two textbooks out in front of her but wholly consumed with her iPhone.

“Sup,” Jeremy says in a tone that confuses even him.

“*Sup?*” Kat mocks, looking up from her phone.

“Yeah, you know, shorthand for *what is up, Katrina?*”

“This is when I make a hideously corny joke about the sky.”

“This is when you sound like your hideously corny father.”

“*Hey,*” she says and reaches over to hit his arm. “You forget the rules – no jabs at family in our banter.”

Jeremy puts a hand up in apology, offers a smile. Kat’s wearing her glasses with the dark frames that match the color of her hair, the ones Jeremy always thought looked like a natural extension of her face. She returns the smile, if only slightly, before turning back to her phone.



“This is so infuriating,” she says. “I’m reading about this whole Code Pink thing with the G-20 Summit. You see this?”

“Kat,” Jeremy sighs, leans back in his chair. “That barely sounded like English to me.”

“Oh my god, Jeremy. The G-20 Summit? You did at least know the G-20 Summit is being held in Pittsburgh in less than two weeks, right?”

“I don’t know what the G-20 Summit is, Kat. I get my news from ESPN.”

“Of course you do,” Kat groans. “You’re such a *boy* sometimes. In meathead terms,” Kat begins with a wry smile, “the G-20 Summit, *Jerm*, is where the twenty richest countries in the world get together to decide the economic policies for the entire world. You know, for the other 173 countries. Does that sound a little problematic to you?”

Jeremy shrugs. “Don’t see how it effects my life in any way.”

“Right, I mean, except that it’s shaped your whole identity, and that’s what they want – for you to take it for granted, to think that’s just the way things are. So when our economic system royally fucks everyone over except the people in charge every ten to fifteen years, nobody bats an eye, just another stock market crash, another recession, because that’s the way things are. And that’s not even mentioning the exploitation of third world countries, because why would you care about them? Since it doesn’t effect *your* life in any way.”

She has Jeremy’s attention now, and he thinks about circling back, reminding her of what she said about jabs at family, but he knows it wasn’t intentional. Yes, somehow his family was *royally fucked* in the crash, first February, then October. And even if Kovacs had somehow magically kept his investments safe, he’d also been able to profit off his bubbly personality long after his playing days, so even though both their fathers were middling

major leaguers during an era of average incomes, Kovacs had the resources for 40K a year in CMU tuition. Jeremy doesn't want to make it explicit but he also can't let it go. "Seems like the system has worked out okay for you," he tells her.

"And I can't argue that," she says, seemingly unaffected. "But it doesn't mean I can't do my part in raising awareness about social and economic injustice."

*Injustice.* Jeremy can't help but scoff at the word. To him it's become the punchline for pretentious white kids dying to prove how much smarter and more *aware* they are of all the burdens of injustice that stain humanity. Like the self-important liberal-artsy-hipster-whatever-you-want-to-call-them kids at Sewickley Academy who got off by calling Bush a fascist and parroting the Green Day lyric, of all bands, *Sieg Heil to the president Gas Man* and then drove home after school in their Beamers.

Though he couldn't draw a direct connection, it makes Jeremy think of the time near the end of junior year when his parents were on him about understanding his options for college, Dell urging him to understand that while she and Pop would do everything they could, realistically Jeremy had to understand it wasn't as simple as *whatever you want to do, Dearest Son*. His situation was one of very real restrictions, which is why he needed to investigate student loans. *But*, she said, she could look into getting Jeremy his Certificate of Indian Blood, begin the process with Papa's death certificate showing the Seminole lineage from the Dawes Final Rolls in Oklahoma if Jeremy would take it on himself to look into what scholarships he could apply for. And he did. And the opportunities were seemingly limitless. Some of them would require Jeremy to write an essay to accompany the application, others required nothing at all. There was money out there to put toward his tuition and groups were waiting to give it to him.

He presented the packets to his parents at the kitchen table, an impromptu meeting where Jeremy would be stunned by his parents' apparent lack of communication with each other on the issue. For it all seemed to be news to the Old Bulldog who could barely stomach the idea of these pleas for handouts that challenged his sense of personal responsibility, that he had achieved everything in his life through hard work and determination *by himself* and what resources he had lost he did so also *by himself*.

"Do you feel like you've been persecuted?" he asked Jeremy from across the table, arms folded at his chest.

"No."

"Has your potential been limited by the color of your skin?"

"No."

"You're a middle-class white kid and—"

"But, Dad," Jeremy cut-in, his exasperation finally boiling over, "I'm playing by the rules. I *qualify* for these things—"

"And you want someone else to pay your way. You want to go to the Seminole tribe, as a white kid, and ask for a handout."

"I qualify."

"Your grandfather," the Old Bulldog began, leaning forward, pointer finger going full bore. "Your grandfather was a *lawyer*. Your mother grew up in *Shadyside*. You grew up with every advantage in Sewickley, and you are *not* going to go begging for money for something you haven't earned. I mean," the Bulldog paused, looked away, let the moment build, "I just don't know how you could live with yourself after doing something like that."

Dell was fuming. Jeremy was so mad himself, so intensely spiteful of *That Fucker*, as he would refer to his father the next couple weeks or so, that he didn't realize, didn't even think about how his mother would take the Bulldog's appropriation of her own heritage, but as soon as he scaled the stairs he nearly jumped at the sound of her letting loose on his father, a torrential verbal brawl that lasted through the night and was felt in the caustic silence between the two for weeks afterwards. Dell went to Jeremy just days afterwards and told him that she was getting his CDIB, that he could apply for whatever he wanted. Jeremy nodded, said okay, but he never did. Though he would never admit it to anyone, especially the Bulldog, the idea had become distasteful to him.

And this was his main point of reference for people his age, especially those from Sewickley Academy who were political, white kids who had everything crying about problems that weren't theirs. It was precisely because he didn't spend much time thinking about it that he was able to stay detached – instead of acknowledging the issues involved, just reject them on some Bulldogesque gut-reaction that somehow works as both claim and evidence.

“It's like this Code Pink thing,” Kat continues, “why would Code Pink be denied the constitutional right to peacefully demonstrate at G-20? Because they're concerned with ending US funded wars and occupations and redirecting that money towards healthcare and education, green jobs? Shouldn't the twenty richest countries in the world have those same goals?”

“Sure.”

“And have you ever thought about this country's obsession with war and its correlation to gun violence? Do you know when the first gun related homicide of this year

occurred? January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, 12:01 am outside a bar in Laramie, Wyoming. *Wyoming*. The lowest population density in the entire country! *At 12:01 am!*”

Jeremy stares.

Kat snickers. “You hate this, so much.”

“Look, I’m sure you have the best intentions and you’re making an impact on the world and all that, and I’m not saying this about you, but it all just seems so fake to me. Like it’s just a Facebook competition to see who can be the most progressive. Except that the whole point seems to be lost when you post something about some rally and your own face is taking up eighty percent of the picture. Like the real cause you’re fighting for is just to be fucking seen.”

“Whoa, struck a nerve didn’t I?”

“You know what I’m talking about. That’s all social media is, regardless of whatever disguise people use. It’s just self-promotion so it comes across as a little hypocritical when the disguise is social *injustice*.”

“You’re on Facebook,” Kat says, smirks again.

“Sort of,” Jeremy snorts.

“Well, I get what you’re saying to a certain extent, but that’s why I’m mostly on Twitter now. You should get on there.”

“Why? It just seems like a condensed version of the same BS to me.”

“What?” Kat laughs. “No, not at all. Twitter’s going to change the world.”

Jeremy laughs. *Change the world*.

“I’m serious. Not only is it revolutionizing the transference of news, but it’s instant communication across so many different barriers that have always existed. It gives people a

real voice who have never had one before. The political implications are endless. Take for example the Homestead Strike. You do at least know about the Homestead Strike, right?”

“Yes, Kat,” he sighs. “I know about the Homestead Strike – probably more than you.”

“Well, just think how different that would’ve been, the dynamics of power, if those steel workers had the capabilities that we have today.”

“Yeah, they would’ve been taking pictures of themselves in front of the mills.”

Kat smiles. “Well, smart-ass, since you’re so above all of it, why don’t you indulge me for a minute. As a photography major, one of the things I find fascinating about people is seeing what *they* decide to photograph.” She reaches over and swipes Jeremy’s phone off the table, leaving him reaching for it after it’s already gone. “Think about all there is in the world – all the beauty and endless change versus, as you say, something as ordinary as our own face. So if I were to go to your photos,” she says, beginning to navigate his phone, “what will I see?”

Jeremy tenses up, trying to remember the last picture he had taken. Then Kat flashes her I-told-you-so smile and flips his phone around, revealing a picture of him and Scott at the party Friday night, arms around each other and drunken smiles stretched across their faces.

“Of course it’s a picture of you and *Scotty B*,” Kat laughs.

“Not just me.”

“Though you’re clearly the one taking it.”

Jeremy shrugs and takes his phone back. “Again, it’s not just a picture of me and I’m not trying to disguise anything.”

“Clearly,” Kat says. “The unbridled joy is on full display.”

Jeremy lets the insinuation linger. It's something Kat has never let go, the nature of Jeremy and Scott's relationship, but she always approaches it in a cutting fashion, never comes right out and asks, and certainly not in a manner that ever promotes discussion. Instead it puts Jeremy in a position of being defensive and withdrawn.

Kat pulls her wry smile like she's just playing, *dude*, don't be so sensitive, but Jeremy knows it's there and it's not going away.

"Anywho," Kat begins, "things are getting interesting around here as the Summit gets closer. You should, you know, try to be observant of the world around you and not just live in the Yinzer bubble of the Steelers and Penguins. Because there's still annoying little civil rights issues that people prefer to ignore – the gender pay gap, gay rights, voting rights—"

"*But*," Jeremy interjects, pretends to check his phone, "did you know that Roethlisberger threw for 350 yards today?"

"I wish I could live in a world where I would never have to hear that name ever again. Let me ask you a question. If you were to poll western PA – *no*, the entire state of Pennsylvania – who do you think would be more correctly identified: Ben Roethlisberger or Rick Santorum?"

"Kat, I have no idea who Rick Santorum is."

"Exactly. Google him sometime. You might find that it says something interesting about the culture we exist in."

\*

When Jeremy gets back to the apartment he finds the living room empty. He turns down the hall, where the two bedrooms wishbone at the end, and finds Scott's bedroom door closed as well. He moves to his bed with his laptop and as he's flipping open the screen he

barely catches the muffled moan. It's nothing new – Amber and Scott – but the sound of it induces momentary paralysis every time, and he lies there for a minute or two, laptop partially opened as the noises become more apparent.

When they moved in Jeremy hadn't realized they put their beds against the same wall, that they were sleeping a foot apart every night, until that first time Amber came over. He thought of moving his bed to the opposite wall after that but the reorganizing of his entire room would require Scott's help and it was a subject he never wanted to bring up.

The sounds heighten and he feels like it's more than his concentration, the squeaking of bed posts, the feigning of restraint. It's performative.

Exhibitionists.

He opens his laptop, plans on googling Rick Santorum after his perfunctory email check, but he's drawn in by a Facebook notification. A profile change. Name and picture. *Scotty Ballgame* has become *Scotty Effin B*. The picture changed to the same one from Jeremy's phone, only Jeremy has been cropped out, and it's Scott alone in his Pens hat and white v-neck, muscles flexed. The exhibition continues, bedposts and mattress springs, the raw audible carnality, and Jeremy pulls up his Facebook account, runs through the series of steps for deactivation, then slides on his headphones, googles Rick Santorum and reads about man-on-dog analogies while the show goes on, the climax bleeding into the music.



## Chapter 4

*What do you know about Alexander Berkman?*

The question floats off into the ether of the classroom. Jeremy fiddles with the book, pretends to look for passages in lieu of admitting he knows absolutely nothing about Berkman. He's only mentioned briefly in *Out of This Furnace*, Jeremy swears it was only a sentence or two, but his instructor goes on an extended lecture about the Russian immigrant turned anarchist who attempted to assassinate Henry Clay Frick. Jeremy eventually leans back in his seat and forsakes the details, the names and dates, for the construction of the story world of anarchists in love but willing to die for the cause they believe to be more pure. It comes in black and white. The luncheonette in Worcester, Mass. Berkman reading the stories of the Homestead Strike, the twenty-one year old believing he'd found the event worthy to give his life for, impress a woman in the process. The narrative plays in Jeremy's mind like a movie reel, the scenes blurring at the corners, a stop-motion quality to the footage that avoids precision. He sees Berkman on a train to Pittsburgh, wondering about the blast furnaces and smog and flowing water, the Pinkerton agents laying siege to the steel workers under the cover of darkness, the eeriness of it all. Berkman closes his eyes and sees the bearded tycoon, the bulbous frame and predator eyes. Once in Pittsburgh, he checks into a hotel under the name Rakhmetov, the literary revolutionist who gave it all in the name of change. In his room he stands in front of the mirror and pulls his revolver, aims at the reflection of his own right eye. He does it again. What will he tell the tyrant in his final

moments? How momentous for a man of twenty-one. He must get it right. People will write about this. He will change the world. Before going to sleep that night he swivels the dynamite capsule between forefinger and thumb, imagines the moment he bites down.

*The son of a leather merchant*, his instructor says, and the poetics of the phrase strike Jeremy as he listens about Berkman's elite, classical education in St. Petersburg where the assassination of Tsar Alexander II had a lasting impact on him and drew him towards the radical Russian literature that would soon be banned by Alexander III. And so much of it seemed so familiar to Jeremy, though he couldn't quite articulate the connections. Spheres of symmetry through history, connections upon connections and his mind is working in kaleidoscopic swirls of images of nine-eleven, beheadings in the desert sand, book bannings – book *burnings* – wraiths in white hoods, Senators talking about lists, cherubic youths in starched khakis and leather boots, flaming crosses and iron eagles, guillotines looming in village squares.

The instructor, Jesse Copeland, tosses a small piece of chalk into the air and nabs it in his palm in his transitions. He's straight razor bald with a massive salt and pepper beard and wire-framed glasses. Add a black derby, Jeremy thinks, and he'd look like the faces on the anti-anarchist propaganda posters from the previous century. He wears a t-shirt with a faded pair of jeans and work boots that have seen better days. When he's finished with his monologue he pauses, does his chalk-toss again, and asks the class what, if anything, would've changed if Berkman had successfully assassinated Frick.

One of the older students lets out a *Pfffffft* and says “absolutely nothing.”

“Why?”

“Carnegie Steel was a massive corporation. It’d be like killing the CEO of Wal-Mart in the hopes of ending globalization. It’s next man up. Changes absolutely nothing.”

Jesse turns to the chalkboard and writes *AGENCY*.

“I’m not talking about an advertising agency, I’m talking about individual agency. Are we as individuals capable of bringing about change in society?”

Another student mimics the first and gives his *Pfffffft, absolutely not*.

“No? We’re completely powerless? What am I, an automaton?”

“More or less,” someone says.

“Think of all the progress we’ve made as a society over the years. What about the Civil Rights Movement?”

Jeremy glances at Scott, who looks like he couldn’t give any less fucks about the discussion. He’s slouched in his seat, elbow on desk and palm propping up his head, his cheek scrunching into a wad of rosy skin from the friction.

“Listen,” Jesse says, “these are big questions that we aren’t going to come up with the answers to today, but these are the issues I want you thinking about as you finish the reading. It’s the topic you’re going to have for your first essay, so continue to think about the relationship between the workers, the company, and the machinery. Are the workers completely powerless against the company? Or are they able to bring about change?”

When class lets out Jeremy tells Scott he’s blowing off Intro to Business, that he’ll catch up to him in Human Bio after going to Jesse’s office hours. Scott gives him this look like he’s lost his mind, tells him to have at it, which Jeremy knew would be the case since if there’s one class Scott takes more seriously than all the rest, it’s Business. Jeremy digs up the syllabus to find Jesse’s office. He makes his way to the Liberal Arts and Sciences

Department where an admin points him down a hall and in a room that looks more like a small computer lab Jeremy finds Jesse at one of the computers cross-checking an email with something in his folder. When he looks up to see someone's head in the doorway, Jeremy barely catches that quick look of *Oh fuck* when Jesse realizes a student is actually here to see him.

“Hey,” Jesse says, hands not moving from mouse or folder.

“Jeremy.”

“Right.”

“I just came by to ask a couple questions. These are your office hours, right?”

“Uh...”

“It'll only take a second.”

“Sure, yeah, pull up a seat,” Jesse tells him, referring to the computer next to him.

“So what's up?” he sighs, settling back into his chair. And Jeremy finds himself harnessing that demeanor he had with the coaches at Sewickley who wanted to shoot the shit with the Starcevic kid with a hose, suck up to the Bulldog by proxy, so he's meandering about the Bulldog's father. *Believe me*, he's saying, he knows it's not all that special to have a family member who was an actual Steeler, but it's gotten him invested in the novel.

“And have you finished it yet?” Jesse asks.

Not yet, Jeremy says, and he notices Jesse try to say something in response, but Jeremy beats him to the punch, going on about how interested he is in the topic – you know, the whole agency thing – and, then, because he's running out of things to say, he finds himself channeling Kat, pulling words and phrases together he's not quite sure make sense about social activism in today's society and voices of marginalized groups and political

awareness and how interesting it is to think about these things in context of industrial Pittsburgh, and to really bring the train wreck home he asks if maybe he could get a copy of the assignment sheet early so he could get a head start on the essay.

“I’m glad you’re so enthusiastic,” Jesse says and Jeremy picks up on the tone, how he’s supposed to hear the *patience* in Jesse’s voice. “But finish the book, then we’ll talk, maybe. It’s pointless to get ahead of yourself.”

“Okay,” Jeremy says. He sits there for a moment, realizing he’s talked himself out of anything else to say. Jesse raises his eyebrows – *this over yet?* – and Jeremy takes the cue, slides his bag over his shoulder and tells Jesse he’ll see him on Wednesday. Jesse responds with a *Yup*, already typing away. “Hey,” he adds when Jeremy’s nearly out the door, “if you’re so interested why don’t you speak up next time. I’m tired of the class staring back at me like I’m a troglodyte.”

\*

When Jeremy gets back from class he makes a peanut butter and honey sandwich and changes into work clothes, pulling an old Pirates *sherzey* from his drawer. He ordered it custom when he was fourteen, something he finds so idiotic when people put their own names across the back, but his reads *Yellowhorse* with number twenty-two in homage to his grandfather, and though he now dislikes *sherzeys* in general, it’s still a suitable work shirt.

The day is overcast, belying the mid-September heat that has Jeremy in a light sweat by the time he walks through the door on the loading dock. Bob rumbles past with the pallet jack, greets him as *New Kid* again. Rick’s at the computer and sighs as Jeremy approaches to clock-in.

“You’ll be with Miles at the tables today,” he says. “We’ve had a fuck up with the life size cutouts. I think Yo Mike entered them all wrong. Anyway, just help Miles get them sorted.”

“Will do,” Jeremy tells him.

The Halloween merch has been cleared, moved to the pallets for tomorrow’s deliveries, and the sorting tables are smothered in stacks of cardboard cutouts of President Obama, Miley Cyrus, Big Ben Roethlisberger, SpongeBob Squarepants and so many others. Miles stands in front of one of the large boxes they were delivered in with the original paperwork in one hand, and, in the other, the report Yo Mike entered before heading out for deliveries.

“Hey,” Jeremy says, “don’t think we’ve worked together yet.”

“Miles,” he says and sets the paperwork down before extending a hand, curls a strand of his chin-length brown behind his ear. He wears wire-framed, oval glasses, a scraggly goatee, and an old, worn flannel that’s unbuttoned to reveal a t-shirt with a silkscreen of Che Guevara.

“Jeremy. So I hear Yo Mike probably screwed this order up?”

“I think Bob’s going to strangle the *little Polack*, his words.”

“Of course,” Jeremy laughs. “Bad, huh?”

“I’m telling you,” Bob says on his way back by, jack now bearing a mammoth pallet of table skirts, “this is what he does. He starts feening or something and can’t wait to get out on the road and the work he does beforehand is shit.”

Jeremy nods.

“Not gonna let it bother me, though,” Bob says. “It’s just a few pieces of cardboard from China.”

“All about perspective, right?” Miles adds.

“Exactly. And my only concern is saving Princess Peach when I get home tonight.”

Jeremy begins to run through the order, sorting the cast of characters, real and fictional, in their proper order. Sydney Crosby with his stick and skates, Troy Polamalu without his helmet to show off his flowing black hair, Princess Jasmine, Belle in her yellow ball gown, and the entire cast of *High School Musical*. Jeremy finds interest in the numbers, seeing what sells, what doesn’t, and what it must say about the city. With hockey season a few weeks from getting started, Roethlisberger and Polamalu outsell Crosby, but not far behind are Miley and Lady Gaga, The Rock and his naked torso, and somewhere between Jasmine and SpongeBob is the President of the United States.

“So what’s your story?” Miles asks. *Work-talker*, Jeremy thinks. “You from Pittsburgh?”

“Yeah,” Jeremy shrugs, then redirects the conversation to the talker. “What about you? Bob says you go to Pitt?”

“Doing my Master’s,” he says. “Lit studies, teach an undergrad class there, but I missed this kind of work, so I got hired on here part time.”

Jeremy nods.

“Grew up in Akron,” Miles adds. “Rubber country. Basically my entire family tree extends back to the first plant there, so, you know, this is sort of in my blood.”

“Gotcha.”

Jeremy turns to lay Super Mario and his plumber's overalls into McKnight's pile and Miles takes notice of the back of his shirt for the first time.

"Hey, Moses Yellowhorse. Hell yeah, man. I thought it was just your basic sherzey. You read Fairchild?"

Jeremy barely understands the question. "What now?"

"B.H. Fairchild? 'Moses Yellowhorse is Throwing Water Balloons from the Hotel Roosevelt'?"

Jeremy stares.

"It's a poem, man – about Yellowhorse. Figured nobody knew of him outside of that."

"Oh, no, my grandfather was from Oklahoma, Seminole Indian, used to tell me stories about him."

"That's cool," Miles says, "you should check out that poem, though."

Jeremy nods, says he will, and turns back to the work, tries to politely give the impression that it's only his second week here and he doesn't want conclusions to be drawn about him, but something about Miles' personality, some effervescence has drawn Jeremy out of himself, and with his head still buried in the paperwork he offers up the most common conversation starter in Pittsburgh.

"So you watch the Steelers yesterday?"

Miles lifts his head, odd smile spreading across his face. "I did not," he says, and Jeremy has to focus on the *not* because his tone and expression seem to indicate that he *did*.

"Oh."



“I think American football serves as a proxy for the masculine craving for war, our bloodlust. It’s part of what others have called America’s athletic-industrial complex.”

Jeremy suppresses a laugh. It’s not so much the ratio of words that he doesn’t understand, but more so Miles’ textbookish delivery. Like it’s something memorized, the line he gives every time he sniffs out a conversation about football.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Miles continues, “I grew up on it with everyone else. My parents live and die by the Browns, which means they mostly die, but I also grew up in that house thinking it was okay to say *nigger*, you know?”

The word catches Jeremy, makes him flinch.

“We’re human beings. We evolve, progress. We can with football, too.”

The clang and echo of the warehouse door causes Jeremy to look up and find Yo Mike ambling down the ramp, and it’s like Bob’s had his antennae up in anticipation because he’s skating up from the back of the warehouse.

“Yo.”

“Hey, dumbshit,” Bob barks.

Mike looks around, confused.

“Yeah, you, the cutouts order is all fucked up.”

Rick approaches the tables with his hands in his pockets but lets Bob handle it. Mike looks to him, then back to Bob. He lifts his hat and scratches his forehead. “My bad, I guess? I mean, I don’t really know what you want me to say here.”

“You’re an ass hat.”

“Okay,” Rick says and steps between them, tells Bob to go take his smoke break.

“Mike, you’re going to finish up the order for a *second* time with Jeremy and maybe he can

show you how to get it right this time. Miles, why don't you jump on the table skirt order Bob has back there."

"And by the way," Bob adds as he walks towards the ramp, cigarettes out and tapping against his palm. "New Kid's going with you tomorrow in case you need to change any plans."

Mike looks at Rick. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Rick shrugs. "Not sure," he says and heads back to the computer.

"Jesus," Mike sighs when it's just the two of them at the table. "Bob's got something up his ass today, huh?"

"Well," Jeremy says and holds the order up, feigns the need for reading glasses, "from where I'm standing...this shit's pretty bad."

Mike chuckles. "Fuck you, too, New Kid."

They sort in silence for awhile and listen to the alt rock station playing. The order is for all seven stores but Jeremy still can't believe this many people buy cardboard cutouts of other people, not to mention cartoons. When they're almost finished Jeremy glances over at Mike and tries to think of something to say, get a foot in the door before they're in the truck tomorrow. He resorts to the tattoo of the ten-point buck scaling his brawny forearm.

"So, you a big Milwaukee Bucks fan?"

"Huh?"

"The tat," Jerm says, feeling his attempt at a joke slipping away. "Bucks fan? You know, the NBA."

"Oh," Mike says and looks away. "No, I got this after my dad passed away a few years ago. It's the last buck we bagged together on a hunting trip."

Jeremy lowers his head. “Shit. My bad.”

“No, it’s cool,” Mike says with what Jeremy discerns as the slightest of grins, though he swears Mike’s expression hasn’t changed. Something in his eyes. “I get it. Funny.” Then Mike snags the paperwork off the table. “I’ll re-enter the order – fuck with Rick a little while I’m over there.”

When it gets near five and they begin shutting down for the day Jeremy asks Rick if he can come in early in the morning. His shift is supposed to start at eight but Jeremy knows Rick arrives long before then. “Any little bit would help,” Jeremy adds, “even thirty minutes.” The implicit message being *since I get paid so little*.

“Sure,” Rick says and smiles. “Seven-thirty then?”

“Perfect.”

But Jeremy’s not ready to go back to the apartment yet. Instead of going down Center he cuts through Shadyside, the quieter streets that remind him of where he grew up with the houses that might seem modest if you didn’t know the value of property. And even though it’s rush hour and the traffic getting off the wedge will be insufferable, he heads to his Bronco and makes his way to the Fort Pitt Tunnel. He inches along the Parkway and in the monotony of the stop and crawl he slips away into the electric delirium of Northstar and sings along about time and medicine and all those reasons to down fire and warm up veins and forget all the names of everyone who remind you of the itching trigger finger grip.

The sun has started to set by the time Jeremy parks in front of his old home. Through the slanted shutters, Jeremy can discern Evan and Dell chatting around the kitchen island. The shutters break up the scene like a game show: if Jeremy gets a question right the host will slide one of those wooden slats out to reveal more of the scene – but Jeremy discerns

enough to understand the context. Evan's on one side of the island, motioning about something and Dell, clearly excited, still in her scrubs and stirring something in the pot, smiles along. She looks happy, even though Jeremy knows she must be exhausted. Question 1: *Are you wanted here?*

When Jeremy opens the front door Dell pokes her head around the corner and Jeremy catches the noticeable change in her expression, the confusion.

“Oh – *hey!*” she says. “I thought you were your father.”

“Sorry,” Jeremy says and throws up his arms in faux-annoyance. “Just me.”

“No, I didn't mean—”

But Jeremy's moved straight for Evan and grabs him around the neck, grinds his fist against his scalp until Evan fights back enough to break free.

“What's up, Sparkles? When you pitching again?”

Evan adjusts his shirt and hair with a restrained smile. “Friday.”

“Damn, son. Two Friday starts in a row? Have to start calling you Prime Time.”

“So you're coming?” Dell asks, though she keeps her eyes on the two pots she has on the stove.

“Well, *Mother*, there are just so many plans, and so little time. But for Little Brother over here,” Jeremy says and reaches again to cuff Evan's neck and Evan slaps his hand away. “I just might be able to make it work.”

A silence follows as Dell looks up at Jeremy, but then looks away again, and he can feel Evan doing the same, knows they're both wondering why he's home but too afraid to ask and disrupt that *delicate fucking psyche* and it makes him feel like an intruder.

“You want to eat with us?” Dell asks. “Making spaghetti so there will be plenty.”

“I think not, *Mother*,” he says in the same stilted manner. “Just came home to grab something from my room.”

Jeremy takes the steps two at a time and when he reaches his room he swings the door hard enough to get the sharp squeaking noise he wants but then leaves it open, puts his ear to the open space, and waits to see if he hears them talking about him. But their voices have gone quiet, replaced by the sounds of wooden spoon against metal pan, the sudden noise of the television powering on. He wants to tell himself he’s crazy, but he can’t let go of the time a few months prior when Dell thought he was out of earshot, and Jeremy caught the whisper of a question she directed to Evan: *How’s he doing?*

So harmless and yet the implications seemed monstrous. Sweet, little Evan: The Babysitter.

He sits down on his bed and examines the minimal amount of books left in his old room, thinks of his conversation with Jesse, the class discussion, those spheres working through history, his own heritage.

When he heads back downstairs Evan has moved to the couch and Dell is testing noodles. She raises her brows. “Find what you were looking for?”

“Need to talk to you about that,” Jeremy says and places his palms on the countertop. “So I’m looking ahead to the end of the month—”

“Uh-huh,” Dell mutters in her prepared-to-bust-your-balls tone, figuring her son is about to hit her up for cash.

“Thing is, one of my professors recommended this book for me. It’s not required, sort of like an extra thing on the side, and I’m sure I’d be fine getting it myself, but things might get kind of tight financially.”

“What book?”

“*The Grapes of Wrath.*”

Jeremy sees it in her eyes when she looks up, the connection to her father, even if it's some token reference of geography. “Oh, well, I have that here – Papa's old copy. He loved that book.”

“Right, but, thing is, I need to mark it up and everything and I wouldn't want to do that to his copy.”

Dell nods, mulls it over for a moment. “Sure, I can get that for you. How soon do you need it?”

“You can bring it to Evan's game,” he tells her. “I won't be back before then.” He simulates a push-up to step back from the island in dramatic fashion and turns to Evan, raises his voice to make sure he has his brother's attention. “Catch ya later, Prime Time.” Evan grins and Jeremy locks eyes with him, winks, and hopes he understands. Then Jeremy raises a hand to the room to signal his farewell, and though he's not sure what he was expecting, the silence that follows after he leaves the room feels suffocating.

## Chapter 5

The library stacks are narrow. The ceiling low, nearly scraping the top of Jeremy's head. He scans the shelves until he finds the sliver of a paperback laminated by the Carnegie Library. Fairchild. *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest*. He turns to the table of contents, finds Moses Yellowhorse.

He's never been in this library before, and like all things he's unfamiliar with, it causes him to withdraw. The idea of not knowing the process for getting a library card makes him anxious, the mere thought of *asking* about it. Then the paperwork, as slight as it might be, and who knows what sorts of questions they might ask, more of those Kat/Miles questions he barely comprehends as English.

He looks one way down the stacks, then the other. Listens for any hint of human activity. He's reminded of the warehouse, Dora the Explorer candles in his hand, then he begins to tear the page.

\*

And that night he reads the words over and over, the poem aligning at times with his grandfather's stories – Yellowhorse striking out Gehrig, Ruth and Lazzeri on nine straight pitches – but also spurring new ideas about the twenties and the mythology of baseball – *the collective dream* – the dream to be recognized as human. He thinks of his grandfather growing up in Oklahoma. Jeremy only visited once, at the age of ten for his grandfather's memorial service at the Seminole Nation Veteran's Cemetery. July. He remembers the

stickiness and swelter. Searches for more. The military salute. Taps. The meticulous folding of the American flag.

He puts the poem aside and pulls up YouTube on his computer, searches for *The Grapes of Wrath*. Dissolve. Henry Fonda walking down a lonely road. Wants some kinetic connection, bodies in motion to spur his mind, but the memories have become warped like his parents' vinyl records stored in the attic. When he draws them up he knows he's thinking of what they're supposed to be, that they've become part of his own creation. And as Tom Joad walks under the power lines that stretch on for miles, he imagines his great grandparents, the images coming in achromatic stop-motion strands: the Scotch-Irish great grandmother married to a full blood Seminole who has taken a chance on tenant farming. A summer day, he's left for the afternoon to support the uprising against the Selective Draft Act of 1917. She's unknowingly with child and was assured by her husband before he left that he wasn't so foolish as to believe this band of socialists and tenant-farmers could march to Washington from Pontotoc County, Oklahoma on nothing but green corn and barbecued beef. He did not, he assured her, and only planned to see them out of the county as an act of solidarity against Woodrow Wilson and his Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight. But when the group was ambushed near the county's border the band dissolved into pockets of guerilla warfare, several members escaping home, others perishing in the fight, while others were arrested on charges of sedition. Only those deemed to be the leaders of the rebellion received heavy sentences in federal prison, but to be labeled an Indian Radical when America was at war was another matter, and he was beaten to death with the blunt-force trauma from what could only have been a deputy's blackjack.



Ruby would move to Stigler, where a sister ran a convenience store with her husband and demanded that she come to stay once they learned of her pregnancy. Jeremy tries to picture his grandfather as a child, but can only see a miniature version of the person he knew – an age-laden slump to the shoulders and thinning hair, kid jeans and white t-shirt. But the longer he fades into the movie reel the smoother the character becomes. The hair grows full, skin sheen as silk. Stephen Williams. A gregarious boy ossified by a childhood in between, perpetually pulled in and pushed out, called *half breed* and praised for his keen interest in reading. He learned to accept isolation, fell into the worlds of Robert Louis Stevenson and Lewis Carroll, along with the mesmerizing voices that called baseball over the radio.

He had told Jeremy of the twenty-seven Yankees, of Ruth and Gehrig, and Jeremy knows he couldn't have been aware of Moses Yellowhorse as a child, the dates would never lineup, and yet Yellowhorse played against that same lineup they called Murderers' Row and it only makes sense that Stephen had listened to this in his room, in his uncle's store, anywhere he could, and would seek out a baseball and schoolhouse wall, to wrap his index and middle fingers around all four seams and hurl the composite of cork and yarn and cowhide towards the wall with all the pent up hope and anger of those who want to believe in the impossible.

## Chapter 6

Jeremy makes all kinds of noise in the kitchen, makes sure Scott knows he's up at a quarter to seven even though all he really does is pour milk and cereal in a bowl. He's out the door by seven and enjoys the walk down Center Ave, the energy of the morning air with the sun peeking over East Liberty, the light hum of traffic. He likes knowing it will just be him and Rick for a while and there's an emptiness to the clang of the door when he enters the dusty warehouse that he finds comforting.

