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# The Blue Lights: Stories

Brian Douglas Maxwell

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THE BLUE LIGHTS: STORIES

by

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A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

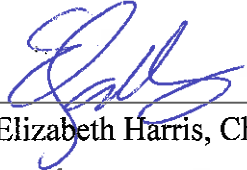
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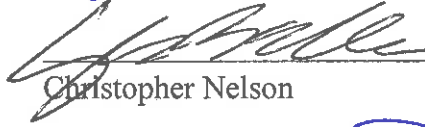
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This dissertation, submitted by Brian Douglas Maxwell in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done, and is hereby approved.



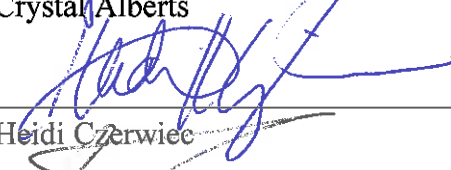
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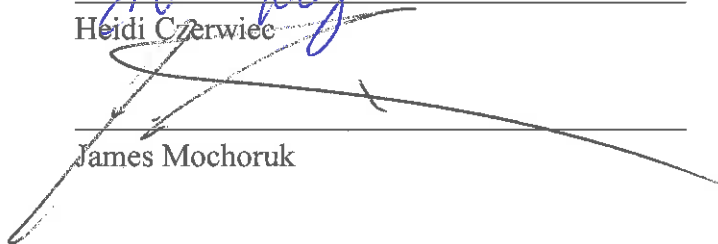
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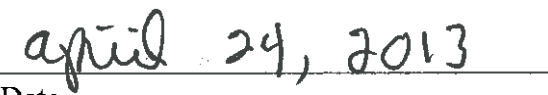


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This dissertation is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.



Dr. Wayne Swisher  
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## PERMISSION

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## ABSTRACT

*The Blue Lights* is a collection of episodic short stories that looks at life along Florida's Space Coast, a strip of beach best known for its shuttle launches and proximity to Disney World. Most of the stories are set along the Atlantic, and all of them chronicle the day-to-day activities of an insular and antiquated beach culture. The stories are unhurried, subtle in construction and inward rather than dramatic, meant to represent a pre-Internet, pre-cell phone Florida where characters stumble into small yet illuminating moments of self-realization set in recognizable, though run-down, places.

Though the stories vary stylistically, *The Blue Lights* relies on a visual style heavy in its employment of metaphor and lyricism, emphasizing alliterative diction and an elliptical syntax to view unglamorous characters in moments of crisis. The stories are meant to convey the feeling of real life in that these illuminating moments are rather more fleeting than consequential. Plot is developed to emphasize tension more so than theatrics, highlighting human isolation as a way to both invite and repel the nostalgia common to Florida's identity as a fruitful paradise.

The stories give voice to characters who—if clumsily posed—embrace the beauty and chaos of a marginalized life. In short, *The Blue Lights* deals with those left behind or caught in between, seeking always to dignify the characters by qualifying the act of survival as an art in and of itself, focusing on domesticity and local drama to explore the unseen side of the familiar.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

During one of my very first creative writing classes, the instructor handed out a copy of Jonathan Penner's "This Is My Voice," an anecdotal piece about a young bodybuilder struggling to impress his writing mentor. After toiling for weeks with no results, he panics and uses a science fiction tale for inspiration. Though he's created an entirely original work in order to prevent detection, he is still surprised when the effort is applauded; in his mind, he's committed the ultimate sin. And when the teacher suggests that he has finally found his "voice," he loses his cool. In fact he tosses a lawnmower through the front window of her house in revulsion.

Looking back, it's obvious that we were being encouraged not to outsmart ourselves. My instructor, Jeanne Leiby, was an advocate of the "write-what-you-know" philosophy, and she often encouraged us to ground our efforts in specificity and to concentrate on "place" as a starting point. In my case, her advice was to stop writing insipid stories about Paris, a city I'd never visited, and to concentrate less on language and more on imagery and a strong plot. She wanted me to look around and take advantage of the Florida landscape that was there in front of me, and especially to draw on my own experiences in order to locate my voice.

Jeanne isn't around anymore, but I'm proud to say that I eventually took most of her advice, though it wasn't easy. In *The Blue Lights*, my own collection of short fiction, the stories are setting-specific and image-driven, guided by past experience and



often haunted by the idea of place. Though the stories certainly rely more on atmosphere than on plot, I did finally settle into “writing what I knew.” In my case, the edict forced me to first address two slightly more complicated questions. How exactly do you write properly about the place where you are from? And how do you decide upon a style appropriate to the task?

In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O’Connor suggests that “The best American fiction has always been regional” (58). She traces the heritage of American fiction from New England to the Midwest to the South, arguing that what is most important is “the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light” (58). Though I’m not interested in the finality of such an argument, I can say without hesitation that the fiction that has had the strongest effect on my own writing is certainly regionally specific. Though Jeannie encouraged us to read widely, the fact of the matter was that she had spent time in Tuscaloosa, at the University of Alabama, and reading widely meant reading a great deal of southern fiction. I came to equate successful stories with the ones that mastered characterization through a sense of place, and I was swept away with the stylized prose that seemed to reflect a world constructed of concrete, specific details.

Probably I took O’Connor’s words too literally, and put too much emphasis on my search for a place with a worthwhile “history.” As a Floridian, I found it puzzling how a state so close in location to the grand literary traditions of the south could also feel so inconsequential. I had trouble seeing past the shiny façade of The Magic Kingdom and the far-reaching tentacles of Disney World. For a peninsular state, Florida is plastered with pavement and scabbed over by outlet stores and strip malls. I never

knew the “old” Florida, and the Florida writers that I read and enjoyed were all transplants who, for the most part, focused their work on the places they had once called home. I’m thinking specifically about Harry Crews and Padgett Powell, two long-time instructors at the University of Florida, who wrote about Georgia and South Carolina, respectively. But before them Andrew Lytle did the same thing, using the lower reaches of Tennessee as a canvas. It seemed as if each and every writer that I admired had been granted the great gift of place. Faulkner had his “postage stamp” in Mississippi, while O’Connor’s stories all seemed to grow organically from her own small seed in Georgia. From my narrow perspective, Florida’s lack of heritage was severely reflected in its literary history.

Of course this defeatist attitude was overblown. In *The Realist Short Story*, Kerry McSweeney suggests that good writers are different from each other in that each one possesses a distinctive sensibility that results in “a particular and unmistakable signature on everything [they] write” (7). He attributes this comment to Raymond Carver, pointing out that Carver’s emphasis on compression, precision of language, and significant detail is simultaneously in line and unlike the remaining subjects of his study. The authorial notion of a “distinctive sensibility” is an attractive one; but it’s obvious now that I was working backwards, searching for an “unmistakable signature” through significant detail instead of the other way around. In short, I was equating setting with style, as if Faulkner’s prose was the exact result of geographic circumstance. I was taking for granted, for instance, that Carson McCullers’ splendid gallery of grotesque characters in “The Ballad of the Sad Café” came directly from a life partially lived in a dreary town like the one in which the story takes place, or that

the “distinctive sensibility” demonstrated in the collection *A Curtain of Green* came more from Mississippi than from Eudora Welty’s ability to define mood and plot through location and custom.

Yet even the more contemporary writers I sought to emulate seemed to possess a distinct local advantage—and most of the time this advantage came from living in or around the south. David Huddle’s *Only the Little Bone* is an exquisite bildungsroman set in rural Virginia, and I especially admired Huddle’s emphasis on linked stories to construct a coming-of-age saga built around his main character Reed Bryant. Breece D’J Pancake’s collected stories are layered with isolation and poverty, concentrating on the far reaches of a West Virginia in the 1970s where “road maps resemble a barrel of worms with St. Vitus dance” (133). I noticed that Ellen Gilchrist’s lyricism throughout *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* allowed her to tackle dark subjects with a spark of humor and jest as she swings between New Orleans and Arkansas. On the other hand, Larry Brown’s gritty imagery has a cinematic quality that sticks to your boots, and of course his stories take place in a Mississippi similar to Faulkner’s, if populated with V-8 engines and Budweiser cans instead of wagon carts and whiskey.

It probably seems clear by now that I was also equating setting with subject matter, and for this reason I still felt caught up in a conundrum of place. So for a long time I wrote highly stylized stories that lacked plot, and set these stories in unidentifiable places. I was drawn to the details and the acute specificity in the stories I read, but since I didn’t want to write about what I saw around me, I drifted into a world of abstractions where language was the dominant feature. I tried simply to string together interesting sentences, concentrating on rhythm and metered prose, syntax and

alliteration; but for the most part I avoided concrete imagery and any sense of reasonable plot. Needless to say, the results were lacking. I'd settled in as a fourth-rate Flaubert who plagiarized his own work for promising lines that I could put to music and play on the guitar when no one was around.

As these things happen, two major turning points were on the horizon, and each would have a huge impact on how I decided to shape the stories that make up *The Blue Lights*. The first occurred when I came across a copy of *Downriver*, Jeanne Leiby's debut story collection. Of course I was thrilled to find out that she had finally found a home for her stories. I was also surprised to note that they didn't take place in the Deep South, but that they were mostly set in south Detroit, downriver of the storied factories amidst a maze of polluted working-class neighborhoods. The stories were carefully plotted and full of believable characters; the prose was terse and unforgiving and for the most part her subjects were depicted without a hint of nostalgia. I recognized a lot of Jeanne's past writing advice reflected in the stories, and for the first time I also began to see the potential for adopting my own childhood home as a fictional subject.

But the logic behind this decision had a lot more to do with artifice than emotional attachment. I'd also been recently introduced to the long short story "The Pedersen Kid," by William Gass, and I was absolutely floored by his use of language, demonstrated in part by his frequent use of the word "snow." Though Gass presents a set of believable-enough characters and a plot that relies on causality and expectation, "The Pedersen Kid" still struck me as a supreme act of style—one that happened to depend entirely on the use of place as a necessary element. Gass has famously argued that "[t]here are no descriptions in fiction, there are only constructions" and his

handling of character in “The Pedersen Kid” supports this point (17). Jorge and Pa and Big Hans feel less lifelike than the folks that populate the stories in *Downriver*; they are at least less complexly expressed and less dependent upon development and exposition. But even as linguistic constructions they signaled the tension between character and place that I was after. *Downriver* presented a gritty, urban depiction of place where the antagonistic forces took shape as sewage plants and bars, while “The Pedersen Kid” presented conflict through the aftermath of a blizzard. Though Gass might have frowned at such a middling observation, his use of the harsh winter landscape rekindled my obsession with place, but this time as a springboard for style. Reading “The Pedersen Kid” against the stories in *Downriver* woke me to the possibility of revisiting the familiar territory of my childhood with a series of new approaches. I wanted to use Florida as a character and to work with the same hyper-specific qualities of the physical and emotional landscapes that I’d witnessed in “The Pedersen Kid” and in *Downriver*.

Basically, *The Blue Lights* takes a cue from both. It’s an exploration, a collection of attempts that all revolve around one writing goal: trying to write about the coast of Florida where I grew up, and trying to find the right voice with which to do it. For me, the issue revolved around how to approach my own place-specific experiences—and how to settle into a tone that captured my own complicated relationship with the long slice of beach that I’ve learned to recognize as home. Setting the stories in Florida seems obvious now, as does taking advantage of life on the Space Coast. But even though I grew up in a place that many imagined as a paradise, I grew up conflicted, especially in terms of subject matter. Like a lot of Floridians my age, I was a transplant. In my estimation, life on the Space Coast was more weird than wonderful. Part of the

problem was that it was hard to take Florida seriously. Where I searched for character, I saw caricatures looming ominously, and the cartoonish landscape felt like something out of a Hunter Thompson sketch. The Space Coast is, after all, duly populated with astronauts, strippers, insurance salesman, politicians, and weed farmers, and the dominating outdoor activity after golf is either surfing or fishing or drinking under the driveway stars.

But I wasn't interested in cataloging the bizarre or writing cartoonish accounts of life in the Sunshine State. I didn't want to waste my time mocking Florida, even if the opportunity presented itself so abundantly. And I didn't want my sole focus to revolve around the local and statewide problems. We were draining the Everglades, for crying out loud, and ocean-front condominiums were going up at a record pace. Though Florida's housing bust was national fodder, the millennium election fiasco might as well have been lifted from a *Dukes of Hazzard* episode. These were my personal concerns, but I didn't want to write about environmental degradation and economic shortsightedness, or even pet politics. I mean I did, but not as a chief focus. Instead, I wanted to write stories about people.