Rick already has the bulk sheets printed and marked and tells Jeremy to get started on Robinson Crossing, that it's going to be a mother of a day, though Jeremy's not sure why. Jeremy takes the order down to the far end of the warehouse where the majority of the bulk materials are located – the serving and tableware that come in an array of colors that must be intended to give customers seizures when they see all their options in the aisle. The big sellers are Schoolbus Yellow (Steelers gold), Glittering Gold (Penguins gold), and lots and lots of Midnight Black. But as Bob had made clear to Jeremy during training, always double check the SKU number instead of just going by color because you don't want to be the jagoff who confuses Candy Pink with Princess Pink, Emerald Green with Hunter Green, Sage with New Leaf, Burnt Orange with Sunburst and on and on and on. There's also the differing sizes to watch out for: ten inch plates versus eight inch; twelve ounce cups versus eight ounce; rounded versus square tablecloths, not to mention table skirts. The identically sized boxes of forks, spoons and knives had apparently been a problem in the past as well.

Jeremy's hardly a quarter of the way through the Robinson order when his work area begins to look like a variegated fort a child might try to construct. His concentration is broken by Rick shuffling down and chuckling to himself.

"Told you it was a mother of a day," he says.

"You weren't kidding," Jeremy responds but he goes straight to the forks shelf, repeating *luscious lavender* to himself over and over again. When he returns with the two boxes of forks he finds Rick leaned against a pallet stacked eight feet high with helium tanks. The surveillance reminds Jeremy of the Bulldog, and he tells himself to keep his nose to the grindstone, even if Rick continues to ask him direct questions.

"So, you a morning person?" Rick asks and Jeremy almost laughs out loud thinking about all the times he's slept past noon.

"If there's work involved," he tells him, then he's off for a box of Caribbean Blue knives and when returns to find Rick still propped against the helium tanks, he gets the urge to ask Rick what exactly it is he's paid to do – like, if it's so goddamn busy how about you not just stand there and *watch*. But he's also caught in the middle. Anxious from the looming presence of an authority figure, but he also knows that Rick likes him and it makes Jeremy feel good, like he's doing something worthwhile even if the pay is shit.

Jeremy's worked enough shifts to get the sense that Rick feels like some sort of warehouse father figure, and it makes him sick to see himself already playing into that dynamic, wanting to please Rick in the same way he constantly sought the Bulldog's approval. It makes him grow distant even as he's doing everything he can to impress him. When Rick finally, inevitably asks Jeremy about getting into their fantasy leagues, Jeremy doesn't bother with some lame excuse like he gave Bob, just shrugs and tells him he's not

into fantasy sports. It's a miniscule change in expression, the slackening of cheek muscles, light leaving the eyes ever so slightly, but Jeremy can sense that Rick feels like he took a calculated risk and got burned. He thinks of what Bob said about Rick's wife leaving him and imagines him spending his nights in front of a computer screen, alone.

"Really?" Rick asks and folds his arms across his chest, his tone suggesting Jeremy just said something remarkably insightful that demands further analysis. "But you're into sports, right?"

"I mean, I watch it enough to know what's going on," Jeremy says. "Don't live and die by it, though."

Rick nods but doesn't add anything more. Jeremy realizes he got sidetracked and gets annoyed with himself. *Grindstone*, he thinks and goes back to the Robinson order. When he returns with two boxes of Terracotta Spoons he asks Rick if he can start coming in at seven-thirty every Tuesday and Thursday.

Rick's face lightens. "Guys like you can get all the hours you need."

Jeremy turns at the clang of the warehouse door closing and watches Bob shamble towards the computer with a giant cup of coffee in his hand, unaware of Rick and Jeremy at the other end. Rick chuckles. "Bob," he laughs under his breath. "He's a good assistant manager but I worry about his drinking." Jeremy nods. "You know about the ten a.m. rule, right? It takes until then for him to get out of the funk. I'd avoid hassling him until around that time. We call that poking the bear."

"Understood."

"Well," Rick says and looks at his watch, "I better go give him the day's rundown."

Jeremy works alone for time, finally making it past the tableware, and gets lost in the serving tray vortex: the chafing dish racks and pans; the Lazy Susans and chip'n'dip bowl sets; the pitchers and ice bins; Sternos with and without wicks. In the drone of the work Jeremy begins to drift off, thinking about how he promised Mom he'd go see Gran with her, but she was so thrown off by his visit yesterday that she forgot to nail down a day with him. His grandmother's health has declined so rapidly in the past few years that those visits are hard for Jeremy. He imagines her when she was younger, when Papa was around. Even then she was struggling with the onset of Spinal Bifida but it didn't slow her down. It's a favorite family story, how her grandkids had to tell *her* to slow down. Now she's bedridden, her face and body so swollen it hurts Jeremy to look at her.

It gives him that awkward twinge of guilt, like he's the stereotypical teen who couldn't care less about his elders, if only they weren't so hard to look at, or be around, because how the hell is Jeremy supposed to start a conversation with her? It's bad. He knows it. He also has the impulse to respect his mom even more for all the time she puts in with Gran, how patient she is, but thinks he's probably just as despicable for having that instinct. As though people are supposed to get extra credit for caring for their parents. *But*, where will he be with his parents in thirty years?

There's a memory from Jeremy's childhood more prominent than others. He and Evan would often spend at least one weekend at Gran and Papa's, and Jeremy would wake in the morning to the cough coming from deep within Papa's lungs. He could hear that cough when Papa was still in his room at the end of the long hallway, the sound growing louder as he lumbered up past Jeremy and Evan's room and on to the kitchen.

Once he'd been up and moving around he was usually fine, but one Sunday morning it was still giving him fits when Dell came to pick her kids up. "Oh, Dad," she said. "That cough is just awful. You need to get that checked out."

He assumed his relaxed position at the kitchen table, coffee in one hand, folded paper in the other. "My dear," he began, "don't you know that I'm a medical marvel?"

She shook her head. "It's time, Dad. You need to quit smoking."

"Oh, Loll," Gran said from the other end of the table. Loll: her southeastern Oklahoma version of Lord. "He'll just lie to us all again. Two years," she said and held two accusing fingers out to Papa. "Two years of me thinking we had quit together only to stop by his office to find an ashtray on his desk filled to the brim. Loll, I say."

Gran. The four-ten Scottish fireball. A natural match for Papa's leisured manner.

"It might interest you both to know," he said, "that I saw the doctor just a few weeks ago and he said I'm fit as a butcher's mutt." A bald-faced lie, of course.

"And this," Gran said and threw her arms up in the air, "he expects us to believe."

"Medical marvel," he said and tapped his chest.

The memory makes Jeremy think about the strange imprint grandparents can have. How he only knows them for this tiny portion of their lives, the end of their lives, and so much of them is left unknown. There are the stories, sure, but stories seem so inadequate by comparison.

He hears a pair of feet shuffling across the dusty floor and looks up to see Yo Mike approaching. Jeremy gives him a head nod.

"Yo."

Mike takes a good look at the Robinson pile and then grabs the order off the table.

“Damn, son,” Mike says, “what kind of pace you working at?”

“I asked Rick if I could come in early. Been at it awhile is all.”

Mike gives him a skeptical look. “I’ll go start on the next store. You need to chill, though. For real.”

Jeremy can’t discern any change in Mike as it gets closer to time for deliveries. After Jeremy finishes Robinson and types up the delivery, double checks it before stacking and shrinkwrapping the pallet, Bob brings him the paper work for the Greentree order Mike’s been working on.

“You’ll type up Yo Mike’s too. Don’t need that same shit as yesterday.”

“That’s bullshit, Bob,” Yo Mike calls from the stacking tables.

“The computer is a privilege, not a right, you toad.”

“All right,” Rick says from his desk, reading glasses down the bridge of his nose.

“Those two,” he says to Jeremy when Bob has left and Jeremy can hear the pride in his voice.

It’s when the last store is completed that Jeremy notices the anxiousness in Mike. He cranks the pallet jack with an unlit cigarette between his teeth, checks his phone, moves the pallet, checks his phone again. He takes his smoke break on the dock while Jeremy loads the box truck. When they’re ready for the road Jeremy gets in the cab and lets out an exaggerated sigh, causing Mike to glance his way.

Jeremy’s never had to procure drugs himself, hasn’t even been directly involved when Scott has done it for them. This is uncharted territory and he has this sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach like he’s climbing onto a Harley for the first time with no helmet, like despite all his inexperience and uncertainty, he’s conscious of the potential for an unwieldy momentum to build.

“Man,” he begins, dips a toe, “got off work yesterday, went straight back to my apartment and smoked a *giant fucking bowl* with my roommate. Didn’t do shit else.” He slumps against the window for added affect. “Still exhausted.”

“How about this,” Mike says and puts the truck in gear, “next time, smoke that bowl *before* work. Cut that jackrabbit shit out. Making me look bad.”

“Like I said, just came in early is all.”

“That doesn’t help either. You heard that term bright-eyed and bushy-tailed? That’s you. And just so you know, I shot one of you last time I went hunting.”

Jeremy laughs and waits for Mike to laugh or grin or something but he doesn’t, just moves them onto the Center Ave, heading for Fifth Ave. When they reach Pitt’s campus area they get stalled in the series of stoplights and crosswalks flooded with students between class periods. Jeremy finds himself wishing Marcus would cross right in front of the cab.

“You ever get the urge,” Mike begins, white-knuckling the steering wheel, “to just plow through one of these lights? Take as many of them down as possible?”

“Can’t say I have.”

“Oh, right. You’re a college kid, too.”

“Hardly. CCAC, man.”

Mike nods.

“You ever try college?” Jeremy asks.

“No,” Mike says in a more reflective tone. “That shit’s not for me. And what was I going to do? Drop a lot of money to end up with the same bullshit degree as everyone else? Only people hiring are places like PartyMart anyway. It’s a scam.”

“What’d you do before this?”



“I’ve done everything, man. Cleaned air ducts, worked overnight security, did the fast food circuit. You name it I’ve done it. Job may change, but the pay stays the same. But these kids,” Mike says and motions to the last of the herd crossing Fifth as the truck crawls through the last of the stoplights, “the majority either have it made already and it doesn’t matter what they really do in school, or they’re in for a rude awakening when they realize they’re not as special as mommy and daddy told them they were.”

“Don’t be so bleak, Mike,” Jeremy tells him. “You’re special, too.”

Mike scoffs. “Yeah, I know *you* were fed that shit growing up. You’ve got it written all over your face.”

“And look what happened,” Jeremy says with palms raised in a shrug, “now I’ve got these habits to support.”

But Mike goes silent. He navigates the truck onto the Parkway with what Jeremy discerns as the slightest grin and Jeremy’s left to analyze inside and out whether he fucked up or not. They travel along the Monongahela on their way to the tunnel, the mid-morning traffic light post-rush hour, and Jeremy makes one more attempt, something less contrived.

“We really don’t get paid dick, do we,” he says as more of a statement than question.

Mike sighs. “No, we do not.”

They deliver Greentree first. The store sits in a shopping center carved out of the suburban plateau just west of the confluence and the vast parking lot remains empty as they arrive just before the retail opening time. Mike directs the truck around back where he pulls into a narrow loading dock. The routine is the same as Monroeville where Jeremy gets introduced to the store manager, who seems eager to stay and chat while the two unload the

truck. When they get back in the cab to head to Robinson Crossing, Mike pauses before he turns the ignition and takes out his phone.

“You wanna talk about habits to support,” Mike says and hands Jeremy his phone, “bet you don’t have nothing like her.”

The picture is of a toddler, Jeremy guesses between twelve and eighteen months, with a curious grin and a white headband crossing her sparse hair.

“Damn, man, I didn’t know you had a kid.”

“Barely,” Mike says and puts his phone back in his pocket before putting the truck in gear. “Her mom has a new boyfriend, I’ve got a girlfriend, and somehow the kid has become a monthly check. And that stings.”

“I bet,” Jeremy says as the truck winds back through the empty parking lot. “How do you make it work on what we get paid? I mean, do you have something extra on the side?”

Mike guides the truck into a row of empty parking spaces at the far end of the lot, shifts into park, and turns to Jeremy with a frightening lack of emotion on his face. It’s the lifeless expression that causes Jeremy’s heart to thump – *poker face doesn’t do it justice* – and he’s thinking about rabbits and rifles and killers in disguise. Mike keeps his left hand on the wheel, the other on the armrest, and his eyes bore into Jeremy from under his brim. He no longer looks squat and pie-faced to Jeremy. He looks formidable in a way that tells Jeremy like hammer to spike that Mike knows far more about the world than Jeremy’s sheltered life could ever allow.

“What?” Jeremy asks before he’s strangled by the silence.

“You tell me.”

“Uh, I think I’m a little confused here.”

“I agree.”

“Dude, all I did was ask if you had a second job.”

“Is that what you asked me?”

Jeremy goes for outright disbelief. His arms go up and out and then he starts laughing. “Dude, I have no idea what’s going on right now.” He looks out the windows in all directions. “Is this some sort of initiation? Is Rick about to pop out from behind the bushes?”

“Is that a serious question? *Is Rick going to pop out from behind the bushes?*”

“Look, man, I’m sorry,” Jeremy says, “my friends and I lost our hookup for blow and—”

“So why the fuck are you hitting me up, college boy? There a goddamn sign on my back?”

Jeremy weighs this as quickly as he can, tries to consider all the ramifications while every millisecond seems laden with incalculable burden. “Bob said something about it. Thought you might be dealing something. I wasn’t ever gonna say shit to him – I was just like *hell yes*, you know? Thought I might have a new connect and what better one to have than someone I work with everyday.”

“Fucking Bob,” Mike says and shakes his head. “Guess that means Rick is suspicious, too?”

“Seems that way, but Bob’s the only one who said something.”

Mike nods, puts the truck back in gear, and eases them out of the parking lot. They drive in silence, the sports talk radio and hum of the engine on the interstate offering the only

sound, and it becomes just as grating to Jeremy. He decides to take another chance, not even as an attempt to get a hookup, it's just the pull to try and make Mike like him.

“And cut that *college boy* shit out,” he tells Mike. “I go to CCAC. What do I look like to you? Some rich, preppy turd?”

Mike chuckles. “Yeah, you mentioned that. What campus you say you go to?”

“North.”

“North campus is where all the rich, preppy turds go.”

“Please,” Jeremy says and smiles but can't think of a solid comeback and so he just shakes his head. A commercial for tattoo removal comes on the radio for Harry's Tattoo Regret Parlor and Jeremy cups his mouth and in a deep baritone calls out *Yo-o-o-o Mike*.

“You're such an asshole,” Mike laughs.

When they return to the warehouse after all the deliveries Mike backs the truck up to the loading dock to remove the pallets before parking the truck. Jeremy starts to hop out but Mike stops him, hands him a blank business card. When Jeremy flips it over there's a phone number written in pen. “I'm no dealer,” Mike says, “but if you want to kick it sometime, do some yay, I'd be down with that.”

“Cool,” Jeremy says and slides the card into his back pocket like the whole thing is no big deal. When Jeremy enters the warehouse he finds Bob at the sorting tables working through an order of Barbie's Glam Birthday decoration sets. Rick shuffles over with his hands in his jean shorts.

“Any problems?”

“None whatsoever,” Jeremy says and Rick makes a pleased expression – either surprise or confirmation, Jeremy can't tell which – and he feels suddenly idle, an insect in

stagnant water, like if he doesn't have a task to perform this very instant he won't make it out, and he asks Rick what he wants him to do next. Rick smiles, says he just got through the paperwork for an order of Mario Bros. party favors.

## Chapter 7

The sun begins to set, cascading the urban shadows of Oakland around Forbes as the happy hour crowd begins to thin in Hemingway's. It's Jeremy's first time inside the bar and even with the rhythm of MGMT blasting through the speakers something seems off to him about the energy. He'd been led to believe this was a staple of the Pitt campus but he found himself surrounded by more young professionals than college students. Too many dress pants and rolled white sleeves. Scott was undeterred though and he squirreled his way through the standing crowd to find two stools and bellied up to the bar like he was a regular, rapped his knuckles on the wooden countertop to the music.

The bartender examines their fake IDs just long enough to make Jeremy nervous but then it's back in his hand and Scott's ordering two Yuenglings because it's dollar bottles night and he taps his to Jeremy's before his first drink and Jeremy gets that feeling like things are in motion again. The bar sits under Marcus' dorm in the Litchfield Towers and Scott calls him and acts like he forgot Marcus doesn't have a fake ID. "Yeah it's popping off in here," he tells Marcus. "Jerm and I will probably knock down a few more of these dollar Yuengs, and then who knows what. You getting into anything tonight?" The conversation dissolves into *uh-huhs* and *words* and Jeremy stares down the length of the bar and wonders if he's the youngest person there.

Bryan Melloy, the middle-child, had told Scott and Jeremy that he could get them fakes for a hundred and fifty dollars each, that they'd be legit – hologram and everything –

and could be used with the new scanners a lot of the bars were installing. Jeremy hadn't tried his on a scanner yet and wasn't sure he ever would. There were limits to the very limits he needed to test, and his preferred method of subverting authority was to do so by not directly walking up to said authority and saying *Here I am!* But he also knows this is precisely what the fake IDs are for in Scott's mind – not just to buy beer – but to sit in these adult places, to occupy their spaces. Jeremy figures Scott was primed for this by having two older brothers, but to Jeremy, sitting in the bar only makes him feel out of place. Like nineteen is more than just a number. He's still a teenager, an adolescent pretending to be a man, and armed with the tools that allow him to claim as much, and sitting at the bar he becomes slowly attuned to the ill-omened feeling this makes the two of them very, very dangerous.

When Scott gets off the phone he takes a long sip of beer, glances around the bar, and then he's rapping his knuckles again in anticipation of something undefined. He wears his white Pens hat and the white Polo with the little man on the horse in baby blue. He has another white polo where the little man on the horse is light green and Jeremy likes to wonder why one night calls for one color over the other. Then Scott has his phone out and Jeremy figures he's texting Amber. It's never enough, Jeremy thinks. He's in a bar at nineteen but he still needs more action. Been that way since he was stealing his mom's cigarettes at the age of nine, smoking pot with his brothers at twelve. Always always *always* more.

"Evan's pitching again Friday night," Jeremy tells him, not quite extending an invitation because he's not sure he wants Scott there with all his family, though he of course knows Scott's got better things to do anyway.

"So that's what you're doing then?"

Jeremy nods.

“Sure I’ll get together with Amber. Speaking of,” he says and waves his phone back and forth before pressing the call button. When she answers he yells “*What up girl?*” like he’s already wasted and makes a big deal about how he and Jerm are at a bar. “Dollar Yuengs,” he adds. But the conversation shifts in some way and Scott turns away from Jeremy on his stool, speaks in a lower tone, and then he’s off his stool altogether and heading outside, leaving Jeremy to stare at himself in the mirror above the bar.

Scott’s in one those moods, he thinks, where all communication is done indirectly. Sometimes they could talk for hours about things as inconsequential as the Steelers to the deep realities of life. But tonight there was a feeling Scott needed to reach and it’s like he wouldn’t let Jeremy suck him into any conversation that might impede the night’s progress so he will avoid eye contact at all costs.

But this was often Scott’s way, even when he opened with Jeremy. A few months after he turned sixteen he called Jeremy to tell him he was swinging by to pick him up. When Jeremy got in the Audi, Scott reached into the backseat and pulled a Keystone from a thirty rack and told him to drink up. It was late spring. The promise of warmer days hung in the lingering twilight and it started as one of those jubilant nights where just driving into Pittsburgh along the Boulevard of the Allies gave Jeremy the feeling that so many things were possible and Scott was rapping along with The Game and Fiddy saying *I wanna live good so shit I sell dope* in that affected white kid way and in the silence between songs he sighed and turned the volume down, punched Jerm in the shoulder and told him he was a good dude. The words themselves, the obvious shift in tone, caught Jeremy like the punch



itself. And then Kanye was rapping about Jesus and Scott was reaching for another beer before telling Jeremy that his father was losing his medical license.

“He’s a goddamn junkie,” he said. “Self-prescribing. Second time.”

He maneuvered his way through South Oakland, pulling an illegal u-turn to get them back on the Boulevard towards the Crosstown. Jeremy was looking at him, not knowing what to say but wanting to show Scott he had his full attention. Scott kept his eyes on the road and Jeremy felt it was why Scott picked this time to tell him, because he would be occupied, distracted. “What is it they say when cancer is terminal?” he asked Jeremy.

“You mean like stage four?”

“No, like, *it’s in the blood*, or whatever.”

“Right.”

“It’s in the blood, Jerm, the genes.”

Sitting on the bar stool in Hemingway’s, Jeremy wonders, as he often has, how Scott is with Amber when they’re alone. When they’re out together Scott’s still full of so much testosterone you’d think he existed in a perpetual locker room, but what is he like when it’s the two of them? When the day gets the best of him and he’s worried about his future. When she’s upset about a fight between her parents. When the lights are low and he wants to fuck. Afterwards. When he’s seen her talking to another guy. The day after Phil Buckmaster. The day *of* Phil Buckmaster. When his basest animal instincts take over. When he’s a threat to her safety. When they’ve made up through a strangled release of fluids. What he says to her. Why this is considered partnership. Why this is normal.

Jeremy has always felt slightly awkward around Amber, like the perpetual sidecar, you’re along on their ride, but not really, and the bike would be, or look, so much better

without it, and yet the bike kept dropping hints like there might be room for three without the silly-ass sidecar. When he was getting ready to move in to the apartment with Scott over the summer, Casi Klopton's parents were out of town and their house was promptly turned inside out. While Scott was engrossed in a game of quarters, Jeremy found himself in another room sitting on a couch with Amber. She had chin-length curly brown hair, an athletic body, and a natural way of getting people on her side. Her legs were pulled up on the couch and somehow the conversation had moved to Jeremy and Scott living in Pittsburgh.

"I guess we're staying together," she said and twirled a curl of hair, noticed the look on Jeremy's face. "I mean, you were in the car that night he chased me through the neighborhood – it was *your* car – how long can something like that really go on? I want to go out of state for school next year anyway, so."

The other room was abuzz with the flip-cup game when an argument broke out over some drinking game nonsense and Scott tried to settle by asking to be punched in the face, causing everyone to bust up laughing. "No," he demanded, "*punch* me in the *face*." Amber smirked and motioned to Jeremy, as if to say *See what I mean?*

Scott sounded ridiculous in that context. It was amazing to Jeremy how just by being one room removed he could see how juvenile the scene was, but he'd also been locked in the moment at Scott's side when he'd dared someone to punch him in the face, felt the tense electricity in the air when the line between laughter and violence could be cut with a knife. He knew how intoxicating it became when you were a part of it, not stranded on the sideline.

"Besides," Amber began, "don't think for a second I'm some poor fool. I know how Scott is with other girls and like he's going to be down there in Oakland and what? Waiting for me? Please, it's just our thing, the drama, part of the game, and I play it, too."

A scuffle broke out in the other room and suddenly Scott was yelling. Someone took him up on his offer and had broken one of his molars, resulting in a trip to Jeremy's mother's office the next morning. She came home asking Jeremy how Scott had managed to split one of his most durable teeth in half and if it was in any way related to the booze breath she had to tolerate all morning. Jeremy shrugged, said he didn't know a thing about it.

Scott sits back down at the bar and finishes off his beer, tells Jeremy he needs to keep up, and orders two more Yuenglings. "Dollar Yuengs, man," he says and grabs Jeremy around his bicep, then folds his arms on the countertop, pulling the cuffs of his sleeves up his sinewy arms. He hasn't gained any mass since he quit football sophomore year, simply maintained that freakish fifteen-year-old brawn that now appears much less impressive on a nineteen-year-old's body, and Jeremy thinks about movement again, his western PA treadmill that Scott seems to have ratcheted up to top speed, spinning his wheels at an unsustainable rate.

A couple of women left over from the young professional crowd approach the bar, order some drinks, and Scott's all over it. He spins around and reclines against the bar, asking what all goes in an Old Fashioned, and he's affable enough that they smile along but Jeremy sees it on their faces that they're more amused than intrigued. There's an *Aw, that's cute* tone in their delivery that's supposed to let him know the bit ends as soon as their backs turn to head off to their table, but he extends the banter a beat or two longer than Jeremy expects before one of them tells Jeremy and Scott to have a good night with a laugh before they disappear.

When they're out of earshot Scott asks what Kat's up to tonight.

Jeremy tells him he's not sure.

“Fucking text her and find out, guy.”

Jeremy pulls up Kat’s message chain, but instead tells her Evan’s pitching on Friday, asks her if she’s going.

*Kat: Having people over again. You should come!*

Jeremy begins to type out his next text, telling her they’re at Hemingway’s, which is meant to impress her more so than be an invitation out tonight, but he gets stuck on the tone of the message, how exactly he wants her to interpret its intent. He’s typing and erasing *hehe* at the end, wondering if she’d find it moronic or maybe cute in that underdeveloped sophomoric way someone has when he goes to CCAC even though his parents dropped a bundle to send him to Sewickley Academy. But then there’s that constant line he tries to walk of providing some value to Kat while not being misinterpreted, needing to be funny not flirty though he’s never thought of himself as a particularly funny person and Scott’s punching him in the arm wondering *what the fuck the deal is* and the whole thing just seems so tiring.

“Ease up,” Jeremy tells him. “I’m trying to figure it out.”

*Kat: That’s a charming image. I’m studying tonight but you should come over Friday. I demand it.*

“She’s staying in. Having people over on Friday, though.”

“Meh,” Scott says and takes a drink. “We’ll see what else is going on. So are you *hittin* that ass again or what?”

Jeremy’s good at this by now. His odd-couple breakup with Kat has helped, too, provided him with easy avenues of deflection to go with his disaffected shrug and *who-*

*really-gives-a-fuck-demeanor*. “You know how it is,” he says and swivels the bottleneck between his fingers, “after three years at CMU she’s acting like she’s too good for it.”

Scott nods, examines his own bottle of Yuengling. “Fuck ’em,” he says. “Fuck all of ’em.”

And then Scott is palming his phone again because there’s always something else, something more somewhere that they’re missing out on, and he looks up to take one long glance around Hemingway’s and says they should meet up with Marcus to smoke. Jeremy gives him a *yeah, sure, whatever* and Scott puts his palms flat against the countertop and simulates some form of pushup and then he’s rapping his knuckles again because the energy is low and this isn’t what he had planned.

“Jager bombs,” Scott says and slaps Jerm on the back. “Not leaving until we knock back some Jager bombs.”

“*Jager bombs*,” Jeremy says, mimicking the voice in the YouTube video that went viral, which gets a laugh out of Scott.

Scott has them tab out before they knock back the shots and then they’re slapping the countertop and out on Forbes where Scott howls at the electricity in the urban campus air. Marcus meets them at the Towers entrance, laughs at how inebriated they seem and Jeremy can’t tell if he’s putting it on a little, if it’s all part of the plot, or if the energy and confusion is real.

“Big Jerm and Scotty Effin B,” Marcus says as the three exchange fives. “I’ve gotta get me a fake.”

“You’re missing out,” Scott tells him and Jeremy feels like the entire night has been a prelude to him using this line on Marcus.

Whether he intends to or not, Marcus flips it on him by discussing all the Pitt buildings, like Scott and Jeremy are on a guided campus tour. When they walk past the Hillman Library, Marcus talks about the series of connected buildings, how they were built over the former site of Forbes Field and how one still has home plate encased in Lucite glass. Jeremy has heard all this before from his grandfather and it takes him back to sitting at his grandparents' breakfast table where he would memorize box scores and listen to his grandfather's oral history of baseball. He thinks about cutting into Marcus' spiel to talk about Mazerowski's home run against the Yankees, the only World Series to ever end on a seventh game walk off. Then he's looking up at the Cathedral of Learning and its forty-two stories of limestone that have been spray-washed but still have scars of soot, and he's thinking about George Silk's iconic photo of Pitt students celebrating from the top of the forty-two story building as Maz rounded the bases.

"It's a big fucker, isn't it?" Marcus asks before going on about the Cathedral's Nationality Rooms where thirty different rooms were designed to represent the different ethnic groups that immigrated to Allegheny County. Marcus has a class in the Japanese room which he laughingly says is smaller and has lower ceilings than the other international rooms, and doesn't that seem a bit racist? but he says it's also really soothing with all the wood and soft light.

"Sounds grand," Scott says.

\*

At the apartment they lounge in the smoky haze and listen to Marcus' iPod. The weed and Jager have Jeremy in a listless fugue and he keeps hearing a line from one of the songs run through his head: *I did not invent the wheel / I was the crooked spoke adjacent.*

“Don’t puss out on me, Jerm,” Scott says.

“I blame the Jager.”

“You got into some Jagermeister, huh?” Marcus asks.

“Closed it out with some Jager bombs,” Scott tells him.

“Master hunter,” Marcus says. “That’s what Jagermeister translates to.”

“No shit? Master hunter. I like that,” Scott says and nods reflectively. But the room grows quiet again aside from the hip-hop and then Scott yells *Jerm!* and Jeremy sits up straight like he’s just been called to attention.

“Fuck off, man. Had a long day. Got to go to work early again tomorrow, too. What do you got tomorrow, other than a bowl or two to smoke?”

“Don’t you worry about me, guy,” Scott says with a wry grin.

“You working?” Marcus asks Scott.

“Looking around.”

Mostly because he thinks it’s annoying Scott to hear Marcus talk about Pitt, Jeremy asks Marcus if he’s got class tomorrow.

“Yeah, nothing till one, though. “It’s a Creative Writing class which I’m loving right now. My teacher is this grizzled white dude who wears these busted-ass work boots to class. He looks like he’d know nothing about hip-hop but he was talking to me the other day about Doomtree and Sadistik and is letting me do this rap-poetry fusion stuff. Totally not what I expected when I first started.”

The description sounds just enough like his own teacher and on a chance Jeremy asks Marcus his name.

“Jesse something, uh...”

“Copeland.”

“Yeah that’s it. How’d you—”

Scott’s laughter is so hard and sharp that Jeremy feels like a firecracker was suddenly lit in the apartment. Scott has both his hands on his stomach, nearly doubled over, and Marcus looks quizzically to Jeremy who can’t help but take a little glee in Scott’s charade.

“We have the same teacher at CCAC for First-Year Writing,” Jeremy tells Marcus.

“No shit? Damn that’s kind of crazy.”

“Oh, man,” Scott says as he feigns pulling himself together. “The same teacher. That is too funny.”

“I don’t know that it’s *that* funny,” Marcus says.

“Does he teach in that tiny Japanese room?”

“Uh, no.”

“Oh, okay. I was just trying to figure out what your parents were shelling out all that money for since Pitt uses the same teachers as fucking CCAC.”

Marcus plays it cool. Just says *right* real laid back like he’s a part of the joke and not the punch line, then he shrugs, says intro classes are probably similar at a lot of colleges.

“Sounds like it,” Scott laughs. Then he’s up to grab beers from the fridge. He asks Marcus if he wants one but just tosses a can Jeremy’s way without asking, sending him shooting up straight again. And it happens like that – the shift in energy – it’s at a level they never could get at Hemingway’s and Scott’s got to keep it going. “I’m telling you, man, this college thing,” he begins with an affected shake of his head, “the whole thing’s a scam. It’s like my brother said – why I shouldn’t sweat being at CCAC in the first place – it’s not *what* you know, but *who* you know.”



“Well, that’s probably true to some extent,” Marcus begins and Jeremy can see him weighing how deep into this conversation he wants to venture. And with a new beer in his hand Jeremy sits back on the couch and listens to Scott continue about how higher-ed is a ponzi scheme and Jeremy’s thinking about Master Hunters and Crooked Spokes personified and Yo Mike in the driver’s seat, peering at Jeremy under the dark brim of his hat.

The image of Mike, his compact stillness, triggers a series of connections in his mind that unwind until he’s back in his parents’ garage at the age of eleven. His father took him there to teach him how to box. It was February and Jeremy can still remember the kerosene smell of the space heater. For one of the few times in his life, the Bulldog told Jeremy about his own father, Niko Starcevic, who died in a mill accident when Michael was Jeremy’s age. He called him a tough son-of-a-bug and Jeremy had never heard that term, swears he hasn’t heard it since and the name has taken on a sacred standing in his mind, like even he can’t use it or its memory might take flight. Niko had taken his own son to their basement and taught him how to box and Jeremy knew in some intuitive way that there was meaning in this simple statement, that it was about legacy as much as boxing and perhaps he was thinking of this, the lineage of his own father and how he was like the branch of a massive oak and his grandfather one of the massive roots beneath the ground that allowed the tree to continue growing, when the first jab caught him in the shoulder.

“What’s your instinct?” his father asked. He had been mimicking his father’s movement, shifting his weight between feet and the jab came so quick he barely saw it. “Huh?” his father prodded. “What do you do?”

Jeremy had no idea and felt like some emotion he knew he needed to avoid was racing up his throat and he took a deep breath which inadvertently caused him to puff out his

chest. The Bulldog caught him in the stomach just hard enough to knock the wind out of him. It was like losing a dimension, becoming suddenly flat and trying to blow yourself back up. The Bulldog took him by the wrists – *like this* – he was saying as he maneuvered Jeremy to a boxer’s stance. Then he was referencing shows on the Discovery Channel, animals in their habitats. He talked about predators and prey, how the weaker animals found ways to make themselves *appear* larger, more dangerous than they actually were: they puffed out their chests, flared their necks, stood as tall as possible. But the predators, the ones who knew they were stronger, never tried to make themselves larger. They stayed very small until it was time to attack. He told Jeremy it was the same way in boxing, and how you could spot an amateur in a fight because he talked the loudest and spread himself out in an attempt to intimidate through size. In boxing, he said, you want to stay as compact as possible, and he got in a sparring position: knees bent, fists around his eyes. He said it was instinctual to puff yourself up, hence all the examples in nature, but it’s the ones who hold the cards, who have no fear, even in distress, who you should fear.

Friction. This is what Scott feeds on, Jeremy thinks, as he listens to Scott and Marcus talk about networking while unfamiliar hip-hop continues to play. Friction: that unfamiliar element that causes a chemical reaction.

“Kat’s having people over Friday,” Jeremy says, causing Scott and Marcus to turn to him.

“You mentioned that,” Scott says, unimpressed. But something’s changed with Marcus in the room and he adds that Kat’s roommate wasn’t all that bad.

“Not bad,” Marcus agrees.

“I don’t know, man,” Scott says. “I’ll probably be on that Amber circuit. Guarantee some ass for that night.”

Jeremy waits for Marcus to show his hand. He seems to be mulling it over. “What do you think, Marcus?” Jeremy prods.

“Not sure,” he says. “Probably see how things shape up on campus.”

Scott yawns, takes his hat off and flings it onto the coffee table, a signal the night is soon to be over.

“Well,” Jeremy begins, “let me know if you guys change your mind cause I think I’m gonna get some coke that night.”

Scott’s brow raises. “Huh?”

Marcus leans forward, anxious.

“Yeah, you guys in?”

“Hell yeah I’m in,” Scott says. “Where the fuck did this come from?”

Jeremy shrugs it off and plays it cool, tells him it’s just this guy he works with at the warehouse. And the stories start to flow about the handful of times Scott had brought back coke from being with his brother at Penn State. And Jeremy is laughing along, feeling the rush of energy and thinking of how Yo Mike calmly directed the truck over to the row of empty parking spaces, sat quietly and waited, how he stayed very, very small.

## Chapter 8

*It's a question of representation.*

The International Workers of the World poster with the sea of workers coming together to form one monstrous closed fist sits on the projector screen while Jesse talks about the rise of the IWW and CIO. “Who was going to represent the workers? How were *their* voices going to be heard, not a politician speaking for them?”

He begins discussing the movement of Proletarian literature in the early twentieth century and about the Taylorist-Fordist system of production, the assembly line, that led to the de-skilling and objectification of worker, but how these systems grew so vast and complex that it in turn gave the workers a great deal of power by being transformed into cogs, because even the smallest cog could completely disrupt the flow of production. And Jesse discusses workplace sabotage and the sit-down strike – workers gaining strength by *not* working – and the list of novels written by laborers beautifully illustrating the agency of the disenfranchised.

He returns to *Out of This Furnace* and how Bell describes the workers relationship to machinery, how it differs from earlier works that wanted to characterize workers as a degraded, powerless mass. Bell's laborers identify with the machinery, the steel, it's the people who govern the industry who turn it into something ugly by trying to dehumanize their workers. And through the formation of the CIO they take back their political voices. Only the workers will speak for the workers.

“People around here worship a football team,” Jesse begins, “because they say it represents the city. They glorify a quarterback, Ben *Rapistberger*, or whatever his name is, who can’t keep it in his pants, but this is the city,” he says and holds up the novel. Jeremy had talked about the book with Miles on Wednesday, brought it up for this purpose, and it turned out Miles had read it in a grad seminar, something that impressed them both for alternate reasons, and though Miles had proceeded to talk in jargon he couldn’t understand it gives Jeremy another level of respect for Jesse.

A student raises her hand and begins talking about the city, it’s rebirth, and about all the buildings and landmarks being spraywashed to get rid of all the soot. How nobody calls it Shitsburgh anymore but something has been lost, too. She talks about the novel’s protagonist, Dobie, the youngest of the Dobrejcak clan and how every time she sees a building being spraywashed she’ll think of him, like his legacy is being erased.

Jesse nods, makes an expression like perhaps he thinks this is a bit maudlin but goes with it anyway. He makes a final note about the essays due Monday and dismisses the class. Jeremy has no intention of going to his Business class, and dicks around for a few minutes to give Jesse time to get up to the adjunct office before he heads up to talk to him.

“Jeremy,” he sighs and leans back in his seat, “a trend seems to be developing.”

He doesn’t even really know what he’s come to say, he’s thinking of what Jesse said about *Out of This Furnace* as the Hunky Pride novel, the story of Eastern Europeans thwarting workplace discrimination, and his own Hunky genealogy, but he’s also seeing the symmetry again, the connections to Papa, and he opens by asking Jesse if he can bring in another novel for the essay.

“In *addition* to Bell?” Jesse asks, looking skeptical.

“Yeah, I was thinking I could write about Bell and *The Grapes of Wrath*.”

“It’s a five-page paper, Jeremy. Trust me, you don’t need to write about two 400 page novels in five double-spaced pages. That makes for a shitty essay.”

“Right,” Jeremy laughs.

“Listen, I’d love to stay and chat, but I’ve got to leave early today,” Jesse says, already standing up and slinging his bag over his shoulder. “I’ve got to get to the other campus I teach at.”

“Oh, you teach at another school?” Jeremy asks, not sure why he doesn’t tell him he knows Marcus.

“Indeed,” he says and taps Jeremy on the shoulder. “Come on, I’ll walk out with you.”

When Jeremy makes it to his car he decides, almost on a whim, to drive out to his parents’ to get his father’s gun. The idea had been lurking since he’d been in the truck with Mike, but it’s not quite out of fear, maybe that same feeling that’s he’s treading downhill on some un navigated slope and feeling the metal tucked into his jeans could provide some sense of calm or normalcy to a situation that his only experience of has been through film.

The house is eerily calm, too still, when he enters, and even though the Bulldog’s car is gone, Jeremy knows Friday mornings are one of his busiest days, he half expects him to be there waiting for him when he opens his parents’ bedroom door. Jeremy moves to his father’s closet, pushes back hangered shirts and jackets to reveal the old cigar box, the smaller cufflink box placed on top. He moves the cufflinks to the side, and slowly opens the cigar box. Even in the dimness of the closet the nickel plating shines. He picks up the Colt,

overly cautious of the trigger, because the cocked and locked position of the hammer still makes him nervous even though he can see the thumb safety keeps it locked.

The Bulldog first showed his son the weapon when Jeremy was twelve years old. It was after a “series” of break-ins in the neighborhood, though Jeremy remembers it as a grand total of two, that had the neighborhood in hysterics. For the Bulldog, the break-ins triggered the memory of their own home being invaded just after he had signed his first contract extension, his first taste of actual big league money though even this was right at the league minimum for veterans. The Bulldog insisted it was someone from his old neighborhood in Aliquippa, someone who had seen an article in the paper. “Dumbshits thought I took it home in a wheelbarrow,” he said and stared at Jeremy. It’s that look Jeremy remembers most. The disdain.

He never had Jeremy fire the weapon, simply explained the mechanism: the magazine (it’s full), the cocked and locked hammer, the thumb safety, and said if something happened and he wasn’t home, the Colt would be there. It felt like the greatest initiation into manhood he could’ve ever imagined, like he would never be jealous of a friend’s bar mitzvah ever again. And for several years Jeremy considered this moment with his father to be sacrosanct. As spine-tinglingly tantalizing as the Colt was to him, he never would have dared cross this threshold of trust for anything less than absolutely necessary. And even now, after all the fucked up episodes that have led to his amateur hour emancipation, Jeremy still feels that twinge of guilt when he palms the gun and removes it from the box.

He moves to the mirror, observes the Colt in his hand, then practices tucking it behind his jeans. How should it look? The tuck, the removal, the raise and aim. Which depictions has he found the most real? The gun feels awkward, cumbersome, and he takes a few paces

around the bathroom, thinking of the safety with every twist of hip and belt. He removes it. Raises it to the mirror until he's staring down the barrel.

When he returns to the car he locks the gun in the glove box and heads to the warehouse, hoping Rick will let him start his shift even though he's a couple hours early. He takes 65, the two lane road feeling free and easy in the post-rush hour scroll of traffic as he rides above the Ohio, the gray water flowing in the opposite direction.

In the parking lot he sends Evan a text, lets him know about Kat's party and says he better not try to big time him two weeks in a row, then he wishes him luck.

Bob's at the sorting tables and looks at Jeremy like he has three eyes. He glances at his watch as if to verify he hadn't slipped into a fugue and lost track of time. "Why're you early?"

"Missed you, Bob. Couldn't stay away."

He shakes his head. "Well, you better verify it with Rick before you punch in. Owner's not big on surprises when it comes to paychecks." He motions down to the far end of the warehouse, but Jeremy can already hear Rick locked in some debate with Miles.

"Eight dollars *here*, eight dollars *there*," Jeremy begins as he heads past Bob, "I can see what a *shock* that could be."

"I don't make the rules, kid. I just abide by them."

He heads down the corridor of pallets and shelving that leads to the back tables, where it looks to Jeremy like Rick had come down to do more of his observing other people work, though now nobody appears to be doing anything other than arguing. Miles is in a t-shirt that looks like a cloudy scrawl of charcoal from Jeremy's initial vantage point, but as he



reaches the sphere of their debate he sees it's a continuous pattern of MADEINCHINA covering the entire fabric, the font going cloudy in places like a printer low on ink.

"You keep talking about the democrats as if I give two shits about them," Miles laughs and then shifts his eyes and acknowledges Jeremy with a head nod. Rick turns and gives Jeremy a surprised *oh, hey*.

"Mind if I clock in early?"

"Uh," Rick begins, looking like Jeremy has just compounded a bewildering morning for him. "Don't you have class?"

"Cancelled."

"Sure," Rick says and throws up his arms like he's not going to worry about something so trivial and then he's already back to Miles. "Well, that's your party, isn't it? The party of *hope* and *change* and all that nonsense."

"See," Miles laughs patiently again, "I'm just as cynical about that rhetoric as you. The difference is you don't think anything *should* change, and I don't think anything meaningful is *going* to change."

"So what're you telling me, that you're a socialist? Cause that's the same as a democrat these days."

"Rick," Miles sighs, "you wouldn't understand if I told you."

"*Try me.*"

"See, you've been conditioned not to—"

"Oh, shut up with that garbage. What? You think you're a communist?"

"More like *left* of communist."

Rick throws his hands up in the air again. “And what do you think that means – that you’re a nihilist? An anarchist?”

“This is what I was saying, you’ve been conditioned to think of these terms the way the dominant culture *tells* you to think of them.”

Jeremy had been waiting to ask Rick what he should do after he clocks in but he finally turns and heads back to the computer. After punching in he approaches Bob at the sorting tables.

“Here to stay, huh?” Bob says without looking up.

“Believe it, Bob. Not sure what I should do though. Rick was too busy arguing with Miles about politics and I couldn’t really interrupt them.”

Bob sighs and motions for Jeremy to follow him down to the back tables.

“It’s real simple,” Bob shouts as they approach. “Don’t be a jagoff. If you want to legislate a uterus and own a rocket launcher – you’re a jagoff. If you want to smoke pot all day and live off the government’s tit – you’re a jagoff. Done.”

“What if you’d like our financial system not to play roulette with our awfully hard to come by incomes?” Miles asks.

“Don’t start with me. Rick, what do you want Jeremy to do?”

Ricks sighs. “Just stay down here for now,” he tells Jeremy. “Help Miles finish the Penguins order.” He shakes his head and walks back towards the front of the warehouse with Bob.

“Sweet shirt,” Jeremy says once Rick and Bob are out of earshot.

“Yeah,” Miles laughs. “It was a big hit with Rick in case you couldn’t guess how that whole thing got started.”

“Had a feeling.”

Miles shows Jeremy the gist of how he’s got the order setup, the two pallets the merch was delivered on, and how he has the seven store distribution aligned. Jeremy starts from the bottom of the paperwork with the Penguins Mini Zamboni Plushes. *Grindstone*, Jeremy thinks but finds that Miles wants to continue the conversation.

“Seriously though,” Miles begins as he sorts through a box of Hockey Night in Pittsburgh towels, “you ever think of all the shit stored in here – and even all the items that get divided and delivered to the stores as soon as we receive them – and how not a single solitary one is made in the US?”

Jeremy nods, he supposes he’s never pulled back and *actually* thought about it, almost one of those things that’s just expected. When you’re a kid and everything you own has that MADEINCHINA stamp on it – from a basketball to a Ninja Turtle then why would you expect anything different.

“What about the J. Marcus items?” Jeremy asks, thinking of the local distributor who sells knockoff Steeler and Pens merch – the “Here We Go Stillers” and “Pixburgh Hockey” stamps placed on anything in black and gold.

“Check the tag. Made in China.”

Jeremy figures his confusion is due to some fundamental ignorance on his part, that since he’s never paid attention to politics he doesn’t understand why Miles’ shirt would cause such a stir. It seems to him like something he’s heard both sides arguing – that nothing is made in this country anymore – and it makes him think of the closing chapter of Bell’s novel: Dobie sitting on his front porch, reflecting on the hard fought union battle. *Made in the USA*, Dobie thinks to himself and he’s referring to more than just a stamp on a product. He’s

talking about human dignity, his lineage and those he'll always be indebted to. He's talking about pride in your work, believing in a cause and not letting anyone diminish your worth.

*Out of this furnace, this metal.*

Out of these party goods, these table skirts.

And Jeremy goes grindstone: these Pens earrings and necklaces; hat trick hats and skull caps; Penguins pens and pencils and erasers; pleather purses and Velcro wallets; porch mats that proclaim *Penguins Fans Welcome!*; Crosby jerseys; Malkin jerseys; Fleury jerseys; Penguins pucks and mini hockey sticks; animatronic Penguins dolls with buttons on their flippers to make them gyrate to Andrew W. K.'s "Party Hard"; Penguins stickers and temporary tattoo kits – *let's get the party going, let's get the party going* – Penguins folders and backpacks; Crosby backpacks; Malkin backpacks; Fleury backpacks; sherzeys for Crosby, Malkin, Fleury; and the t-shirts with no name on the back, only the logo on the front, and it reminds Jeremy of his Moses Yellowhorse tee. Swimming in the miasma of what he suddenly thinks must be the silliest logo he's ever seen – a penguin skating with a hockey stick – he's laughing at the thought of the asinine amount of products sold so people can feel a part of a community. A penguin with a hockey stick.

Evan responds to Jeremy's text, telling him he already has plans with his girlfriend but maybe they could do it some other time, and Jeremy messages right back that he needs to sack up. *Bring her along if you want*, he adds in a second text. Evan responds with a simple *K* and Jeremy rolls his eyes, unsure of how to read him.

After Miles enters the distribution sheets into the system he and Jeremy box up the merch for delivery and Jeremy mentions Miles' shirt again to reference the final chapter in *Out of This Furnace*.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Miles says, “haven’t read that since last spring, but he does go all industrial pride at the end, doesn’t he? Sort of a love letter to American manufacturing. Still think that’s great you’re reading that in a first-year writing class. What else are you reading this semester?”

Jeremy gives his embarrassed goofball shrug, says he honestly can’t really remember, that he’s just thinking about the paper he has to write, and to not sound like a total flake he mentions how Jesse started discussing other radical novels, how he dug up the IWW posters.

“Hell yeah, man,” Jesse smiles, “Wobbly art is the tits. You working here on Monday?”

“Should be.”

“Cool, I’ll bring something in that you’ll appreciate. You can watch me fuck with Rick some more.”

“Sounds good,” Jeremy laughs.

The two are getting set to wheel the order down to the delivery pallets when Mike announces himself with his obligatory *Yo* then shuffles down to Jeremy and Miles.

“Yo! Mike! How was that delivery?” Miles asks in that preening faux-sincere manner of his. He stands at his handcart full of boxes and waits for Mike’s response.

“Great,” Mike says and stares at Miles, seemingly waiting for him to leave.

“Is it me, or are you waiting for me to leave so you can talk to Jeremy?” he asks, grin widening. Mike brings one index finger to his nose, points the other to Miles. Miles stands pat. Mike rolls his eyes.

“Six?” he asks Jeremy.

“We were thinking, uh, later...maybe?”

“Six,” Mike says, gives an affirmative nod, and then shuffles back down the warehouse.

“Look at PartyMart,” Miles says, “playing matchmaker.”

Miles’ ass clown demeanor lessens Jeremy’s natural social embarrassment whenever somebody’s been left out of plans, so he doesn’t feel the need to extend a fake offer – *want to tag along and partake in very illegal drugs?* – and he just plays along with him.

“It’s the magic of this place.”

“You know what they say, party goods are the aphrodisiac of the consumer age.”

## Chapter 9

The Bronco has a nervous, silent energy that reminds Jeremy of being in his parents' house that morning. Marcus sits in the back with Scott riding shotgun and nothing is said about the absence of music. The address Mike texted Jeremy is in Lawrenceville and he takes Bigelow to the Bloomfield Bridge and when the road curves downward, Polish Hill is to their left and as they descend into the convergence of Bloomfield and Lawrenceville, the row houses packed together on the modest sloping terrain look like someone pulled a rug from underneath the neighborhood's foundation that left it permanently imbalanced. There's an illusory quality to it, Jeremy thinks, like that many homes shouldn't be able to squeeze into so tight a space.

Once they cross Liberty, instead of hovering above on the slant of the bridge they're in the thick of the Lawrenceville row houses now, and Jeremy supposes in a different context he wouldn't think anything of it but the stupid fact of the matter is they're Sewickley Academy kids on their way to a coke deal in a lower-class neighborhood. And Jeremy's heard all about how Lawrenceville is becoming the hipster haven of Pittsburgh, the Brooklyn of the Burgh, and all that, but Yo Mike is no hipster, and what was it he said in the truck – *you've got it written all over your face* – and the anxiety builds as Jeremy imagines a cartoonish green stench rising from the three of them that Mike can sniff out from a mile away.

“There it is,” Jerm says as they pass the address. It’s a row house in the middle of the block, but there’s an alley on the left side unlike most of the other homes. He takes a right and finds a spot to parallel. “Hold up a second,” he tells them once the keys are out of the ignition. He texts Mike to let them know they’re here – a few minutes early, which Jeremy thinks is good because if things go right he might still be able to make first pitch – and then it’s come to the moment Jeremy’s been thinking about since he left his parents’ house that morning. He begins to spin out, telling himself the gun is completely unnecessary, could literally be a *colossal fuck up* if Mike finds out he brought it, but it doesn’t outweigh the juvenile pull to show his value to Scott through what he can procure, because this is the way Scott views the world – acquisitions and liquidations – and he can see the negotiations are underway, the potential for devaluation, and he reaches to unlock the glove compartment.

“*Whoa,*” Marcus says. “What the hell is that?”

Jeremy has his eyes on him through the rearview mirror and he gives it one full second, lets it sink in.

“Play big, Marcus.”

He sweeps the gun behind, tucks it into his jeans, and glances at Scott, sees the moment of hesitation, and each second feels like ten as Jeremy waits for his response.

“Put your big girl panties on, Marcus,” Scott tells him and Jeremy steps out to cut off any possible response, makes sure his shirttail isn’t caught in his jeans.

When they turn the corner Mike’s standing up the street smoking a cigarette. “Yo Mike,” Jeremy calls out and Mike nods and says “Yo Jeremy,” in return. Jeremy introduces Scott and Marcus and Mike nods again, drops his cigarette to the pavement and they follow him down the narrow alley to a side door that leads them into a musty basement. On the first



step into the basement, it becomes official to Jeremy, the unchartered territory, that point of no return, and he runs through the only thing he has for guidance: *Goodfellas*, *The Departed*, maybe *The Wire*, something to help him know how to behave, and the scene is imbued with a muddy seventies acetate like they've moved to *Mean Streets* or *The Deer Hunter*. A punching bag hangs in the right corner with two-by-fours stacked against the walls, and as they descend, the center of the basement comes into view with a square table and a handful of lawn chairs, one of them occupied by a man with black hair cropped tight, stud earrings, and a nose that looks like it has taken a direct shot from a shovel.

Once they're off the stairs Jeremy notices the shower and toilet in the far corner with no surrounding walls, just a drain for the shower, that pre-war architectural relic of the rust-belt so workers could step in the back door to try and wash away the grime and sludge before seeing their families. The only point of comparison for his generation being a chemical shower station in a science lab. "Shit yeah," Scott says, "a Pittsburgh toilet. Sure I'll be putting that to use later."

"The hell you will," Mike grins and Jeremy feels like the ice has been broken.

Mike introduces them to Pat and everyone says *what up* in-non question form and the newcomers take a seat in a confused, stumbling neophyte manner while Mike starts pulling Keystones from a backpack one by one.

"Thought we'd build a base," he says.

"Build a base?" Scott asks. "Heard that with eating before drinking, but you're saying booze before blow?"

That's it, Jeremy thinks. That effortless ability to imbed himself in a setting even while acknowledging he's an outsider.

“Yeah, man?” Mike smirks, like adding the question mark is the explanation.

“I don’t know you clowns,” Pat says.

“Why you want to get gigged out at six anyway?” Mike asks. *Because you’re the one who set the time*, Jeremy is thinking and feels an instinctual pull to check the time on his phone. “No, we chill first, get some beers in our system. That’s the best way to do coke, anyway. The snap back. You guys have done coke before, right?”

“This guy,” Scott says and throws up his arms, smacks his palms to thighs on their way back down. “Who you think you’re talking to?”

Mike chuckles and Jeremy can see he’s taking a liking to Scott, because of course he is, but Pat appears more stolid, and Jeremy figures that’s natural, that he’d appear the same way in his position.

They crack their beers and there is something familiar and strange about the setting to Jeremy: five guys sitting around a table in a basement with no entertainment except the beers and themselves. It reminds him of when they first started drinking in high school and harder than getting the beer itself was finding someplace to consume said beer, which is why that place so often became a car on the open road, and so even someone’s cold-ass stale basement in February would do. And maybe this makes sense for the three nineteen-year-olds, but he finds himself thinking about Mike and Pat, supposes Mike’s mom occupies the house upstairs.

“So you go to Pitt?” Mike asks Marcus, nodding to his sweatshirt. “Or do you just want people to think you do?”

Scott busts up laughing and Marcus does, too, because he’s cool like that, and in his modest ho-hum robot way he says he does go to Pitt and it’s the slight uptick in his inflection

when he says *Pitt* that needles Jeremy and he's thinking of Mike white-knuckling the steering wheel on Fifth, waits to see how he responds. Mike does narrow his eyes a little, nods along, then asks what he's majoring in, and when Marcus tells him environmental science, Mike seems genuinely impressed. But there seems to be a figurative question mark behind it all. Like Mike can't quite figure Marcus out. And then it occurs to Jeremy: it's because Marcus is black, like he's never been around someone quite like Marcus before – expects him to be a certain way – and Mike has a natural pull to try and pin him down.

“So you just taking a bunch of science and math?” Pat asks.

“I like to spread it around, take a little bit of everything, but by the next year or so I'll be taking mostly upper level math and science.”

“Upper level, mind you,” Scott adds.

“Smart kid,” Mike says and places his empty can on the table, pulls another out of the backpack.

Jeremy pulls his phone out and checks the time, feels the game slipping away.

“Somewhere to be?” Mike asks in a way that's not threatening but not quite harmless either and Jeremy tells him he thought he felt his phone vibrate and this gets the table going about phantom vibrations they've all felt and whether or not smart phones cause brain tumors and Scott's saying *gotta die someday, might as well enjoy the ride* and he and Mike tap Keystones in a toast and Jeremy finds himself caught in a stare, eyes locked beneath the table where the concrete descends towards a drain, the surrounding area looking stained from elements that aren't water.

Then it's time for another round and Jeremy is staring up at the square of glass growing pink in the twilight and this time his phone really does vibrate and of course it's

Mom asking where he is in the most *Mom* way ever saying she *thought* he said he was coming tonight and Pat is saying his favorite thing about blow is how he can drink and drink and drink and then *Boom!* the blow keeps him right on-point, never sloppy, and Scotty B has his arms out at his sides and looks around the room before saying *So where the fuck it's at?*

“Gotta get our plans straight first,” Mike says. “What bar we headed to after?”

“This kid doesn't have a fake yet,” Scott says, thumb jerking to Marcus.

Before it gets too far, Jeremy mentions how he's supposed to go to Kat's thing, not to mention get his brother, and he extends a backhanded invite to everyone. Mike and Pat seem down for it though and Jeremy's wondering how that will go over with Kat when Mike says he knows a bar in Lawrenceville he can get Marcus into and they can all meet up later, and so, cool, everything seems copacetic, and then real smooth Mike makes the first mention of money – *no dealer though* – and the three are reaching for wallets, sorting bills, and then there's powder on a mirror and a credit card going *click click click* and Jeremy's heart is racing before anything's entered his system.

Then it's straight.

On-point.

And everyone's good and heading up the stairs and Jeremy makes sure he's last so no one gets behind him and when gets to the Bronco he slides the Colt back into the glove box and exhales and once the ignition turns he feels like things are in motion again.

\*

It's no problem cause he's on-point so he parks his car in the stadium lot, and even though he can see the game has ended, he heads over to the crowd gathered around Moon's dugout to search out Evan. He spots his parents first, then Evan between them, and before he

can reconsider he calls out *Yo* and it's not the sudden, startled turning of heads that gets him. It's the moment just after recognition, when they realize it's Jeremy, and he can see the subtle shift to fear in their eyes.

"So what's the word? How'd you pitch, Little Bro?"

"Good!" Dell speaks for him while Evan does his modest head-wobble like there are too many pros and cons to analyze before he can come to a conclusion. "Got another win!" she adds and Jeremy can feel the contrived good cheer, like if she can just force herself to be positive then this entire situation will just dissolve like sugar caramelized in a skillet.

"Well, you know, Mom," Jeremy begins because he just can't help but screw with her a little, "these new-fangled sabermetricians will tell you that wins are irrelevant these days. Isn't that right, Pop?"

But the Bulldog just nods grimly, not in response to his son's question, but rather that he's working things out in his mind and something suspected has been confirmed.

"So we rolling or what?" Jeremy asks anxiously, motions to parking lot.

"Dude, I have to shower at least," Evan says.

"Well, shit, son, let's get this show on the road then."

"*Lan-guage*," Dell says through her teeth, the pretense gone.

Jeremy motions to the lot again and catches Evan exchanging the briefest of glances with their parents, and there's something about it that makes Jeremy feel like the three are complicit.

"Meet you at the house, then?" Jeremy says.

But once they get to the house Jeremy fakes a phone call while everyone goes inside, and when Evan finally makes it back out to the car Jeremy's all smiles, congratulates him on

another win, and tells him to saddle up. Once they're out on the road Jeremy asks how he pitched, trying to get beyond the superficial win/loss, good/bad binaries. He asks if he was getting the corner calls, how his off speed felt, if he was changing the eye-levels for the batters.

Then he asks how the Bulldog thought he pitched, and it's ever so slight, a miniscule change in his spine, but one that reverberates through Evan's neck and jaw, and suddenly he's all buttoned up because he still thinks Pop hung the fucking moon. Evan nods, says the Bulldog was cool after the game, which Jeremy knows really means that the first thing said to Evan was probably about *that pitch in the bottom of the third when you had the batter in a 1-2 and no one on base but you sunk the ball in the dirt and blah blah blah* but these things don't seem to bother Evan like they did Jeremy.

Before they pick up Evan's girl Jeremy swings by the nearest beer emporium and grabs a thirty rack of Keystone. He tosses a can to Evan, cracks one himself before *h-ing* out of the parking lot. Evan holds the can uncertainly, traces a finger around its rim.

"Won't bite," Jeremy tells him and he laughs.

"I'll just wait till we pick up Eliot," he says. "In case I have to talk to her parents."

"Sure thing, Little Brother," Jeremy says and cranks the stereo.

But he feels like the night is slipping away before it even begins. He thinks back to those nights Scott would finagle his way into a case of beer and they would drive around Pittsburgh listening to music. Anticipation would build as they entered the Fort Pitt Tunnel and waited to emerge over the confluence of the three rivers, the golden triangle, the skyscrapers of downtown. They'd cruise the Parkway where it takes you down close to the Monongahela, the magnetic lights of the Southside shivering across its surface and making

those moments feel electric and essential. After a couple beers they'd sing along to favorite songs like they really did *mean* something, and Jeremy wants to recreate this feeling with Evan, but he's reluctant, even after they pick up Eliot. Jeremy clinks his beer to the unopened one in Evan's hand, takes a swig and finds Empire of the Sun on his iPod because he's heard Evan listening to them and when the chorus starts up Jeremy raises his beer to the rhythm and is shouting out *We are the people who rule the world* but Evan only chuckles once and after a minute or so the weight of awkwardness presses down on Jeremy like the Bronco is slowly compacting into a cube of tin.

He uses the pretense of a brotherly talk to turn down the stereo.

"Listen, Ev," he begins, "you ever think about how Pop was a catcher but groomed us to be pitchers instead?" Evan eyes him curiously. "See, as the catcher he gets to call all the shots. He gives the sign, pitcher obeys, or he goes and gets in his grill. It's the same shit with us. We're his little pitchers he gets to control forever and forever, amen." Evan nods but he's averted his eyes. "All I'm saying is that there are lots of ways to live your life and you don't have to follow every one of his little *guidelines*. It's Friday night and you pitched a hell of a game. Enjoy it."

Evan's barely nodding now, just staring – at *what*? Jeremy would like to know, and it's the nettling feeling of being placated that keeps him going even though he knows he should've stopped long before.

"The Bulldog can only see in black and white. Good/bad, right/wrong. As if the entire world isn't all about the shades of gray. Just remember that, Ev. See the gray. Some things aren't so easy to slap a label on."

He looks in the mirror to gauge Eliot's reaction but she's focused on the back of Evan's head like they're Shining or something and Jeremy gets the feeling she's uncomfortable with his drinking, might suspect he's on something more. He finishes his beer and crushes the can against the dash so hard it makes her jump. Jeremy laughs and reaches to change the song when he feels like the car might be veering just a smidge into the other lane before he jerks it back. Eliot gasps and places a hand on Evan's headrest.

"No need to worry," Jeremy says and looks in the mirror again but Eliot won't meet his eyes. "You might say I'm an old pro at this. Ain't that right, Ev?"

"Yeah," he mutters, perched forward in his seat, thumbnail between his teeth.

When they turn down Baum Jeremy's eyes are again drawn to the spires of East Liberty Presbyterian, and maybe because of his little spiel with Evan, the spires make him think of the Bulldog and the strangeness Jeremy finds in genealogy: the Bulldog's mill town roots, the deaths, the estrangement from those who are left, the *unlikelihood* of finding Dell, and even the line to his best and only friend Kovacs, to Katrina, to Jeremy.

They park and Jeremy texts Kat to let her know they're outside. She meets them at the security door in a skirt and breezy top, her black hair bouncing around her shoulders, and Jeremy can tell she's at least a couple drinks in. She makes a big deal out of Evan immediately, hugs him tight and does her auntish *loook at you* before asking her perfunctory questions about his game.

"This you?" Jeremy asks referring to the dance music pounding through the walls as they enter the hallway.

"Didn't I tell you?" she says and slides her hips into his. "Dance party, Fungo."



It's not as loud as Jeremy thought it would be inside, it's just the walls accentuating the bass. All the furniture in the main room has been pushed along the walls with strands of mini white lights strung throughout the space, and there, in the center of the loft, is a tangled horde of awkward white people laughing and gyrating and if nothing else *bouncing* to electronica. A friend of Kat's immediately sucks her back into the mass that Jeremy avoids like a frothy amoeba eyeing him hungrily.

He moves to the fridge and makes space for the case of beer, notes that Evan seems to have misplaced his beer so he offers him another.

"I'm all right," Evan says and reflexively moves his arm to Eliot's waist as if one thing had to do with the other. Jeremy looks at him, makes him squirm. "Getting up early in the morning to do some drills with Dad," Evan says.

"Well, I have no such worries, do I?" Jeremy asks as he cracks a beer and takes a drink without breaking eye contact with Evan.

"*Eh-li-uh?*" Jeremy offers in his *E.T.* voice, which gets no reaction.

"No-thank-you," she says, the cheeriness a bit too strained.

Jeremy laughs and takes another drink, takes his phone out to text Scott, lets him know they're at Kat's. But through some gradual process of osmosis, the vibe of the party begins to seep its way into Jeremy and he becomes more relaxed, even as he just leans against the kitchen counter and drinks his beer alone. He can't tell where he's at with the blow. He doesn't feel amped or drunk or sloppy but he doesn't feel straight either and when he finishes his beer, perhaps a little quick, he rummages for another.

Evan and Eliot have gravitated to their own undefined space in the apartment, the equivalent of a party dead zone of their own creation. They avoid walls and counters where

people congregate and stand in the in-between of the kitchen and main room. Rachel has spied Jeremy and she chats with him, but he's observing his brother, his mating habits. Eliot's attractive in that objective-conventional-male-magazine way, he decides. Average height and just curvy enough to still maintain a comprehensive slimness, he pictures her standing naked in front of a mirror and inspecting the various folds that pop up as she bends and turns. And she's blond, *because of course she is*, and maybe she's a natural blond, but not *that* natural, and there's the tight jeans and three-quarter sleeve v-neck that brings Jeremy back to that word again – *conventional* – and Jeremy wonders what it's like for Evan: did he feel some overwhelming release of hormones when he first saw her that screamed *MATE*? Or does status come into play? Has he ranked the girls at his high school? Has his clique of dudes? Is Eliot simply someone who checks all the boxes? Someone he could never have his balls busted for? *Threw yer line out and reeled in boot, bro*. Jeremy doesn't think so. He sees it. The attentive way he has, the pull to make her laugh. But it's just so cookie-cutter. So *expected*.

“Uh-oh, watch out,” Rachel says and Jeremy is thinking *what?* just as Kat takes him by his free hand and commandeers his beer with the other, takes a long drink, and then is shuffling backwards towards the mass with Jeremy in tow. But the edge is not enough and Kat twirls herself through the peripheral wall and into the nucleus of the cell where the bodies in motion collapse around them. At such close proximity her eyes have to shift up to meet his, but it's only for a moment and then they're averted as she brings her body in close, lips at his jaw and Jeremy thinks she's asking the question *Was it suddenly?* before realizing she's somewhere between mouthing and singing along with Phoenix. Then her body's away from his again and he finds his hands moving toward her as some sort of instinctual safety

mechanism. He feels the silk of her top, something form-fitting and lacy underneath, and there's a magnetic pull to the touch and feel and friction of fiber, and Kat is back into his body again saying *where would you go* and pulling away and then she's playing to the music and twirling an imaginary lasso and cinching him tight and spinning herself around and backing into Jeremy through the invisible line. Her waist finds his and the blood and pulse of the moment allows physiology to do its job and Jeremy's hard and he has the fleeting fear that this is why Kat twirls away again but there her lips are at his jaw saying *could you run into?* and his hands find the curve of hip and he meets her eyes as she mouths *could you go and run into me?* and Jeremy sees the beads of sweat on her forehead where her bangs have been brushed away and he feels raw and ungedled, wanting the sweat and grime and filth of it all, and somebody accidentally corkscrews between them and is apologizing to Kat and Jeremy's drawing his head back in a sigh and the strands of lights have an astrological feel among the whirring bodies and somebody behind him is sing-shouting *forever is a long, long time when you've lost your way* and then Kat has his hand again, lacing her fingers between his and pulls him towards her, lips so close at his jaw and lobe that it feels like the heat of her breath giving life to the words *forever is a long, long time*.

And she stops cold. Like a rope pulled taut suddenly scissored in two. Her expression moves to anger and she stalks out of the mass of people as Jeremy turns to see that Scott and the crew have arrived. Scott is locked into some sort of tangle with Evan that seems to have other people alarmed, and by the time Jeremy gets there Evan has wrestled free, his face flushed and hair awry, but he's got that grin on his face and Jeremy knows it means something to him to have this older crew, friends of his brother, pay him so much attention.

“Hey,” Kat barks at Scott, “can you try to act like a fully developed human being?”

“That’s the thing though,” Marcus laughs, “he *isn’t* fully developed. Probably has five more years before his brain is fully formed, biologically speaking.”

He’s giddy with himself in a way Jeremy’s never seen and even Kat looks annoyed when she sighs and says *Marcus* like she’s so incredibly disappointed that he’s wormed his way into that group of people she’s classified as mind-crushingly Neanderthal.