William Gass and Jeanne Leiby gave me two different ways to imagine the same landscape in *The Blue Lights*, and essentially to take stylistic chances in order to overcome the previously catalogued fears. My earlier work had always been centered on disconnected protagonists, alienated characters under duress. But embracing place as a potentially dominant element of my fiction—and not merely a subordinate one—gave me the opportunity to locate these efforts, or at least a way to measure the value and quality of such attempts. I began to mix the timeless quality of “The Pedersen Kid” with

the more contemporary details present in *Downriver*. I went back to the pre-internet, pre-cell phone era Florida where I'd come of age in search of material for the type of character-driven fiction that I wanted to write, but I never lost sight of the fact that what made Florida unique was the unusual and often threatening weather. We didn't have blizzards to shape our consciousness; we had hurricanes. But the effect was the same, as was the opportunity to fuse plot with place and to take linguistic advantage of the rhythm of such an existence.

*Downriver* focuses almost exclusively on the post-industrial Rust Belt, using the abundance of hardship to shape the lives of the characters and to illuminate their specific conflicts. So with an eye skewed toward the 90s, I looked around at my peers, the people I'd worked with or played pool against, especially those most affected by Florida's social and economic identity. I reminded myself that despite the proximity to Disney World, life along the Space Coast was actually rather interesting—especially to outsiders. After all, I was one of many who tuned out tourism to follow the weather religiously, not for blizzard conditions but for wind patterns and changes in barometric pressure. We got up with the sun to check the waves and understood the tidal shifts and the vocabulary of ground swells. We sipped coffee out of paper cups at dawn and counted the seconds between sets. But we also sat in our cars and smoked hash out of aluminum foil pipes, or rolled joints into the afternoon.

Essentially, *The Blue Lights* is a collection of portraits that view unglamorous characters in moments of crisis. Despite the varying tendencies the stories seem to exhibit, they generally take place in and around the beach towns that I've called home for the better part of my life, and they often explore angles of vision that wouldn't

please the local tourist board. Though loosely structured, they are meant to convey the feeling of real life. Plot is developed through repetition to highlight the crisis points that serve the eventual storylines. Despite all of this, the drama that unfolds throughout *The Blue Lights* is rarely sensational. Conflict is reflected in loss or yearning. Character desire is realistic, pedestrian. An impartial brother grows concerned about his sister. A group of transients pass a summer by the creek. An old man tends to his dead rabbits. Two boys wait in the rain outside a bus station, hoping for something to happen. No one here is reaching for the stars, though each of the characters struggle with identity and various forms of powerlessness. All share a desire to escape or transform their surroundings, and a common theme is the shared inability to overcome. This also means that the characters are best understood as products of their environments.

What I started with was the idea of a series of coming-of-age stories, modeled initially after David Huddle's *Only the Little Bone*. Set in rural Virginia in the 1950s, part of the beauty of Huddle's related stories is the absence of modernity. In fact it's the tension between the past and the present that reflects protagonist Reed Bryant's struggle to understand himself and the world he inhabits. Huddle's stories are on the long side, chronicling Reed's life first as a very young boy and on until he grows up and gets married. Similarly, my own story, "Start with Stars by a Sea," introduces a pre-teen named Russell who was meant to be a lead character in a sequence of ongoing stories about growing up poor and disgruntled along the coast. His father has abandoned him for an even more solitary life shaping surf boards in California, leaving him to the care of his alcoholic mother. Russell has inherited his father's nickname ("Snickers") as well as his cold and calculating demeanor, and he toils under the weight of both.



But where Huddle succeeds in letting Reed Bryant's childhood unfold languidly, I grew impatient with the burden of a young narrator and the responsibility of so much exposition. Though *The Blue Lights* contains two more stories that feature Russell, in "The Right Kind of Light" he has reached his very early twenties, and by the time "In Town" rolls around, Russell is an adult—at least in terms of age. Both stories take more of a cue from the Ernest Hemingway's character Nick Adams than from Reed Bryant. The stories continue the concept of the "unified" collection used by Huddle, but like Hemingway's portrayal of Nick Adams, the notion of unity is informed by the technique of omission rather than abundance. In most of Hemingway's stories featuring Nick Adams, there's an emphasis on what is not stated, on the subtle allusive material that lives just outside of the frame of reference. Often the buried past presses itself into the foreground as the stories roll on to their conclusions. Where Huddle romanticizes Reed Bryant's experiences, Hemingway understates Nick's explicit reflections to the point of a skeletal plot.

In "The Right Kind of Light," Russell is trying to escape his past by moving a few towns up the beach. Like Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River," there's not a lot of action, though there is plenty of understated conflict. Russell has moved to a place where downtown is "right up against the ocean" (24). It's full of strip clubs and overflowing dumpsters, leftover drunks and aging holdovers from a once vibrant surf culture. It's a tourist trap, basically, where locals are marginalized and left to either serve drinks or work on the roofs. Hemingway's story places Nick on a fishing excursion. As he tries to catch trout, it's obvious that he is struggling with the aftermath of his war experiences. The struggle is mostly internal, and without the aid of

flashbacks or exposition, we end up with a story that is virtually actionless and void of any characters outside of Nick. “The Right Kind of Light” mirrors Hemingway’s “man-alone” approach, a technique pointed out by Julian Smith in his essay, “The Thing Left Out.” As is the case with a number of Hemingway’s stories, stretches of narrative solitude work to characterize the plight of the protagonists, even if the information gained appears on the surface to be minimal. Russell, too, wanders the streets and the beaches with an unnamed or at least unspecified motive. He is struggling with the past, a struggle symbolized by his move up the beach to escape a childhood nickname.

Though Russell’s conflict is personal, hidden from the audience, and implied rather than stated outright, I increased the narrative tension in order to sustain interest in his journey through town. So I gave him a mission to try and collect money owed to him from a previous employer. This mission forces him to go where Nick does not, entering the mouths of the bars that litter the nighttime landscape. Like Nick, Russell is on edge, and memory seeps through the prose in a combination of run-ons interspersed with clipped phrases, sometimes replacing the commas with subordinating conjunctions as Hemingway often does to convey immediacy. Russell finds the man who owes him money, but he also finds a girl from his past who casts a shadow on his charade to rid himself of the past. Though I had to rely more on exposition and flashback to illustrate Russell’s more immediate conflict, the idea is still to imply how he is struggling to keep his memories buried, how he tries—and fails—to keep from thinking about the past.

In the third Russell story in this collection, “In Town,” I had to leave Hemingway territory somewhat in order to expand the scope of the narrative. While the story still draws heavily on Hemingway’s portrayal of Nick, the similarities are more

stylistic than structural. It was becoming increasingly difficult to rely solely on a front story to move Russell forward, so I had to include a back story that worked in tandem with the present narrative. Here we find Russell as an adult, returning like a prodigal son to the Florida coast just as a hurricane is getting ready to make landfall. He's been away for months, living with a woman in a small town in Arkansas, though their relationship has been based partly on dope dealing. "In Town" is a family story, a portrait of tense reconciliation between Russell and his sister and even the community that he has tried to leave behind. The return, of course, mirrors Nick Adams' own attempts to return to innocence after his war experiences.

Though the prose is terse and the tone somber, even in its pleasant moments, "In Town" draws also from the layered stories in *Downriver*, concentrating on character interaction and dialogue to draw the audience into Russell's suddenly crowded world. The stories in *Downriver* are full of such character interplay, and since a great many of them are essentially coming-of-age stories, they are often structured to highlight moments of clarity or awareness dependent upon a shift from innocence to experience. Though this strategy works well for Jeanne, I find it nearly impossible to write stories that result in character-based epiphanies. My characters are more apt to turn away from each other and maybe stare into the void that is their existence. Fiction writer Charles Baxter takes up this idea in his essay "Against Epiphanies," suggesting that in the world of the contemporary American short story, narrative detail is often assumed to require a justification. For those of us that may lack a dramatic imagination, however, this impulse for clarity in the insight department can sometimes be detrimental. Instead, Baxter argues that in many cases, "[s]tories can arrive somewhere interesting without

claiming any wisdom or clarification, without, really, claiming much of anything beyond their wish to follow a train of interesting events to their conclusion” (52). Baxter uses Chekhov as an example of a writer who often avoids wrapping up the narratives with any concrete sense of closure, and critic David Jauss agrees, pointing out that “Chekhov’s stories are frequently less about change than they are about the failure to change” (24). This inability to change is often rooted in the limitations of the characters, who—as products of their environment—certainly do not have the ability to produce insight as easily as an author might.

Though “In Town” deals with Russell’s past and populates his world with a cast of aging surfers, day laborers, and drug dealers, it also marks a move toward using the setting itself as a character. Like “In Town,” the stories “We on the Creek” and the “The Blue Lights” look closely at the parts of Florida that stretch outside the postcard image. They juxtapose poverty and paradise by examining characters that inhabit the places in between, echoing the harsh depictions that characterize the stories in *Downriver*. They also feature flawed and potentially unsympathetic protagonists, the type of troubled characters that populate the work of Larry Brown. Glenn Davis, for instance, from Brown’s novel *Father and Son* is violent and icily remote; he’s deeply flawed and almost unredeemable after only a few chapters. But the novel *Joe* introduces us to the title character, a well-meaning alcoholic contractor who runs into a family of drifters. It’s really the story of an awkward struggle for decency and dignity in an impoverished and rather deformed moral landscape. In both cases, Brown’s gritty descriptions of the back parts of Mississippi set the tone, as he relies heavily on the visual dynamic of outward degradation to suggest inner turmoil. From the rusted vehicles to the derelict

houses, the parched and ragged landscape figures so predominately that it often overwhelms the senses.

My story, “We on the Creek,” features a group of transients who carve out a fringe existence in a makeshift homeless camp. The camp is a free place, but it’s also prisonlike, bordered by chain-link fence and a wall of “rag palms and juniper bushes, all bunched together and growing like a series of zippers” (45). This of course gives me a chance to visit the worn edges of Florida, the ones that never seem to touch the ocean. I’m mining similar ground in “The Blue Lights,” where the conflict begins outside a bus depot and spills over into a polluted river. In both cases I’m investing in the coarse setting details to bind the characters to their own outward flaws. The protagonist of “We on the Creek” retreats to a dingy bar to avoid intervening on the behalf of an innocent woman, while Jon from “The Blue Lights” leaves his friend behind in an attempt to preserve his own fragile sanity. Neither character is meant to be judged as severely as the murdering Glenn Davis from *Father and Son*, but both demonstrate a measure of cowardice and desperation that certainly reflects the ugliness that surrounds them.

The urbanized side of paradise presents a fair amount of potential for illustrating the power of decay, as Jon stands under an awning that has been so scorched by the sun that it now looks “like a stretched-out asshole” (71). The creek in “We on the Creek” is nothing more than a “muddy push to the river,” a place where “trains went by not fifty paces away” (55). Most of the stories in *The Blue Lights* work in some degree to accentuate the plight of the beach bums, unskilled laborers, and holdover artisans who have seen their communities slowly transformed into tourist meccas or usurped by asphalt and outlet malls. Often it’s the air of encroachment that I’m seeking to highlight,

as my characters are forced to struggle in the face of excessive building projects or to find a sense of life amidst an endless sequence of well-manicured palm trees lined forcibly in a row. These types of setting details can produce tension when they contribute to a surreal sense of place, but they are largely dependent upon the juxtaposition of the natural and unnatural to function.

As a peninsular state, Florida is truly a place shaped by water and weather. Since the stories in *The Blue Lights* are all set on or along the stretch of barrier island where I grew up, I'm especially sensitive to the effect that these elements can have on shaping the stories as well. In "The Pedersen Kid," snow "brings life, confusion, and death," according to Nick Ripatrazone, in the essay "Let Me Make a Snowman." Ripatrazone points out that the word *snow* appears frequently within the 79 pages of "The Pedersen Kid"—181 times by his count. "The repetition," he suggests, "transfers snow from word to thing: snow is overwhelming and smothering, equal parts plot, character, and theme" (Ripatrazone). In *The Blue Lights*, rain, wind, and water in their various forms play enormous roles in just about every story. Due to its location along the Atlantic, the Space Coast is particularly vulnerable to the threat of tropical storms and hurricanes. In the absence of more traditional seasonal change—the colors of fall, the spring thaw—we measure the calendar year around hurricane months and flood periods, or the dry part of summer when things catch on fire. For the most part, I've tried to resist the urge to overuse weather strictly for dramatic effect, but it is true that most of the stories in *The Blue Lights* do turn on the presence of water.

In "Girl with a Dog," the climactic scene takes place as an impossible storm comes barreling out of the blue. Since the protagonist dreams constantly of water, the

suddenness of the catastrophe has both a haunting and clarifying effect. In “We on the Creek,” a crippled girl is set to sail on a makeshift raft and left for dead, while the narrator slips away beneath the cover of rain to contemplate his inaction. In “The Blue Lights,” rain is a constant, creating a world full of puddles where the sun refuses to shine. The downpour is so relentless that Jon is eventually unable to retreat into his own daydreams; his friend’s eyes are transformed into “pale blue facets running noiselessly,” and his fist becomes a “shriveled thing, a worn acorn. A baby’s heart” (83).