“Jesus, man,” Scott says, “even when you’re schmacked you act like you’re answering test questions.” And it’s like Scott’s synapses are firing in chaotic brushstrokes, splashing some portrait of a night together in staccato bursts because he turns to Jeremy and gives a *Big Jerm!* and suddenly his arm is around his neck and he’s asking where the beers are at.

“Big Jerm,” Mike laughs. “I like that.”

“Hell yeah, man,” Scott says, “Big Jerm and Scotty Ballgame.”

Jeremy catches the glare Kat sends him but he shrugs it off and directs the guys to his case of Keystone in the fridge. And though the fracas has been settled, and their group has relaxed into a circle along the counter, Jeremy discerns the edge in the glances they receive.

Maybe it’s purely the residual alarm from Scott’s behavior, Jeremy thinks, but he doesn’t buy it. Rachel has appeared at Kat’s side and Jeremy’s pretty sure this is for one reason. It’s the lingering unease in the air, the shift in the atmosphere that seems centered on Mike and Pat. It’s not as if anyone is glaring maliciously – it’s not actually in anyone’s look at all, but their way of *not* looking – their way of pretending they don’t notice at all. And the resentment begins to boil because it hits him in a flashing pique of perception that it’s not demarcation defined by clothing, but the *shade* of clothing, the mother fucking *hue*. The

room is full of blacks and charcoals and deep navy denims and plaid so dark and briny the pattern can barely be discerned. Round slabs of black filling their lobes instead of Pat's faux-diamond studs. His and Mike's jeans are light. If put to a PartyMart color swatch they'd land somewhere between Caribbean and Baby Blue. And their t-shirts are loud. Flashy designs that span the length of the fabric and Timberlands whose color seems so *bright* in context.

And this is the thing about the CMU kids, Jeremy thinks, aside from the designer frames that give them that cultured and hip and tediously learned look, he's certain the price tags for the practiced look of *not trying* that define this crowd would be nearly identical to Mike and Pat's.

He brings his attention back to their inner circle at the sound of Rachel asking about Scott's backwards hat, if it follows him everywhere he goes. "And what about those rubber bands?" Scott glances down at the bands on both his wrists. "Are they just, like, precautionary? Never know when you're going to *bind* something?"

And Scott plays along: digs at her glasses, her "boy's" haircut.

"The word you're looking for is *androgynous*."

"Match made in heaven," Scott says, pointing to Marcus and Rachel.

"I'm in!" Marcus says, hand raised, and everyone laughs because the commixing has made him so giddy and in the pause of laughter Jeremy scans the room to find that Evan and Eliot have separated themselves again from the party. This time they're sitting together in a love seat. Evan's doing an impression of something and the jolt of laughter that comes from Eliot is so guttural and pure. She has her hand on his arm, bracing herself or begging him to stop, or both, but Evan keeps it going a beat longer, a sly smile on his face. The scene is

striking because Jeremy's never thought of his brother as particularly clever, and maybe he's not, maybe Eliot just brings it out in him, or maybe Eliot's the only person who actually finds him funny. But it's the sincerity he sees in his brother's face that gets him and he knows what lies behind it all will never feel stilted for Evan.

Jeremy finishes his beer, sets the empty on the counter and heads toward the love seat. He sits down on the armrest, looming above Evan, and their conversation abruptly stops as Evan glances up to him. "What up, you two?" Jeremy asks and claps Evan on the back.

"Not much," Evan says, "was thinking we need to head back soon, though."

"Sure thing, Little Brother. Looks like things are starting to wind down here anyway."

"Cool. So, I was thinking I'd drive us home then?"

"Pffft. Why would you do that?"

"Well..."

But another circle of conversation has caught his attention, a group closer to the door where someone has bleated out *Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board*. And somebody cries back *Zora!*

"Please," Jeremy says and waves him off. "We'll head out in fifteen."

*It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and—  
Plath!*

"Sorry," Evan says, "those are the conditions."

Jeremy can't help but smile. "You sneaky little rat," he says, "look at you and Mom, thinking you're all smart."

Evan shrugs. "That's how it's gonna go."

"We'll see," Jeremy says and then he's off the arm rest and heading for the fridge to grab another beer on principle. When he gets within range he hears Marcus talking in tonight's unusually animated manner about how we wants to eventually get his PhD in Atmospheric Sciences and people give the markers of audible active listening until Scott abruptly ends the monologue.

"*Je-sus* Christ," he says, "would you give it a fucking rest about school already?" And Jeremy knows this is the moment. Jeremy's seen it brewing, probably fueled it himself. "We get it," Scott continues, "you go to Pitt. Congrats, dipshit."

"Fuck off," Marcus says, but it's a timid half-hearted effort.

"Yo, Mike," Scott says and gives Mike a backhanded tap on the arm as if he weren't paying attention. "You know me and Jerm have the same writing teacher at CCAC that home boy here does at Pitt?"

"Yeah?" Mike says but glances at Pat like he couldn't care less about who teaches what and where.

"Yeah, you believe that? I'm telling you, these major universities, it's all a scam. Sucking these fools money left and right."

"Don't be an asshole," Kat says.

"Yeah, hey, Scott," Marcus says, directs his index finger toward him. "*Fuck. Off.*"

Scott hams it up, exaggerates his laugh, keeps backhanding Mike, which causes him and Pat to chuckle. Marcus looks frustrated. He takes a step back, then forward, working out the words before he says them.

"Seriously, I've put up with it enough. Deal with your own insecurities."

“*Insecurities*,” Scott laughs.

“I’m sorry you dicked around too much in high school, that your dad’s a junkie, or whatever the reasons are that you’re at CCAC, but you’re not taking that shit out on me.”

“Please, my man,” Scott says, “we both know why you’re at Pitt.”

Though Jeremy’s standing right there, he can feel himself disconnect, float away until the scene unravels behind the acetate film.

“No, Scott, please tell me.”

“Quotas.”

“*Damn*,” Mike laughs and brings a fist to his mouth like he’s an audience member of an afternoon talk show and he and Pat’s laughter block out Kat’s audible disgust.

“Quotas?” Marcus nearly shouts.

“Quotas.”

“You think I’m a fucking *number*?”

“*Quo-tas*,” Scott says in some bizarre sing-songy voice that causes Mike and Pat to lose it.

“You think you’re smarter than me?” Marcus asks with his arms thrust out wide. Jeremy can’t help but notice how large Marcus is making himself, how small Scott remains.

“Brother,” Scott says, “I *know* I’m smarter than you.”

Marcus fires off a litany of terms Jeremy figures are related to atmospheric sciences. He dares Scott to identify a single one, and maybe it’s that the music is still playing, that so many people are still dancing or locked in their own worlds, but the majority of the party exists outside this bizarre bubble of human activity and has allowed it to proceed this far, has allowed Scott to feel as comfortable as does. He continues to laugh Marcus off.



“Calm down, crazy,” Scott says. “We get it. You’re into science. But,” he says and takes a sip of beer, enjoys drawing it out, “you know what you call a black scientist, right?”

“*Scott*,” Kat barks and whether it’s her tone or that they themselves think Scott has crossed the line, Mike and Pat appear stunned into silence. She turns to Jeremy, whacks him in the chest, but he is watching from very far away. “You need to leave, Scott,” Kat says, which makes him hold up his hands in feigned-innocence like *what did I do?*

“Tell me, Scott, what do you call a black scientist?” Marcus asks.

“You haven’t heard?”

“I want you to say it.”

Scott laughs, backhands Mike again.

“You’re a coward,” Marcus says and sticks a finger in Scott’s face before he turns and walks out of the apartment.

“Marcus, come back,” he calls in the innocent voice.

“You’re despicable,” Kat tells him.

“*What?*” Scott asks, taking his ploy to new levels of faux-ignorance. “I didn’t *create* the joke, I just asked if he’d heard it. Is that not what happened?”

And Jeremy’s struck by his confidence, how he hasn’t even moved. Because in some twisted way, Scott’s right – he didn’t say anything – yet it’s precisely what was left unspoken that holds so much power, how he led Marcus to the edge, the impact somehow greater by leaving it unsaid. Kat has her jaw out, leering at Scott, and Jeremy notices that Rachel has been there the whole time, too, dumbstruck into silence, and Jeremy wonders what they both share, why both of them, for completely different reasons, let the thing occur without saying a word.

## Chapter 10

Jeremy wakes to the sound of Evan's feet shuffling down the stairs. But his body tells him with a listless urgency that it's not time and he dozes again. After he toyed with Evan a little in the parking lot, dangling the keys only to swipe them away when Evan reached for them, Jeremy finally consented and climbed into the backseat. Then consented again by crawling into his old bed, but faced with the reality of seeing his parents this morning he wishes he hadn't. He feels like he's been bedridden for weeks. He thinks of the scene in *Se7en*: man strapped to a mattress for a full year while his body tortuously wastes away. It sounds okay right now.

When he finally makes it down a little before noon, he finds Dell in the kitchen steeping tea. She smirks and says, "Well, look what the cat *drugged* in," in her phony Pennsylvucky accent, assumes a snarky pose against the counter that makes Jeremy prepare for the third degree. "So did you tie one on and then decide it was a bright idea to drive all the way back out here?"

"*Tie one on?*" he mocks. "No one says that, Mom."

She holds her mug up to her mouth but doesn't take a sip, just breathes in the aroma, and examines Jeremy as if he doesn't notice.

"Besides, Evan drove us home," he says.

"Well, good."

He glances out the window: the Bulldog and Evan are in the backyard. Since Evan pitched last night, the Bulldog has the soft toss stand setup and he squats a foot away from Evan, lobs balls that Evan crushes into the net, the *ping* of the aluminum bat coming like clockwork. There's no doubt Evan will be a pitcher at the next level, but *gotta work on all five tools*, Jeremy mocks to himself. Pop always did have a thing about Saturday mornings.

It was a couple weeks after Jeremy had told Kovacs off that the Bulldog was up in his room at eight sharp on a Saturday morning, saying there were chores to do, that Jeremy wasn't going to be a bum just because he quit baseball. He poked him in the ribs. Tried humor: *He who hoots with the owls will not soar with the eagles, buddy*. Jeremy was crashing on cocaine for the first time and when the Bulldog poked him in the ribs for a fourth time Jeremy flung the sheets off and sprang from the bed so fast his father looked frightened. He'd never seen his father frightened. Jeremy started screaming like a banshee, waving his arms, telling his father to leave him the fuck alone. Then he collapsed back into his bed feeling like someone had taken a straw and sucked all the marrow from his bones.

Jeremy eyes them through the window as Evan puts down the bat, he and the Bulldog both putting their gloves on. He's caught off guard when Dell slaps a book to his chest.

"As requested," she says and picks her mug back up. It's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Jeremy tells her thanks, flips through some pages. "I suppose fair compensation, given that you're strapped for cash, would be an A in this class."

"Sure," he mutters. And that's such a Bulldog way to look at it, he thinks, has to see everything in black and white, like an A actually signifies anything other than a dog learning tricks, like there's nothing else on the spectrum of valuing an education. He looks to the backyard again where the two stand and talk, the Bulldog gesticulating with his glove on his

hand. Jeremy has the sudden urge to force a catch between the three of them somehow, and he turns and heads upstairs. He looks for his old glove in his closet but can't find it, so he heads for Evan's to see if he has an extra one. He rummages through Evan's closet but comes up empty and is about to head back downstairs, maybe try the garage, when he catches sight of a picture on Evan's desk of the Bulldog.

It's one from his playing days Jeremy has never seen before. It looks new, bright and glossy like someone recently ordered it from the Post Gazette's archives. The Bulldog's in full uniform, catcher's equipment and all, trudging off the field after an inning. He's removed his mask and holds it in his throwing hand, his bare knuckles curling around the black metal rungs while the old, worn catcher's mitt covers the other hand. From the dying ivy on the outfield wall Jeremy figures it's either early April or late September at Wrigley Field. The sky is overcast and the Bulldog wears a black long-sleeve shirt under the Pirates' road grays. The photo looks like it was taken from ground level because even though the Bulldog's head is tilted down, Jeremy can still see the furrowed brow, the despondency. His stubble is mostly gray and Jeremy decides it's the last year of the Bulldog's meandering eighteen-year career when his knees had given out and the pain in his hips kept him from catching up to the young arms' fastballs.

Two months later the organization would offer him the minor league minimum and in February, three weeks into spring training, he was told it was time for both parties to move on.

It would be the first of many times in rapid succession the stoic Bulldog would be told he wasn't good enough and Jeremy thinks he understands the concept of middle-aged depression. He thinks of the framed picture in the Kovacs' home. It would have been

thirteen years prior. Stan has just thrown a mammoth sweeping hook of a curve that the batter can do nothing but have fleeting, flinching thoughts about, and the ball slides perfectly through the zone and smacks into the Bulldog's mitt. Third strike. Third out. Bottom nine. Game seven of the World Series. Jeremy's seen the footage so many times it's beyond ordinary. Kovacs swiping the hat off his head with so much force it's like he's trying to tear his whole scalp off and the hat and the glove both fly out of the frame as he rockets them skyward and the cascading flood of dopamine somehow sends him into a full-on Olympic toe-touch. And this is the shot frozen in time. Legs spread impossibly wide, arms up and out and fingers extended so wide the fingertips themselves are screaming *HOLY FUCKING SHIT!* and then there's the Bulldog: jogging towards the mound, ball in mitt, and the only sign that something momentous has occurred is the closed fist solemnly pumping in celebration.

And where do you go from there? Twenty-three years old. Do you know at that time nothing in your life will ever come close to this moment again? Not *in* the moment, but in the months to come, during the off-season, when you're reflecting on the achievement, do you think: that was it, the high point, all downhill from here. Of course you're just then hitting your prime so maybe you don't think in these terms. Maybe you still look at this world that facilitates baseball as a career as a place of infinite possibilities, but later, maybe, say at thirty-one, when the pain in your hip seems to be permanent, do you feel it slipping away? Begin to dread the day you'll be told to move along, your services are no longer needed. And then, like a flash, you're hobbling off the field at thirty-six, still a young man but playing a game with even younger men, boys, really, and it has made you feel very, very old and *flash!* the moment is captured forever.

And then what? You've made a living on the no-nonsense grit and toughness that suddenly seems limiting in terms of capitalizing off of your regional semi-fame. The natural charisma and flare so easy to see in Stan Kovacs leads to a never-ending stream of interviews, personal appearances and radio spots for anyone asking him to relive the Series in '79, or even get his take on the current goings-on in Major League Baseball. Nobody asks for the Bulldog's time. And so even though they were both marginal talents at the professional level who shared an epic moment, the Bulldog's career even lasting longer than his best friend's, Kovacs will be able to monetize it in a way that's unattainable for Michael Starcevic. Because it turns out the Old Bulldog was also a Giant Asshole and it was Kovacs himself who put it best to Jeremy one night when the Starcevic's were over and Kovacs had put down a beer or three. "You've heard that saying about hard-ass ballplayers? You hate him when you play against him, love him when he's on your team. Well, that's not the case with your dad. His teammates hated his guts too. But *goddammit* every team needs one of him."

And so life becomes reduced to managing monthly finances, hoping your kids don't become raging fuckups. The long, aggravating struggle to find meaningful work after baseball lands you in the receiving department at Home Depot, which eventually you settle into because, for the most part, you're left to yourself and you appreciate working on your feet, but of course management doesn't really care for the instinct you have to invade people's personal space when you tell them to *knock the fucking grab-ass off and unload the fucking truck*. But, for a few more years, anyway, you still have someone at home who you can impart your knowledge to. Because it's good to identify with something, to have a skill,

something honed and crafted through hard work, to be proud, and you hope your kids understand this. It's the best you can do.

Jeremy bends the picture in half, creating a smooth crease down the middle, and slides it into *The Grapes of Wrath*. He's given up on catch with the Bulldog and Evan and is thinking instead of his father's old Louisville Slugger, the beautiful cursive scrawl of Michael Starcevic seared into the northern white ash. It's a sudden impulse: maybe try to get Scott to play homerun derby they way they used to at the Montessori field.

He gets downstairs, makes sure Dell is in the kitchen, then sneaks back to the Bulldog's closet where he finds the bat resting in the corner. He carries it at his side and is nearly out the front door when Dell calls after him.

"I'm just borrowing it," he says. "I'll bring it right back."

Her brow furrows, unsure of what he's talking about. "Oh," she laughs, then waves him off. "I don't care about that old bat. No, I wanted to talk to you about Gran. You said you'd visit. When would be good for you?"

He runs through his schedule, thinking there's never a good time, because that place makes his skin crawl, and maybe any other morning he'd give her a line and never follow up on it, but after thinking about it he asks, "How about now?"

\*

Jeremy and Dell walk through the sliding doors of Allegheny Specialty Care and Jeremy is stricken by the synthesis of smells that he associates with baleful auguries. He gets it, Gran's in a specialty care facility, the place is going to smell like disinfectant. But to him the witches' brew of chemicals oxidizes into a tyrannical form of formaldehyde. It's not

death the smell makes him think of, it's of never getting there, of being in-between, like people are being preserved.

They get to Gran's room when one of the nurses has brought her lunch by. "Hey, hey," Dell says as she knocks on the open door. The nurse turns and smiles and Gran does, too, but in a much slower, less responsive way. Her spinal stenosis has deteriorated to the point where she only moves from her bed to her wheelchair. The doctors told Dell that it would be operable but she also has congestive heart failure and has developed the early signs of renal failure. Her entire body has swelled since the last time Jeremy saw her, she's turned moon-faced and shut-eyed and the sight of her catches Jeremy by surprise.

"Hey, Boo," Gran says to Dell, which Jeremy figures is what she used to call her as a child, something about the symmetry of life that brought it back to her mind.

"And look who else came to see you," Dell says and Gran looks at Jeremy and he knows there's recognition in her eyes, but there's also the slightest question, like she knows it's her grandson, just not which one.

"Jeremy was at the house today," Dell says, stepping in, "and said he wanted to see you."

"Oh," Gran says in a surprised and pleased tone somehow laced with pain, as if she's touched by the gesture but even the figurative touching of emotions causes discomfort.

"Hi, Gran," Jeremy says. "Good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too, Boo," she says and then turns to Dell and laughs. Jeremy's struck by the genuineness of it, how she's laughing at herself and simultaneously telling her daughter thank you for reminding her of her grandson's name. "Oh, loll," she says and keeps laughing. "You all...I just don't know anymore."



“You’re doing fine,” Dell says, which makes Gran grunt and say *oh sure* all sarcastic and there it is, Jeremy thinks, that’s the person that I know, but then Dell says something about her posture and she’s up and adjusting the pillows behind Gran’s back and it sends her into a fit.

“What are you *doing*?”

“You’re slumping, Mom. We need to get you upright.”

And Gran starts wailing, calling for help to the best of her debilitated ability, which doesn’t allow for tremendous volume, but it’s the awkward horror of the moment, a mother thinking her daughter is assaulting her, that has Jeremy telepathically pleading with Dell to just stop what she’s doing.

“There,” Dell says patiently, as if nothing happened. “All better. We just need to be sure you’re upright during the day – keep that circulation going.” Gran shakes her head and mutters something that Dell ignores completely. Her food smells awful, Jeremy thinks. The formaldehyde has invaded this, too, the purpose of the food isn’t nourishment, but part of the pre-embalming stage. Gran has her fork in hand, face leaned close to her plate inspecting what’s in front of her.

“Here,” Dell says and begins arranging the small dishes on her plate, moving certain ones closer, and it sends Gran into another fit.

“Oh,” she calls out, like this too has caused physical pain. “*Now*, what do you think you’re *doing*?”

Dell steps back, and in the most delicate manner, places a hand on her mother’s shoulder. “I was just trying to help. I’ll leave you alone though.” She turns and pulls up a

chair next to Jeremy and she makes small talk with him, gives her mother some ostensible privacy while she eats.

When Gran seems close enough to finished, Dell tells her about getting *The Grapes of Wrath* for Jeremy, and Gran makes a *hmmph* sound he doesn't know what to make of. "So, I was thinking you could tell him some stories," she tells her mother.

"Stories?"

"Yeah, you know, of growing up in Stigler." Gran doesn't know what to make of this, and Dell cuts Jeremy a quick glance, winks. "Well, maybe something will come to you." And she transitions to telling Gran about Evan's game last night, getting another win, striking out seven, and Gran starts chuckling.

"Oh, Boo," she says, "you always did love baseball. You were going to be the first woman baseball player." She laughs heartily and Dell peeks at Jeremy, grins. "Loll," Gran says, "your room was so *pink*. Pink wallpaper, pink bedspread, dolls in pink dresses, but you wanted to put those *ugly* baseball pennants everywhere."

"It's true," Dell laughs. "I did."

"And those *statistics*. Oh my heavens, you used to sit at the kitchen table with your father and study those box scores."

The move is so instinctual he can't help but turn to Dell, because the feeling outright frightens him, that there were things she wanted him to see, the symmetry and circularity, that she knows him so much better than he wants to admit.

"And what was his name?" Gran asks, her face almost pleading to Dell.

"Who?" Dell asks.

"You know, that ballplayer. The one you liked so much."

“Oh, you mean Willie Mays.”

“Willie Mays,” Gran repeats, like the name holds some ineffable, mythological power. “You were going to *be* Willie Mays.”

“It’s true,” Dell laughs, harder this time. “I was.”

“And, well, you know how Mother was,” Gran says and Dell goes right along, encourages her with a an *uh-huh* and Jeremy figures this is part of the routine now, the random connections, the memories that arise out of thin air. “She was just so *stern*.”

“Grandma Katie?”

“*Yes*. So old and stern. When I was a girl she would’ve been forty or so, I suppose, but of course I thought she was a hundred and *ten!*”

This causes Dell to bust up in surprise, she brings a hand to her mouth, and the look she gives Jeremy tells him this is the first time she’s heard her mother talk like this, something about her tone.

“She was so funny with your father, though,” Gran goes on.

“Yeah?”

“Oh, of course. This was when he was back from the war and already planning on going to law school, but none of that mattered to Mother, you know. It was just after Betsy had been married and your father was getting close to asking me. It was a Sunday. The week after Easter. And he was sitting on the sofa looking uncomfortable as all get out, and mother says to him, she says, ‘you know what I like about my new son-in-law? Three things. First, he’s a Presbyterian. Second, he’s Scotch-Irish through and through. And third, he’s a Republican.’ And it was that look she gave him, knowing he was *none* of those things!”

Dell has her hand at her mouth again, her eyes watering up, and Jeremy gets the sense she's just thankful for this moment – her mother and father, her grandmother. Gran chuckles some more and tries to adjust her positioning and then cries out again, begins to whimper like a small child.

Dell lunges out of her seat. “Mother,” she says, her hand barely touching Gran’s shoulder.

“Oh, you all,” Gran says. “I just don’t know anymore.”

“Why don’t I see if I can get you another pain pill?”

“Okay,” Gran whimpers.

Dell mouths to Jeremy that she’ll be right back and she heads down the hall in search of a nurse, and as her footsteps grow faint it’s like Jeremy can see a fog pass over Gran, her lids grow heavy and there’s the slightest slump in her neck, and her head falls forward, lifts up, but then it’s down again. Jeremy thinks of when Gran was still in the retirement community and fell in her kitchen one evening. She lay on the floor for fourteen hours before someone found her. A urinary tract infection set in, Shingles, and due to being severely dehydrated, the onset of dementia.

Then, as soon as it came, the fog lifts and Gran looks directly at Jeremy, eyes sharp. “Where is she? Where’s Ruby Dell?” she asks and it comes out like an accusation.

“She went to find a nurse, I think.”

“I knew it!” she says. “Every time *her* and some *doctor* get to scheming together it ends up bad for *me*. I don’t know what she’s after, but she’s not *getting* it.”

Jeremy stares at her, watches the flare settle, then dissolve and within a few more seconds he thinks she probably doesn’t even remember saying anything. *This? This is what*

*we wait for? What we live for?* Dell's footfalls sound in the hall, then Jeremy hears the hushed voices of his mother and the nurse. They stop just outside Gran's room and it's then that she catches the sound, maybe just the pitch and timbre of her daughter's voice, her guardian, and her head moves in that direction. A soft *hmmm* sound comes from her as though just a trace of Dell's voice comforts her. Like this, Jeremy thinks, if things could stay just like this. And then Dell is back in the room, giving her mother a pain pill, which she accepts like a small child, until Dell begins sorting through Gran's daily pill box.

"What are you doing now?" his grandmother grumbles.

"I'm just making sure that—"

"I won't have *it!*" she snaps and flails her arm at the pill box in Dell's hand. She misses and Dell holds it away from her. "I won't have you messing things up anymore!"

"Well, I'm sorry, Mom," Dell says in a tone Jeremy finds remarkably placid. "I wasn't trying to mess things up. Maybe Jeremy and I should go – come back another day when you're feeling better."

Dell nearly jog-walks out of the facility. Jeremy trails behind, observes his mother fumbling in her purse for her keys long before they reach the car, but she walks so fast that it takes her a long time to finally fish them out. She sighs when she's seated in the car, keys still in her hand.

"How do you deal with that?"

She turns to her son, one eyebrow cocked so high Jeremy wonders for a fleeting moment if she's having an aneurysm. "What?"

"That was awful," he says, confused that they aren't on the same page. "I don't know how you're able to put up with that on a daily basis."

“That is my *mother*, Jeremy.”

“So that means she’s allowed to treat you like shit?”

She tries to slap him across the face, but the angles are awkward inside the car and it ends up as nothing more than an aggressive pat on the cheek. The move stuns Jeremy at first, makes his body go rigid, but as the moment passes he can’t help but laugh a little to himself – she’s probably wanted to do that for a long time.

“I cannot believe I let you get so disrespectful,” she says and grips the steering wheel, palms twisting against leather. Jeremy thinks she didn’t *let* him get anything but holds that one in. “I’m sorry,” she says, “I shouldn’t have done that. But don’t you realize how small that moment is? Don’t you remember the way she used to be? And you just want to reduce her down to this one moment at the end of her life?”

He thinks about telling her what Gran said when she was out of the room, wonders if the hurt would show on her face, if it would reach new fathoms she didn’t know her mother could reach, or if she would laugh, shrug it off, say *welcome to the party* or something in her deflective sarcastic way.

“That doesn’t give her the right to treat you like garbage,” he says, hoping she realizes that what he’s really saying is that he loves her.

But it frustrates her more. She wipes her eyes, then grips the steering wheel again like she’s going to twist it off. “So we just send her off to die – act like she already has? Just say, Thanks for raising me, sorry you’re in a lot of pain right now, bet that sure *sucks*, but my life’s easier if I toss you aside. *So long!*”

“No, but—”

“Can you not see her as something more than an old woman? Can you not conceive of people and relationships outside of yourself?”

And Jeremy starts shaking his head because he’s annoyed with the cross-talk, the way his words have been misconstrued to somehow make him out as having volunteered to euthanize his grandmother. He just wanted to tell Dell he understood, that he saw how tough it must be for her, but he doesn’t want to bother with being misinterpreted again so he looks out the window.

“We’re all we have, son.”

“What?”

“Family. It’s messy. You have to work at it. But in the end we’re all we have.”

\*

By the time Jeremy gets back to his apartment Scott has already left for the night. Some high school party in Amber’s crowd he’s texted Jeremy about. Jeremy puts him off, tells him he’ll text him in a bit. He’s not sure he wants to go all the way back out to Moon and likes the idea of the apartment to himself, so he takes the *The Grapes of Wrath* to his room, but it’s a text from Kat from that sets him off. *You’re an asshole*. That’s all it says. And it’s not that he disagrees. He just doesn’t feel like explaining, or defending or apologizing for his or anyone else’s actions, and he’s been down this road before with Kat and he’d just rather not. So he ignores the message. But it makes him restless and he’s up wandering around the apartment, rifling through the fridge for nothing, flipping on the tv to mindlessly watch a series of college football, before he’s texting Scott for directions to the party.

And he doesn't mind the drive because it's good to be in transit, especially on a Saturday night with the anxious energy in the air and the city lights reflecting off the silky black water of the Ohio as he drives north on 65. Some Moon High kid's parents had gone to Chicago for the Steeler game, and Jeremy maneuvers his way through the sloping tangle of neighborhoods, the same area Scott had chased Amber through in Jeremy's Bronco, until he finds the split-level home carved into the curve of land so it can look over the other homes built on the descending foothill.

Music and laughter pour out of the house and Jeremy figures it's only so long before a neighbor issues a noise complaint. He finds a sprawling staircase in the entryway, a gaudy chandelier overhead and an inordinate amount of hallways to choose from. He locates the kitchen where Amber is the first to see him. She gives quick *gah!* of excitement and hugs him.

"I didn't think you were coming," she says.

"Yeah," Jeremy shrugs. Her hand lingers at his waist just long enough to cause him to glance down at her. She wears black tights and a long, loose tank with a cartoon apple standing on a stack of books with a mouth made of jagged, bloody teeth, its cartoon arm holding a pencil like a weapon. The red, dripping font stating *Reading is Dangerous*.

"Well, it's good to see you," she says and pulls back. "I'm sure my boyfriend will have a priapism when he finds out."

"Right." He finds the choice of words odd, the implication. He thinks of saying something like *Well, I guess you'll have to do something about that*, but figures that would make things even weirder.



And then Scott is yelling *Big Jerm!* from the kitchen and the moment is over. He's wearing aviator shades and his black Pens hat instead of white; with the bill facing front and working in tandem with the glasses, it creates a steely exterior. His palms rest on the countertop, triceps flexed and he yanks his head back, telling Jeremy to come to him, and when Jeremy does Scott punches him in the arm, massages his bicep deep into the tissue.

"What up," Jeremy laughs.

"Nothing, man," Scott says, "just getting wasted. Get you a beer."

Jeremy finds a Yuengling in the fridge and when he returns to Scott's side he asks about the glasses.

He leans in close. "X, man."

"What?"

"Ecstasy. It makes you all wonky-eyed and I don't need everybody up in my shit."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Jimmy Wiggles," he says like it's the most obvious thing ever.

"*What?* You talking about Jimmy Wieland?"

"That's the one."

Jeremy drinks his beer and leans back against the counter. The layout of the house gives this spot a panoramic view of the space, into the living room and through the windows to the patio, the hallways leading in and out of the rooms. Jeremy people-watches for a time, content to sip his beer.

"Hey, listen," Scott says and leans in toward Jeremy's ear again. "You see that blond kid next to the tv?" He points across the kitchen to the living room to someone Jeremy recognizes from Sewickley.

“Yeah, grade or two below us, right? What’s his name again?”

“Fuck his name. He thinks I’m oblivious.” Jeremy turns and looks into the Aviators, the Pens bill nearly poking him in the forehead. “Dude’s got a thing for Amber, and I’m letting it play – just keep thinking I’m not there, bro. But you know me, Jerm. I am there. And when that dude disrespects me, I will break his fuck-ing-face.”

Jeremy stares into the Aviators and nods, wishing he could see his eyes. He turns back to the party, tries to think of the blond kid’s name. *Tyler?* He seems to be harmlessly talking to two other guys, beer in hand, cheeks blushed from laughing at ostensibly the right times. Maybe he does have a thing for Amber, maybe he’s a slick little fuck who thinks he’s totally playing Scott, but Jeremy prefers to think of him as an oblivious, cherubic waif, meandering his way through a newly discovered social world that he believes to be so warm and inviting – girls, guys, *it doesn’t matter!* – a hug here, a hug there, *and maybe just one more from Amber*, because the world is a friendly place, with friendly female curves to lean into, but it turns out you’re just fuckboyishly naïve enough not to see the two-ton truck barreling down on you. The absurdity is too perfect. The common, crushing asymmetry.

As Jeremy continues to scan the room he spots Marcus’ younger brother Reggie sitting at the breakfast table playing quarters.

“You talk to Reggie?”

“Fuck Reggie,” Scott says quietly but then in the next breath he’s calling out to him. “Hey, Reggie, *what up!*” And Reggie looks up, brows raised, like he’s been cool enough not to bring shit up, hasn’t even told his friends about it, and you’re pulling this dumbfuck move? “Aw, c’mon, don’t do me like that Reginald.” People start to look, laughing at Scott because

that's what you do. "Reginald, my man, my brother," and Jeremy cringes, begins to float away.

"What are you carrying on about?" Amber asks and takes Scott around the waist. This pulls Scott out of the moment and he runs his hands from her ribs up to her shoulder blades, crooning *my girl, my girl*. The two sway like this, locked into the moment, and Scott begins to sing *I wear my sunglasses at night* and humming the parts he doesn't know and laughs along and Jeremy can see the way the story ends, so he slips out, decides it's time to head home.

As he walks down the street along the trail of cars, he comes across Reggie leaned against the trunk of his own car and talking on the phone. Jeremy slows, thinking this is the moment he's needed, if only Reggie would get off the phone. An apology is forming, a long, winding explanation, telling him how fucked last night was, and how if he was a bigger man – no, a *normal human being* – he would've stepped in and done something instead of condoning everything with his silence, and how he should've reached out to Marcus today, how ashamed he is that he still hasn't and now he feels like it's too late, and maybe it always would've been too late, because he's not sure there's any coming back from that, and, if so, Marcus should at least know how much Jeremy despises Scott, but its just this *thing* that has gotten out of control somehow, and, like this moment, there really is no stopping it, because this is Pittsburgh, the lines have been drawn, and Scott is his tribe.

## Chapter 11

*Where the wind where the wind where the wind...*

The dreams come in swaths of gray and brilliant Technicolor. The characters are not real, he knows this, while he dreams, unlike so many dreams he's had where he has to distinguish reality from fiction upon waking. He returned from the party feeling pensive and restless and he crawled into bed with his laptop and headphones and fell into the world of Forties cinema. It's about keeping the memories of his grandparents alive before they've both slipped away. He thinks of himself as an amorphous fraction, one that could unfurl back to carbon, and so it's not with any sense of determinacy that he resorts to dividing himself into sixths. But even these sixths aren't equal measure. He never knew his father's parents, and yet they're the ones who shaped his father, while Gran and Papa helped raise him during his childhood, and so how could he ever define this composition? He can't. But he wants some active, mobile piece of where his grandparents came from. He wants to go beyond the grainy, fading photos and so he resorts to these representations, cobbles together the stories and photos with the depiction of place and time, finds room for his own memories so old and shopworn there's no way to fully trust them.

But he's not looking for some objective truth, either, which might be why he seeks out these cultural representations to fuse with the memories and stories and photos, because he's looking for patterns. Those spheres of symmetry and connections he's felt before but

can never quite pin down. If he can only make these articles *mean* something then it will all make sense. There's an answer somewhere.