Though the threat of a hurricane informs the central tension in “In Town,” two stories from the collection feature storms that do, in fact, make landfall. In “Consilience,” the idea was to shift away from the imagery of decay and shine a light on the natural beauty of the setting. Jessup, the gentle protagonist, views the mainland suspiciously and the ocean religiously; he exists in a temporary paradise where citrus and coconuts grow wild; his sandy yard provides shade for squirrels and doves who feed beneath “under-hanging sea grape,” and where at the end of each day the sun sits “pinned to the horizon like a soft, pink pillow” (135). Jessup is obsessed with boats, and after a series of strange dreams he sets out to assemble one of his own out of the leftover junk in his cramped garage. But when his sons catch wind of his bizarre new hobby, they force him to stop—an act that ultimately dooms him when a hurricane engulfs the entire barrier island with water.

As the longest story from the collection, and one of the more recent, “Consilience” is more playful and much less somber than many of the works previously discussed. Here I’ve found a way to balance past experience, setting, and voice without relying as heavily on the influence of writers like Hemingway or Larry Brown, and

without sacrificing—I hope—too much to the beachcomber cliché. It flirts with the “man alone” narrative dominant in the Russell stories, but also takes advantage of the lyric possibilities available in describing the characters and the specific Florida that they inhabit. Jessup is a mystical figure, a catch-and release fisherman prone to feeding the wildlife in his backyard. His neighborhood is a colorful arrangement of new and old, but since boats play a meaningful role in the story, his eye is tuned to such immediate detail: “Across the street Bill Sparrow had a wide-bottomed bobber with a splintered, fiberglass hull and lettering along the edge in Spanish that had faded with time and now said nothing of consequence” (134).

Jessup is a lyrical creation, a combination of visual metaphors and loquacious syntax; but he’s also a surfer, a survivor, and a dreamer. He’s patient in the face of change, though he’s well aware of what has become of his community. As a roofer and a tree trimmer, he’s worked for years to reshape the landscape around him, to civilize this paradise in a manner that seems irreverent to the type of idealist who listens to the tide change and talks to the birds. But mostly he’s worked to please his various employers, “all of them in love with their yards only after they’d been redrawn in a series of unholy straight lines that stood in sad relief of the sky with all the grace of a pile of bones” (136). Jessup is simple, but not stupid, and “Consilience” is meant to point out that, for him, there are no villains in the world, and no bad guys—only circumstance and a series of systems at work. This is his grace or his stupidity; either way, I’ve tried to give voice to his ability to rise above.

My story “Helpless” also uses a hurricane to push the plot forward, and ends with a more or less direct hit. But it also marks the completion of a stylistic arc in *The*



*Blue Lights* since it picks up with new vigor the idea of a unified collection where the Russell stories leave off. Along with “Autopsy” and “Passenger,” “Helpless” features a lead character cut from the cloth of the Ellen Gilchrist heroines found in her collection *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*. Gilchrist’s protagonists are bold and impossible to dismiss, like Nora Jane Wittington who comically robs a well-fortified establishment in “The Famous Poll at Jody’s Bar.” According to critic Marianne Gingher, Gilchrist’s characters exhibit internal conflict through off-beat behavior, as they are often “unable to reconcile with their desires” (130). Gilchrist’s Rhoda Manning, for instance, the protagonist of three linked stories, is a brash and self-absorbed young woman who seems to resist maturity and reality. Rhoda shirks responsibility for her actions and is characterized by what Gingher calls a “lock-jawed stubbornness” (130). The end result is that though Rhoda suffers, we, as readers, tend to laugh at and enjoy her foibles.

Similarly, in *The Blue Lights*, “Autopsy” introduces my new protagonist, an unnamed misfit who struggles with just about everything. Fresh out of rehab, he visits the weed-dealing couple Jody and Steve only to learn that he’s got a bigger problem: “I was sure I didn’t know Tabby Thomas, but he must have known me. Otherwise he wouldn’t have wanted me dead” (37). Where in previous stories I’d been shy about dramatic plotting, here I’m going for it—and I’m hoping that the power of the first-person voice and the specificity of the peculiar plot line can carry the story through the potential clichés. Instead, I’m looking to overcome melodrama through action, as the narrator meets the conflict head on by facing his assailant at the appointed place, a beachside pool hall called The Hustler. I’m also trying to indulge the seedy grace of the

various settings, and doing so by allowing the details to come directly from the mouth of my distracted narrator.

Though he makes it out of this situation, the next story puts him back at square one. He's still drifting, though it's unclear if he's more or less for the lessons available at *The Hustler*. In the aforementioned "Helpless," we find him in the middle of another conflict, set in motion by his own pursuit: "I met Maggie Moss in the parking lot of a club where she danced and followed her home, which wasn't such strange behavior for me in those days" (85). What follows is part love story, part disaster, as a hurricane looms just off the coast even as he and Maggie Moss drink the days away in a state of ignorant bliss. "Autopsy" features a death threat, a gun that doesn't go off, and a premise that revolves around drinking and drugs. "Helpless" is a story about a knucklehead narrator who wants a girl, gets a girl, wants to leave a girl, and finally saves a girl, though he is acting entirely on his behalf all the same.

My story "Passenger" is a second-person account from the same unnamed narrator, and takes place on a bus under the midday Florida sun. It's a story that relies entirely on the perceptions of its extremely unreliable narrator, and it completes the series of newer works, setting up a tidy comparison to the three Russell stories in terms of style and structure. Certainly the Russell stories are more subtle in construction, less reliant on verbal chaos and theatrics as plot points or characterization. They're definitely more apt to look inward, meditating on character insights, however symbolic, and treating these insights as sincere and significant, especially as they search for a way to access O'Connor's sense of locating a "small history in a universal light." Instead, I've turned to the brevity-laden and darkly comic approach popularized by Denis

Johnson in his story collection *Jesus' Son*. Johnson's stories all concern a hopeless screw up, known only as "Fuckhead." The energy in his work is rooted in the virtuosity of the narrative voice; it's a style that is more conversational and unrestrained by polished language, or at least intended to appear that way.

This is where the exploration has taken me, to a version of the Space Coast narrated by a nameless protagonist who in my wildest dreams might allow me to construct a collection of linked short stories that finally frees me from my prior obsession with southern fiction. At the very least I'd like to take advantage of the energy present in my narrator's voice and indulge in the contradictions that make Florida a unique and interesting place, now that I'm not as gun-shy about embracing surfing and drugs and chaos as potential subject matter. In the meantime, I'm content to look back at *The Blue Lights* as a series of answers to my previous writing dilemma, a literary experiment that has paid off grandly in terms of explication and self-reflection.

## CHAPTER II

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## CHAPTER III

### STORIES

## The Right Kind of Light

He moved one town up the beach and became Russell again, leaving behind anything he couldn't fit in the trunk of his car. He was twenty-two, and he'd decided he wouldn't answer to "Snickers" anymore, even if it had been his father's name before he left. Here, Russell had been promised a job on the roofs, and he jumped at the chance to start over. So he loaded his Ford Maverick and headed up the line. There were plenty of towns on the Florida coast—at least he could live where people called him by his own name.

Finding a place proved easy, though he was closer to the pool halls and strip joints than he would have liked. Downtown was right up against the ocean. If he wanted to hear the waves, he had to listen to street life as well. The apartment had a single room and a cramped kitchen, and he used the back door so he didn't have to see the neighbors. He scored two chairs from a dumpster and a mattress from the *Shop of Gulls*, where the church ladies sold second-hand goods. He knew they prayed for the folks in the beer bars because they told him as much every time he came in.

The job didn't last long. The crew boss had been a surf rep and a contest rider once; he'd even ridden with Russell's father back when both men were young enough to stay in the scene. But now Jed Dickerson was all boss, and he had a habit of holding

pay. Russell walked on the third week, sold his car for rent and waited. He knew the game was to try and collect. Instead, he walked the beach at night, slept late. He hauled a card table in from the trash and set up an old Panasonic radio that had also been his father's. It picked up AM stations so he listened to the news. That was how he'd heard about the tropical storm: it was still closer to Africa than the Caribbean, but the forecasts suggested that they were in for a big one if the weather system held.

The window was open to catch the breeze and he could hear the sounds of downtown. He smoked out of boredom, stubbing the butts in a coffee cup. There were three surfboards lined up against the wall, all destined for the pawn shop if he couldn't score. He concentrated on the largest, the one he shaped himself for riding big waves. It had taken him an entire summer to form the blank just so and add a layer of fiberglass. When that had dried, he sanded until his fingers wore out, painted it red, put another layer of glass over the first. He could still make out his initials, carved into the foam underneath and, despite the imperfections, he felt proud to have built something that he could touch.

Upstairs the neighbors were yelling. It was Friday night, and he knew that back home his sister would be getting ready for work, scurrying to find a sitter. Leaving her was hard—but he'd had enough of the boyfriends, and living under her roof hurt in a way he couldn't describe. She'd given him a bottle of Old Crow, though he didn't know how to drink whiskey. "You're moving to a *shit town*," she said. "A tourist trap." He thought of this now as he ran his hand across the crease in the label, wondering whether liquor could go sour, whether he'd know the difference anyway. Then he stood and stretched, gave the surfboard a last glance. If the storm did hit, that would be the stick to



ride. He promised himself he'd fix it in the morning, repair the dings and straighten the fin. But now it was the weekend, and he figured the old boss was loose on the town. He might as well try to shake him for that roof money once and for all.

Outside, the air felt humid even for July, and he thought about the storm as people milled around him, jostling for position on the narrow sidewalks. Rock music pumped out of the bars and the crowds were lively. He passed a few places that he deemed too bright and walked in the direction of the pier, looking for the kind of bar that might lead him to Jed Dickerson.

While he walked he tried to imagine a town on the coast of Africa, what it would look like, whether the streets would be busy. The storm would have started there, a few hundred miles out to sea, no more menacing than a cluster of heavy clouds shaped like crumpled paper. But if it moved onward without breaking up, then great changes could begin to take place. His father used to talk about how storms began as seedlings, funnels of moisture far away. How the summer water heated with the sun and the rate of evaporation drove huge amounts of vapor upward where they gathered strength. That was how Russell's father imagined a storm: a mass of whirling summer heat pushed across the ocean's surface, feeding on the warm air, plodding slowly in whatever direction the trade winds pulled.

Russell compared the odds to the dream. For a storm to reach the Florida coast with waves as big as buildings, many things had to line up along the way. And because of this, when people begin to clamor at the possibility of rogue waves, sloped walls of water and surfing perfection, Russell knew that unless the system made it across the

Atlantic full force, unless it assumed the power to threaten Haiti or Cuba or one of the Keys, the storm would never even be given a name.

The Adirondack was a brick bar without windows and Russell had been inside only once before. The crowd had thinned out on the trek and he walked through the swinging doors, despite the motorcycles parked outside. Many of the pier bars were biker hangouts, dark places with concrete floors, but Dickerson was a bully, the sort who preferred the low murmur of drunks to the rowdiness of the strip.

It was quiet inside; a few roughnecks played pool in the background. Guitar riffs poured through the jukebox and he ordered a bottle of beer. The woman behind the counter didn't even look at his face and he took a seat along the wall. There were black and white photos nailed into the wood paneling, featuring surfers on long wooden boards. Behind them the ocean appeared tame, blue-green and almost transparent, as if all that water were merely a figment of the imagination. He sipped the beer. The room smelled of smoke and the televisions showed car races. No one watched. The few patrons seemed content; this was a neighborhood bar for people without neighborhoods to call their own.

A few younger guys came in, a pack of three in ripped Levis and bright shirts with a mess of buttons down the front. Their hair was blond but they didn't appear to be surfers. The biggest had his hat turned sideways and he looked around as if he were sizing up the place. He said something and they all laughed, grabbed a few beers and began to circle the room. They weren't unlike the boys he'd grown up with, who spent too much money now on clothes and preferred fast cars with plastic spoilers along the rear. None of them surfed anymore; they messed around with pills instead, went to

clubs, drove around all night until the sun came up and then went home to sleep. One of the bikers was gesturing across the bar and the three boys mocked him, staying close together even as they moved. The music throbbed and Russell could hear them shouting but not what they said. Jed Dickerson was nowhere to be seen, so he tipped his bottle and moved for the door.

The wind had picked up and the ocean gave off a fishy smell, the smell of low tide. He walked by the pier and circled back, slowing to count the lamps along the edges, the lights of the fisherman who stayed out all night tossing their nets into the shallows, trolling for tuna or mackerel or small sharks. He could see the red dots of their cigarettes. But the quiet was imposing; the world was asleep here. The tiny waves lapped the beach and the wind blew bits of trash across the sand. Russell put his hands in his pockets and walked back the way he'd come.

The houses were all one story and made of cinderblock, with sandy front yards and rusted mailboxes. The cars in the drives were rusty as well, and there were piles of dog shit every so often along the curbs. He'd expected something different. As silly as it sounded, he didn't think that here he'd have to stay up on the roofs, or work a lawn crew to earn a paycheck. But his sister was right: the only difference seemed to be that in this town there were more tourists, come for the palm trees and the long, white beaches, for the strip clubs and the shuttle launch. And they'd drink too much and crawl back to their ocean front hotels and before they left town in their rental cars, they'd make sure to search for the neighborhood where television crews had once filmed episodes of "I Dream of Jeannie."

The walk back seemed longer, and Russell saw the dull glow of neon spreading upward in the darkness before he heard the voices of the crowd. He walked through an alley and hesitated, watching the rush. Girls swam through the streets in short dresses, their tan shoulders sinewy and strong. The men were a mix of teens and old-timers, some bearded and stumbling, their boots and ratty jeans giving them away as laborers. The younger bunch looked much like the boys at the Adirondack: tall and packed with muscle, adorned in ball caps and unnecessarily white sneakers, as if everything rested on them distinguishing themselves from the drabness of the strip.

It was almost midnight and he made for a place just off the main drag, a wide-open bar without TVs or pictures on the wall. There wasn't even a sign: just a patch of glue drawn out in a line that once held a wooden bust that said Al's Lounge. There were no windows either and no neon lights. But Jed Dickerson haunted this place on work days; Russell had noticed more than once a cluster of work vans and roofing trailers parked in the dirt lot outside.

Now the place was mostly empty. An old blues number played in the background but the sound was muted, as if the speakers were blown or turned low. He ordered a bottle of Bud, took a stool. He shared the bar with two older guys who didn't say hello or nod when he sat down. They wore shorts and unlaced sneakers, no socks, and had thick calves and leathery necks. They looked like old surfers. One of them poked at a pack of no-name smokes, pushed it across the bar as if he were waiting to light up. The ashtray was full and Russell noticed their beards and the deep creases around their blue eyes. If his father hadn't taken his act to California, he might have ended up here, just like this, and he couldn't help but wonder if these men had sons on

the strip somewhere, boys dealing dope or selling pills, wearing ball caps twisted to the side.

He drank quickly, ordered another as his companions nursed glasses of tap beer and sat in silence. He wondered about the storm again, what these men might do with the news if they snapped on the radio and heard about a tropical depression headed straight for the coast. Russell was sure that they'd be up at dawn, busy on their feet as the sun peaked over the horizon, illuminating the steady swells of water. He stayed there, trying to picture the scene, until the music came to life—he jumped when the chorus to a Police song came wailing from the speakers.

The older men hardly budged; they sat stone-like, smoking, one of them talking now, but in such a low rasp that Russell could only imagine his mouth moving. He thought about leaving, pushed his bottle across the bar and riffled through his pockets for a few dollars. He was about to give up when he turned and saw his man across the room, and Dickerson wasn't alone. He was shabbily dressed, his long hair visible beneath a hooded sweatshirt. But the girl with him wore a short sun dress and combat boots—both accentuated her long, white legs. She towered above Dickerson even though she was probably half his age. They were drunk, stumbling around by the pool tables, spilling a pitcher of beer on the floor as they tried to fill glasses, and Russell tried to size up the situation from a far.

The song ended and a reggae track took over the room, echoing bass. He was readying himself to walk over when he noticed the girl's face, and especially her tattoos. She had full sleeves of color covering both arms above the elbows and a pair of black wings that rose from beneath the tiny straps of her dress. As he tried to place her,

she looked up and caught him staring—and at that moment he knew that he needed to get out of there. But it was too late: she'd made him. Dickerson was oblivious, head down, but she'd made him. If he wanted his money he'd have to deal with them both.

The song changed again to something he didn't recognize, a jazz number, and he grabbed a beer and made his way over. Dickerson leaned against the wall chalking a pool stick. A stack of quarters rested on the edge of the table. The girl still hadn't stopped watching him and Russell walked right up and sat down. She had black hair and a pale face; the tattoos on her arms were so full of color that they seemed to jump from the surface of her skin.

"Hey," she said. "Long time." Then she laughed, tilting her head back to show her neck. The veins stood out like whipcord. Dickerson continued to work the stick. He stumbled a bit as he put down the chalk and Russell noticed he was shorter than he remembered, and that his teeth were rotten.

"Yeah," Russell answered, staring at the girl. "Long time." He held his bottle between two fingers. Either Dickerson hadn't noticed or he didn't care, but the girl had placed him. Russell wondered if she remembered the details of their night together. In addition to the sleeves, she had a mess of smaller tattoos across her lower back that fused with the wings in a massive cross-hatch of black ink. At first she'd been embarrassed to take off her clothes. She'd said some days the tattoos felt like scars. But they were loaded that night, up past dawn, and after a while none of that mattered. It had been a few years and now he couldn't even recall her name. She'd been one of his sister's friends, and seeing her made him feel guilty again for leaving, but also silly for not going far enough away.

“This is Jed Dickerson,” she said. “He lives by the pier.” She reached for him but he was busy circling the table. He bent to feed quarters into the slots and fell to one knee, balancing himself with the pool cue. His eyes darted up quickly and Russell thought he saw a grin, but he didn’t say anything or offer to shake.

“Jed, this is Snickers,” she said. “He’s an old friend.”

Russell watched them play a game of pool, a sloppy game that ended in laughter and more spilt beer. Dickerson still hadn’t acknowledged him and Russell felt trapped, but he didn’t want to leave without the money. So he watched, trying to recall the girl’s name, wondering about the storm. He kept an eye on the clock though he had nowhere to go.

She was pretty, but he didn’t think he wanted her again. When she laughed, her voice broke, and the laugh carried through the room, at once too loud and hoarse. She made a show of embracing her man whenever she could get him steady on his feet, and she made sure his hands were on her, that everyone knew the score. After a long game she set the rack, bending over the table so that the backs of her legs flashed through the dreary bar. Then she asked Russell if he wanted to play.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Play one, man.” It was Dickerson. He was slouched over a little, showing his teeth. But he looked more alert, as if he’d adjusted somewhat to the bar and the booze and the situation, and the look on his face was undeniable. “Just one,” he said. “Then you can take your ass home.”

Russell squared him up: he’d taken off the hoodie and wore a plain white T-shirt. His arms were tan and strong and he had tattoos as well. But they were dull,

washed out and hardly recognizable, as if they'd been acquired years before; now they looked like oil stains along his heavy forearms.

“OK,” Russell said. “I’ll play one.” He grabbed a stick and set to break while Dickerson pulled out a wad of bills. As he dropped it on the table Russell decided that he looked drunk enough, but something else too. There was a slight tremor about him, in his hands and face. Russell knew that he would indeed play one, but he could not let the man win.

The girl watched in silence. The music had stopped and the bar felt like a museum, still but for their movements around the table. Russell could tell Dickerson was concentrating, taking his time with the shots. But it didn’t matter—his hands were fluttering and he had to squint to see the cue ball. It would be hard to lose this game, but maybe harder to collect the money without incident. Instead of worrying he drank the rest of his beer and stole glances at the girl.

A few people walked into the bar—another cluster of guys—and the noise turned their heads. Dickerson went right for them, carrying the empty pitcher in his hand like a hammer. He greeted them loudly and it was obvious that they knew each other. The girl walked past Russell on the way to the bathroom. She smirked, shook her head slightly, but Russell couldn’t tell if she was trying to call him out or if she was flirting.

“We’re playing pool,” Dickerson yelled from the bar. “Big money game.” He made sure to check Russell’s reaction. But he didn’t return right away. Instead, he followed the girl down the hall, two of the guys in tow. The other two stood across the room and watched Russell, not smiling, not moving. They just watched. He couldn’t tell



what they were about but they looked local, more like bikers than surfers, and he wondered if they would even let him leave.

Instead, he finished the game alone, hitting in the rest of his balls. Then he shot Dickerson's. They went in easy, and he circled the table, avoiding the messy stack of bills balanced on the rail. When he'd hung his stick on the wall the girl was back, staring at him in silence. Her face was flushed, her eyes watery, and she was breathing through her mouth. "Hey," she said. "I saw your sister last night."

He heard himself answer, but he wasn't sure if she was finished. He didn't want to talk about his sister. He didn't even want to leave, though he knew it was the best idea. They stood for a moment, silent, until she tried to take a step and fell. He leaned over her, lifted her head. She was coughing, spit flying as her body jerked forward. "Take me home," she whispered. "Let's go." From her knees, she reached for the money, stuffed the wad down the front of her dress so that it created a bulge between her breasts.

Russell didn't move to stop her. He knew she was drunk, maybe more. Instead he got her to her feet and leaned her against the pool table.

"Snickers," she said. Her face was a messy red, the skin around her eyes raw and hard.

"He asked me if I liked you." Her breathing was heavy and her eyes were closed. She lurched forward again, and he held her steady. He wanted to tell her that he was Russell now, things were different. He wanted to touch her face and tell her, but he still couldn't remember her name, and she was crying a little as she tried to speak.

“I told him no,” she said. “That I didn’t like you.” She looked hurt, as if he’d started all this, dragged her down this road and forced her hand. Russell waited for her to cry, but she didn’t. Instead she looked him in the eye.

“But he asked me if I screwed you,” she said, and as she did, she smiled and pulled away from him, adjusting the dress so the bulge disappeared. “And I said yes.”

Before Russell had time to react, Dickerson was back. His boys were nowhere to be found. It was hard to tell if they were all in the bathroom now, doing lines of coke, or if they were outside waiting in the alley. “Buddy,” he said. “Let’s go.” He glanced at the table and grabbed the girl by the arm. They marched toward the door and stopped as Dickerson looked back.

“Let’s go,” he said again, and Russell followed.

Outside, there were stars but no moon. They walked to the ocean, passing stragglers along the way. The night was relatively quiet and Russell walked a few paces behind. Dickerson held the girl as she stumbled, slurring her words, weeping some and forcing them to stop every so often as she whispered something indecipherable. Dickerson seemed to find this funny, and he’d turn to Russell each time and nod. His smile said: “See this? Do you see this?” Then they’d lurch forward, making steady progress on the road to the beach.

There was no sign of the others from the bar and Russell felt a little disappointed. It was one thing to get a beating from a group of bikers, but this was something else entirely. Up ahead the sky glowed, a few clouds thrown up like thin blankets. They weren’t storm clouds; they were just passing by on their way down the

coast. If there was a storm without a name out there in the ocean, it was hundreds of miles away, banking its way through the sea at a slow but steady clip.

When they reached the shore, Dickerson stopped. He dropped the girl in the sand and she sobbed, her hands covering her face. He unzipped his pants and pissed into the dune, not far from her head. Russell watched and waited. The air was warm and the wind had died down. It was a beautiful night and he thought about how the beach ran in a crooked line up the coast, how you could walk for days, weeks even, and not even know where you were as you moved from state to state until everything disappeared underfoot.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and noticed that Dickerson had a knife. His pants were still unzipped but he had a knife in his hand. The girl cried in the darkness, but it was quieter now, subdued, and Dickerson seemed to be speaking to her out of the corner of his mouth. Soon she would stop, Russell thought, sleep it off. Wake without memory. He pictured her naked beneath the sheets, pulling this man close, touching his face where the stubble grew in gray-brown patches. If he did live by the pier, they might grab coffee when they were done, take the cups down to the sea wall. There was a place where you could dip your feet in the surf and watch the waves while the fish swam below in frenzied circles, avoiding the pull of the tides. Sometimes they'd even nibble at your toes, hoping you were food.

Dickerson let go of Russell's shoulder and gestured with the knife, saying something, but Russell didn't hear. Instead, he watched Dickerson for a sign, thinking that together they were hugging the shore, caught between day and night. In a few hours people would be rolling out of bed for their lawn jobs and work on the roofs. There was

plenty of work to be done and this made Russell a little sad, the endless string of things that needed doing. Dickerson held the knife but Russell could see that it was just a fishing knife, the blade was rusty, the tip broken off. Dickerson didn't come forward. His mouth still moved, but he seemed more exhausted than angry. He looked like an old man and Russell hardly paid attention. He couldn't; his head ached from the beer and this scene seemed so out of focus in the weak light.

Russell wanted to think about the nameless storm instead, stranded out over the sea, but at this moment he couldn't do that either. Try as he might, he couldn't picture a mess of wind and rain, a funnel of air traveling across the surface of the water. It seemed impossible, and the impossibility disappointed him. It was as if the storm didn't exist—had never existed—and he turned away from the man with the knife and his crying girlfriend and started home, considering all this. As he walked, he thought he heard Dickerson finally say something out loud in the dark but he didn't stop to listen, he didn't slow his pace at all.

## Autopsy

I was sure I didn't know Tabby Thomas, but he must have known me. Otherwise he wouldn't have wanted me dead. I'd checked out of rehab that morning and now I sat on Steve's couch watching him roll a joint. He had one of those machines, and he talked while he loaded it. I wanted to know more about this mystery man, but Steve was telling me about his day.