And at some point before he drifts off he switches to Rogers and Hammerstein where the grays go prismatic and saturated and he falls asleep to songs about waving wheat and carrots and *pertaters* and the brushstrokes smear Tom Joads and Moses Yellowhorses and Ruby Williams with green corn and civil unrest and the sweeping plain and the wind behind the rain and the start of brand new lives in a brand new state where the wind

where the wind

where the wind

where the wind

*the wind*

He sits straight up in bed.

It's not total disorientation. He knows he's in his apartment bed, that he had been dreaming. But he's stricken with the sensation that within these parameters something is flat-fuck *off*. His eyes move first to the corners of his room. It takes a moment to adjust to the darkness, to rule out ordinary shadows. From his seated position he can't discern anything out of the ordinary.

But it's there.

The feeling.

Someone has been in his room.

An abnormality in the air. A remnant in the sag and release of mattress. He observes the corners and angles and soft spots in his vision and he starts to get up, to get to the fucking

bottom of it once and for all, *but*...some rankling intuition seizes him, some ancient instinct of self-preservation that says *pause, hold, just ease off*. It's better this way.

## Chapter 12

Jeremy eases into consciousness unsure if he had fallen back asleep at all. But he's too rested, the sunlight through his blinds too sharp, for him to have been awake through the night. When he checks the clock he's surprised it's already mid-morning and he has a pique of anxiety for reasons he can't quite name when he thinks about the remaining day. He has to write his essay by tomorrow morning, but there's plenty of time for that. It's just something about being stationary and he starts to get dressed and gather his things.

But when he leaves his room with his bag swung over his shoulder, he finds Scott sitting on the couch and watching NFL pregame. It's early for him and he has his head propped against his fist, looking pretty hungover.

"Where you headed?"

"Thought I'd go out to my folks', try to get some work for class done out there."

"Bullshit, you gotta stay and watch the Steelers with me," and he's up and moving to the fridge and grabbing a couple Iron Cities. "*C'mon*," he faux-pleads and hands Jeremy a beer where he stands, fidgeting. Scott plops down on the couch, cracks his beer as if everything's decided. Jeremy sets his things down, beer included, and brings a bowl of cereal to the couch.

But the morning remains calm, Scott's in no hurry to pound beers, and Jeremy tells himself one drink before noon isn't bad and with a slow and steady pace he'll be fine when the game ends and he can head out to his house then.

“So what was the X like?” Jeremy asks during a commercial.

“I didn’t do any X last night,” he sighs, head still propped against fist, eyes on the television. Jeremy is unable to process this for a moment. It’s the kind of admission Scott normally sniffs out in others, the pretense and posturing so offensive to his delicate alpha sensibilities, and Jeremy has a moment where he can’t decide if Scott truly lied about doing ecstasy, or if he’s actually lying about lying now.

“Wanted Amber to think I was,” he continues, “hard to explain, I guess.”

Jeremy nods but doesn’t know what to add, doesn’t want to make him clam up.

“Like it was an excuse for me to act a certain way, and she wouldn’t think it was odd, cause I’m supposed to be rolling, you know? and she doesn’t know what that’s like. So if I’m totally spaced, just zombied the fuck out, how’s she gonna be with everyone else?”

“And?”

“Same shit different day,” he shrugs and turns to Jeremy, locks in with his eyes.

“Took her out to my car and fucked her rotten,” and though he’s calm and remains curled on his end of the couch, it’s like the words themselves materialize to spring and strut, not just protect a boundary, but to *extend*, let the world know what lays dormant, what can be aroused.

But then he’s chill again. Jeremy can tell by the way he swivels his can that he’s out of beer but he doesn’t rush to the fridge, and Jeremy gets the feeling he doesn’t even really want to drink this morning, that it’s just a mechanism, to talk, to keep Jeremy in the apartment.

“So that was pretty fucked on Friday, huh?” Scott asks.

Jeremy nods. *Pretty fucked*, that’s one way to put it.



The game is about to start and Scott shrugs, like there are so many other pressing things in his world that he couldn't give any fewer shits about what he did or did not say to Marcus and he doesn't have time for anyone else who cares about it either. "Dude can piss and moan about it if he wants," Scott says while thumbing the tab on his beer can, "I won't be losing any sleep on it. Not over that faggot," he adds and raises his eyes to meet Jeremy's.

Jeremy averts his eyes, turns back to the tv. Something about the look.

When the game kicks off Scott comes alive, and Jeremy supposes this is out of the ordinary, except that he's acting like he does when there's a room full of people, not just Jeremy. He talks to either Jeremy or the tv on every play, gives fist pumps for first downs, leaps out of his seat yelling *boom!* for spine-bending hits, reaching out to slap hands with Jeremy, and the beer goes down a little quicker.

It reminds Jeremy of the 2006 Super Bowl, when they were freshmen in high school and still ran in packs of fifteen to twenty awkward teens. They were at Ryan Calhoun's with his parents' massive den and big screen where they could sprawl on couch or love seat or bean bag chairs and the guys acted like the fate of the world hinged on every snap. The Steelers were going for their fifth Super Bowl, which would tie Dallas and San Francisco for the most titles in the Super Bowl era – *One for the Thumb* people were calling it – and though none of them were alive the last time the Steelers had won a Super Bowl, the game was worthy of every exaggerated teenaged squawk and groan, chest pound and fist bump and primal roar, the calls to war of entitled youth.

And when it was all over, when the teens didn't really know how they were supposed to celebrate in some suburban den, Scott shouted out: *Now let's make it Six for our Dicks!* and somehow the hanging tension of testosterone and violence and lust and sex that had

permeated the room for hours was dispelled and made open and everyone could laugh, some still out of nervousness and others thankful that just this one image eluding to sex could somehow alleviate the anxiety, because they were acting like cavemen but weren't they supposed to act like cavemen? since it was the goddamn Super Bowl, after all, and in some ineffable way it was all tied to pheromones and fluid, smooth tight clothing over taut skin, the scent and knowledge of arousal and discharge, and they had been told in so many ways that this stew of sex and violence was the way it had been before, the way it would always be.

In the apartment, Jeremy plays into it with Scott just enough. He brings his arm out wide to get some mustard on their hand slaps and make it sting, curses Jeff Reed when he misses two field goals that would have secured the lead. When Jay Cutler completes a long pass to set up the game winning field goal for Chicago, Scott calls him a *smarmy douche* but when Robbie Gould sends the kick through the uprights, he doesn't have much reaction. The game is over, there's nothing left to rant about.

Jeremy adds a perfunctory line about something or other being bullshit and slides his bag over his shoulder.

“Really going out to your house, huh?”

“Yeah, need to get some work done.”

“Well, best of luck with that,” Scott says, eyes back to the tv.

Jeremy stops at GetGo for a liter of water and some gum before getting out on the road, figuring at least the gesture means something. When he gets to the house he finds the family on the couch absorbed in the afternoon game, because this is what they do on Sundays, whether the game is relevant or not. He gets a *Hey there* from Dell and the Bulldog

gives a look like that goes for him as well. Evan just nods because this is their routine in front of the folks.

“You watch the game?” Dell asks.

“Yup.”

“That was awful wasn’t it?”

“Sure was,” he says, keeping things distant and after a time he taps his bag, says he has some stuff to work on. But when he gets to his room he finds it impossible to get started. The role of agency in *Out of This Furnace*; he feels like he could discuss this for hours in Jesse’s office, could answer any question about any character, but the thought of organizing these thoughts at the moment locks him in paralysis. He pulls the book out, perfunctorily flips through the pages like the motion itself will allow the ideas to mature.

He conjures an image of a mill, the raw materials needed – the red ore, yellow limestone and black coke – like the Steelers logo itself: the yellow, red and blue hypocycloids. He thinks of Bell writing about the education of American industry, its cost, the way its paid in human bodies, human lives. He tries to imagine even just the taste and feel of it, of just being in the shit, the soot and slag, the cinder dumps. The descriptions of being baked alive by searing gas, disappearing into liquid fire, reaching for a friend and having his skin slide off his flesh like a pair of silk gloves.

He thinks of his grandfather, son of a Croat immigrant who knew no English but traveled with plenty of other Croats sent by family members to a place called Aliquippa in western Pennsylvania. He would work for Jones and Laughlin Steel Corp on the shores of the Ohio, at the time the largest integrated mill in the world. A peasant farmer with no knowledge of machinery, the mill was an alternate universe where it rained molten metal and

he learned through the fear of his life on twelve hour shifts, twenty-four on the long Sunday turn every two weeks. Jeremy thinks of Bell's line about how when human flesh and blood could stand no more...it got up at five again with everyone else. Couldn't say, *Nah, I hear Wendy's is hiring, maybe checkout Best Buy, too.*

But they fought. And by his grandfather Niko's generation conditions were better. Workers felt like human beings. Until the jobs went overseas, and the retirement benefits went with them. If Niko had lived he probably would've been one of the retired steel workers protesting outside the tunnel entrance to Aliquippa Works after J&L had sold to LTV Corp, who promptly closed the plant. As the stories go the veteran workers and retirees protested in temperatures as low as minus ten, trading shifts to drink coffee in a small portable building they called Fort Justice. They called themselves the Tunnel Rats. But of course this ended the only way it could. With the former workers in handcuffs.

He wonders how Bell's novel would've turned out if he wrote it in the eighties.

The magnitude is too great for Jeremy. He's thinking again of these spheres of connections – these wandering orbs of history that sometimes align in some fucked Venn diagram of greed and exploitation, protest and placation. Even in the greater Pittsburgh area, from Braddock and Homestead to Aliquippa, it's all still so small. He thinks of Miles coming from Akron, the battles over rubber; Detroit and the auto industry; Chicago's Packingtown; the logging camps of the Pacific Northwest; tenant farmers in Oklahoma; tenant farmers everywhere. And all the other lives and stories he doesn't have the faintest inkling of the human struggle. He thinks again of his grandfather in smoked glasses and heavy gloves, handkerchief around his neck, and two pairs of pants for the cinder burns.

But these ideas have no true source for Jeremy. It's an oral history once removed, the author's voice never reaching Jeremy's ears, Niko having no characteristics discerned by his eyes, and with The Man of Few Words being the teller of these tales, the details are spare, even with the power of Jeremy's own imagination and he shifts the connection to his other grandfather. He pulls what memories he has of the 1996 Super Bowl – the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Dallas Cowboys meeting for a third time to decide the championship, the talk of *significance* is what he remembers about the lead up to the game, how *historic* everyone said it was – which he watched with his family at Gran and Papa's house. Of course these memories are already blurred and he pulls up YouTube to search for the full broadcast. He finds snippets here and there but not the full game. But his mind is still wandering, threading connections from disparate materials and he finds the 1992 NLCS Game Seven between the Pirates and Braves – the day baseball died in Pittsburgh – and imagines himself there at Gran and Papa's, his father playing in his last Major League Baseball game, though he wouldn't make the lineup, would watch the destructive majesty of baseball play out from the dugout. And as soon as the game begins, the shot of the grass at Atlanta's Fulton County Stadium, the sonorous voice of Sean McDonough, Jeremy feels like he's not imagining, like these memories are real and merely resurfacing through the YouTube Time Machine.

## Chapter 13

After school Jeremy would play whiffle ball in the sloping backyards of western Pennsylvania that were at once connected and disrupted by the wooded Allegheny foothills. He and his friends created a three-man game of homerun derby where they rotated from pitcher to batter to fielder. Jeremy kept tallies of wins and losses and total home runs in a spiral notebook that he thought just as infallible as the box scores in the *Post-Gazette*. This was what he would later think of as the naïve obsession, not just the childish whiffle ball games, but combined with his fixation on statistics that he carried over to the Pirates.

From an early age he understood this tie to baseball was traced through the line of descent of his mother and her father. The bizarre aligning of genetic code that encouraged the obsessive studying of baseball statistics. She dreamed of playing alongside Willie Mays – no, *being* Willie Mays – and held an encyclopedic knowledge of the Golden Age of Baseball. She collected baseball cards for the statistics, referenced them against the current statistics in the *Post-Gazette*, and had long discussions with her father about the relative greatness of Mantle, Williams and Mays. The youngest of three siblings, a surprise, she would jokingly refer to herself as a *cocktail party baby* and her father took great pleasure in indulging her love for his favorite pastime, and it was redoubled for him when her first-born took just as keen an interest in the game.

Papa and Gran would pick him and Evan up from school and watch them until Dell got off work, allowing her father time to analyze the statistics with Jeremy, search for hidden

clues and deeper meanings. In the calm of the late afternoon Jeremy could read and analyze, but in October of '92, when the Pirates had in fact won their division for the third straight year, but were looking to make it to the World Series for the first time since '79, Jeremy would become a livewire once the games began. Something about the way live baseball necessitated *wait*. The numbers weren't laid out in front of you. Every pitch could have statistical, and therefore historical, implications, or, and much more likely, be completely irrelevant, and this paradox was too much for his nine-year-old mind.

As the opening game of the National League Championship Series drew closer he took to sprinting down his grandparents' long hallway to alleviate the tension. A ranch-style home with a hallway leading out of the living room and down to the three bedrooms and two bathrooms that appeared as a narrow corridor that could entrap Jeremy if he didn't run fast enough. With his fists pumping and legs churning it felt like he traveled at an insurmountable speed. When he reached the end of the hallway with the two bedrooms forked at the end, he touched the wall with his fingertips and went sprinting back where he burst into the living room. His speed was legendary. Surely no child had ever run so fast. But he needed to know just *how* fast. He knew his father was bigger, stronger and better at all things, but he couldn't quite discern where Papa fit into this athletic spectrum. He was bigger and older, and experience had told Jeremy this must make him better at things.

"Race me, Papa," he said after he came tearing back into the living room.

"Jeremy," he began and took a long drag on his Carlton, "if you want to race me, you'd better practice."

He was right. Jeremy would need to be very, very fast to outrun Papa, and he spent the rest of that afternoon sprinting down the hallway.

“Goodness!” Gran would call out and clap her hands when he leapt back into the living room like a sprinter breaking through the tape.

“Am I getting faster?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Better keep practicing,” Papa told him, cigarette between thumb and index finger.

When Dell arrived for the game she found Jeremy in a sweaty, tousled state and making the grand announcement about his impending race with this grandfather.

“Are you now?” Dell laughed as her father returned from the kitchen with a Heineken.

“But first I need to practice,” Jeremy clarified and looked to Papa for confirmation.

“I’m very fast,” Stephen told his daughter.

“I’m sure you are.”

As it came time for first pitch, Jeremy settled in with his notebook, ready to keep score. He didn’t follow the traditional method, only tracked the batting statistics, the pitchers’ strikeouts and walks, the hits allowed. But the lumbering pace Jeremy found frustrating was only amplified when things didn’t go the Pirates’ way as was the case that night, and by the end, before Dell said it was time they got home and went to bed, Jeremy was more focused on practicing for his impending race.

But there was the other side: playing the game. He had a father teach him the game from an early age, and this gave him a set of skills that set him apart. Because it takes more than natural ability, more than hand-eye coordination, Jeremy was taught the *why* and *how* of the game: the flick of wrists and torque of hips, that hidden power, the power within, his father called it. But it was the tedium and drone of perfecting the mechanics that was hard.



His father's rules. The hours of soft-toss where a ball was hit directly into a fence in front of you. No pleasure in watching a ball soar into the outfield. Just a *rattle* of the fence and then do it again and again. When he'd get sulky, and nine-year-old Jeremy had the inclination, he could be stopped immediately by The Look. The expression that held untold possibilities of the Bulldog's wrath waiting to be unleashed. It went untested until Jeremy transitioned from machine-pitch where the ball was delivered sure and straight to kid-pitch where the wholly unpredictable trajectory of the baseball was introduced into the equation.

This unpredictability included the imprints of baseballs left on Jeremy's shins and arms, shoulders and back, and basically anywhere the opposing pitcher decided he wanted to torture Jeremy that day, and suddenly the freakish test-tube knock he had for belting baseballs into the outfield was countered by the force of psychosis. His father tried to remedy this the only way he knew how: lots and lots of practice, which now included its own unpredictability to disrupt the mechanical way Jeremy had learned the game.

His father would stand on the mound at Montessori middle school with a rucksack full of balls and tell Jeremy, "Some of these are going to hit you," he said, "but I don't want to you to dive out of the way, I want you to stand in and take it. Others, they'll be right over the plate, and you're gonna smack those into the outfield, okay?"

But the rules had changed, and Jeremy couldn't understand, and after the first ball came in at his shoulder, he threw the bat down and wailed, "*I can't do this anymore.*"

*"I can't never could do anything, son."*

Jeremy had heard this before, many times, in fact, and he was unimpressed. "Now pick that bat up. I want to see five solid line drives from you, okay?"

Jeremy retrieved the bat, stood uncertainly in the box. The next pitch Jeremy watched cross right over the plate. “Strike one,” his father said. Right over the plate a second time. “Strike two.” Ditto for the third. “You just struck out. Is this the kind of player you want to be? Now stand in there like a man and swing the bat.”

But the next pitch came at his hip and it caught him so off-guard that he wouldn't have been able to move if he tried. The tears welled-up in his eyes, not from the pain, just confusion, the feeling that something he thought he understood so perfectly had been knocked irrevocably off course. His father laughed. Jeremy would realize later that it was contrived, another teaching mechanism. His father adding, “You're gonna cry now? You've got a runner on first and one out. Are you gonna be able to bring him home, or are you just gonna squeal and pout?”

Jeremy turned and slung the bat into the backstop. Turned to stare down his father.

“You pick that up *right* now.”

Jeremy stood his ground.

The first standoff.

It was his baseball dichotomy: the naïve obsession and the raw realness of the bit and whip mindset he developed for the actual game. He could be in the backyard with Scott and Marcus, take great joy out of hitting a whiffle ball over the fence and making the notation without thinking of his upcoming game. He could watch a Pirates game and Gran and Papa's and cheer when a Pirate pitcher plunked an Atlanta Brave and make no association to himself. He could sit and listen to his grandfather's stories about Ruth and Gehrig and Moses Yellowhorse that did not correlate to the deep-seated fear that he brought with him every time he walked onto a baseball diamond long after he gave up caring whether he was

hit by a pitch. They were separate. Worlds apart. And at his grandparents' home, with the Pirates in between innings, he could take off sprinting down the hall, head full of absurd notions about a race that would never happen, and knowing he had to be very, very fast because if he missed even one pitch, he could miss some vital statistic, a crucial piece of data.

## Chapter 14

The Pittsburgh gloom does its worst on Jeremy's walk to PartyMart for his Monday afternoon shift, as though the weather is attuned to the hearts and souls of the Steeler faithful and turns deep overcast gray from mourning. Jeremy figures most of the crew, particularly Rick, will want to revisit the whole game, even if it's been done a handful of times already. But when Jeremy walks down the loading ramp he finds Rick at the sorting tables locked into another debate with Miles, this time with an array of cardboard cutouts spread out around them.

"Do you even know what a credit default swap is, Rick?" Jeremy hears as he passes on by and makes his way to the computer to punch-in. He sighs, like he's not quite ready for whatever it is to begin and he checks his phone. There's a text from Kat: *Plans tonight? We should get together.* It's a relief to see Kat reach out, that they won't devolve into another awkward round of radio silence over something Scott did, but he's also got to write his essay sooner rather than later. He thinks of Jesse on his way out of class – *So instead of writing about two 400-page books you chose none* – and Jeremy had started into some half-assed apology/explanation when Jesse simply put up a hand: *Either you do it or you don't – I'm not your babysitter.*

There's something so juvenily dickclownish about flunking the one class Jeremy's interested in, and this fear is real, it lodges somewhere in his solar plexus and has a tangible

weight and mass, but there's an immediacy to Kat's message, not in the text itself, but what it represents for them, and he sends back *sure* before heading over to the sorting tables.

“But all it is, Rick, is people inventing an equation where money is mythically created from money. That's where our entire economy is going. That's why we continually have, and *will continue to have*, stock market crashes, because its trading, or *gambling* on the intangible, just words or ideas, not concrete *things*. That's why people call it *casino capitalism*.”

“No, it's just *free market capitalism* based on supply and demand. Aren't you an English major? Do they make you guys take *any* Economics classes – do you even *understand* supply and demand? Or do you just think the government should control everything? Because I'm not sure if you're aware, but the Soviet Union was a giant fucking failure.”

“Okay,” Miles laughs, “try to listen to what I'm about to say and not spin off on the cultural flash words that people don't even understand. I'm going to evoke Marx, but just bear with me, because I think you and I are more aligned than you realize if you just take a step off your soap box.”

Rick folds his arms, pulls a smirk, the dad with the irreverent son that he wants to slap some sense into. “By all means, edify me.”

Miles pushes the cutouts to the periphery of the table, creates an open space, then selects a Zac Efron *High School Musical* cutout. “In Marx's dialectical formula—”

“Oh my god.”

“*In his dialectical formula, M-C-M', (M) or in this case Zac Efron and his All-American white boy good looks, represents accumulated wealth, okay? Yay, good for Zac*

Efron.” Miles turns back to the strewn pile of cutouts. “And for (C) how about Dora the Explorer,” and he places Dora next to Zac, “so (C) represents capital once (M), or Zac, is invested in the production of commodities, which leads us to (M’), or profit.” He pulls Dwayne The Rock Johnson, flexing in his wrestling speedo, and places it next to Dora. “Still with me? So once you produce a commodity through investment capital, you can sell it for profit. Pretty cut and dry, right? Nothing political about that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But that’s the problem with the new era of finance capitalism. It removes the commodity from the equation. It attempts to create profit from money itself by gambling on the future – hence the term casino capitalism. Sometimes it makes people money, *aaaand* sometimes five trillion dollars disappears into thin air.”

“Listen, smart guy,” Rick says and pushes Zac Efron and The Rock off the table, “that’s wonderful all you learn about is what some German radical wrote back around the time Lincoln freed the slaves, but let me explain something to you about 2008.”

“Edify me, Rick.”

“What happened was that idiot liberal Senators like Barney Frank, who is gay by the way—”

“What does *that* have to do with anything?”

“Just listen, so Senators like Barney Frank who want to play the victim card around every corner instead of taking personal responsibility,” Rick says and takes a Barack Obama cutout and moves it in front of Dora, pins his finger on Obama’s cardboard grin before moving over to Dora. “So they start bitching and moaning and threatening mortgage loan

corporations like Fanny Mae and Freddie Mac because not enough *minorities* are homeowners.”

“*Whoa*, how you gonna do Dora like that?”

“But, guess what, maybe minorities couldn’t *afford* to pay mortgages in the first place, and when companies are *forced* by the *government* to just pass out loans like every one won the lottery, then guess what? You have financial collapse.”

“I see, it’s all the minorities fault,” Miles says and picks up the Dora cutout, wraps his arms around it in a faux-hug. “It’s okay, Dora, I still love you.”

“*Hey*,” Bob snaps as he approaches the tables. “You guys done? Still got that Steelers order waiting. Think New Kid could work on that?”

Rick nods and trundles off to get the paperwork. Some of the order is merchandise they have stored in the warehouse and some has just been shipped in and will be going straight out to the seven stores. The order is large and with Rick in obsessive lockstep with Miles and Bob working on his own business, Jeremy is able to go *grindstone*. He falls into a Steeler coma brined in Steeler hard hats, Terrible Towels, foam fingers and Steeler flags. Setting the chorus are dozens of yellow animatronic frogs with Steeler beanies, who when you touch their paws, the “Here We Go” theme plays and they convulse like they’re having a frog seizure. He presses as many of them as he can, surrounds himself with rabid Steeler frogs, and he’s on to separating the Ben Roethlisberger, Troy Polamalu and Hines Ward merch – not just the standard jerseys and shertzys, but also purses, earrings and backpacks that come in number seven, forty-three or eighty-six.

He sounds the frog paws again and then it’s on to the Steeler beer koozies, pint glasses, shot glasses, German beer steins with Bavarian Steeler flare, and plastic mugs that

light up in electric, neon light when you pound the bottom on the table; stickers and fake tattoos; Steeler stationary and Steeler invites for all the Steeler parties to be thrown; Steeler pens and pencils to write them with; Steeler garters for Steeler weddings; refrigerator magnets and bumper stickers; paperweights and mouse pads; keychains and tiny plush Steeler footballs to accompany them; larger rubber Steeler footballs that alternate in black and gold patches so that when you throw a spiral it's a kaleidoscopic Steeler mindfuck coming at you. Jeremy goes for more frog paws and by then he's laughing about all the meaningless, meaningless junk people buy to make them feel a part of something larger than themselves.

*"Here we go!"* Miles calls out to the tune of the frogs as he approaches Jeremy's mini Steeler distribution center. "Could you use any help? Rick cut me loose."

Jeremy nods, says sure, though he prefers to work alone, especially when he's deep into a project. Miles moves to the boxes from the newly-shipped merch that Jeremy has yet to sort. "Is there anything cornier than this shit?" Miles asks and holds up a Steely McBeam plush doll.

"It's pretty bad," Jeremy laughs.

Steely McBeam. The Steelers had gone over seventy years without a mascot, seemingly to everyone's great approval – the Steelers couldn't even be bothered to put their logo on both sides of their helmet, because less had always been more with them – but suddenly in 2007 the franchise introduced the mascot donning blue jeans and, what else, black and gold flannel with a hard hat and obligatory massive jaw and cleft chin. When appearing in packaged form to be bought and sold he carries, of course, a steel beam across his cartoonishly broad shoulders.



“Does this not totally drive home the irony here?” Miles asks. “All this Steeler merch, the team supposed to embody American industry, and everything is made in China.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy murmurs, thinking about *Out of This Furnace*, workers identifying with the job, as perilous as it might have been. He figures at one time people probably did view the team as an embodiment of the city, maybe in the seventies when they called Three Rivers the Blast Furnace, but now the team, the logo, the miasma of branding has morphed into something else entirely. “It’s like people were proud to have something make them forget about how shitty their jobs were, or, like, the team was recognition of the work they did, or, something.”

“Imagine having a job that was literally building your country,” Miles says. “Hell yeah you’d be proud of that. And it’s like we were talking about with *Out of This Furnace*, it was a shitty job but the workers fought to make it better. And it worked. Their unions helped end, or at least lessen exploitation, but in the end the almighty corporate bottom line fucked them over, sent their jobs overseas where the workers have no voice. What’s there to be proud of here?”

“People need their party goods,” Jeremy says in deadpan cynic. “We provide them with a much needed service.”

“Seriously, though,” Miles says, “maybe it would be different if we were *making* things. But we’re just third-party distributors. There’s no skin in the game, so what do we identify with – our eight bucks an hour?”

“I identify very closely with that, actually.”

“Has to come from somewhere. But imagine this as a career. No wonder Rick and Bob are on the express train to crazy town. They just facilitate the shallowest of consumer

transactions, like it's supposed to matter if someone doesn't get the right *shade* of plastic fork, the right superhero on the paper plate they'll use for two minutes and then throw away."

"Yeah, Bob seems like a couple of Yo Mike fuckups away from going postal."

"Oh, Rick is too, though. It's just a very different kind of crazy. Probably shouldn't enjoy messing with him so much, but I can't help it. It's that fucking Reagan shtick that eats away at me."

Jeremy wants to add something, take up for Rick in some way, but feels himself turtling into his shell, like Miles is Scotty B and instead of a dank basement they're at a party where Scott has dared someone to punch him in the face again, or some other bizarre display of virility. Rick's not so bad. Is it just because he's conservative that he's a worthy target? That he *does* take pride in his work, it's just work Miles doesn't deem worthy enough of pride? And it makes Jeremy spin out again, worried about what it is in him that makes him like this work, that he's okay being the grunt, coming in and sorting through the maelstrom of junk workers in worse shape than him produced and people who don't know how good they have it will buy just to throw away, like they literally swiped their credit down the asscrack of a garbage dump and the transaction itself probably released some twisted flow of endorphins.

He of course gets where Miles is coming from, too. That shit would eat away at him if he thought about it too long, and even though he thinks Rick is on the wrong side of the argument, he wants to align himself with Rick for reasons he can't quite explain. It makes him think of Sewickley Academy, the Beamer Protesters. Is it purely because he sees something genuine in Rick? That even if Rick is blind to the wheels within wheels of the larger economic system, finds ways to blame the crash on minorities – *did that just happen?*

– it’s okay because of the sincerity he approaches his daily duties with? And that no matter how incisive an argument Miles might have, all Jeremy sees is a pretentious, condescending grad student.

“Almost forgot,” Miles says and taps Jeremy’s arm, “brought that thing I wanted to show you, something to add to the pillar. Just go down like you’re getting some water and I’ll be right behind you.”

The Pillar of Shame, as it came to be called, was one of the concrete columns spread throughout the warehouse that stood closest to the break table. A conglomeration of Chinese manufacturing fuckups and just your basic politically incorrect nonsense anybody finds out in the world, the pillar is a shrine already masked-taped to death. There’s the bar code cut off of the order of Halloween paper plates with a witch brewing something in her cauldron, the description under the SKU number reading *Nigger Witch’s Stew*; the napkins with a smiling green frog proclaiming *YOU CAN FIND LOVING IN EVERYWHERE!*; the cartoon animal of indeterminate species wishing everyone *Happy Thing!*, along with the Rick additions like the caricature of a middle eastern man with a giant red circle and line through him, the caption stating *No Turbans Allowed*.

The public-art-spectacle aspect of the pillar fascinated Jeremy when he first started, but he takes it that it’s one of those things that people gloss right over when you see it everyday, and when Miles casually walks over, pulls a bar coaster sized sticker out of his back pocket and slaps it on the pillar, it takes Rick, seated at the break table examining some work order, a moment to slowly raise his head and locate what exactly has been added to the shrine. The image is a black cat with claws and fangs bared, back arched and brushy tail erect, placed inside a red orb. The word *Sabo-Tabby* arcs along the top of the red circle.

Rick, with pen and paper in hand, eyes lifted above his reading glasses, understands that it's a production, that this is meant to garner some reaction from him. He stares for a moment longer, seems to wish he could just ignore it, not even bother, but can't help himself.

“And?”

“Sabo-*Tabby*, Rick.”

Rick sighs. “What am I supposed to take from sabo-tabby?”

“It's the historic IWW code word for workplace sabotage.”

Rick shakes his head, turns back to his paperwork, circles something, but does so a little too forcefully – *won't do it, won't be drawn in*.

“Was thinking PartyMart needs to think about unionizing—”

“Don't start,” Rick says, “even if you're joking. The owner will flip his lid if he hears that word uttered.”

“If he even *hears* the word?” Miles laughs. “That seems a little, I don't know, *draconian*, especially in a free market economy.”

“Miles—”

“And that's why workers have to resort to workplace sabotage, because in an economic system that persistently dehumanizes its labor force, the only way to make your voices heard is to bring direct action to the point of production.”

“To *sabotage* the workplace?”

“See, I can hear it in your voice, Rick. You have this cultural association with the term – images of anarchists in beards and black hats dynamiting brick buildings, shattering windows – but sabotage is about the disrupting the flow of production, not the destruction of

property or machinery. Of course, since we don't *produce* anything we'll have to come up with other forms of direct action if management won't listen to our demands."

Rick taps his pen impatiently.

"Don't you want to know what our demands are?"

"Let me guess, more money."

"Eight dollars an hour isn't much, but management might say what we provide to the company isn't worth more than that – that we do eight-dollar-an-hour work – but we'll see how valuable they find our services once *sabo-tabby* goes into effect. Of course, we have other demands, too, like better snacks than this barrel full of stale pretzels." Miles moves to the table and raises the half-full tub of pretzels. "And what if one of us has a gluten allergy? What snack options are provided for the gluten intolerant?"

"It's not a *right* to have snacks provided. Paul does that out of kindness, it's a privilege."

*"Like Carnegie with his libraries! Maybe we'd prefer a higher wage over stale pretzels!"*

"Miles, I swear to god—"

"We'll see how he feels after our subversive methods come into play, when we disrupt the flow of party goods to Pittsburgh. When party-goers in need are left without. How seriously will our demands be when the Luscious Lavender table skirts go to Robinson Crossing instead of Monroeville? When the Backyardigans balloons go to McMurray instead of Lower Burrell?"

"We have that already – it's called Yo Mike, not *sabo-tabby*. And it highlights the fact we put up with a lot around here. You are all very replaceable, and—"

“*Is that a threat?*”

“Hey, shitbird,” Bob barks as he comes stalking over towards the action. “You finished with that Steeler order yet? What about you, New Kid?”

The moment gets real for Jeremy, and he suddenly feels like a putz holding an empty paper cup, like *what the fuck was I thinking taking a five-minute drink of water* and he immediately tosses the paper cup in the trash, starts to move back down to the Steeler order. After a minute or two it’s Bob, not Miles, who walks down to join him.

“Got your chatty pal some solitary work to do,” he tells Jeremy. “I’ll help you finish this up.”

They work in silence the rest of the way and Jeremy stays on edge, wanting to get the Bob back who told Jeremy how he shit his pants waiting in line at Burger King. He feels like Bob has somehow come to associate him with differing forms of fuckboyish behavior he sees in Miles and Yo Mike, so he’s sure to stay *grindstone* until they’ve got the order boxed-up and ready for delivery the next day. When they’re jacking the boxes down to the delivery pallets, Jeremy takes his chance.

“So’d you save her yet?”

“Huh?” Bob says, eyebrow thrust-up in his abrasive way.

“Princess Peach. Save her yet?”

“Oh,” Bob softens. “Not yet. That Bowser is a sneaky fuck. Keeps moving her to another castle.”

“Maybe tonight?”

“Only thing on my mind,” he sighs. “It’s what I do to keep you turds from getting to me. Some people count to ten, I just think of Princess Peach.”

When it's time to shut down for the day, Yo Mike still hasn't returned from his deliveries and it causes a minor disturbance over what exactly people need to do about it. Bob isn't having it though and punches out the second the computer clock ticks over to five. Rick's been trying to reach Mike on his cell for the last five minutes and is noticeably distressed.

"Don't get paid enough to care," Miles announces and punches out with Bob. Just before he exits he gives one last *Sabo-Tabby!* shout out and it echoes through the warehouse with the clanging close of the metal door.

"Anything I can do?" Jeremy asks when he and Rick are alone.

"Not your concern," Rick tells him. "Just unsure if I should phone Paul. He's at a trade show in Tampa and this is the kind of thing that might send him into a panic attack, which, you know, won't be worth it when Mike comes strolling through the door here in a minute."

"Gotcha. Well, see you at seven-thirty?"

"See you then, Jeremy."

On his walk home Jeremy realizes he hasn't checked his phone since punching in and finds multiple texts from Kat: first, asking if he'd like to try out his ID at a bar in Lawrenceville, and the rest are various forms of *or maybe not?* He texts her back, tells her he's cool with whatever, and by the time he's back to the apartment and out of the shower, she's texted back saying she'll pick him up at seven. Then, in a separate text, lets him know that in case it wasn't clear, the invitation was for Jeremy, and Jeremy alone.