"First guy wanted a deal," he said. "I asked him: how do you know to come here, anyway?"

It was always the same with Steve. He was forever asking people to leave for wanting a deal. But they always came back because Steve and Jody sold the best bud. Hands down.

"Then that cop came by, the one with the eye thing." I don't know how but he was having trouble with the rolling machine. The paper ripped and he cursed.

"What then?" I wanted to steer the conversation back to Tabby Thomas because I didn't know how worried I should be. But I also didn't want to miss that joint.

"He wanted it up front," said Steve. "I told to him to come back when he got paid. Guy should really fix his eye. It's a little disgusting."

When he finished, Steve held up the joint and examined it. I knew he would stare at it for a while and then forget to light it and then forget where he put it down. I tried to keep tabs and get him to talk about Tabby Thomas. What kind of a name was that, anyway? I asked him.

“Well, he had muscles,” Steve said. “And black boots, but he was wearing cut-offs, like cut-off jeans, I think. He didn’t say a whole lot.”

“Jesus,” I said. “I don’t care what he was wearing. What did he look like?”

Steve started to pout. “Big guy,” he said. “Looked like a murderer. Square chin. No neck. He had some tattoos on his arms. And he had one on his face.”

“He had a tattoo on his face?” I said. “How do you not start with that?” By then Steve was rubbing his hands together. I had totally lost track of the joint.

“You know, I wouldn’t have even mentioned it if I knew you were gonna spaz. Maybe you should leave.”

“Maybe I should alert the authorities,” I said. In the next room, Steve’s wife Jody was separating an enormous brick of bud into a hundred little baggies so she could sell them when school started back again. Steve shook his head.

“That,” he said, “is a really bad idea.”

After that I went looking for Clevenger. He was my only friend, but that didn’t mean that he wanted to see me. His car was there at the surf ghetto but he wasn’t home. I even checked the beach. All the while I tried to place Tabby Thomas. I’d seen plenty of ink around, especially during my time at the group home, but none on the face. I’d just got my license back and thought maybe I’d find a job or something. It was dead hot, mid-summer and I had ten bucks. This was the last thing I needed.

I drove around a while and then went to Beef's. I'd been avoiding him, but now I hoped he could help. At least he could help me find Clevenger. It was too hot to think anyway, and I didn't have anywhere else to go.

He let me in but I could tell he didn't want to. "Oh, boy," he was saying. He said it over and over as we stood in the dark kitchen. The windows were boarded and you could hardly see. Beef never paid his bills on time. Plus he got violent. He used to be a real big guy but he'd gotten skinny, and I think sometimes he forgot not to drink so much. And lately there were the pills. Instead of punching you in the ear like old times, he got quiet. Like he might just walk up behind you and slit your throat with a pen knife.

Still, I took a beer. He sat on the floor as I popped the can. There was no fizz. It tasted terrible, warm and metallic, but I drank it down in three gulps and asked for another. By now I could tell Beef hadn't shaved in a while; his hair was long and his skin looked tired. I wondered when I'd seen him last, if he always looked this bad. "Thanks," I told him. "You're a lifesaver."

Beef didn't know much more than Steve, but at least he seemed properly worried on my behalf. "Yeah, he came by. He showed up. I said I hadn't seen you for a month, maybe. But I didn't tell him where you were. I couldn't, actually, 'cause I didn't know."

"Then what?" I asked. He looked shaken and that made me want to know more. Who was this dude and what did he want from me?

"He was a big boss," said Beef. "But calm. Said he'd be at the Hustler. That's where you're supposed to meet him, I guess."

The Hustler was a beachside pool hall, a cave with no windows, but they had a nice happy hour. The good bottles were lined up behind the bar like museum pieces, untouched. But the right crowd could make the cheap stuff disappear. They sold single cigarettes and never kicked you out, no matter your misery.

Beef was tapping his foot and making me nervous. But he had a plan.

“For sure,” he said. “I know just what you need. Maybe you’ll even make it out of this alive.”

I didn’t see any other option. So I opened another can of warm beer and said, “Shoot.”

It was late afternoon when I finally left and the clouds had begun to rise in the west like thin cotton sheets, but they were moving too fast to rain. I drove by Clevenger’s one last time but didn’t stop. There was nothing he could do and I knew that now. I had given Beef all my money and my license so he could trade it for pills. And Beef had given me a pistol, a rusted .32 that looked like it might have belonged to a cop. I had it stuffed inside my pants at first but I was afraid it might go off and I put it on the dash, but then I couldn’t stop looking at it while I drove. So I slid the gun under the seat. But I wanted it closer and put it back in my lap. Beef had loaded it himself and assured me I wouldn’t even have to use it. “Just whip it out,” he said. “Wave it around. He’ll know the deal.”

I circled the parking lot twice before I realized I was a little drunk. There were a few cars and a motorcycle and a minivan. Someone had leaned a bike against another bike along the brick wall out front. There was a spot by the door and I pulled in and



pulled back out and drove another loop. Then I reversed into the spot and kicked the car door open and sat there for a while with the engine running. It was hard to breathe and I thought I might puke so I got out. “Tabby Thomas, you shit,” I said to myself. “What do you want?” I slammed the car door and started moving before I could change my mind.

The place was dark when I walked in, silent. There were a few people at the bar but no one playing pool. I straightened my shoulders, ran a hand through my hair. It was like I didn’t exist and I had to be sure. A big man sat back in the gloom, his head in his hands. He seemed too big for the bar stool. As I approached I could hear him breathing in thick gasps, but I didn’t dare tap his shoulder. He was larger than I imagined and it was right about then that he lifted his enormous head and I realized that I’d left the pistol in the car.

He yawned my name, his jaw fluttering slightly, and I nodded by accident. “I been looking for you,” he said. “Then again, I guess you know that.”

I couldn’t stop looking at his face. His eyes were a bright, dangerous blue and his cheeks were rough like sandpaper and knotted in places. He had scars along his forehead as if someone had tried to blind him and there were skulls tattooed on his chin, a row of them. I counted five and then quit. He was still looking at me, waiting for me to speak.

“Do you remember Patricia Thomas?” he said. “Trish? I know you knew her. What I’m interested in is if you remember her.”

He’d turned away from me and seemed to be putting himself back together silently. He stared straight ahead at the bottles on the wall behind the bar and opened and closed his fists a few times. He picked up a glass of beer and put it down without

drinking. His hands were big, of course, and there were tattoos on his knuckles but they bled together. I stood there feeling dizzy. I knew Trish, sure I did. But I hadn't seen her since high school. What I remembered about Trish was her sweetness, and how she loved to go skinny dipping at night. As soon as her toes touched the sand her clothes were coming off. I would slow my pace just to watch her, it was an art. She was beautiful and a bit crazy and she'd been nuts about me. Looking back, I couldn't believe my dumb luck.

"Trish was my sister," he said. He tried to relax by placing both hands flat on the bar, but I could see the tension all the same. He took a breath and continued: "She's dead, kid. Died last week alone on the side of the road. But she had a lot to say about you, she did. When I was going through her things, I read her diary."

"Jesus," I said, though I didn't mean to say it out loud. I wasn't sure if I was reacting to her death or the diary, and from the look on his face, Tabby Thomas wasn't sure either.

"Listen," he said. "She had a thing for you. That's fine, no problem." He shifted his weight and seemed to be sizing me up. I was zombie pale from rehab and too skinny. I'd punched new holes in my belt and still had to pull my pants over my hips. If I were Tabby Thomas I would have been thinking about why I had to be standing there alive while a girl like Trish had to be gone. I mean, that even made sense to me.

"I wanted an investigation," he said. "But they laughed. Told me they'd rather be doing an autopsy." He sighed at that. I didn't know exactly what he meant but it seemed like a joke, a bad one. I wanted to get out of there, but I was stuck, so I tried to think of something to say.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. My voice cracked on the second word and for a moment I thought he might murder me right there.

“Did you love her?” he said. I was shocked. There was so much in that line and yet it was so simple, too simple. My knees choked underneath me and Tabby Thomas noticed right away. He reached out and touched my shoulder—gently—and sighed again. Then I was nodding my head ‘yes’ but he was already taking his hand back. It was obvious he didn’t believe me. I knew he could have killed me without any effort but he just looked at me with the same eyes Trish used to when I’d pick her up at her house gasping with love on our way to the beach at night. Later I’d often hide her clothes or make her walk, or kick her out somewhere along the way while I sped off to the next place raging with alcohol, searching for something to rip me apart.

Tabby Thomas finished his beer and ordered another one and told me to sit down. He didn’t buy one for me. Then he began telling me all about Trish—his sister—from the beginning, from the Floridana motel they lived in as children to the Plymouth Grand Fury he’d fixed up as her first car. He’d tried to teach her everything that he could about life, he said, but she was too full of love. She wouldn’t even eat a fish. I thought right there that I’d like to care that much about someone, if even for a moment, but I knew the feeling wouldn’t last. He talked for an hour without stopping, his giant hands trembling the whole time. I didn’t interrupt. I didn’t dare get up for anything, even when I remembered that I’d left the car running out front and that Beef’s pistol was probably sitting there on the dash.

## We on the Creek

John's safe face was always an omen in the twilight. Each Friday when I'd arrive, the pit full of fire, he'd be standing by the old couch, fanning the flames with a piece of cardboard. His smile would say we'd made it through another week, and since he was tough as whipcord, muscle and grit from the neck down, there was something about his gentle expression that made me believe. Several of us slept by the creek that summer, and of course that meant drinking. But it also meant John Rafferty standing tall and telling tales, orchestrating in a way that made us laugh and moan and want to argue with the world. After a day of construction sites or working roofs, it was something to watch him chase down rabbits, his body crouched and gliding over the crab grass as he ran. Then we'd sit by the coals while he guzzled beer, stopping only to howl at the sky. Eventually he'd pass out in his station wagon, the back open so his legs could hang out like telephone poles, and we'd be left to dream as the dew grew heavy and night fell around us.

But this day the sky was pregnant and gray, and the fire pit smoldered unattended as the rain fell in dashes. It looked exactly like what it was: a camp for bums. We were set up by a one-story clapboard structure, a relic of the railroad days. The creek picked up behind that, a muddy push to the river, and I could see the gang

standing along the shore. Chain-link walled us in on two sides, and a jungle of pepper trees had tied together to form a barrier on another. Trains went by not fifty paces away. Eventually Wood strolled up from the creek, slapping his hands like he was in his own living room. “They’re talking, Eck,” he said. “You best go see.”

Things were hard enough by the tracks, living outside, and we had all learned to avoid trouble. We became invisible, walked with our heads down, kept quiet. Most of our problems seemed to begin with talk, so I went straight down to the water’s edge, hoping it was nothing.

“Boys,” I said. I called them boys, even though they were men right down to their bones. “Don’t you know what Friday’s for?”

The three of them stayed quiet, hands in their pockets. They kicked around at the wet earth like they were contemplating mountains. Tett and Highboy were still, and I watched Highboy close. He was a cheat. He’d stolen a blowup raft recently from some backyard and they took turns pissing into it after dark. It was half ashore, still hidden in the bushes. Finally Ray Dipper spoke up: “John’s got a girl, Eck,” he said. “He’s been at it all week, and he aims to bring her tonight.”

The fidgeting was more than I could bear. “So what if he does,” I said. “What of it?”

No one wanted to speak. Highboy shuffled. Ray Dipper scrunched his face like a rain cloud. I didn’t want to pout, but for a moment, I guess I hated her a little for catching John’s eye, even though I’d never seen her.

We picked at dinner. Wood drank from his wine bottle, but we weren’t much for it. Highboy went scowling, acting big. Tett trailed behind him as always. Most

nights I tended the fire, kept an eye on the trail. There was only one way in—an old gravel road that must have served the railroad. Now the path was mostly sugar sand and fire bush, barely packed at all. Saw grass grew in waist high clumps along the ridge and in some spots it was tall enough to blot out the sun. The cops only came down if they had reason, though once in a while we had to chase out high schoolers in search of a place to park and drink. So most nights I kept a vigil, staring off into the darkness.

When John called out, I was still staring. Ray Dipper was the youngest so it didn't surprise me that he stood straight up like a hungry calf. I guess I felt the same heat. I just played cool.

You could always tell John Rafferty by the noise. He was tall enough, maybe six three. But his hands were big and his feet were big and he had shoulders like a bumper. Even his hair was big—he looked like some kind of wind storm. His clothes were disheveled and he strutted with his chin out. Even though I had to look up to see his face, I felt big when he smiled down at me.

This time he sounded happy and knocked down all at once. Ray stood by the clearing, waiting on his man. When he came crashing through the bushes, all eyes were on him. I could see his outline through the flames and he laughed, a smile on his face like a cheap earring. He carried a girl in his arms.

They approached and I saw she was pretty. She had long, dark hair. Her skin was pale, her eyes big and brown and she had a small mouth. Ray was still bouncing and busy on his feet. John stood grinning. As he cradled this girl I could see how young she was, younger than Ray.

We got up—at least I did, and Wood. Tett and Highboy retreated. John was in the fire then, at least that’s what it looked like. He towered, swaying and holding her tight. Ray was still on him but all I could see was this girl in his arms. She didn’t look around much: in fact, she was still as a bag of flour.

There we were, me and Wood and Ray Dipper, standing dumb as shit. The fire cracked and the seconds went by and we waited. I held my bottle of Spanish Rose.

“This is Lucy,” John said finally. She wriggled in his arms and he kissed the top of her head. I waited for him to put her down but he didn’t. Her dress was up over her knees but she didn’t seem to care. Her feet dangled like dead weights, like they weren’t attached.

“Let’s drink to that,” I said. But I didn’t feel like drinking. I unscrewed the cap and took a sip, passed it to Ray. But he just held it. I guess we were all watching.

John stepped with care, bent in front of the couch and set her down. He cradled her head and torso, wedged her in the crook. Then he stayed like that—bent over and kneeling, his back and shoulders looming like a train car.

“Water.” He wasn’t up yet, but we heard him clear enough. “You got a jug, Wood?”

Wood went to fetch it. John followed, tapping me as he passed. “Hey,” he said. That was all. The girl stared at the fire and again I noticed her stillness. She was seated, of course, but when she turned only her head moved. She sat with her feet tucked behind her. When she turned I looked away.

“You’re Eck?”

I nodded. Offering her the bottle seemed dumb, so I scooted over and sat in the grass. “That couch is dirty,” I said.

“I can’t even drink milk,” she said and pushed herself up with her elbows. “I’m fine.” She looked over at John. “Long as I have him, I’m fine.”

She wanted to know everything: what we ate, how we kept the fire, where we went when it rained. I told her we ate canned everything, that by the creek there was a dry canopy under the mango trees. I found myself talking too much and trailed off. John was shouting, trying to get the boys to join in, and I wished he’d hurry.

Lucy pulled her hair into a thick, black ponytail, sighing as she relaxed and shook her head. It surprised me how serious she looked. “Men,” she said. But something in her voice made me think that she was only repeating the phrase, that she didn’t know anything at all about men, or even boys. Then she told me her and John were in love. He’d promised to take care of her because her legs didn’t work. She was crippled from the waist down and would be forever.

John Raferty belonged to us down here. I still believe that, although it sounds silly. Living outdoors, underfoot, being left alone is the grace. But we were drawn to John. When he sat down, he could sit forever. When he got up to move or move on, the day rose with him. He was as regular and impossible as the tides. He didn’t bother to notice he was a bum. John Raferty was a ghost—our ghost. And for that, we were careful and jealous and always on guard. He was something necessary to us in the cycle of working and begging and hunching down in the weeds.

But he brought that girl everywhere after that. He carried her in his arms, or on his back. He’d drop her on the couch and we’d drink while they whispered. It wasn’t the



same, and we never seemed to drink as merry or talk as much. Highboy would disappear altogether, and since John lived out of that station wagon, he spent a lot of nights away.

The last time I saw him alone was by chance. I had to leave a job because I couldn't catch my breath, so I was walking along the main road, staying out of sight. The day was wet and muggy and I wanted to get back to the pit and fall asleep in the shade. Then a car pulled over and I saw right away it was John.

He didn't say much. We pushed on until there weren't any stop lights to slow us down. The houses were large and clean, the yards sloped and empty, dotted with mailboxes. When we stopped, it had begun to rain. John slipped out of the car and went to the door. He was there a while and I leaned against the window and watched the frogs jump out of drainage ditches. I figured we were at Lucy's house, but I hoped he wouldn't come back with her. I didn't feel like talking and I didn't want to climb into the back. It was selfish, but I wanted to ride around a bit. Outside, the frogs jumped and jumped; we'd run them over for sure on the way out and I couldn't help but think that maybe they didn't care.

John came back alone and we drove in silence. I slept some, but I remember his face. He looked tired and sad, confused even, like he'd run up against something that he couldn't toss to the side.

It all came down on a weekend. John was gone and we were at odds in the pit. Highboy had picked up a grill somewhere and hauled it down. Between the grill and that raft, I thought he was pushing our luck, but Tett backed him up. Even Ray Dipper. I

knew it wasn't a big deal, but I didn't like to cede control so easily. So it was me and Wood talking sense, and Wood didn't say much anyway.

Plus, Highboy had taken to slinging on the streets. I couldn't prove it, but he hadn't been working labor jobs, and there were only so many ways a man like him could make things happen. He was showing money and marks on his arms and I warned him about that too. The month had been rough—rain and mud all over. I felt weaker inside and out than I had in a long time, and I felt like moving on. But I hadn't a clue as to what that meant.

When John came it was near dark. Lucy was sleeping in the car, he said. The rain had stopped and we had a fire. Highboy disappeared and I knew that he'd be a mess when he came back. The grill sat like an ugly chunk of jewelry and John picked it up over his head for show. He said we were asking for trouble stealing junk from porches, and it was only because Ray begged him that he put it down. We sat and talked and even sang a song as the fire heated up, and we got drunk.

After that John got Lucy from his car. He held her like a weed and she didn't even open her eyes. He cleared Wood from the couch and plopped her down, smoothing her dress. Ray stood by the grill, on guard. John had wine and whiskey and we passed those bottles around, drinking while Lucy slept and Ray looked on. I couldn't roll smokes fast enough. We talked about the rain and the cops and the people. We drank until the stories started over from the beginning.

“Let's get rid of that,” John said. And though he didn't say what, we knew.

He was drunk but I wanted to see it anyway. Wood and I clapped. We didn't get off the ground—we just clapped.

Ray tried once to stop him. Then he headed for the creek. John pretended to admire that grill for a minute or so, spinning it, wheeling it around. Finally he lifted it and marched away from the pit.

“How far, Eck,” he said. Then it was airborne. We watched that grill soar over the fire and into the darkness. Beyond that there were rag palms and juniper bushes, all bunched together and growing like a series of zippers. We heard a crash and I laughed out loud, thinking John was back, that he was here tossing his weight around and that for a little while, everything was OK.

The whiskey went around and Ray stayed away. Wood found a spot behind the couch, heaped in a raincoat and blankets. I rolled a smoke for John and we sat as the fire died. He got up and stroked Lucy’s hair and told me he wanted to marry her. He said that soon they would drive off in his station wagon and look for some place to live. I wanted to tell him that it wouldn’t work, that the world would try to swallow him, and when it couldn’t get him, it would get her. But he was standing big and tall against the night. I remember the size of him, how I would have liked to go along instead. Then I remember giving in to sleep as the sky turned white with stars.

I woke to dew on my face. The day was cloudy, thick with humidity, and I went straight to the creek. Lucy was on the couch, stretched out with her eyes open. She smiled but I had to hurry down before I burst.

When I got back my head hurt. “Where’s John?” I said. The sun was high enough to make it midmorning. I stood by the pit and stared at the dead coals.

“He went to work roofs with Ray and Wood,” she said.

That hit me. I'd slept through the morning like an old man. Standing there didn't help. She was ruffled from sleep but still pretty. She looked ready for breakfast.

"Ray came down and said they only needed one. You didn't miss out," she said. Maybe that was to make me feel better. But if they were calling for help, they were paying, and I didn't even wake up.

"John said I could stay," she said. "He'll be back."

I figured Lucy would need something, but she said she was fine. I rolled a cigarette, thinking I could use a drink as the clouds darkened.

"We should move that couch," I said finally. "It's gonna rain."

I tried to drag it up against the shed, but with her weight I could barely move it. She looked at me like she wanted to say something. I leaned in one last time but it was no use.

"That's all right," she said. "I'm fine."

"No you're not," I said. The rain would be coming. "We have to move you."

Picking her up wasn't easy. She didn't weigh much, but I was nervous. I slid an arm under her legs and pulled her against my chest. She moved into me, unsteady, her hands on my neck. I didn't want her to touch me, but her mouth pressed against my cheek and I could feel the warmth of her breath. She felt so delicate, so fragile, I could understand John's pleasure in carrying her. The blue dress bunched around her knees and her legs were pale, stretched out and limp. There were silver bracelets around her ankles with bells that jingled. I ignored it all long enough to get under the cover of the shed. Then I went back for the blankets. The rain was starting and she looked almost

comfortable, wrapped and upright. The bottoms of her feet were brown and she smiled as if there wasn't anywhere else she wanted to be.

A clap of thunder went off. I knew that I shouldn't leave, but I had to get away. For a moment I hated her for smiling, for being so content.

"I'll be back," I said. She nodded as if she didn't believe that I'd go, or didn't care. I passed through the high grass, and the rain came down in sheets as I stepped out over the weeds and onto the gravel road.

I went to Al's Lounge and talked my way into a couple of glasses. Tony the day man let me sweep and take the trash out. So I sat in a dry place and watched the rain, though I should have headed back. I'd walked in ready to beg, and when I ended up on a stool, I couldn't leave. Traffic glided past. Everything slowed down. I watched through the open screen door and listened as Tony talked about his wife and his girlfriend and his daughter. Then his daughter's boyfriend and what a fuck up he was. He poured beers. The rain beat the roof and the world felt like a comfortable place. I couldn't remember the last time a woman had held my hand, and that thought stuck with me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen a woman naked, but for some reason I couldn't stop thinking about holding hands.

My glass was empty. Tony was still talking about his wife and his girlfriend. He had a square face. His eyes were like gravy and he shook his head no and yes and they followed him, always a little behind, bouncing this way and that. I slid the glass across the bar, wanting to say, "Tony, you're an idiot." I wanted to tell him that life was bullshit. But I just thanked him and straightened myself off the stool. My back hurt and he told me to get the fuck out, and that he'd see me around.

The rain didn't bother me and I walked straight into traffic. The cars were all lined up at a light and I weaved through, putting my hands on their hoods because there was nothing they liked worse than some asshole bum touching their cars when they couldn't get away. A few honked. Most ignored me. It was lousy sport and I hit the sidewalk and made for the pit.

The road was flooded and I picked my way through the vegetation, slipping on the uneasy ground. When I got to the trail, John's wagon wasn't there, but I heard something as I stumbled in the weeds and fell. The ground jumped up to meet me. I felt water soaking through my pants and mud on my face and I felt dizzy and sick. It was the shouting that finally helped.

I approached, not trusting my legs. It was Lucy. But even her shouts were weak, as if she were going through the motions. She wasn't where I'd left her. The blankets were there, but the noise was coming from the creek. Then I heard Highboy and I followed the sound, moving easy, taking my time.

They had her, or at least Highboy did. His arms were wrapped around her waist. She wriggled against him. Her dress was muddy and the bells on her ankles rang noisily. It was a strange thing to notice and I stopped and watched, not hiding but not moving either. Tett was working at that raft, trying to dislodge it from the bushes. As he yanked it free he stepped into the water and I heard him curse, but he smiled and I could tell he wasn't right. He kicked in the creek and tried to splash Highboy and Lucy, then he fell to one knee in the mud. Highboy told him to quit and then they were in the creek, holding the raft and working Lucy into it.

I stood, frozen, as they pushed her off. She'd stopped shouting and sat perfectly still; the yellow raft looked like a toy beneath her. She had one arm slung over the side and as the creek took her away I noticed that she didn't look scared or even angry. She looked surprised.

They waved as she coasted away. Tett fell again and Highboy laughed as he leaned over and tried to force his head under. Then they were rolling around, yelling and waving their arms. I thought I'd have liked to see them drown, or at least disappear, but all I could concentrate on was that look on Lucy's face, her brown eyes staring toward the shore and her mouth shut tight. I thought about going after her or doing something, but there was nothing to be done. She was out of sight and I felt groggy, like it had all been a dream, and I wanted to crawl up against the porch and wrap myself in her blankets, try to erase her from my mind. But I didn't do any of that. I got the hell out of there.

Wood found me behind Al's. The moon was up, shining bright over downtown. We walked past the storefronts until we found the train tracks. It was cold, a dry dusty cold, and the world was empty there. Wood had a bottle and we set down along a stretch of thorny sand and little mounds that weren't hills. The sky was empty except for the power lines. As we drank, there was time to study every stone in the gravel along the tracks. Eventually I told him what I'd seen, and he nodded, knowing half the story. What I didn't count on was his half; John had come back, and when he found Lucy missing, things changed in a way I couldn't have imagined.

The stories we tell ourselves are often softer than the ones that happen. We find reasons to forgive memory, to blur lines. But when I tell John's story, I don't leave

anything out. I say that I found him by the water, although I was asleep in an alley. I pretend that I saw him pacing, his feet kicking away at the bank, though the only thing I witnessed was the rain falling on a dumpster. But Wood was there; he helps me imagine John's boots as they shoveled mud, as he kicked and turned and paced and kicked again. I see Tett leaned against a dead mango tree, his head down. Highboy stands next to him, bleeding from the nose. Ray Dipper's there too, and I imagine they are scared.