Scott's in the main room watching tv when Jeremy heads out the door. He tells Scott he's going out with Kat and Scott raises his eyebrows like there's going to be more to it than that.

“You back in the game?”

“Looks that way,” he says.

“Get some!” Scott yells as he leaves, making Jeremy laugh cause he hasn't heard Scott say that since they were at least fourteen. Kat's waiting outside in her Acura coupe and Jeremy opens the door to Bloc Party on the stereo and a clean, citrusy smell. “Hey, fella,” she says all nonchalant and Jeremy reaches out his fist for a dap to which she gives an eye roll and puts her car in gear.

She takes them to Remedy, a bar on Butler St. where the vibe is totally different from Yo Mike's part of Lawrenceville, must be that Brooklyn of the Burgh side, and even at night he can see the signs of gentrification in progress – the renovated buildings and bulldozed sites, the bars and coffee shops that no matter how they try to mask it give off the aura of newness. This is not the case with Remedy, however; it sits in a three story red brick building that doesn't have a sign, other than the neon “Open” light in the window. Jeremy holds the door open for Kat so she can lead the way, save him from any embarrassment of illustrating his barroom virginity.

Kat wears lace-up boots over above-the-knee socks, a bodycon black skirt to go with her leather jacket and when she walks past Jeremy into the bar he thinks he sees two hipster doofuses at the end of the counter light up at the sight of her. Turns out they know her. Or at least one of them, who Kat gives a hug and he does a big rock-back-and-forth production



with her. He has a grizzled beard, black-framed glasses, and a red and white striped sweater and winter cap with a giant red poof ball on top.

“Who was that?” Jeremy asks when Kat returns to belly up next to him at the bar.

“Just a friend from school.”

“He looks like Waldo after his fifteen minutes of fame are up. Like things have taken a major turn for the worst.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Like it’s all awkward now that nobody wants to find him anymore but he keeps popping up anyway, all strung out smelling like piss and body odor.”

“Hmm. Seems like somebody’s jealous.”

“Of *him*? Um, no.”

“Oh-ho,” she laughs. “I don’t know, that seems pretty passive aggressive.”

Jeremy smirks.

“He’s gay by the way,” Kat adds just as the bartender approaches, asks what he can do for them. Kat orders a PBR pounder and Jeremy follows suit. The bartender asks for their IDs and seems to pause on Jeremy’s but doesn’t add anything when he hands it back.

“*So*,” Kat says in dramatic fashion after her first sip of beer. “You know your *boy* Scott is basically the biggest fucktard on the planet, right?”

Jeremy shrugs. “That was really stupid. Believe it or not he feels bad about it, though.”

“Is that supposed to be an excuse? He’d basically be inhuman if he didn’t. Seriously, in this day and age, who could possibly think it’s funny or cool or whatever to be *racist*?”

“He doesn’t think it’s any of those things. And he’s not racist, he was just annoyed at Marcus for going on and on about how wonderful Pitt is. That had been brewing for a long time. Aren’t you supposed to get all that? The class struggle or whatever?”

“Jeremy, please, Scott is as silver spoon as it gets.”

“Not anymore. You know about his dad losing his license after getting busted for the second time, right? For self-prescribing? The second time he was doing it for the secretary he was screwing.”

“And he had his retirement nest-egg,” Kat adds. “Guy had been a hot-shot orthopedist for decades. You know he was sitting on loads of money.”

“Not after 2008,” Jeremy says and cuts Kat a glance, hoping she catches the implication.

“Yeah? How’s he paying for the apartment?”

“Well, that’s temporary. His mom’s helping out right now, just for a month or two until he finds the right job.”

*“The right job.”*

Jeremy sips his beer.

“Okay, whatever,” Kat sighs, “but we’re getting away from the main point,” and she continues on about what Scott did to Marcus, getting more animated, emphasizing the final word to every sentence, and Jeremy gets it, as Scott said himself, it was *pretty fucked*, but he feels like Kat is laying it on a bit much – because what does she expect, for Jeremy to renounce his best friend? – but there’s also a common thread to their relationship here: the age difference, the way she has of lecturing him. It borders on condescension, but there’s something about her manner that makes it different from Miles’ demeanor. Like Kat truly

believes she's teaching or molding and it doesn't come across in the same pretentious manner, and the truth is, Jeremy kind of likes it, because what does he really know, anyway? He knows his scope is small and he's always found Kat's perspective unique, her way of seeing the world. He's always seen her as *unconventional*. And he's thinking about how exactly partnership is defined when he glances down the bar to see Waldo lean forward and kiss the guy next to him.

His first instinct is fear and he scans the bar while telling himself *This is Pittsburgh* and waiting for the slur he's heard so many times it has no impact anymore. But nothing happens. When Waldo pulls away there's no fear, or shame, a smile that seems to hold some incalculable level of connection between the two. And even though Jeremy knows things are changing, even here, he still can't stop thinking: *This is Pittsburgh*.

Kat picks up that she lost Jeremy and tries to wrap up the discussion by concluding that Scott is no longer welcome at her apartment, and when Jeremy still seems zombied she takes a sip of beer, playfully smacks his arm with the back of her hand and asks him what he did on Saturday.

It's partly through some impulse to annoy her, to dig the Scotty Ballgame knife in a little, but it's also an honest to the question, when Jeremy tells her about Scott's possibly faking being on ecstasy, how he said he would break that guy's face, then the overtop affection towards Amber.

“What do you think that is that allows him to be so possessive of Amber, treat her like property, but still try to fuck anything that moves.”

“Scott isn't like that. He'll flirt around but he doesn't cheat on her.”

Kat looks at him like he just shit his pants.

“You don’t actually believe that?”

“You don’t know him like I do, Kat. Dude is as loyal as they come.”

“Okay, I won’t get into that discussion, but just take the caveman possession part.

You think you’d be like that if you ever had a girlfriend?”

“If I *ever* had a *girlfriend*?”

“Well,” Kat begins, unsure of how to proceed, “correct me if I’m wrong—”

“You realize how often we exist on completely different planes?”

“Okay—”

“There’s like this sliver of my life – a Kat sliver – that you know about.”

“Right, okay, so fill me in. I’m interested. I want to know more than just this *Kat sliver* you speak of.”

“And I want to know more about *you*,” Jeremy says, seizing an opportunity to redirect the conversation. “I wish you would’ve called me about the thing with your professor.”

“Well,” Kat scoffs and rolls her eyes. “A, that wasn’t a big deal to begin with, and, B, I’d rather not get into why exactly it was we weren’t real close then.”

“Kat, the d-bag pulled a gun on you and confessed his love.”

“Allegedly.”

“Allegedly,” Jeremy smiles.

“Sort of like this girlfriend you’re not telling me about.”

“I didn’t say I had one *currently*.”

“Oh, right.”

“Besides,” Jeremy begins in a faux-shy manner, “there’s sort of this girl I’ve been into for a while now. Not sure if you know her.”

“Oh, gee, really,” Kat mocks with her dopey-male-Jeremy impersonation.

Jeremy laughs, nudges her thigh, hopes that signals some end to the conversation. He motions to the bartender, asks Kat if she’s ready for another. After they get their next round Kat tells Jeremy to follow him and scoots off her stool. There’s a doorway in the back corner of the shotgun bar that Jeremy figured just led to the kitchen, which it does, but there’s also a long, narrow staircase that climbs to the second floor where there’s a large, empty room. “It’s dead since it’s Monday,” she tells him, “but on the weekends it becomes a dance floor and you can barely move.” They continue to the end of the hall where there’s a much smaller room with a pool table, the walls splattered with graffiti.

“Feel like a game?” she asks.

Neither are very good and they don’t take the game too seriously. Kat is more into the jukebox on the wall and Jeremy takes in the graffiti. It reminds him of the Pillar of Shame the way every space is covered in words or images that overlap one another in an irreverent claiming of space as if no previous thought is untouchable, and along the backwall Jeremy discerns the outline of the symbol through the overlapping graffiti that spans the entirety of the wall, the giant red circle and concentric letter A for Anarchy.

When “Beasts of Burden” plays Kat begins to swing her hips and when the final selection is made she glides away from the jukebox, mouths the lyrics like she’s Jagger, the pool cue the mic stand, and then she slides effortlessly into position for a her next shot, missing woefully. They share a laugh and the game continues like that before Kat heads down for the next round of beers and Jeremy leans against the table facing the window and takes out his Parliaments, scans down the row houses on Butler St.

Kat returns and leans against the window sill facing Jeremy, taps her PBR to his.

“Smoking in here?” she asks with an eyebrow raised.

“Saw the ashtray,” he shrugs, “plus your boy downstairs was smoking so I figured what the hell.”

“Right,” she says and then they’re quiet for moment as “Psycho Killer” plays in the background. “So,” Kat begins, “have any big plans for the weekend? I mean, other than *slaying ladies* with Scotty Ballgame, of course.”

Jeremy forces a smile, unable to read her. “Nothing special,” he tells her.

She nods. “All right, so, you know my friend Hunter down there – you know, the one you’re so jealous of?”

Jeremy eyes her.

“The one you were shooting little lasers at with your menacing man eyes?”

“Uh-huh.”

“The one who practically made you stand up on the bar and whizz everywhere to mark your territory?”

His eyes narrow.

“Well, he bought me a shot when I was waiting for the beers, and I guess I’m a little buzzed, so it’s probably a dumb idea, but I’m going to say it anyway—”

“Maybe you should just hang on to it—”

“I just wanted to say,” she begins and looks down at her beer, “I understand why you said those things to Scott – about us, I mean. It was hard at the time for reasons I won’t get into, but I wanted you to know that I understand now. I get it.”

Jeremy looks her in the eye, considers things. He drops the cigarette on the wood floor, squashes it with his shoe. “What do you get, Kat?” he asks, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Jeremy,” she says softly, “you know it’s okay, right?”

He laughs so loudly and so sharply that her spine stiffens. “Jesus Christ, Kat, I’m not the first high school kid to lie about fucking a girl.”

“I was just always waiting for you to make the first move,” she says, “even the slightest hint of one. I thought I’d made it clear in so many ways how I felt about you.”

He takes his hands from his pockets, palms on the edge of the table, the weight shifting back and forth between legs.

“Because that’s what they always say, right? Guys are never *just* friends with girls. I mean, not strai—”

He presses her against the wall, kisses her hard. Her mouth opens and he’s hard again and he knows she feels it and he’s running his hands up her waist, thumbing the base of her bra. Footfalls sound on the stairs, echoing throughout the empty second floor. Her hands go to his shoulders, pulling him in. The steps grow closer. The sound of male laughter. His hand moves to her throat and feels the blood coursing through as her breath grows heavy, tendons flex.

He pulls away just before Waldo and his friend enter the room. Waldo’s the first one through, pulling a cigarette and lighter from his pocket. He pauses when he sees them, lighter extended halfway to the cigarette in his mouth.

“What up, hoss?” Jeremy says as he heads to the door. Waldo stands frozen, eyes following Jeremy. Their paths cross and Jeremy flicks the cigarette from his mouth.

*“Seriously?”*

But Jeremy keeps walking through the door and down the stairs.

He slides up to the bar and pulls out his phone, texts Scott: *Scotty Ballgame...Kat's being a cunt. Get down to Remedy and let's get wasted.*

*Typical*, Scott sends back, *on my way*.

He looks towards the stairs, still no sign of Kat, and when the bartender comes by he orders another beer. He stares into the reflected glimmer of liquor bottles and mirror and soft amber liquid until his pupils begin to dilate and everything merges. It was a little less than a year ago when they had gone back to Scott's house after a party. They went down to his father's man cave, a final project of a previous age with its dual big-screens and leather couches, the oversized framed photo of Franco Harris' fingers stretching out, trying to best physics in the football's plunge to the turf, that surreal moment when the Immaculate Reception was conceived. Scott went to the minibar and retrieved a bottle of Johnny Walker, then Glenlivet and Oban, just a dab from each and the old man won't notice, and this seemed the perfect extension of the synergy buzzing all night with the raw November air and teenage angst, so even after the party was over Scott wouldn't let it end because who really gives a fuck about tomorrow and in that moment in Scott's basement when the two were good and lit and laughing Jeremy placed a hand on the curve of Scott's ribs in a manner that made his spine stiffen as Scott shrugged away and this instant had Jeremy at the brink of fight or flight until Scott pretended nothing happened and Jeremy let his fists uncurl.

Jeremy feels Kat slide onto the stool next to him. Waldo and his friend haven't returned and the barroom seems cavernous and claustrophobic at once, like he's fallen into some oceanic abyss miles underwater and is slowly being crushed by the pressure. He taps



his beer can against the wooden countertop, bobs his head to a song that's not playing. Kat places her hand on Jeremy's to silence the music. The can rests. Jeremy contracts his lips as though he's about to say something, but there's nothing there, an amulet to ward off speaking from either of them, but he feels it wearing thin.

“So you know Evan's girl?”

Kat appears flustered. “Yeah?”

“What do you think of her?”

“I don't know, Jeremy,” she sighs. “She seems...what – *nice*, I guess? Can't say I've thought about her a whole lot.”

“Right. But doesn't she just seem so, I don't know, *common* to you?”

A quick sharp laugh bursts from Kat. “What, like a plebeian?”

“No, I just mean, like, typical.” As he searches for the right words to express what he wants to say he hears the door open behind him and sees the color disappear from Kat's face.

“Big Jerm!” Scott calls out, hands cupped around his mouth. He's got his Nikes and jeans to go with a heathered purple v-neck and backwards Pens hat and he brings his hand out wide for a five and hug, slapping Jeremy hard on the back when he comes in close.

“Okay, hotshot,” the bartender says before Scott has a chance to sit down. “Let's see some ID.”

“Certainly,” Scott says as he hands over his fake.

The bartender leans over the countertop and holds the ID close to Scott, looks at him, then the ID, Scott again, then hands it back to him.

“You know, next month we're getting the ID scanners.”

“That's good. Do you have a lot of underage knuckleheads trying to get in here?”

“Not for long,” the bartender says, taps his fingers on the countertop. “What do you want to drink?”

Scott glances at Jeremy’s PBR. “One of those, please.”

When the bartender turns, Scott places his elbows on the countertop, leans forward to look across Jeremy.

“Katrina.”

“Scott.” She lays a tip on the table.

“Leaving so soon?” Scott asks.

She slings her purse over her shoulder. “Yeah,” she says and crinkles her nose, “it’s suddenly foul in here, and that’s, you know, off-putting.”

“Jesus,” Scott laughs, “Jeremy was right, you really *are* being a cunt tonight.”

She shoves off the bar and to Jeremy it’s like it happens in one fluid motion: the rocking barstool, the swinging door, while he stares into the mosaic of glass and liquid. Then Scott is laughing and slapping him on the back again before taking a performative look around the bar.

“Dude, seriously? What kind of hipster hole did she drag you to? Let’s finish these and head somewhere else?”

“Fine with me,” Jeremy tells him. “Where to?”

“Not sure,” he says and pulls out his phone. “We’re in Yo Mike’s neck of the woods. I’ll holler at him, see what he’s up to.”

“You got Mike’s number, huh?”

“Yeah,” he says, shrugs, holds the phone to his ear. “*Yo-o-o-o Mike!*”

Jeremy gulps his beer, listens to the conversation that doesn't seem to be going Scott's way. That rankling feeling of intrusion starts to seep in, still in its initial stage before it metastasizes into something toxic.

"No go on Mike," Scott says and slides his phone back into his pocket. "Says we're doing too much for him on a weeknight." Scott smiles at this, proud. "Let's just head down to where he took us on Friday."

Scott leads them down Butler St. towards the 31<sup>st</sup> St. bridge where they wind up at the Thunderbird Café. They're charging a cover at the door, which makes Scott consider bailing but it's crowded and Jeremy can see Scott getting primed just being in the proximity of the action and in the end they pay the cover. It's a split-level bar with exposed brick and dark-tiled floors. They enter on the mezzanine level with the band playing up a half-flight of stairs, pool tables on the lower level. They stay at the mezzanine bar where the indie band remains at a tolerable volume. The band seems to move between various stages of indie folk, jam music, and what Jeremy thinks he overhears described as *murder ballads*.

And Scott goes gregarious, finds out the band is local, or used to be, had moved away to Nashville, and its supposedly a big deal they're back at Thunderbird because the front man used to tend bar. Scott doesn't care about any of this, just uses it as a way to talk to girls. But everyone seems noticeably older and most of the girls offer placating smiles when he attempts anything beyond basic questions. It's a detached amusement, observing strange animals in the wild they had happily forgotten about until they popped up somewhere unexpected. Jeremy wants to tell him they're in the wrong bar, wrong neighborhood, that people run in packs and they're a long ways from their own, but there's something about the

pulse of the bar that locks him into his stool, like the calm eye of a storm, and he quietly stays put, orders more drinks.

He sinks into the music and smoky haze, plays the scene over again of Waldo leaning in for the kiss, the feel of the cigarette flicked from his mouth. And then he's thinking about Kat and Scott's ordering another round of Jager bombs and Jeremy knocks it back while his head begins to swirl thinking about the parameters of partnership, organs fitting together like puzzle pieces, incongruities and abnormalities and all the ways things are *supposed* to be. He stares himself into oblivion through the mirror thinking *This is Pittsburgh and life is so long* and he knows things are changing, even here, but how he has no idea what he even wants and *my god* can he even imagine where he will be in five years, let alone ten, twenty, *thirty*, and is it even worth it beyond that, is anything really worth it? and given everything, could he not imagine a life with Kat, a partnership, why is that so impossible to fathom? and when Scott's about to order another round Jeremy claps him on the back, tells him he's going for a smoke and Scott follows him out to Butler where Scott asks what exactly happened with Kat and without hesitation Jeremy weaves a tale of fingers in orifices and pulling away and Scott calls her a fucking tease and Jeremy calls her a stuck up cunt and Scott says that's when Jeremy should have given her the old shocker for good measure and he holds up his index, middle and pinky finger with the ring finger curled down and yells *Two in the pink and one in the stink!* and Jeremy yells *Goddamn right!* and raises his hand for a high five and as Scott raises his, Jeremy finds the opening and slaps him hard across the face.

Scott stumbles. Catches himself before he falls, hat knocked askew. He remains crouched in the recovery position, ready to spring. His eyes sharpen. Before Jeremy can respond, Scott has each side of Jeremy's collar in his fists and they're wrestling on Butler St.,

serenaded by the car horns of passing motorists. A few bar crawlers call out and Jeremy feels for a moment like he's on some midnight roller coaster, jerked around at whim, floating. Then his face skids across the pavement and everything goes still.

*Winner!* someone yells from across the street. Jeremy listens as Scott's footfalls grow faint.

## Chapter 15

Jeremy dabs a finger at the large burgundy scab covering his right cheekbone, the splatter of its smaller brethren scaling his cheek like an archipelago. Beneath the surface lies a bone bruise, but his hangover occupies most of his capacity to hurt this morning. He finds an old Pirates hat in his room, brings the bill down low, and this seems to help, somewhat. He wonders whether it looks like anything else could've happened besides him being face-raked by pavement. It doesn't.

Rick lets out a low whistle when he clocks-in. He sits at the break table, highlighter in hand as he peruses the morning bulk orders. Jeremy thinks of a line from a movie, tells Rick he should see the other guy, but judging from the parabola that shoots down his face, Rick doesn't seem to like the sound of that, so Jeremy says he was joking, that he was wrestling with a buddy who got the better of him.

"Well," Rick sighs, "at least your troubles aren't as big as your boy Yo Mike's right now."

"What's up with Mike?"

"Turns out, the reason it took the Polish wonder so long to get back from deliveries yesterday was due to the fact that he hit someone." Pauses for the drama. "*Not* a vehicle. A mother fucking *pedestrian*."

"Not good," Jeremy says.

"You're damn right it's not good."

“Did you have to fire him?”

“Well, it’s an odd thing. This is all from Mike, of course, but he’s the one that reported it to us. Said the guy *literally leapt*, his words, in front of the truck, like he thought he was wearing some sort of sticky suit and wanted to land *splat* on the grill. Mike thinks he was on something.”

“I’ll say.”

“Luckily Mike was just turning out of a parking lot, said he sat with the guy on the curb for a long time, making sure he was okay. Apparently he wanted no part of going to the hospital, eventually got up and wandered off.”

“Weird.”

“Only Yo Mike, right? If it had been anyone else you just talk it up to crazy people, but when it’s Mike, it makes you pause.”

“Right.”

“At any rate, you’ll obviously be going with him on the deliveries. Fairly heavy today, better go ahead and get started.”

Jeremy takes the first bulk order down to the far end of the warehouse and when Mike comes in he stays down at the break table talking to Rick for awhile. From what Jeremy can tell, Bob comes in and out of the conversation while working, and when Mike makes his way down to Jeremy’s end, Bob trails a few feet behind.

“Yo, check out that mug,” Mike says, “you and Scotty B go a little too hard last night?”

Bob had been on a mission, looking to knock the next item off his checklist, but he cuts Jeremy a look, eyebrows raised. That's it. He turns down the candle and balloon aisle, but it was enough, like a notation had been made.

"No," Jeremy tells Mike, "just messing around."

When the truck is loaded and they're set to leave, Jeremy climbs into the cab of the truck and texts Kat, asks if they could get together for a coffee or beer later. He's not expecting a response right away, knows he needs to say more than that, but can't force himself to. When Mike climbs in the cab too, he becomes enough of a distraction.

"So you hit a person yesterday, huh? Congrats."

"Shit, man," he says and turns the ignition. "I would've thought the guy was trying to commit suicide if I hadn't only been going five miles an hour. And of course Bob wants to act like they should fire my ass for it, the prick."

"That's rough."

"You have no idea," Mike says as he turns onto Center. "The bitch of it is I can't work on Thursday and you know how that's gonna go over."

"What do you got on Thursday?"

Mike sighs. "Have to take my girl to the clinic. Fucked up and got her pregnant."

"Sucks, man."

"I'll say it again, you have no idea. Don't think you can understand self-loathing until you convince your girl to get an abortion she doesn't want."

Jeremy lets this sink in, suddenly no longer feeling like he has anything to offer the conversation.

"Just can't have another one, man. Not with one payment already."



They come to a stop on Fifth along Pitt's campus. The interchange with Bigelow between Forbes and Fifth is barricaded with roadblocks and a circle of cops stand in the blocked-off street, apparently listening to a presentation of some sort. They aren't quite in full riot gear, there aren't shields and visors present, but they have the appearance of a SWAT team.

"The fuck is that?" Mike asks, seemingly offended.

"Not sure," Jeremy shrugs. He's seen the roadblocks before at Bigelow, it doesn't seem *that* out of the ordinary. "Might have something to do with that G-20 thing."

"The what?"

"It's this thing," Jeremy begins, but the words fail him, "I don't know, some conference with representatives from the twenty richest countries in the world. Some global meet or something."

"In *Pittsburgh*?"

"I know, right? I guess Obama chose it because of our economic turnaround after the steel industry left."

Mike gives a sarcastic *ha!* and Jeremy chuckles in agreement but figures he doesn't know enough about it one way or the other. The whole idea of twenty countries or twenty representatives from around the world meeting to discuss(?) determine(?) economic policies for the world seems so counter to the way he experiences life. What could Indonesia have to do with America's economy? How about Turkey? And vice-versa. He can barely see beyond the bubble that stretches from Sewickley to Pittsburgh and yet the world seems to be converging in the city he's always thought of as provincial.

On the Parkway, before the truck disappears into the Fort Pitt Tunnel, Jeremy looks out to the point where the rivers converge and sees something on the water he's not sure he's seen before, except maybe in a movie, maybe one set in Pittsburgh. It's a black, arrowhead shaped boat cutting against the current of the Allegheny, the unmistakable projection of an artillery barrel rising above the hull.

\*

It's not until five minutes before the end of his shift that Kat text's back: *Can't. Really busy.*

Right away Jeremy sends back: *I can't never could do anything.* Then adds: *How about tomorrow?*

*Even busier.*

He tells himself to shrug it off, that she'll get over it, but the thought of going back to the apartment makes him ill and he makes the sudden decision to head out to Sewickley. He finds Dell in the living room, standing in front of the tv with her scrubs still on. She's watching the local news, something about the protests in anticipation of the Summit set to begin the next day, but she breaks away when she sees it's Jeremy.

"Hey, now! What brings you..." and her expression falls when she sees Jeremy's face.

"Scott and I were wrestling," he says, "it's nothing."

"*Wrestling?*"

"Yes, *Mother.* Wrestling."

She tilts an eye at Jeremy like she does when she doesn't completely believe him, but then Evan is coming down the stairs and when he enters the room Jeremy tries to get him in a headlock, which he barely avoids.

"Damn, dude," Evan says, pulling away. "What happened to your face?"

"You should see the other guy."

"Who's the other guy?"

"He said it was Scott," Dell says.

"So how bad's Scott's face?"

"Holy hell, guys," Jeremy groans. "It was a *joke*."

Evan continues to stare at Jeremy, the faintest hint of a smirk at the corners of his mouth. "So, what happened to your face?"

Dell folds her arms across her chest. "He *says* they were just wrestling, which probably means I'll have to fix another one of Scott's teeth with his booze breath polluting the air."

"I believe him," Evan shrugs and then asks Dell what time they're eating, which makes Jeremy chuckle to himself, his brother's pampered manner. These things Evan's never questioned.

"How about thirty minutes? Are you eating with us?" she asks Jeremy.

"Sure," he says like it's no big whoop either way. Then he whacks Evan's arm, asks if he wants to throw a few. He can see Evan working it out in his mind, figures he threw a lot at practice today, but he gives in and Jeremy takes the Bulldog's glove and they head out to the backyard.

The temperature has started to drop and the early evening breeze is cool. When the ball smacks against the leather for the first time it's like a shot of serotonin to Jeremy's brain. He tosses the ball straight up, catches it in his open palm before sending it back to Evan.

"So what really happened to your face?" Evan asks.

Jeremy monotones: "Scott and I were drunk at a bar in Lawrenceville and after I bitch-slapped him he sent me skidding across the pavement."

Evan laughs.

"Typical Monday," Jeremy adds.

"Right."

It's not like it wasn't expected, even half-ass planned, but when the Bulldog appears on the back porch, Jeremy gets that sickly anxious feeling like his skin will catch on fire if he doesn't immerse himself in activity. The Bulldog walks Jeremy's way with his perpetual scowl and hardened brow, his work pants looking particularly dusty.

"You sure you should be throwing?" he asks Evan before he reaches Jeremy.

"I'm fine," Evan assures him. "I'm practically lobbing them."

"Well, that can be a problem too," he barks. "Don't be out here jacking around. It makes you sloppy."

Jeremy pulls a smirk at Evan, the brother look, like *don't let me slop ya up over there, little bro*, and the next ball he gets he sends back to Evan on a rope, as though the Bulldog had been talking to him.

The Bulldog takes a stance next to Jeremy but remains quiet, like a coach observing warmups. Jeremy zips another ball to Evan, makes the leather sing.

“Easy, son,” the Bulldog says. It’s not until Jeremy realizes he said it soft enough to where only he could hear that his father spoke to him. “I don’t think you’re warm enough to throw that hard yet.”

“I was born ready, Pop,” Jeremy says four notches louder than his father. “You know that.”

The Bulldog grows quiet again and Jeremy continues to pound the ball into Evan’s glove. Even though he stands on Jeremy’s right side, the side that makes him look like a burn victim, he doesn’t say anything about it, and this is a relief for Jeremy yet makes him anxious at the same time, like he and Dell talked about him behind his back, the Bulldog throwing up his hands in an apathetic shrug like *yep, that’s our idiot son – what do you want me to do about it?*

“How’s school going?” the Bulldog asks.

The question sounds absurd.

“It’s *fa-a-a-a-a-ntastic*.”

More quiet.

On a rope, Jeremy thinks. Scorch his glove. Break his fucking hand.

“Listen, son, I know your mother told you about my ceremony on Saturday.”

Jeremy’s right arm begins to pulsate. He wipes the sweat from his brow. Aside from the missing leg kick, it’s like he’s on the mound again. “I just wanted you to hear it from me, it would mean a lot to me for you to be there. For us to be there as a family.” Evan misjudges Jeremy’s next throw, catches it on the heel of his glove, not the netting, and he takes his hand out and shakes it to alleviate the sting. “As we’ve discussed in the past, you’re your own

man now and make your own decisions, so I'll leave it that." He takes a step, then pauses.  
"Maybe by then that thing on your face'll look better."

The sudden jab stuns Jeremy and he turns to find his father already hobbling onto the porch. *Did the Bulldog just zing me? He leave on the high note?* He can't help but laugh. He can't remember that kind of sarcastic banter being offered to him but always knew it was there, could see him being that way with Kovacs, and it highlights one of the things that he always found so frustrating about his father – that he couldn't act like a human being in these situations with his kids, everything had to be a judgment of some kind. *See*, foolish people drink and look what happened. *See*, lazy people sleep in and see where they end up? Like people weren't allowed to be human beings in the Bulldog's world. You just got immediately divided into worthy/not worthy, or some other Bulldog binary that Jeremy perpetually found himself on the wrong side of.

But still. *That thing on your face*. He'll savor that.

When Evan throws it back, he tosses the ball straight up in the air. "Thanks, Little Brother, that was just what I needed."

"You were flinging it, man. My hand is killing me."

"Listen," Jeremy says as they come together, "tell Mom sorry but I'm going to skip out on dinner, head on back to the Burgh."

"What? Why? What did Dad say to you?"

"Christ, Evan, I'm not afraid of him."

"I didn't say you—"

"I've got things to do is all."

"You coming with us Saturday?"

“Doubt it.”

“*Why?* It’s a big deal, Jerm.”

“It’s a has-been’s wet dream.”

“Rather be a has-been than a never-was. What’ve you ever done that’s so special?”

“Ouch, brother. Ouch.”

The tone is meant to be sarcastic, but Evan’s words cut deeper into Jeremy the more they linger. He’s not supposed to be able to get to Jeremy like this, the younger brother, and he stares at Evan, notices the changes in him that he missed somehow – the broadening shoulders, the teenage five o’clock shadow. Jeremy feels suddenly like a fool. Pretty soon he’ll be gone, Jeremy thinks, and he’s been treating Evan like a kid all this time.

Evan holds his eyes for a moment longer, but Jeremy shirks it off, flashes him the deuces. Then he’s off to the garage where he finds an old rucksack and one of the buckets of baseballs the Bulldog keeps around. He throws a few balls in the sack and heads back to Pittsburgh.

Scott’s on the couch watching the Pirate game with an Iron City in his hand when he walks in. “What up,” he says with a head nod. “Grab a beer.”

Jeremy gets a beer and slumps down on the opposite side of the couch, eyes on the game, another impending loss for the Bucs.

“Looks like I did a number on your face,” Scott says.

“It was a big hit everywhere I went today.”

“Well, you deserved it.”

“Well, you’re a d-bag.”

With everything settled, they drink until they finish the case.

## Chapter 16

Tonight, Jeremy tells himself as he sits in class, tonight is the night he writes his paper. He's received the slightest reprieve because Jesse has stalled the progress on their second unit to talk about the Summit, though he spends most of his time talking about the protests, specifically the ones that have yet to come.

"What I want you to do," he tells the class, "is look at the way these protests are presented to you. News is not objective. It's filtered. And I want you to notice the choices different outlets make in how they present these next few days to the public."

He thinks Jesse keeps looking at him during class, figures it's due to the *thing on his face* and not because he still hasn't turned in the essay, and he has a fleeting moment where he hopes Jesse will stop him after class but Jeremy leaves unmolested, *because Jesse's not yer babysitter, bro*, he tells himself. *Remember?*

He's reminded it's a Miles day when he gets to PartyMart, has to offer some story about his face to yet another person. He figured with the protest business Miles and Rick would be at it again, but Rick is going over paperwork at the break table and sends Jeremy down to the far end to help Miles with an order of Amscam mugs.

"Welcome to the height of merchandizer laziness," Miles tells him with arms spread out over the boxes of mugs. "How stupid do they think the American consumer is? Just take a look at the evidence."



What lies in front of them are white porcelain mugs with block lettered phrases plastered on them, sometimes level, sometimes not. Like the white mug with *World's Greatest Dad* stenciled on it unevenly. The even lazier *It's a Baby!* set. Miles holds up an *I'm Too Sexy To Be 40* mug.

“And don't worry,” he tells Jeremy, “PartyMart carries the *I'm Too Sexy To Be 50, 60, 70* and *80* mugs as well.”

“Why stop there?”

“Precisely? We don't need to piss the nonagenarians off, do we? And these,” he says and hold a *You're 40, Get a Grip* mug. I know what you're thinking, and just relax, they come in *You're 50, 60, 70* and *80* too.”

“Supply and demand,” Jeremy tells him.

“It really is the answer to every riddle.”

After they work for awhile Jeremy asks Miles about Mike, if he came in today.

“Delivering the goods as we speak. Let's see if he hits anybody else today.”

“Yeah that was wild, huh?”

“I hear that's why the owner doesn't want the PartyMart logo on the delivery truck. He doesn't want his company advertised with goofs like Yo Mike behind the wheel, taking pedestrians out like he's playing *GTA*.”

“Suppose that's smart.”

“It's all part of the bullshit hiring process. Same reason they seek out multiple part time hires like you and me instead of having another full time employee, fewer benefits, higher profit margin. Swear they look for full-time guys like Mike because they figure he

won't last long, don't want him to, just get enough out of him before he puts in enough time to start earning benefits. Then find some other mook."

It makes Jeremy think of Mike saying he'll be out tomorrow, wonders if he's told them already, or if he doesn't want to have to discuss it so he'll just call in sick. Seems screwed either way given the current Yo Mike climate in the warehouse.

"Then like we were saying about Bob," Miles continues, "he's locked-in, they want him to stick around, start off at ass-nothing pay, and the guy just works and works and works until he's assistant manager. Rick lay that American dream stuff on you?"

"Yeah," Jeremy laughs.

"Some dream right? And you see Bob is slowly going crazy. It's Sisyphus' boulder in the twenty-first century. You know about Camus and *The Myth of Sisyphus*?"

Jeremy shrugs, shakes his head.

"Camus uses the story of Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill over and over to compare it to life in modern society, says the main problem is how to keep people from killing themselves, that that's what the world does to you."

"Gotcha," Jeremy says, trying to go grindstone, make sure they get their work done.

"Telling you, that's got Bob written all over it. Though at least he's got a lot of color in his daily life. He's got a gorgeous polychromatic boulder, slowly spinning with emerald greens and candy apple reds and sunburst oranges and shimmering silvers and lots and lots and black and gold, but in the end it's still a boulder."

"Lipstick on a pig."

"Exactly."