If I'd have been there I like to think I would have called his name. But he swings at Tett anyway, knocking him over, then kicks him in the chest with one of those big boots. Tett tumbles in the creek, hits bottom. He wouldn't have wanted to get up.

Ray has his hands together. He looks like an angel in prayer, talking, pleading. John kicks at the mud and turns and turns. His head bobs and I feel bad for Ray. He's trying, but it's not enough. He shouldn't be there trying to make peace, but he doesn't know better. He's a kid in the shit. That's all.

When John stops moving I hold my breath. Just thinking about it, I hold my breath. The only thing worse than seeing a big man move is seeing him go still. But he stops. Maybe he sees Tett in the water. Maybe he sees the creek. But that stillness is everything; things are set and the rain keeps falling and the crickets wail and clouds push by overhead. I can feel the rain on my face, the hollow in my bones.

John goes after Highboy but Ray won't let him. He puts his hands up and tries to stop him. John shouts, but Ray doesn't listen. He shakes his head, drops to his knees to beg, and for a moment everything is quiet. "John," I say. "Please." But the words are too late. John grabs Ray by his skull and pushes him like a plow. Ray skids along on his knees and John walks them in. It's almost graceful. One minute John's giving him a



blessing—a hand on either side of his head—Ray’s eyes turned upward. Then they move through the slickness and into the creek. John pushes him until they’re stuck: Ray bent over, his spine arched, chest against the sky. John leans in and straddles him, pushes until Ray’s face is nearly touching the water. He’s inverted, thrashes once or twice but his back breaks first. They stay like that a while until the thunder claps and Tett lifts his head. Highboy is already running, just a figure in the rain. Tett follows.

John stands a long time. Ray doesn’t move. He’s arched over, his chin pointing straight up in the air. John looks like he isn’t sure what he’s done. He’s as surprised as Lucy must have been when they set her afloat. Tett and Highboy disappear but he doesn’t follow. He could chase them easily enough but I’m glad he doesn’t. Instead, he lifts Ray out of the water. He picks him up gently and carries him back to shore. Ray hangs limp, his legs and arms splayed this way and that, and John walks right toward me. I look up at him, hoping for some spark of recognition, something familiar. But his face is blank, dull and settled. He doesn’t look angry or sad, and anyway, I’m not even there.

But I know that he’s a different John Raferty, that he might one day laugh again or shout at the stars, but he won’t be exactly what we remembered. This will take something away, prove to be bigger than him. And though Lucy will be found safe a few miles downstream, and no one will care much about a dead homeless junkie, John will have to disappear. He’ll have to disappear and whether he ends up caught, or rides around the country in that station wagon forever, he’ll be less for it, and all of our lives will be less for it too.

## Follow the Smoke

McGurl knew his father named him after a buddy he lost in the war and that his mother left when he was a boy. But his life really began when he struck out to Florida and met Willie, moved in with her and found work as a roofer in a town that seemed always to be growing in houses. Willie liked to dance so McGurl learned to play bass and the two lit up the highway bars each weekend night. The highways ran north and south so McGurl wasn't surprised when word came down that his father was sick: the past had always weighed on him like an anvil. But McGurl preferred the present. He preferred especially the timeless feeling of being on stage where he could stand still as a post, searching the crowd for Willie's scrunched up face in the dark. When she moved to the music he imagined them as orphans, two lone stars in the small-town sky, independent of all that had come before.

These were the happiest moments of his life, though he didn't think in such terms, at least not until his father showed up one day and installed himself on the couch. He'd come only with his talk and his illness, a sad man, long-faced and helpless, and his presence devoured the air around them a little at a time. Before McGurl could blink Willie had vanished, and if he was sure about anything then, it was that she would not

return as long as his father remained. There was no room for lone stars in all that hazy, jaded light.

Like most transplants, McGurl felt defensive about those that followed. Each morning when he found his father snoring on the couch he stewed over those north-running highways. They reminded him of towns full of paper mills where sea gulls crowded the streets to pick at plastic six-pack rings. But the worst part was that the towns were full of scowling faces, none of which had the good sense to move south. Or when they did, they did it too late, until finally the highways became a trade route for the doomed and their sinking.

McGurl's father was the perfect example. He had lugged his war stories all this way, and while they weren't anything special in the realm of combat tales, they had a precise effect on McGurl, since each led eventually to his name-sake, his father's friend. Occasionally the details changed, the order of events, but his father always wound his way to the other McGurl—a man who died in a field of ditch grass far away, beneath the whirl of clustered helicopter sound. There were many versions but all ended in death. One morning McGurl went down sudden as a springboard; the next he was all smiles, a dirty magazine clutched to his chest. One day he was a hero, carting stolen ammunition through the weeds; then he was a coward, pissing his pants in retreat. The thought of not being an original had always infuriated him. And since Willie wasn't coming back until the situation was fixed, he had to find a way to get rid of his father.

McGurl hadn't been on a roof since Willie walked out and he hadn't been to band practice either. But he had been trolling up and down a small stretch of the highway, returning again and again to Pusher's Creek, a sandy clearing that butted up

against the Econolatchee River. It wasn't really a creek at all but a run off where the Big Econolatchee split into the Little Econolatchee and where the Little Econolatchee wedged off and flooded an abandoned retention ditch hidden underneath a wall of saw palms and zippered pepper trees. Locals went to Pusher's Creek to park and drink or burn garbage. McGurl had never known anyone to swim there, which is why he had been returning to watch the young couple who appeared to be living along the sandy shore. He'd found them frolicking in the water, and he hadn't been able to ignore the fact that they always frolicked in the nude.

The first time he saw them he was sure they were pale-white ghosts. But as the days passed the couple took color from the sun and this made them real. Probably they'd come straight down the highway like the rest of the northern invaders, and his first thought was to rush over and expel them. But after a while he felt something else: they were beautiful really, even if they were as skinny as snakes.

By the third day he'd noticed they had a car and a camp, though both were hidden well. The car was an old '65 Rambler two-door which might have been red at one time but now looked like it had been smeared with dirt. There were great streaks of rust running up the doors and the bumper was held on with duct tape. The kids slept in the backseat—in a pile, he guessed—but there was a folding chair and a fire pit that they kept covered with palm fronds. There was also a clothesline tied in the trees but he had yet to see them wearing a stitch. Instead, a simple yellow dress hung next to a pair of denim cut-offs and a checkered shirt, and after a while McGurl began to think of them as four instead of two.

The day he approached he moved slowly, whistling several times in succession. The girl was submerged in the water up to her waist, which left the boy sunning himself on the shore. When he was a few paces from where the boy lay flat on his back he stopped, expecting him to rise. McGurl also expected the girl would scream since her breasts were exposed but she did no such thing. Instead McGurl stood waiting until the boy opened his eyes and propped himself up on his elbows. “Did you know,” he said as he twisted to face McGurl, “that this place is full of wild peacocks?”

The girl giggled and started for shore. When she’d reached land McGurl realized he’d been staring and that he had ignored the question entirely. He looked to the boy, who hadn’t moved an inch, and then to the ground. The girl stood in front of him with an outstretched hand and he felt himself blush. It was impossible not to notice her small, freckled breasts, so he locked his gaze first on her chipped front tooth and then on the impossible red ring of hair that crowned her head like a floral arrangement. “It’s OK,” she said, patting his arm. “You’ve already seen all there is to see.”

The boy stood and McGurl found himself shaking again. Together they were as confident as trees and he thought momentarily that he had been mistaken. They were skinny enough, but not frail, and each knew the key to a firm handshake.

The boy broke the silence: “You’re in the van, right? With the ladders on top? We’ve been waiting for you to come down and say hello.”

McGurl nodded as they smiled, still radiant over their discovery. Then they excused themselves and wandered behind a towering hibiscus to retrieve the clothes from the line. When they returned, the boy carried a bulging bunch of grapes and before he knew it McGurl was sitting in the sand, telling them about how he’d lost Willie and

how he was losing his mind living with his father. They formed a semi-circle in the shade and when McGurl had finished the boy reached over and nudged him gently in the ribs.

“No one wants to change,” he said reassuringly. “But everyone wants to be changed. That’s why we all leave home eventually.”

The girl agreed with a sigh, plucked a grape from the bunch and ate it. She seemed so satisfied by this that she plucked another one and fed it to the boy. Before long she was feeding them both, dropping grapes in their mouths one at a time. McGurl reclined, staring out over the ragged tree line. He’d placed his arms behind his head and every time he saw a grape coming he opened wide, making sure to thank his lucky stars for stumbling into such a day.

At home, McGurl found his father asleep on the couch with the TV on. He heated up some chicken salad in the microwave and sat at the kitchen table, spooning the gummy substance and staring at the wall. When he’d had enough, McGurl tossed the dish and spoon into the sink and stood by the couch, arms over his chest. He saw no resemblance. His father had thinning hair that stuck to his skull like tangled fishing line and there were small slits where his eyes fit into his face. His nose had grown bulbous and pink. It dawned on McGurl that he wouldn’t recognize his own mother if she passed him on the street. He didn’t even know the color of her eyes.

Just then his father coughed himself awake and reached out. McGurl recoiled at the sight of his hand. The nails were bitten down to the nubs and his fingers looked brittle enough to break. As McGurl lunged back in retreat he kicked over a bucket and the sudden stench reminded him his father had been using it for a spit cup.

“Good God,” he said, and as he gathered himself his father let out a low moan, a single word that McGurl knew meant that another story might be on the way.

The next day McGurl went looking for Willie though he didn't know it until he found himself at their old haunts. He had eggs and grits at the Waffle House and lunch an hour later; then he even went for a can of beer at Merv's where he and Willie had first met. But no one was talking. Even old Merv clammed up, though McGurl's band had played there for years. He sat nursing his beer, thinking about all the time he'd spent with Willie under this roof. They'd met over a game of darts, and that same night he'd taken her home and held her head while she got rid of an evening's worth of whiskey. He'd never been happier in his life.

McGurl was headed home when he came across a moss-covered brick building behind the bait shop that he had never noticed. The sign named the place Shady Glen and the small grassy patch certainly fit the description. There were banyan trees lined up in a row and they were fairly covered with moss, as if someone had gone to great pains to arrange it all. Beneath the trees McGurl could make out a few benches and a stone fountain that shot out a single stream of clear water. But what he particularly noticed were the old folks. Occasionally a white uniform pattered about, but it was obvious that Shady Glen was an end of the road spot for the elderly. Such a place would not be cheap, he knew. But the bigger problem would be convincing the old man in the first place.

At home, his father sat with the TV off. He had wrapped himself in a blanket and was coughing furiously. McGurl knelt and patted him gingerly on the back despite

his disgust. When the fit subsided McGurl got back on his feet. His father appeared to be shivering. Even his eyes were hazy.

“Hey,” he said, then started coughing. McGurl went for a glass of water from the sink. It took the old man a long time to get it down and when he did McGurl turned his attention to the rest of the room.

“Pop,” he began. The word still felt strange in his mouth. “I think you might need a change of scenery.”

“Son.” His voice was raspy and he dropped his head. “I cannot tell you, not even, how happy I am to be here.” He tried to meet McGurl’s gaze. “But we need to talk. It’s about your mother.”

McGurl stopped him. “You need rest,” he said, wrestling him back into the couch. He covered him with the blanket until he was almost invisible. Then he switched on the TV and turned the volume up as loud as it would go.

He didn’t go back to the creek empty handed. He brought two chairs from the backyard and a shovel for the fire pit and even a large bucket he thought might be useful. He also picked up groceries: bread, some yellow cheese, apples, and a fancy bag of chips—a treat for two kids marooned in the middle of a Florida swamp.

When he pulled in he recognized Ernie’s truck by the winch on the back and he tripped over his own feet scrambling down the embankment. Ernie played drums in the band and had a thing for high school girls. McGurl grabbed a tire iron and hoped Ernie had the sense to leave the kids alone. But when he made it to the shore the girl was holding court. He was relieved to see that no one was naked.



“And when I finally made it back to the car,” she said, pausing for emphasis as she stretched herself up to her full height, “I realized that what I thought to be an alligator was nothing but a log. So I went back to the water and dragged that log out, piled kindling on top and set it ablaze, just to make myself feel better.”

She bowed as her audience clapped. When she noticed McGurl hanging back she shouted his name. “What have you brought us, our prince?”

McGurl hid the tire iron behind his back and soon the four of them were sitting in a circle, ripping into the bread and gnawing at the cheese. The chips had been devoured first and McGurl felt good about his choice.