His point seemingly made, Miles lets Jeremy descend into his own world and as he falls into the drum of the work he thinks more about what it is that ultimately turns him off about Miles. He's funny, and his effervescent constant bubbly way is good for the warehouse, somehow it seems to lift morale even while people find him annoying, but it's not just the condescension, it's the way people seem so perfectly cordoned off into categories for him. It's a facet of the condescension, but something more subtle, and even though he seems to be including Jeremy in his little subset - for what Jeremy can only assume is because he goes to school, or maybe because he thinks highly of Jeremy's reading habits, but Rick has a freaking degree from Pitt, and yet he's still lumped in with Bob as some PartyMart lifer schlub, and Mike, well, who knows what Miles category Mike falls into - Jeremy has the natural inclination to pull away, because in a way he never could have seen coming, Miles reminds him of some bizarro, judgmental version of the Bulldog.

It's not until the end of the shift when the Summit comes up. Mike returned from deliveries without any problems but with a story about a massive banner that activists hung from the West End Bridge, the DANGER: CLIMATE DESTRUCTION AHEAD message clearly visible from the Fort Pitt Bridge. Miles says it was probably Greenpeace but there isn't too much more said and Jeremy waits to see if anything comes up about Thursday, if Rick will say anything to him about doing the deliveries by himself, but both he and Mike are mum. Everyone's gathered around the computer to clock-out when Miles starts in.

“Well, I guess I'll see you guys tomorrow, unless of course something happens to me tonight.”

Bob just scoffs and carries on but Rick can't let it go.

“I suppose that's some reference to the protests?”

“No Bailout No Capitalism, Rick,” Miles says, raises a fist.

“Don’t be a fool,” Rick says.

“*A fool?*”

“I’m out of here,” Mike says and waves goodbye as he heads towards the ramp.

“So what’re you going to do tonight?” Rick asks. “Go stand around Forbes Ave? Chant some stuff with Pitt students?”

“Not going to be in Oakland. Lawrenceville is where the real movement is, not with the Pitt students who only half understand what’s going on, most of them just wanting to take pictures, post a video on Facebook.”

“I’m out of here, too,” Jeremy tells them. “See you tomorrow.”

And despite the impression Jesse had left with him in class, despite his interest in the mounting sense of unease in Pittsburgh, when Jeremy gets back to this apartment, finds it empty, all he feels like doing is curling into his own world with his laptop and headphones. Even with Scott gone and the apartment to himself, he likes the insular feel to the headphones, how they lock him in a world, and he moves between old movies and games he either remembers himself or knows through oral history. He finds what he can of the Steelers-Cowboys Super Bowls of the 70s – Bradshaw to Swan, Jackie Smith lying in the end zone, disbelief in his hands that let the ball bounce off his chest – and on to their last Super Bowl of the decade in ’79, would be their last for twenty-six years, how this seemed to encapsulate things. He switches to *The Deer Hunter* – mill shifts ending at dawn, to the bar for Stillers-Iggle, *just one shot*. The impossible amount of times he’s heard Scott do his *You see this? This is This* De Niro routine out of context, like he’s the only kid in western PA to see the film.

During a quiet moment in the movie he hears the apartment door open and he slides off his headphones. Scott on the phone, the fur-raised tone of younger brother defense.

“Yeah and I’m looking, jackass...please, Mom’s fine...*dude*, I said I’m looking. What do you want me to do? Work the graveyard at GetGo and get shot up by some thug? Shit’s bad out there...it’s a, you know, what do you call it, a *recession*...you’re such hot shit why don’t you call in a favor at BNY? That old fuck Mellon still around?”

Headphones. De Niro and Walken, the grandeur of an Orthodox wedding, reception at the VFW – *fuck it* – the drunken posturing Jeremy has already come to understand so well, the release, laugh it off, yeah, *fuck it – ha-ha!* Cut. Vietnam.

And Jeremy thinks of the G-20, can’t rid himself of the connotations to his Beamer protestors at Sewickley, because, yeah, they’re running near a decade of two wars now, and maybe such things should be protested, but my god his generation has it good in that respect. *Anybody care to bring back the draft?* Might really see some protesting then. He’s transfused with De Niro. Assault rifle and camo, the jungle replaced by searing desert, and he thinks of the Bulldog learning his son was going to ask for money from Native tribes, that scoffing, incredulous look – *You think you have it bad?*

Perspective.

Bootstraps.

He can do it.

He doesn’t need to ask for help.

Doesn’t need to blame others.

He makes it to the river cage, the rats and Russian roulette, but it’s too much and he slides off his headphones, waits for sleep.

\*

Rick greets Jeremy with a weary shake of the head. He sits at the break table in his cut-off and jean shorts, highlighter and morning paperwork in hand. Looks at Jeremy over his reading glasses. “Gonna be a long one for you,” he tells Jeremy, “so prepare yourself now.”

“What’s up?”

“Yo Mike,” Rick sighs. “Called in sick. Left a message five minutes before I got in. So, you know, that raises questions. Suppose you could say he thought I’d be in by then, but what’s more likely is he missed me intentionally.”

Jeremy nods along, unsure if he should interject.

“Anyway, you’ll be doing the deliveries by yourself today. You ready for that? Any questions on routes?”

“No, I’m good.”

“I’d get started on bulk then,” Rick says, hands him Greentree’s order.

The night off from drinking has his legs feeling refreshed and Jeremy enjoys the work, the isolation at the far end of the warehouse as he tears through the order, pulling the materials in all their colorful glory. He makes color spectrums. Some of the items get delivered in the basic brown cardboard box they arrived in, but for the others Jeremy aligns them in a design he wouldn’t be able to explain, but that makes sense to him. His dreams. The Shimmering Silvers and Springtime Charcoals go with the Midnight Blacks, oh so much Black, the Ivory Whites and Clears, because, yes, Clear has a color, a shade, that deep translucence verging on opaque that fits somewhere between silver and white, like hanging

ten shower liners until the human form merges with the steam, becomes an idea. These are his Tom Joads. His Moses Yellowhorses and Alexander Berkman's.

But they're splashed like Oz. So many hues. So many tinctures. Candy Apple Red and Hot Magenta – because it's *hot!* – with Candy and Princess Pink, the Sunburst Orange and Terracotta, Passion Purple and Luscious Lavender, and so, so much Schoolbus Yellow with Glittering Gold - the blues and greens – Royal, Caribbean, Baby, and Navy to Emerald, Easter Egg and Kiwi, Hunter and Sage. His Rogers and Hammersteins. His De Niro's and Walkens. His Seussian world of the spectacular and unnecessary.

When he's finished with Greentree, he walks down to enter it in the system and finds Bob standing with Rick, discussing Yo Mike. It's still in Bob's *don't poke the bear* time frame, the worst possible time to discuss Mike and he's morning hard-on pissed.

“This is it, Rick,” he says. “Two days after hitting a fucking *pedestrian?*”

“It's not good,” Rick agrees and Jeremy sees it, the dynamic between the two, his own reluctant attachment to Rick – he sees his grandfather – with Bob playing the role of his fireball grandmother. They balance each other, and Rick knows it, knows Bob would rant and rave when he found out, and Rick needs that, but it also levels him out, allows him to see the other side. But he seems too close to aligning with Bob this morning.

“Think it's time to talk to Paul when he gets back,” Rick says. It pains him, the idea of firing someone, casting a child aside.

“I know what's going on,” Jeremy interjects. “Sorry, Mike didn't want me to say anything, but he's taking his girlfriend to get an abortion today.”

The burst of laughter from Bob echoes through the warehouse. Rick shakes his head.

“*Are you shitting me?*” Bob asks.

“Mike,” Rick sighs.

“Does he not know what a *condom* is?”

Jeremy shrugs.

“Well, I hate to say it, because I’m against it on principle—”

“Oh, please,” Bob laughs.

“But it’s the right decision for Mike. He can’t have another kid.”

Bob busts up in another round of laughter. The thought of it, it’s too priceless for him. “At least that brawny little Polack is getting some. I should be so lucky,” Bob admits, which draws a laugh, Jeremy and Rick both glad to see deprecating Bob poke his head out this early in the morning.

When the truck is loaded and Jeremy’s ready to head out for deliveries, Rick tells him to avoid Fifth altogether, that it’s probably blocked off, but even if it’s not, the risk isn’t worth it, so stick to Bigelow. But once in the cab Jeremy thinks, what the hell, and starts in that direction. But he only makes it as far as Bellefield, the eastern edge of Pitt’s campus before he runs into a police barricade and is directed back towards Bigelow. But the implications run so much deeper than Tuesday, something in the faces of the cops, the tension palpable.

He takes his time, not wanting to be back to the warehouse too early for more rounds and Rick and Miles. In Monroeville he stops off for a snack, sits in the cab and eats a bag of chips, washes it down with a Coke while watching the unending caravan of traffic stop and go, stop and go. The burbs are running just fine, he thinks, these outer layers, and he thinks of an earthquake, the aftershocks and reverberations, wonders how far things will be felt.



That night he shrugs off Scott's ploys to go out under the pretense of the paper he still has to write, and this has an odd pacifying effect on Scott, like he admires Jeremy's level of procrastination, because while Scott turned in a shitty-ass paper, he still *wrote* the fucking thing. "I'm telling you," Scott says, "you just have to *do* it, don't worry about some bullshit *grade*. It's just a degree, a piece of paper, doesn't mean shit how you go about getting it or where it's from, just get the thing."

And Jeremy nods, *totally*, he gets it, he'll hammer the paper out tonight, but he just needs that jolt, the triggering point, and he spends the evening flipping through the news to try out what Jesse suggested even though this has very to do with their first essay. The national cable news outlets spend a good amount of time on the protests, the most popular footage across the board comes from Lawrenceville where the media seems to be fascinated by the band of anarchists who have apparently taken over the neighborhood or at least come out of the woodwork to terrorize the police, or maybe just are exercising their right to freely assemble depending on your perspective. Because of Jesse's focus on them, Jeremy finds himself lingering on Fox News where they replay the shot of police blocking off Butler St. and the anarchists perched on the sloping side streets and sending a garbage dumpster barreling down towards the police.

There's one segment in particular during *Hannity* that catches Jeremy's attention. The intro is full of carnage, like Pittsburgh has suddenly become Thunder Dome and for the fair and balanced coverage they bring in two protestors, students at Pitt, to discuss the situation with Sean Hannity. And there's something about the basic setup that makes Jeremy's blood pressure rise – the national news organization covers the protests by bringing in two students? No, two *poetry grad students*? Maybe it's his proximity to Miles but

Jeremy finds himself talking back to the tv, asking the smarmy host and his smug, *did-it-myself* arrogance if this was the best he could get. And Hannity even flaunts his working class roots when the two women discuss income inequality, propose wage caps – because why would any individual *need* to make more than five hundred thousand dollars a year? Because, sorry ladies, he’s a working man, too – *worked construction to pave the way to prosperity through hosting a tv show, anybody could be me if they tried, so boom!* because he actually believes in freedom and democracy not some euro-academic commie theory garble, but thanks for your completely out of touch perspective on the violence that people like yourselves are perpetrating against hardworking business men and women, costing them untold amounts of property damage, just so you can play pretend revolution like you’re confused by the difference between theory and reality. And there you have it, folks, the fair and balanced look at the unhinged anarchy run amok in Pittsburgh as leaders try to get the world’s economy back on track.

And Jeremy is left thinking, yeah, if this guy represents *The Man*, who the fuck *wouldn’t* want to stick it to him, and he flips around, grows irritated, or apathetic, or something in between, and resorts to moving back to the *The Deer Hunter*, but starts over, becomes absorbed in the establishment of context – the steel and grit, the celebration of bride and groom, this traditional world where the familiar makes things easier to swallow, continue on, press forward while staying right where you are.

## Chapter 17

*So what, if anything, can you as individuals actually change?*

It's the same question, framed in a different context in light of the G-20 protests.

"It's really easy," Jesse continues, "for organizations like Fox News to pull a quote or two from a college student, show one clip of students chanting, and even outside of the interests Fox News is aligned with, I'm just talking about basic presentation, it's really easy to splice a quote here, a clip there, and make the actions of the protestors look ridiculous, asinine, or whatever adjective you want to use, but when taken in the context of power dynamics, when we understand that more than half of the world's wealth is owned by the richest one percent, and it's this summit between the richest twenty countries and some of their pals, who are meeting to protect the interests of the one percent, what are you, as individuals, actually capable of changing, and how is that accomplished?"

Jesse continues on, discussing how the moment is bigger than just the economic summit itself, he talks about the students and protestors who have driven in from New York, Florida, even traveled from California, refugees from other nations, community activists and human rights advocates, anarchists and socialists, veterans and opponents of war, environmentalists, trade unionists, and even religious activists. "So what you have are all these different groups, with their own, let's say, individual interests, and so how are these different voices organized, made coherent? Or should they be? Would something be lost in the assimilation process?"

And Jeremy is struck by what Jesse says in response to a couple of student comments – *there are no answers to these questions*. He senses it’s just meant to spur discussion, that the questions are large and unwieldy, but the phrase rings in his head like some ominous death knell. *There are no answers to these questions*.

“Because as we also saw yesterday,” Jesse says, “just as they’ll try to make students seem ridiculous with a quote, or clip of someone banging an Indian tom tom, they’ll also zero in on any hint of violence or destruction of property. The police wait for any sign of it to disrupt our right to freely assemble, and news organizations will use it to discredit any protest. And so knowing all of this, I’ll ask again, what can you as individuals actually do to bring about change?”

\*

The warehouse is quiet when Jeremy gets in for his shift. There’s a Friday afternoon calm that’s settled through, that Jeremy doesn’t necessarily like, and he wishes they would need him to come in for some extra work tomorrow, wishes he had a reason to lay low on a Friday night, some pretense of responsibility. Now that the stores have processed the bulk of the initial Halloween merch, it’s time for the next wave and Bob and Miles are paired together at the sorting tables while Rick has Jeremy work through a Marvel Comics order. It’s the same basic goods the warehouse must have shipped half a million of this week – paper plates and napkins, cutlery and cups – this time with Spider Man, Hulk, the X-Men and Iron Man, their likeness and branding slapped across the materials.

Jeremy thinks of his first day, his initiation to this world when the McMurray store manager called Rick to ream him out over an in-store transfer that didn’t make it to them in time. Some mom had been assured that PartyMart had the G.I. Joe birthday decorations for

her son's birthday party, the set just had to get transferred from another store. The G.I. Joe decorations didn't make it on the truck. Mom was displeased. The store manager was displeased. Rick was displeased. Yo Mike got the ass-end of the blame. Jeremy laughed, imagined some brat stuck wiping his face with Batman napkins instead – *Mom! You blew it!* Now he shakes his head thinking about it. None of this stuff is *needed*. None of it. It's stuff people already have but want a temporary replacement, something to use once and throw away, for the decoration of it, the make believe of it all.

*Swipe!*

So Johnny can lick the icing off of Bruce Banner, have a fleeting thought about turning into a giant, then leave the plate on the table for someone else to throw away.

It doesn't change anything for Jeremy, though.

He still likes the job.

Likes being a grunt.

A working stiff for the man.

Likes the heft of a pallet full of goods, the torque of the jack, straining up the ramp. He's not exactly building America, doesn't feel the MADE IN THE USA pride that Dobie does, but nobody else does either anymore. He just likes being able to disappear into the work.

Jeremy has finished with the order and is grabbing a drink of water when Mike returns from the delivery. He swings the key ring around his index finger, nods at Jeremy as he makes his way to the computer. Rick sits at the break table, asks if everything went okay, and Jeremy has a full panoramic view of the scene as it slowly begins to unfold, senses it somehow.

It's that dead period on a Friday. The major tasks have been completed and there's just ten more minutes till the weekend, time to kill, and Bob and Miles make their way towards the three others.

"*Yo-o-o-o Mike!*" Miles calls. "Everything come out okay yesterday?"

Mike stands uncertainly, senses it, too.

"We've got a little commemoration gift for you," Miles says and tosses a white porcelain mug the ten remaining feet between him and Mike. The action, the flight of something fragile through the air sends Mike's reflexes in motion and he becomes consumed for a moment with catching the thing, and by the time he does, he shuffles it in his palms to read *World's Greatest Dad* stenciled across the mug.

"It's about time we get you neutered," Bob tells him and slaps him on the back.

"Don't you know you're *doing* it wrong if this keeps being the result?" Miles adds.

"Jesus, you guys are assholes," Rick says and shakes his head.

But Mike plays it cool, nods along and laughs, but cuts a glance in Jeremy's direction that makes him sick to his stomach.

"I can't help it if I'm just *that* much of a man," Mike tells them.

"You certainly are *virile*, Mike," Miles says.

The sick feeling begins to spread through his body, and he catches Rick eyeing him like he senses something is off with Jeremy. This only makes it worse, like he's being discerned, and he crumples the paper cup in his fist, tosses it in the garbage, walks away under the pretense of some unfinished task.

\*

He takes Bigelow. The road carved out of the side of the foothill that slowly descends into the madness of downtown and he can see the protestors on the three sister suspension bridges, the condensed horde of individuals smothered into what looks like a black teeming mass. The traffic heading onto Liberty Bridge is relatively light with so many people staying home today that he's around the curve of downtown and heading up to Mt. Washington and back onto 376 and leaving the city behind him.

By the time he gets to Sewickley the overcast drear present most of the day parts enough to send some early evening rays shimmering across the Ohio and when Jeremy turns onto the pale green Sewickley Bridge he takes in the simple tableau of sky and flowing water, leaves on the verge of change.

Once he crosses the bridge he takes the first right, past the BMW and Porsche dealerships, then another right and he's on a quiet street of modest homes, one that Jeremy figures probably looks like a zillion others in America – *Dubuque, Iowa* he picks at random, *Paducah, Kentucky* – the only difference being some estimation of the property's value. Straight ahead of him is the boat ramp that goes under the railroad tracks and into the Ohio, but before he reaches the ramp he takes one last right and pulls up alongside the ballfield at Montessori Middle School.

He reaches into the backseat and grabs the rucksack and his father's old Louisville Slugger. Once he's behind the plate, he empties the rucksack, picks up one of the balls and stands in the batter's box, observes the field: the Montessori gym rising above the left field fence; the railroad tracks beyond right-center; the Sewickley Bridge looming above it all. He tosses a ball up and swings as hard as he can, throwing himself off balance. The ball shoots into the outfield but the trajectory's too high and plops down in short left-center. He tries

again, finds the optimum point of descent and sends a shot towards the fence. Short again. It feels good, though, putting the dormant mechanism in motion, but in a shallow way, like something's missing. With the rest of the balls he just works on his technique, shaking the rust off, and sending soft line drives into shallow left.

When the last ball flies into left he texts Scott, tells him to get his ass out to Montessori.

Scott: *The middle school?*

Jeremy: *The ballfield. Trust me.*

He runs through another round of balls and is in the outfield tossing them back into the rucksack when Scott pulls up in his Audi. "Are you shitting me?" he shouts through his open window.

"Get out here."

"You had me drive all the way out here in Friday rush hour so we can hit some goddamn baseballs?"

"*Get out here.*"

"Unbelievable," he groans but gets out of the car, heads onto the field. "Do you at least have some drugs or pills or horse tranquilizers for me to make up for this?"

"Let's play derby like we used to," Jeremy says with the rucksack full of balls as he reaches the mound. "You want first at-bats?"

"Shit," Scott says and reaches for the rucksack. "You go first. I want to scratch this itch and get the hell out of here."

It takes Scott a few throws to get warm, get his location down, and once he does Jeremy backslides into trying to crank the ball over the fence, leading to foul tips and pop



ups. He lets an audible curse escape, drawing a snicker from Scott, but he zeroes in, clears his head: weight on your back foot, meet the velocity of the ball, torque of hips, flick of wrist, the power within. He relaxes, swings smoothly and sends a few line drives into left-center. On the last ball Jeremy finds the sweet spot, uncorks a cruising liner that skips into the fence on one bounce. He heads to the outfield with Scott to gather the balls, offers Scott his father's bat.

"That's okay," Scott waves him off, "I just like watching you hit, to be honest. You always had the best stroke on the team."

The sentiment is so unexpected, Jeremy expects him to follow it up with something like, *I mean, for a fag anyway* and Jeremy tries to beat him to it.

"And I also had a good looking swing."

Scott laughs.

The sun begins to set and Jeremy punches the park lights on and the electric snap and whir reminds him of a Hollywood movie as they're suddenly bathed in fluorescent light. The crack of the bat becomes intoxicating and Jeremy slips into the beautiful mechanism of cartilage, muscle and bone with the synapses firing to bring the barrel to the ball, releasing the latent power, and one hit becomes another, and another, and he's about to lose himself in the rhythm of it all when Scott pauses before a pitch.

"C'mon, now," he says, "open it up. I want to see you jack one."

"Put a little more on it then, Alice," Jeremy goads him.

"Oh, okay," Scott laughs. By the look of his windup, though, Jeremy thinks there won't be any gas on it but then the ball is whistling into the backstop and he's stumbling over the plate trying to regain his balance after his follow through.

Scott chuckles from the mound, next ball already in his palm.

“Do that again,” Jeremy tells him.

By the sound of the bat Jeremy knows he got the sweet spot and then Scott is saying *Holy shit* and turning around to watch the flight of the ball which seems to last only a second before it thunders against the Montessori gym and bounces back into left field.

“Goddamn, I bet that felt good.”

Jeremy tells him it did.

\*

They sit on the dugout bench, laughing about old little league games, Jeremy still holding the bat in his hands, simulating his stance while Scott communicates with the outside world through texts. Since they’re already in Sewickley he says they should meet up with Amber’s crowd, but the thought of being at another high school party brings that acute nausea to the base of Jeremy’s throat and he tells Scott he should just go on without him. “Fuck that,” Scott says, “you drug me out here, now we’ve got to drink some beers together, man. That’s what you do after a ballgame.” Jeremy laughs at the thought of what they just did as a game. “Beer league softball, man,” Scott continues, “we’ll probably be doing it for twenty some twenty odd years here in a bit. C’mon,” he says and punches Jeremy in the shoulder, and he can feel himself caving, and the nausea begins to spread through his chest because the moment is like a microcosm of his entire life and finally he tells Scott *okay* and even lets Scott talk him into taking his Audi under the pretense of listening to music together, even though he knows it’s just a way for Scott to keep him under his thumb all night, and so Scott takes the rucksack and dumps it into the backseat and Jeremy does the same with his father’s bat and Scott’s blaring Kid Cudi as they cross back over the Sewickley Bridge to

snake through the sloping neighborhoods of Moon and Scott's got the windows down, the cool late September breeze pooling through the car as he sings along about feeling lit, feeling light on summer nights, all in the pursuit of happiness and knowing you'll be fine once you get there.

And when a destination has been figured and the thirty rack of Keystone acquired, Scott directs them to a split-level French country house so regal and dripping of opulence Jeremy feels both guilty and vindictive about playing quarters on the kitchen table. Scott holds court with the band of high schoolers, and Jeremy thinks he's got an excuse, a beautiful girl, but Scott plays into it even more as a source of alcohol, the other kids' eyes lighting up when he enters. And it's the thing about Scott, Jeremy thinks, he can access that confidence at any time, it just seems so unattractive to Jeremy in this context. But Scott keeps him supplied with beer, too, and when he realizes he's laughing and slapping hands with a lot of Evan's friends he doesn't even care anymore.

\*

Scott drops Jeremy off at his car a little after midnight, after the party has dimmed due to the curfew crowd. He slaps Jeremy on the shoulder, squeezes a wad of muscle. "Man, that was a good night," he says. "Wasn't that a good night?"

Jeremy tells him it was.

He walks to his Bronco, turns the ignition and flips the lights, but waits until the Audi disappears around the corner and then kills the engine. He walks down to the boat ramp and under the railroad tracks, sits down on the adjacent dock, his feet dangling just above the Ohio. Even though it's only a difference of fifty yards, it's colder to Jeremy here than it was by his car. He listens to the quiet rippling of water, watches a solitary car cross the

Sewickley Bridge. He sends a rock skipping across the water, listens for the final *plunk*, remembers Al Michaels on the broadcast of a Steeler game giving the obligatory *Pittsburgh for Dummies* geography lesson, circling the Allegheny and Mon, the confluence. *And if you jump in the Ohio, you'll be in Cincinnati by morning.* Jump in the Ohio. Cincinnati by morning. There was something absurd and beautiful in the poetics of the phrasing, the contradictory connotations. Release and movement. Resignation and promise.

He pulls out his phone, sends Evan a text: *You out?*

When his phone rings and he sees Evan's name on the caller ID he rolls his eyes.

"Where are you? What's wrong?" Evan asks, his voice drowsy and confused.

"Go back to bed, Chicken Little," Jeremy tells him and ends the call.

He finds another rock, a small, smooth stone and sends it across the water. *Kat*, he texts, *I'm sorry. I fucked up. Again. Can I see you?* and he stares off into the blackness of the Allegheny foothills, waiting for a response that never comes.

## Chapter 18

He wakes earlier than he should, the hours lost. There's no shifting, stretching lethargic legs and rolling over, stealing another half hour. It's full-on consciousness. He looks at his door, closed. Checks his phone, nothing from Kat. He sighs and relaxes back down, thinks through returning home last night. He had expected Scott to be up, waiting, no matter how much later it was that Jeremy finally returned. But he found the apartment dark, silent, still. He went to the end of the hall and found Scott's door pulled nearly closed, the latch not engaged, and it was this in-between state – closed, but not – that gave him pause. He slowly turned the knob of his own door and brought it open then closed as silently as possible, making sure the latch caught.

He reaches for his phone to text Kat and tries again in the sober light of day, tells her he's sorry, he screwed up, and would like to see her. He lies back down, closes his eyes and doesn't realize he's drifted off until his phone buzzes him awake.

*I'll allow it, Kat writes, but I'm not carving out any special time for you. Studying at Coffee Tree Roasters in Shadyside this morning if you want to stop by.*

That's enough for Jeremy and he gets up and dresses, gathers his things. When he opens the door he hears Scott in the kitchen and when he walks to the front door he sees in his face that he's caught him off-guard. He's pouring a bowl of cereal in nothing but boxers, unprepared, not sitting coolly on the couch, bathed in disaffection. It's not the nakedness, it's something about the act, found needing sustenance, and *There*, Jeremy thinks, the

expression, that's why there's unease, the look of being caught. Jeremy flashes the deuces. Scott doesn't respond, and Jeremy is out the door.

It's another overcast morning, the breeze cool as he walks through Shadyside with its mixture of townhouses, modest ranch style homes along with Victorian and Second Era mansions. He thinks about how quickly the neighborhoods change, the distinctions so prevalent, the barriers real, despite the close proximity of people set apart from one another.

He finds Coffee Tree Roasters on Walnut St., a small hive along the popular business district. He spies Kat through the window, seated at the nearest table, book in front of her while she writes in her notebook.

"Hey," Jeremy says, pulls up a seat, "why aren't you at your Kiva Han place?"

"Are you serious? You know Oakland's like a war zone, right?"

"Right."

"You do at least know what's going on in your own neighborhood?"

"Yes, Kat," Jeremy sighs, the chastised teen. "Just wasn't thinking. But war zone? You don't think that's a bit much?"

Kat shrugs, reiterates her question if Jeremy *actually* knows what is going on, and she goes through the armored Humvees, the Chinook helicopters, the city buses full of riot police, the assault weapons and batons, canisters of smoke and pepper spray, stun grenades, and something people weren't familiar with, didn't believe had ever been deployed on the public, what they were calling a *sound cannon*. She runs through the pictures on her phone, some that she took herself, some posted online: the G-20's official banner *Pittsburgh Welcomes the World* with a line of riot police with a assault weapons standing guard; a young man being choked out by a police baton; the black anarchist banner of *No Borders No Banks*,

the mob marching behind; a shot of Forbes Ave in the heart of Oakland swarmed in a sea of protestors that reminded Jeremy of being there after the Steelers had won the Super Bowl; and someone on their knees, crying out as someone doused their eyes with a bottle of water to alleviate the tear gas burn.

And Kat tells him the story of the standoff on Forbes outside of the Litchfield Towers, the line drawn in the sand, the riot police suddenly advancing, firing the canisters of tear gas, the group of students looking for escape up the outdoor stairwell to find it blocked in by police, turning back, but finding the entrance blocked as well, dropping to their knees, choking on gas.

She says it was frustrating, the massing of protestors, the Pitt students who didn't really know what was going on, who were just there for the spectacle – the idiocy of the *Let's Go Pitt!* chant breaking out.

“Here,” she says and reaches out her hand, “give me your phone.”

“Why, so you can do a photo check on me again?”

“Just give me your phone.” Jeremy hands her his phone and she swipes the screen open. “I’m signing you up for Twitter. It’s inexcusable you’re not more informed. I saw you shutdown your Facebook account, by the way,” she says, raising her eyebrows at him. Jeremy shrugs. “Well, like I said, this is different. You want the handle *Big Jerm?*” she mocks.

“This is your show, Kat. I’m just along for the ride.”

“You won’t have to do a thing – I’m getting you following the right people and turning on your notifications, so when you’ve been away too long your phone will let you know what’s going on anyway.”

“Can’t wait,” he says and glances out the window at the morning crowd starting to pick up on Walnut, begins to think about his father’s ceremony tonight.

“There,” she says and slides his phone back across the table, “that should get you started.” He opens the screen, clicks on the app and doesn’t see when Kat leans over and punches him in the shoulder, hard. “You’re a fucking asshole, you know,” she says through her teeth.

“Jesus,” he groans, rubs his shoulder.

“You realize if you were anybody else I’d just wipe you from my mind completely? It would be like you didn’t exist, like a computer file – *Delete* – like we were never friends. But I can’t. Because you’re like family. You know that I’ve *literally* known you since you were born? There are pictures of me with my parents at your parents’ house the week they brought you home from the hospital.”

“I did know that, Kat. I’ve seen them.”

“Family,” she says and makes a waving motion with her hands, like a slate has been wiped clean. “But not a brother...” she narrows her eyes. “More like an asshole cousin who I can totally disregard when I choose.”

“So does that mean you’re going to the Bulldog’s thing tonight?”

“Well, no,” she begins, “I was planning on it, obviously – you know my dad’s introducing him, right?”

“Of course he is.”

“But I have to stick around here tonight. The Summit ended last night, but the protests are going to continue. It’s almost like things are more focused now – on our end, I mean – like there were so many groups there was this underlying disorganization, but the



police have gone too far, the violence, but it's galvanized everyone. It's not even about the economic issues anymore, it's just about the fact that we live in a police state where the first amendment can be beaten down with a riot baton."

Jeremy nods but he's thinking of Jesse's class – *There are no answers to these questions* – because, yeah, the police force tends to win these things and he looks at Kat, the intensity and sincerity, and wishes he had some argument to sway her.

"And it would be so pointless if the protests ended just because the Summit's over, it would make them irrelevant. They have to continue, otherwise there will never be any change. I'd say that you should come with me, but you obviously should go to the banquet."

"Well," Jeremy sighs, "not sure I'm going yet."

"What? Why?"

As if he could even begin to explain.

Because of everything and nothing.

"The whole thing just seems so silly to me. The Beaver County Hall of Fame? *County?* Everyone's supposed to get together and kiss the Bulldog's ass because of a *county* hall of fame?"

She rolls her eyes. "No, what you just said is stupid, not this. I think it's a very cool thing. Mike Ditka's in the Beaver County Hall of Fame."

Jeremy laughs out loud. "Why is it that everyone's response to why this is supposedly a big deal is to cite Mike Ditka?"

"Everybody loves Ditka," she laughs and does the *SNL* routine. "*Dit-ka. Sau-sage.*"

"Right," Jeremy laughs, "well, we'll see."

Kat rolls her eyes. “Whatever, you’re already taking up more of my time than I told myself I’d let you.” She does a shooing motion at him that makes him want to sit in his seat until the store closes.

“Oh, right, this is when I play the asshole cousin.”

“You’re not *role playing*, Jeremy. You *are* the asshole cousin.”

“Family,” he says and meets her eyes.

“Family.”

When he gets back to the apartment, Scott’s on the couch watching college football, flecks of cannabis scattered around the coffee table. He tells Jeremy to grab a beer.

“Nah,” Jeremy tells him. “I’ve got this thing for my dad tonight and am heading out to my folks here in a bit.”

“What thing for your dad?”

“He’s getting inducted into the Beaver County Athletic Hall of Fame.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn, dude, that’s awesome.”

Jeremy nods, watches a few plays in the game. “I guess Mike Ditka’s in their Hall of Fame, too.”

“Iron Mike and the Old Bulldog,” Scott grins. “Pretty cool.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

\*

It’s the pictures Jeremy finds himself thinking about on his drive out to Sewickley. The mementos and scrapbooks and pieces of history from when his father played the game.

Jeremy sees him in an old dugout, strapping on his catcher's equipment; in the on-deck circle, bat resting against his shoulder, the impenetrable glare; squatting behind home plate, mask pulled up and resting on his helmet as he glances unknowingly in the direction of the camera, some forlorn quality to his eyes, his dirt-caked brow; and one, just one, of his father sitting in the dugout, smiling – Stan Kovacs reclined back, proud of something he said.

And the one resting on a bookshelf in a rich amber frame: Kovacs on the mound, hands on hips, eyes to the ground, as his father sticks a finger in his face, lips turned in the trademark scowl. Signed, *For the toughest bastard who ever played the game. Stan.*

The images take him back to Montessori as a child, he and his father dragging the dugout bench to the batter's box. It's during that stagnant period in the Bulldog's life when he was searching for meaningful work after baseball, and it would feel to Jeremy like his sole purpose was to transform him into a boy who was unafraid.

"I would never hurt you," he tells Jeremy, "you know that, right?"

Jeremy nods.

"You have to trust me. Some of these balls are going to hit you, but the bench is going to be right behind you, so if you move, you're going to fall over. It's only temporary, the pain."

Jeremy stands in the batter's box, bench up against his knees and he learns how to take a pitch in the arm, the shoulder, the back, and also learns his father is right, the pain is temporary. But it's hard for him to think quickly, to discern between strike and ball, to swing or flinch. Something has been lost in the swing.

In the winter he plays basketball and the constant flow of the game appeals to him, he finds it pacifying in a way that baseball never did. He's always *moving moving moving*, no

time to stop and think. No time to stand out in the field and replay all the things that went wrong. No time to dread what will happen the next time he steps to the plate.

The season will end and there will be days when rain falls from the sky, when snow covers the ground, and he'll know spring is coming. And then, when the temperature finally gets warm enough, his father will take him back down to Montessori and sit with him in the dugout. He places a hand on Jeremy's shoulder, asks him whether or not he wants to play baseball. Jeremy wants it more than anything. His father pats his shoulder again, falls quiet for a time, looks off towards the Ohio.

"It's only going to get harder," he tells Jeremy. "You boys will continue to get bigger and stronger. But this game, it's just like life, son. You're not always going to get a nice, soft grapefruit lobbed over the plate. It comes right at you, and you have to be strong enough to stand in there and take it. It takes courage, that strength in here," he says and leans forward, taps Jeremy in the sternum with his index finger, "the power within."

Jeremy nods, looks down to his chest as if what his father spoke of was something tangible.

"I want us to hit some balls today. We're not going to put the bench behind your knees, but some of the pitches are going to come right at you, and I want you to be strong enough to stand there and know that, eventually, a pitcher has to give you a pitch to hit, and when it comes, you knock the cover off the ball. Can you do that for me?"

He can.

He will.

And he learns to take the pitch, to feed off it. When he's older he feels like pitchers are looking for him, want to take a shot at the big leaguer's kid, and he grins at them all the

way down to first with the pain radiating like a badge of honor. But the thing has grown much larger, far beyond some childish fear of the ball, if that was ever it to begin with. It's fear and shame weighed against the prospect of failure, the expectations of the rules of the game, and with every at-bat the scales wobble up until the very millisecond a decision has to be made – ball or strike, swing or no. The synapses fire. Barrel meets the ball and his body floods with dopamine but when the chemicals recede he realizes that the anxiousness is still there, grown larger. Some terrible drug where the stakes get raised the more he succeeds and the precipice of failure becomes steeper and steeper and he tells himself if he just hits the ball over the fence one more time, if he just strikes the next batter out, then the thing will recede. But it just keeps growing. Because what he came to realize was that the thing was difference, and the fear, the prospect of failure, was the prospect of being seen, discerned, and the game doesn't offer him the escape it did his father.

When he pulls up to the curb alongside his parents' house he's thinking about those pictures of his father and Stan, wondering what Stan will say at the banquet. It will be good, he knows. Stan has basically carved out a second career doing bits like that.

He barely has time to shut the front door behind him before the Bulldog comes out of his bedroom in slacks and an unbuttoned dress shirt. "Where is it?" he growls and Jeremy's body goes stiff as a cadaver.

"Where's what?"

The Bulldog stalks right up to him, eyes unwavering, and sticks his face into Jeremy's.

"My gun."

“How should I know?” Jeremy says and tries to step past him, but the Bulldog grabs his forearm, and Jeremy’s entire body spasms as he shakes him off. “*Get your fucking hands off me!*”

And Dell is coming around the corner with her arms folded and Evan is sticking his head out of his room, asking what’s going on, footsteps on the stairs, and the Bulldog is snarling, inching closer again, and it all feels like Jeremy’s an animal being tricked into a cage and then he’s exploding into his father, arms extending through his chest, telling him he doesn’t have his fucking gun, and it’s the pain in the Bulldog’s hip that makes him crumple like a brown paper sack and he’s wincing on the floor and Jeremy stands over him for only a second before he’s whirling on his family like who wants it next and the looks on their faces are too much for him to take and he’s out the door, racing to his car and feeling them on his heels like he’s about to be tackled and strung up like a rodeo calf, but when he’s in his car and peeling down the street he looks in the rearview mirror, and no one is there.

## Chapter 19

When Kat opens the door she has her phone to her ear and looks at Jeremy like he has misunderstood something critical. He does a dramatic motioning towards her inner sanctum, pantomiming the *We-e-e-e-ll, aren't you going to invite me in?* Kat stands aside lets him pass, and when he does Jeremy catches the sound of Stan Kovacs through the phone.

“Dad, seriously, it’s fine,” Kat says then stops, sighs. Jeremy takes a seat on her couch, looks over in time to see Rachel closing the door to her room. He looks to Kat, motions her towards the couch. She walks over, but doesn’t sit, stands with a hip cocked as if she’s having a face to face confrontation with her father, until Jeremy tugs on her shirt that comes down over her black tights, and she takes a seat next to him.

Jeremy listens to the crackled, strained voice of Kovacs through the receiver, wishing his daughter was a different breed. “They do not care about you, Katrina. Not the police and not that stupid mob of anarchists either.”

“Yeah and what does that say? Maybe that’s the reason people are there in the first place, to show how little our government thinks of its citizens.”

“*Great!* Let them do it for you. It’s not safe, Katrina. The further the police get pushed, the less valuable human lives become.”

“*Listen to what you’re saying!*”

“*I know exactly what I’m saying!* The difference, Katrina, is I’m talking about you, my daughter. I don’t care about some larger ideal. I have one singular concern: you. And

let me tell you something, there won't be a single person there tonight with your interests and safety in mind."

"Well, thanks for your concern, Dad."

"Katrina."

"I have to go."

She ends the call, gives a last exasperated head shake at her father, and turns to Jeremy.

"You seem to be misplaced."

"So sassy tonight," Jeremy laughs, taps her thigh.

"No, seriously, what's going on? What're you doing here?"

Jeremy shakes his head, feigns insult, and reaches for her thigh again, runs his hand against the smooth tights. "Just wanted to come by and see you." Katrina looks at the hand at her thigh, back to Jeremy. "I was thinking," he says, "about what you said about family."

"Family."

"How I'm like a cousin."

"Asshole cousin."

"Right," he laughs, traces his fingers across the light material. "But what if I was more like...a cousin once removed, a second cousin, and we were living in Kentucky."

"Kentucky." She allows a smile, Jeremy draws her to him, maneuvers her hips over his so she straddles him, and she goes along, but in a completely asexual way, like her position has changed but her demeanor hasn't, and now she looms over Jeremy, arms folded across her chest. Jeremy tries to lean up, to get her to meet him halfway, but she won't give. Jeremy moves his hands around her thighs and up to her waist.



“This could work, right?” he asks.

Her eyes narrow. “What could work?”

“This,” Jeremy says and makes sure she feels him there.

“What is *this*? *Speak!* Use your big boy words. Talk to me like an adult.”

“*Us!*” Jeremy shouts back and Kat’s eyes go the size of ping-pong balls as she nods towards Rachel’s room with a *shut the fuck up* glare. She hits him in the chest once, then lets her hands curl around his neck.

“Us,” she says in contemplation. She leans forward, softly brings her lips to his. She tilts her head forward, drawing her lips away, breath warm against Jeremy’s neck. But then their lips meet again and it feels like Kat’s going to sink into it all until she pulls away, straightens her spine. Her phone buzzes and she looks, tries to read the screen, then reaches. She types away, sets it back on the couch. “Us,” she says again, eyeing Jeremy, who raises a hand to her neck to pull her back towards him, but she brushes it away, laces her fingers in his, looks at him in a way that makes him feel like she knows some crucial bit of information that he should know as well, but seems to be ignoring. Her phone buzzes again. She cuts her eyes, steals a glance before turning back to Jeremy. “I think this is the wrong night to talk about this.”

“I think it’s the perfect night. I think it’s the only night.”

“And I think it’s really strange you’d put parameters on this discussion.”

He tries to bring her to him once more. She stiffens.

“I don’t think I like what you’re doing.”

He rolls her off him, leans forward. “Yeah, it’s cool,” he says, “I get it. I mean, we’ve been friends since before I can remember. Like you said – *family* – and you can’t

expect anything *sexual* to come out of that, right?” He laughs but Kat gives him a *what the hell* look and he wants her to do something, reach out to him in some way, but it doesn’t seem imminent, and he tells himself to shake it off, *grow a pair*, and he stands up and heads for the door. “Just a goof.”

“Damn it, Jeremy,” she sighs and maybe if it came out differently, if she weren’t using the asshole cousin tone, the *this is when I disengage* tone he’d try to stay, make another effort.

“Just messing around,” he says and fidgets for a moment at the door, unsure of what to do with his hands, so he flashes her the deuces like she’s just another dude and then he’s out in the late September evening, the sun leaving a pink film above the western skyline, and he rolls the windows down in his Bronco, sends Scotty B a text – *let’s get wasted bruh* – and then he’s shooting up Baum towards Bigelow because the rushing air tells him that everything is in motion again and he’s going *forward forward forward* and then he’s cresting Bigelow where the street curves and to his right is Bloomfield and Polish Hill and the North Shore and the Downtown skyscrapers and everything else that’s demarcated and stratified and when he enters the tunnel the air goes *whoosh* and it feels like he’s traveling all alone through a wormhole, coursing through time and space, charting new territory in a defective dreamscape.

\*

The problem: Scott hasn’t responded, and when Jeremy cruises by the party he doesn’t see his Audi. The solution: liquor store for a bottle of Jager. When he returns bottle in hand, he finds Aesop Rock playing on the stereo, surprising him a little, but when he winds his way to the living room he sees Reggie standing at a computer, nodding along to the

beat, and when the chorus picks up – *and I will rejoice in your fall from grace* – he lifts a hand, points a finger in someone’s direction and Jeremy follows the invisible line to find his brother, Marcus, standing against a wall with a red Solo cup in his hand, talking to a girl Jeremy doesn’t know.

It stops him cold. He can’t believe Marcus, a Pitt student, has chosen the *one* place Scott is most likely to come tonight – or maybe this is why Scott isn’t here? – and Jeremy pauses for a moment, uncertain of what his next move should be, when Marcus spots him, nods, and raises his cup in what Jeremy takes to be a mock toast before turning back to his conversation. Maybe he just wanted to hang with his brother, or maybe he wanted to get away from the madness unfolding under his dorm window, but it occurs to Jeremy what’s more likely, is that he’s having trouble with the transition, fitting in, finding a new pack, and this was where he felt most comfortable on a Saturday night.

Jeremy shuffles through the crowd, gives him a tap on the shoulder. “Hey, man,” he says and Marcus raises his eyebrow, turns, if only slightly. Jeremy pauses, struggles to find the words, and it occurs to him he’s trying to evade the issue, pull some bullshit double-speak – the *sorry, not sorry* he always does for Scott – and in the end all that comes out is “Shit, I’m sorry, man.”

“For what?”

Jeremy thinks Marcus is doing the same thing he did to Scott, wanting him to spell out what exactly he should be sorry for, but Marcus cuts him off.

“You’re not responsible for Scott.”

Very cool, Jeremy thinks, because he didn't have to say that, but he can also tell Marcus isn't looking to hang out with him, would prefer to disappear, like, *now*, and it makes Jeremy want to stand there and talk in his ear for the rest of the night.

But there's a burst of girlish scream behind him and he turns to find Amber wrapping her arms around his waist. She looks up at him and asks where her boyfriend is in an unbalanced, slightly tipsy way.

"Don't know, actually."

"*What?*" she says and lets go of him. "He told me he was going out with you tonight?"

Jeremy loosens an imaginary, choking tie. "*Yeeesh*. This is uncomfortable."

She backhands his stomach.

"Let me text him again," Jeremy laughs. "Where should this go?" he asks her, raising the bottle of Jager.

"Follow me," she says and leads him to the kitchen. But as they wind their way through the living room the song changes to Ludacris, which seems to be a friend of Amber's favorite song, because Amber's nearly tackled by the grinding of crotch on her thigh, arms wrapped around her shoulders, the squeal coming from somewhere beneath the wave of dark hair – *yeeek-yeeek woop-woop!* – and Amber is laughing and playing along, gyrating to the abrasion and the party has taken notice and guys are urging them on, clapping and rapping along, and for a moment the girls' faces come together, and it's like the guys are collectively blue-balled when Amber breaks away, flips them off. "*Perverts*," she teases and motions for Jeremy to follow her to the kitchen where Jeremy finds a row of liquor bottles on the counter.

“This is too perfect that you brought Jager,” she tells him and gives him a Solo cup, “I’m going to make you a Rich Dead Nazi.”

“The hell?” he laughs.

“*Rich Dead Nazi!* Jager, Peppermint Schnapps and Goldschlager.”

“Nice,” Jeremy says as she pours the drinks. “You know what Jagermeister translates to, right?”

Amber raises an eyebrow.

“Master hunter.”

“I like that,” she smiles and slides him his drink, mixes her own.

They toast, take a drink, and Jeremy’s phone vibrates: Scott asking if the Bulldog’s ceremony is over. Jeremy’s working on impulse, trying to keep the wheels spinning, fearful of what happens when the mechanism stops, and something tells him to withhold.

*Where r u?* he sends back.

Some seniors on the baseball team straggle into the kitchen and pull a double-take when they see Jeremy, then they’re shouting *Big Jerm!* and giving him fives that lead into man hugs. There’s Austin McBride and his ironic Randy Johnson mullet spilling out of his Pirates hat, the pitcher who Jeremy knows must’ve taken over the alpha role on the team this year. Justin Barczowski, the squat second baseman in his San Diego Padres hat because he always has to go oppo, because who really gives a fuck about the Padres – Justin Barczowski, *that’s who!* – and Tanner Goodson in his boots and wavy blond hair, the bro who loves to use the line on girls that he’s a *utility player*, plays all the positions, or something to that effect.

“Where’s Evan?” Austin asks.

“Hell if I know. Probably posted up with his girl. He ever go out and get slammed with you guys?”

“Evan?” Austin asks, and at first Jeremy’s like *Who’s the only person we’re talking about?* but realizes he’s implying Evan’s a square, though he is only fifteen. “That dude’s on the straight and narrow, man.”

“I’ve tried my best,” Jeremy says in faux-shame, hangs his head. They pat him on the back.

Jeremy’s phone vibrates again, a reply from Scott: *Ayo for yayo walk around with yayo all in my nasal.*

Followed by: *Yo Mike and I went to South Side, still got a little sumthin for ya...get to Dee’s.*

Austin discovers the Jager and goes all ape shit, starts looking for some Red Bull to make Jager bombs but he can’t find any and Amber is yelling *Rich Dead Nazi!* and the guys are laughing and the noise in Jeremy’s head is building, telling him to *go go go*, because he just has to keep things from growing stagnant, has to ward off those still moments of reflection that inevitably lead to the numbing malaise he knows so well and he slaps Austin on the back, reuses the Master Hunter line again and turns to wink Amber.

She smiles.

Jeremy replies to Scott.

*Meet you there.*

Austin downs his drink, makes a production of slamming the plastic cup on the counter, saying *Damn that’s good shit* and pouring himself another. Jeremy sips his own, beginning to sink in to the din of the party, allows the rhythm of the music to serve as a

proxy to movement and he imagines what's going on in Oakland, wonders if anyone at the party has a clue. The city could be burning as they stand here, he thinks, and nobody would even know. The line so thin. What will be the breaking point? How do we bring about change? There are no answers. He looks around the kitchen that's stainless steel everything and marble everything else and suddenly he's making a comment about *how goddamn nice* everything is here, and Amber laughs, tells him he hasn't even seen the best parts yet. She motions for him to follow her out the patio door. He knows the guys are watching and he turns, makes sure it's Austin who he makes eye contact with and raises one eyebrow. Austin snorts or chuckles, Jeremy can't tell which, and then he's going through the sliding glass door. Down a short walkway, then Amber leads him around the pool – *a pool in Pittsburgh* – where there's an open air cabana with a fireplace and full bar, a flat screen mounted beneath the wood beams of the ceiling, corner loveseats built into the brick interior. Jeremy plops down in one of the loveseats with a satisfying *Aaaahhh*, kicks his feet up on a sham-rustic coffee table, and says *ain't it the life* in a manner he knows is corny.

Amber takes a spot on the loveseat across from him. She folds her arms and then seems to scan the rest of the backyard, surveying. “So why haven't you told me what's going on with Scott yet?” she asks.

Jeremy takes a long drink. “He wants me to meet him at this bar on the South Side.”

“And he's there because?”

“Because he scored coke.”

“Figures.”

He finds himself wondering what Scott tells Amber about him. Did she hear him enter the apartment that Sunday afternoon? Walk down to his room? He thinks of Kat at

Remedy, the question of girlfriends, possession – *if you ever* – and Jeremy takes a last look towards the patio door, the party seeming distant and muted, then he pulls out his phone, motions for Amber to come sit by him. “I’ll show you what he said.”

But it’s all pretense.

“Do I even want to know?” she says, curling her legs under her as she takes a seat next to Jeremy.

Jeremy shrugs, puts his phone away, notices the goose bumps freckling her chest, the low cut of her tank top. He smiles. She seems to return it.

“So you’re *not* showing me what he said?”

He shrugs again. “Thought you didn’t want to see?”

“Just wondering what I’m doing over here now.”

“Well,” Jeremy says and moves an arm to the top of the loveseat, lets his hand dangle at first, meets her eyes, then moves down her top until he hooks a finger inside her jeans.

Her eyes narrow. *No*, her eyes seem to say as she twists away, *I don’t think so*.

She stands, walks away. Jeremy stays seated, listens as the door slides open, the sounds becoming real again, only for a moment, before the door mutes them once more, and everything goes still.

\*

When he slides the patio door open the baseball trio is still in the kitchen, Austin and Tanner laughing at Tanner’s Kanye routine – *they be askin us questions, harass and arrest us* – and Jeremy comes up behind Austin, fakes a series of kidney punches then slaps him on the back. “What up, fellas.”

“You tell us,” Austin says.



“Checking out that patio bar, man. Shit is one hundred in this place.”

“Where’s Scott at anyway?” Justin asks.

“South Side.”

“Damn, you two have those fakes, huh?” Austin says then looks over his shoulder, checking proximities. “You know he’s getting all up in some hotty’s guts tonight.”

“Gross,” Tanner laughs.

“Naw,” Jeremy says, waving him off. “Scott talks big, but that’s all bluff, he doesn’t screw around on Amber. Dude’s as loyal as they come.”

And it’s hard for Jeremy to process the three nearly identical looks this comment receives. Not disbelief or surprise, but it’s like they’re collectively saying *you?* Of all people *you’re* the one making such an asinine statement?

“*What?*” Austin finally says, a harsh braying ejaculation of the question.

“It’s all talk, man—”

“Dude, I’ve *seen* it. Like, with my eyes,” Austin tells him, looks over his shoulder again. “Walked in the wrong door at Ryan Calhoun’s and found Macy Goins slobbering his knob.”

“They do call her Knobber Knees,” Justin adds, as though this is evidence of some kind.

Jeremy is caught in some temporary fugue, knowing he’s supposed to say something but...*what?*

“Sorry, bro,” Austin finally laughs. “Didn’t mean to bust some bubble of yours there.”

And Jeremy gives them an epic *Pffffttt!* and *The fuck do I care?* because he's back to fight or flight, that wretched feeling of being discerned because how in the holy hell could it have reached the point where he was saying these things about Scott, not out of loyalty, but because he actually thought, or at least wanted them to be true when he seems to be the last idiot off the turnip truck and he's going back to that night even Amber basically admitted she knew he was messing around on her. Because this is what Scott wanted him to believe, and, *there*, he thinks, *that is why*, because everything about Scott oozes that alpha syndrome of bragging about belt notches, but Scott would go out of his way when he was alone with Jeremy to say how he had never cheated on Amber, never would. Because he wasn't actually talking about Amber. He was talking about Jeremy. And the deep pool of nausea begins to stretch through his body as he thinks about the little things – the hugs and shoulder grabs, the locker room defense as some fucked marking of property – and all those other things he has explained away, tried to keep buried.

But then Jeremy's laughing off the whole thing, pouring another drink and slapping Austin on the back. "Dude," he says, "tell you what would be funny. You should text Scott, tell him you saw me hooking up with Amber."

The collective look.

"Say what?" Austin asks.

"Telling you, man, it would be hilarious."

"I don't know," Justin says, "there are some pretty legendary stories about him.

Weren't you in the car for the infamous Property Damage Voyage?"

"Yeah," Austin says, "this is getting a little weird."

"Dude, are you serious?" Jeremy asks. "Here, let me see your phone."

“Hmmm.”

“C’mon, pussy,” he says because he knew that would be the one, and it’s curiosity in Austin’s eyes when he slides his hand into his pocket and hands Jeremy his phone. Jeremy finds Scott’s contact info and types up the message, some tactful throwing of Jeremy under the bus, the *I’m no snitch* play, *but this was pretty fucked*. And Jeremy hands the phone back to Austin for him to review the message. Austin raises his eyebrows to ask *Really?* one last time, then presses send.

“You’re an odd dude,” Justin says.

Jeremy drinks what’s left in his cup, tells the guys it’s been real.

“Not even gonna stick around to see what he says? What am I supposed to do now?”

“Just go with it,” Jeremy tells him and he’s giving fives they reluctantly accept and walking back through the living room, thinking how regal it all is, and he’s giving a head nod to Marcus, imagining Kat on Forbes, row upon row of riot police, tear gas slowly filtering through a choking crowd, and some vague notion of a plan begins to form. He’s thinking about Scott and his impulse towards sudden violence, but he’s never seen the fuse burn down all the way, always someone there to snuff the flame out between forefinger and thumb, and something deep within, some ill-formed notion breeding in the nausea, tells him to put it to a test, to see how far the charade will go.

He makes his way over to Marcus, takes him by the shoulder and tells him if Scott contacts him, to let Jeremy know. The confusion spreads over Marcus’ face, and Jeremy gives his shoulder a squeeze, tells Marcus to trust him.

\*

It comes in a phone call. He wasn't sure this was how Scott would play it. He sits in his car down the street from the party, phone in hand. His heart races. He modulates his breath. Swipes the call on.

"Scott," he says, voice laden with news.

It's quiet on the other end, still. Jeremy gets the fleeting sense that he's being watched, the killer hunched in the grass. "Sounds like you've got something to tell me."

"Dude," Jeremy sighs, "I couldn't believe it."

"*You* couldn't believe it."

"Man, when I saw..."

"When *you* saw."

"I came to the party looking for you – that's when I texted you – and was about to leave, Macy Goins, she stopped me, said I'd be interested where Amber was, who she was with."

"Macy Goins."

"I saw them."

"Who?"

"Amber—"

"*Who?*"

"It was Marcus Osei."

The laughs come in assault rifle bursts, three quick *ha!*s like Scott's done playing along if that's the best Jeremy can do, but then it's quiet again on his end.

"Marcus Osei," Scott sighs.

"It was Marcus."

“This is what you’re telling me?”

“This is what I’m telling you.”

When the line goes dead, the *thing*, that aching, throbbing mass liquefies, slowly descends his spine, leaving it cold, bloodless.

## Chapter 20

The homes scroll by in the fluorescent buzz of porch lights, become a wash of linden and pine, the power lines stringing these ancient American burbs together like patchwork, and it's this movement, the chaotic *foom!* of speeding through quiet neighborhoods that make these homes furl up like mishandled photographs under his tires and Jeremy thinks, *that's it*, everything is so static, the maintaining of status quo – stagnation – grow old and fat in mini suburban fortresses, spawn and send forth in *this way this way this way* and everything stays the same, and then he's on 65, the Ohio to his left, and once again they're working against each other, the Bronco pushing against the silky black pall of the river at night, and when Marcus texts him it's like the spheres are aligning, forming that Venn diagram correlation to say *ah-ha!* these things so innocuous, so commonplace, in themselves now offering a wealth of insight when looked at under the naked light of analysis and the finger points, says *there*, that is the data, and to the question – the *And so why is Scott telling me to meet him at Robinson Crossing?* – Jeremy waits as he swallows white line after white line, thinks of how this is the natural end, the incredible, titanic rupture of a supernova, because the need for *more more more*, no matter how many arterial tributaries of lives may feel the need, the pull and longing, and may begin on such drastically different courses than Scott's, they all flow into the river of violence in America to burn out brilliantly, and in the continuous flow of the open road, Jeremy simply thumbs out *Don't go*.

## Chapter 21

Robinson Crossing. The consumer hub of the western burbs that Jeremy has gotten to know much more intimately since working at PartyMart. Built on top of one of the Allegheny plateaus, it offers an intricately layered mapping of goods and services, a *Marble Madness* outlay of Targets and Best Buys, Ikeas and Bed, Bath and Beyonds, Starbucks and Applebees, humming with reams of traffic during the day and still as the Once-ler's dystopian village at night. After wending his way through the traffic lights and outlets, Jeremy finds the vast, empty Guitar Center parking lot. The building is the last and largest in a half-mile sphere of an outlet grouping and the building reminds Jeremy of a watchtower on a monstrous, ancient wall turned tourist attraction.

He kills his headlights, drops into neutral, and coasts along the side of the building, stopping before he reaches the corner.

He reaches into the glove box and removes the Colt, wary of the thumb safety, the cocked hammer. A stream of light catches the nickel, makes it gleam. Just for a moment, to know how it feels, he closes his eyes and presses the barrel into the soft flesh beneath his chin.

A slow, mounting chill runs through him.

His eyes open. The color has changed. Locked in the midnight shadow of the building, the protracted light from the loading zone around the corner has gone saturated, a grainy Seventies film brining the scene with sunspots threatening the edges.

He exits.

Tucks the gun into the back of his jeans.

Enter scene.

A tall, solitary light pole casts a broad sphere of light, illuminating a section of the empty lot and at the far rim lurks Scott's Audi, his tints shrouding the interior in darkness.

He's seen this before, wonders briefly if it's real, another dreamscape of his own creation, or some rendering of cinema he's seen before, but the precise movements escape him, the script forgotten and he walks towards the stage light with abrasion marks tickling his vision, ready to accept what lies in wait.

He stops at the edge.

With the first half-step into light the Audi opens. Scott emerges.

Jeremy walks to the cement base of the light pole.

Scott stands, watching. The car door slams closed. "What is this?" he says with a shrug of his shoulders, the motion revealing his father's bat that Scott holds by the barrel.

Jeremy remains silent, waits for him to enter the field of action.

Scott concedes. Walks towards the light as the bat slowly slides down his palm until he grips it at the knob.

He steps into the light.

The barrel end smacks against the pavement, the sharp *crack!* echoing across the valley.

"Well?" he says.

Jeremy remains locked in the grainy saturation of color until Scott lifts the bat in both hands and Jeremy feels the cascade of air brush past him as the bat crashes into the cement



corner of the base and splits in two, splinters of ash swirling, then pillowing to the ground as the sound of the broken barrel rolling across the lot fills his ears.

“What’re you going to tell me?” Scott rages between his teeth, close enough for Jeremy to feel his breath, and there are worlds of change behind that breath, like they stand on the precipice of a crumbling society, just miles from a city, a way of life, an entire history of wealth and loss, greed and struggle, burning to the ground at this very moment, and Scott brings the splintered handle to Jeremy’s throat, now carved into some medieval weapon of torture and bloodlust, and he waits for the synaptic burst that brings a hand behind his belt, or just lets Scott ignite in fire and flame, the moment to combust in irrevocable change, then be wiped black in a permanent, nuclear wave.

“You want to play the game? Tell me again it was Marcus?”

“No. It was me.”

Scott rages again, seethes between his teeth. Draws the bat away only to lunge it closer to Jeremy’s neck the next time. *Go ahead*, Jeremy whispers, *do it*, and he can feel the blood about the spill, the viscera and brain matter, the opened marrow of change, it’s there in the shared kinetic energy of their fingertips, the reckless fury boiling in Scott’s eyes, the unsustainable system ready to collapse into itself after a final stand and this fiery destruction will breed creation and

*and*

*and*

*and*

and just as suddenly as the bat had splintered apart, the moment has past, some heaving sag to the momentum. The tendons in Scott’s neck flex a final frenzied time, the strain nearing

rupture, and when he exhales Jeremy sees it in his eyes: the acknowledgement and shame. As if Scott suddenly sees through the unspoken tangle of Jeremy's actions. Knows that nothing is buried anymore. He lowers his head. But seeing this clarity only makes the nausea more acute for Jeremy.

Scott turns away.

The cauterized bat falls.

A hollow echo.

Exit stage right.

## Chapter 22

Jeremy's feet dangle above the Ohio, palms gripping the edge of the dock, Colt resting at his side as he stares off into the darkness of a clouded sky. He takes his phone, scrolls to Evan's text chain. *I love you*, he writes, *you were a good brother*.

He sets his phone on the dock. It buzzes almost immediately, Evan's name appearing as an incoming call. He lets it buzz. And Evan calls again. Then texts: *If you don't respond I'm getting mom and dad involved*.

He reads the text, considers, but then looks off into the shades of blackness delineating the foothills from the sky. But the buzzes keep coming, some unending intrusive stream of the world entering his space.

EVAN  
INCOMING CALL

KAT  
INCOMING CALL

MARCUS: What the fuck is going on?

@chrispetersNYT and three others are tweeting about the riots in Pittsburgh

EVAN  
INCOMING CALL

He takes his phone, so sickened by the isolating pull of the interconnected world and tosses it far out into the Ohio. Cincinnati by morning. He thinks of Papa taking Evan and

him down here, teaching them the basic motions of fishing, because they wouldn't catch anything, but the pictures are there: faces beaming beneath the arc of pole and line, mushy prepubescent legs in short-pants dangling above the water. One of many times in their young lives he would take over instructing Evan as if he was some third-party interpreter, the only person Evan could understand.

“You think this river ever stops?” Papa asked.

He doesn't remember how he responded, but the question is seared in his memory, the teacher's inclination. Surely Jeremy looked up, puzzled, because why would he have ever considered the source or end of flowing water – it just *was* – and his grandfather would chuckle and tell him about Cobb Hill, the West and East Fork Rivers, the Mississippi and Gulf of Mexico.

He sees the headlights before he hears the car. They appear on the water from up the street, then the tunneled sound of the car crawling through the railroad underpass. The first place Evan checks. The headlights disappear, the engine dies, and a pair of feet shuffle towards the edge of the dock. Jeremy faces the river, watching out of the corner of his eye as Evan sits next to him, gun between them. Evan doesn't look at it, doesn't reach for it. They sit in silence.

The air is cool again coming off the Ohio and Evan, wearing only sweats and a t-shirt, shivers, tries to conceal it. Something about the motion causes Jeremy to break the silence.

“You're a good egg, Charlie Brown,” he says in some faux-father figure tone. Evan just looks at him, doesn't change expressions. “A real good egg,” but he starts to lose it and turns off towards the Sewickley Bridge. He wants to say he's sorry, that Evan shouldn't be responsible for him, that he doesn't understand how it got this way.

Jeremy tries to turn and face him but only makes it halfway, fixes his eyes on the river, tells himself he just needs something to center his focus, like getting blood drawn, bite down hard and don't look at the needle, the pooling blood.

"We're different," Jeremy offers.

"I know," Evan says. "I love that about us."

Jeremy nods, wonders what Evan thinks he means.

"You're my brother," Evan says and Jeremy bites down, does it hard, closes his eyes but he can feel everything he wants to stay buried coming to the surface, and Evan adds, "I'd do anything for you," and Jeremy is caught in a choking laugh because this is so Evan, the sincerity. It's not funny. It's just that Jeremy has felt for so long that being sincere, being genuine, was a *problem*, something to avoid at all costs, and he's spent his entire adolescence thinking of Evan as charmingly *naïve*, as if it were interchangeable with *genuine*. He knows it's another sign that something is off, and he begins to try once more to tell his brother he's sorry, because he knows the text was a ploy, an admission, and he wishes he was strong enough, that he could do it all on his own.

He turns at the sound of metal scraping against cement, finds Evan gripping the Colt.

"Is this what Pop was looking for?" Evan asks. "Weird," he adds and turns it over in his palm, observes the glimmer of nickel plating in moonlight. He looks back to Jeremy. Then he throws it far out into the Ohio. Jeremy traces its arc in the night sky, the splash of water. "The hell is he doing with a gun anyway?" Evan asks. "We live in Sewickley."

Jeremy smiles, shares a quiet laugh with his brother.

They sit on the dock, waiting for nothing.

## Chapter 23

It's a dream, or maybe a memory, something in between, where Gran and Papa have picked Jeremy and Evan up after school. Jeremy can tell by the shade of sky, the nearing of dusk, that Dell will be coming to bring them home soon, and he is a tightly wound ball of mess. Evan has just become old enough to understand baseball cards, that his father can be found on quite a few of them, and Papa brought one of Dell's childhood sets out that Evan sorts in a schematic only he can understand, but these don't hold Jeremy's interest for the time being – there is an impending race with Papa to prepare for, and to make things worse, Papa is there, on the couch, watching a movie about, of all things, *racing!*

And the ball of mess is tearing through the house, every point of measure a mini race in itself: kitchen doorway to the breakfast table, breakfast table to Gran's piano, piano to the *aaahhh!* and suddenly he's shooting back down the shotgun hallway. The natural light has darkened in the late afternoon and with bedroom blinds drawn low the hallway becomes a tunnel of shadows that heightens Jeremy's drive. The new game. So many unknowns in those dark rooms that shoot off from the hallway. He must make it to the end, reach for the wall with his fingertips and haul his rear-end back to the lighted living room faster than any other kid could possibly be capable of. But he is.

He bursts into the room, legs and arms flailing, demanding an audience to take notice of his daring speed. "Did you see me, Papa? Am I getting faster?"

“A little,” he says and holds his thumb and index finger an inch apart. “But why don’t you come sit and be still with me for a minute.” And when he does, his grandfather puts an arm on his shoulder, asks him to watch the end of the movie with him, and Jeremy picks up on the theatrical cues, intuits the importance of some final race. With the shot of a gun the sprinters are off in a fury, but the movie slows to focus on one runner in particular, his hair flopping in the wind. A voiceover narration begins but it’s too much for Jeremy, impulses stoked and primed by the drama of cinema and he’s leaping off the couch before his grandfather can harness him back down.

“Race me, Papa,” he pleads. “I’m ready. I *know* I am.”

“Jeremy,” Stephen Williams laughs, finally giving up, “I’m an old man with bad lungs. I can’t race you.”

“*I can’t* never could do anything, Papa,” Jeremy pronounces, drawing a chuckle, and then he’s off, sprinting down the shotgun hallway.

The sun has set even further, darkening the corridor and cloaking the adjoining rooms in ominous black. Jeremy flexes his fingers taught and draws them together, his hands turned into blades that slice through the air and make him *faster faster faster*. But the rooms loom large on his mind, these vast, empty voids of darkness surely hide some lurking danger.

He passes one room, the sets of family photos adorning the hallway, another room, legs churning, more photos, but the last two rooms wishboned at the end of the hallway remain.

In a flash he reaches the wall, allows himself to stop for what must be infinitely less than a second, because he can’t afford anything more, just a stretch of fingertips to scrape the

wall, and a quick glance in one of the rooms where the darkness makes his blood go cold before he's off again, racing towards the light at the end of the hallway.

Darkness recedes to gray. Light reflects off the framed photos. And coming from the living room, Jeremy hears his mother's laugh, but how could she have arrived so quickly? He's running so fast. The sound reverberates, these comforts of tradition, husband and wife, their children and children's children and it makes him churn his legs even harder, slice his hands through the air more fiercely, because he will get there, too, and the light grows larger, the doorway discernible, but something is off, the tone and pitch – it's not laughter – or has since transitioned to fear, or mourning, and the voices call out *Stephen Stephen Stephen* and the photos on the walls skate by in a blur, the expressions smearing to the brink of dissolve, and the voices grow louder, the light luminescent, and Jeremy knows that when he returns they all, in their own way, will meet the naked face of change.