Ernie, of course, had a rack of beers. The sun had begun to set and the mosquitoes had come out to brawl. Ernie stepped out of the shadows, zipping his pants, a huge grin on his face. “Oh boy,” he said, reaching for a beer. “Here I thought you were home weeping over Willie.” He took a slug from the can, then a longer one. “But you’re living it up at the creek!”

McGurl hawed a bit before settling down next to Ernie, who couldn’t seem to stop talking about how wonderful the kids were.

“What about Willie?” McGurl asked finally. He was dragging his boot in the dirt, digging a hole big enough to swallow his next question. “Have you seen her?” “Sure,” Ernie said. “She’s been hanging with me and Tommy G.” He belched, looked McGurl square in the face. “But there’s more to it than that. Ladies like to feel protected, if you know what I mean.”

McGurl contemplated this notion, picturing Tommy Guerrero in all of his queer, quiet glory. Tommy was the guitarist in their band and a home security nut. He

collected guns and spent his nights rigging up alarm systems. McGurl didn't think Willie ever felt unsafe under his roof, but the situation gave him an idea anyway. He also knew he had to act fast. Lone star or not, she wasn't the type to wait around. It took some work to get Ernie in his truck and on the road, but when McGurl had the kids together, he lowered his head and asked them if they could keep a secret.

"Indeed," the girl said. "We understand the gravity of every situation."

The boy agreed: "Either you follow the smoke or you follow the fire." It was only when he hiccupped loudly that McGurl realized he was drunk.

"Listen," McGurl said. "This is serious. I need you two to shake things up at my house. I need you to break in—or fake breaking in. Then I need you to steal my couch and my TV." He explained it all, how he wanted to get his father to agree to Shady Glen, how he thought scaring him would help. "Right now he's content—but he's frail. It wouldn't take much to spook him, especially if someone stole away his whole world." McGurl pictured the old man's face when they arrived home to find the living room empty—no couch, no TV. Maybe a busted window would help, or a forced door.

"What do we do with a couch and a television?" the boy said, and hiccupped.

"I don't care," said McGurl. "Bring them here." He looked around. "Yeah, here's fine." He decided the best plan would be to swap cars: McGurl would take the Rambler and leave the van. He drew a map on the back of a napkin for them to follow and handed over his keys. "Make sure that the door looks jimmed," he said. "Here—take this." He handed over the tire iron and stood to go. "When this is over I'll owe you," he said. "Big time." As he sat in the Rambler, trying to turn over the engine, the

girl was still holding the tire iron between two fingers like it might bite, her red hair glowing in the light of the moon.

It wasn't easy getting his father to leave the house. "You had something to say." McGurl was shuffling them out the door. "Tell me over a hamburger." The old man didn't comment on the Rambler. He was silent while McGurl drove them to Merv's; mostly he gazed out the window as if he'd never seen a town before.

It wasn't until they parked that McGurl realized it was the weekend. The lot was full and he knew Willie might be inside. They found a booth despite the crowd and sat down. The table had a red and white checkerboard cover and McGurl's elbows kept slipping as he steadied himself. He ordered two hamburgers and two bottles of beer without consulting his father and when the beers came he banged them together and placed his hand on the table as if calling a jury to order.

"Now," he said. "Here we are." Before he could answer the room darkened. A cluster of people climbed out of their chairs, heading for the dance floor, and McGurl picked Willie out of the crowd. She wore a black T-shirt and carried a drink. Tommy Guerrero took the stage, followed by Ernie and a guy McGurl didn't know. When the stranger started tuning a bass guitar McGurl figured this was the new guy—the new him. He had been replaced.

The hamburgers arrived but suddenly McGurl wasn't hungry. The band launched into "Radar Love" and Willie worked her way closer to the stage. She lost the drink and began to snap her fingers. Across the table McGurl could hear his father muttering but he couldn't turn away. When Willie got to the stage she spun around

twice like a top and tossed her arms over her head. McGurl held his breath as she began to gyrate her hips. The crowd opened to give her room and she kept at it, spinning and wincing while the band played faster. When she jumped on stage, she didn't go for Tommy Guerrero—she went for the new guy. The place erupted, and for the first time McGurl took a good look at this man: he had a blocky chin full of gristle and coal-black eyes and his arms were as big as milk jugs. Willie pranced a few seconds and went down on her knees.

McGurl was determined to get there before the song quit. Every muscle in his body twitched dangerously as he cut his way through the chaos. When he found himself on stage he stood for a second, frozen in the glare of the lights. There were boos and cheers, but the band played on. Willie had yanked the black shirt over her head, so McGurl sidestepped his way over and tried to pull her up. When that didn't work he threw a punch, but it glanced off the bass player's blocky chin like a rain drop. McGurl hit him three more times as the crowd screamed. Tommy and Ernie were shouting then, but the audience thought it was part of the show. McGurl stood there, arms dangling at his side. Willie hammered the stage with her fists while the bass player grinned sadistically and ran his fingers up and down the fret board like he was charming a snake. McGurl knew he could stand and wait for his beating or go home. It was all the same, really. One public, one private. Both would hurt, just in different ways.

Outside his father had found the Rambler and crawled in the passenger seat. The window was up and he rested his head against the glass. When McGurl got in the old man didn't move; he might as well have been a corpse. The engine didn't turn over right away and McGurl could smell gas from under the hood.

“It’s flooded,” his father said. “Give it time.”

But McGurl couldn’t stop. He felt the anger welling up inside—then the sadness. When his father broke the silence McGurl had forgotten he was even there. “You know son,” his father said. “I’m sorry for your pain. But I really want to tell you some truth, ‘cause in the end that’s all we have.”

McGurl was still trying the engine, cursing under his breath. The car wheezed and as he turned to answer, his father cut him off with a wave. Then he plucked the keys from the ignition and shook them in his weathered fist.

“Listen,” he said. “I came down here to tell you something, you hear? Maybe I waited too long.” He began to cough, and as the coughing took over McGurl could hear the keys jangling in the dark.

When he’d composed himself the old man wiped his eyes. “These tears aren’t the crying kind,” he said. “Though I really wish they were.” Then he told McGurl about his mother. “She loved to dance too, you know. But after you were born I got to worrying and couldn’t stop. I drove her away,” he said. “And she came down here. I think she has a little hotel somewhere on the coast. Thought you should know that.”

He also told him there was no original McGurl. In fact, he didn’t remember exactly where the name came from. “Maybe a great-uncle on your mother’s side. The important thing is that you’re an original, I guess. I made your mom crazy with that talk. But I never did have a friend in the war—not one—and that was hard.” He handed McGurl the keys. “I just hope I didn’t do a number on you, son. I know we’ve never been pals.”

When he got the car started McGurl cruised slowly through town. The radio was broken but he was content to drive in silence. His father had drifted off to sleep and as he passed the bait shop he glanced at the banyan trees that ringed Shady Glen. He recognized the fountain standing at attention in the middle of the lawn but it must have been turned off. There was no arc of water to be found.

He was surprised to see his van in the drive, the back open wide. The porch light glowed unevenly and the front door was ajar. Not jimmied, just hanging open in the breeze. McGurl left his father in the car and went to investigate. The volume was up on the TV and he recognized an episode of "Gilligan's Island." The couch had been moved about a foot to the left; he could make out a dusty outline on the wood floor like a crime scene photo. The kitchen light was on and when he entered he found himself staring into his refrigerator, though all of the food sat piled on the table, half-eaten and sweating. There was a whole life there, run together with plastic wrap and tin foil, and as he heard the music from the "Gilligan" rerun announce the end of the show, he cleared the table with a swipe of his hand and stood, daring the room to speak.

He found a can of beer and popped the top. If the van was here, then where were those kids? The television had gone to static and when he knelt to shut it off he found the tire iron on the floor. Then he heard something else. He set the beer down and went to have a look, massaging the tire iron in his hand as he walked.

Of the two rooms left, one was his bedroom, and he paused at the half-open door. The clamor was coming from inside and he rested his hand on the flat of the knob, tracing a circle as he waited. He heard the girl giggle at something the boy said and the bed began to rock, gently at first, a few seconds between the creaking of the springs,

then faster. McGurl took a step inside and found the yellow dress in a pile on the floor. As he looked up he could make out their tangled shadows in silhouette on the far wall. The girl moaned, a low sound that she repeated a few times, until the boy answered with a short cry of his own. These were sounds McGurl hadn't heard in a while and he paused. The bed sat on the opposite side of the room and though he couldn't see past the door he could recall every inch of their bodies. She had a birthmark along her right thigh that resembled a bee sting and a long, flat scar on her stomach. The boy's head hung like a bell and his skinny legs were long for his torso. McGurl let go of the knob. He could tell from the outline on the wall that the girl was on top because of the slender bend of her shoulders. But when she began to sing softly, her voice mingling with the heavy air and the steady, quickening march of the mattress springs, McGurl noticed that their trembling shadow changed momentarily and appeared to him like a swan.

## The Blue Lights

We were waiting on that bus and I felt like going home. Red couldn't stop moving. He wouldn't shut up either. I stood still, picking at scabs. They were out on my face again, a map of bleeding nettles. I wanted to roll a smoke but Red had the tobacco.

The Memphis was due at nine but hadn't shown. Red spat and swore and twisted. Moving, always moving. His bones were like eels under his skin. He crawled over against the wall and I put my boot out and told him to stop. Bullshit, he said. But there would be a bus. There was always a bus from Memphis. It would show and we'd get somebody—an old lady or a young one. Or a kid. We'd find someone wide-eyed enough to listen.

We were under the awning in front of *Jack's*. If they knew we were out here they'd be sore. But they didn't know. Inside everyone was drunk by now. My dad and Red's dad. The whole town. Sucking on glasses of beer. Drinkin' and riding the clock.

This won't do either. Bad news, Jon.

Memphis is always late, I said. It's Memphis. But I was just talking to talk.

It's too late then. Ten minutes ten minutes ago.

I stared ahead, through the mist and the sounds of rain dripping and puddling. The whole world was moving water. I hated it. I couldn't remember the last dry day, or



the last time my feet weren't rubbing wet against my boots. The clouds were there in the morning and they sat in the sky like parked cars—a junkyard drizzling away. It was under your skin. You couldn't avoid it. The sun had quit trying.

I stood there wishing on a bus. Red groaned. He was still on the ground. I wanted to kick at him but at least he was quiet. He was older than me but he didn't act it. Cobwebs covered the awning. Once it had been bright red and said *Jack's* across the front in cursive. Now it was pink from time—washed out. Scorched by the sun. It looked like a stretched-out asshole. A single bulb glowed overhead and I realized that anyone at the bus station could look over and see us. But I didn't care. I wanted the sun to come out. Even though it was night, I wanted the sun to come breaking through the clouds and dry us up. Dry up everything.

I was gonna kick at Red and ask for that tobacco but I heard the diesel. The bus. He heard it too and straightened up along the wall.

About time. Suddenly he was big again, and serious. He chomped on his lip and stared out across the empty blacktop. The station looked deserted until the bus pulled in and a few people came slowly from inside. They stood under the eaves.

Hey, he said. That bus looks empty.

He was right. A few men in cheap suits were off first, and a couple of soldiers in uniform. Then an old lady, but she had people to meet her.

Red was moving again—this wasn't what we wanted. He rubbed his legs and arms—he couldn't keep still.

The luggage was coming off now. Jerry Dent pulled the air brake and the bus dropped a few inches. The metal hull opened up like the belly of a whale, full of

suitcases and duffle bags. It looked bad. There weren't any fish, just Old Dent and his loading.

Damn it.

Red slapped the brick wall.

I wanted to ask him for a smoke but I knew better. He was liable to take this out on me. I didn't care. I just wanted to be home, under the covers. I wanted to get as warm as I could and dream about that sun—those days were mine when I shut my eyes. It was all sunshine and greenery—I even remembered to think about bees and the sweet smell of the screw pines. I made sure to get it all in there.

Wait. Look at that.

I looked but all I saw was rain. Fog crept over the blacktop and even Jerry Dent had gone, dragging all that luggage behind him. I always wondered what people put in those suitcases, what was important enough to bring with you each place.

Look. You see?

I did. It was a fish, all right. He had on glasses and his hair stuck straight up. He was lugging something bulky.

He's carrying a damn TV set. Red whistled but the sound was all wrong, like a tire losing air. Don't look tough, neither, he said.

He waddled off the bus and stopped short as the rain pounded.

Damn, I said. He was carrying a TV. I'd never known anybody to do that before.

And he's got a turtleneck sweater, Red said. Let's wait and get him inside.

We stayed under the awning until he made it to the door. This was a first. No bag. Not even a knapsack. Just a television and his crazy hair and glasses.

He looks like a damned bird.

He don't even have a jacket, I said.

That's right. He probably ain't got no sense neither.

Why's he got a TV?

Maybe he's not right.

The thought of that made me grit my teeth. Red was a cruel one, and I knew he'd push plenty hard if this kid was dumb in the head.

We followed him inside after a bit. I walked left and right trying to avoid the puddles. Red clomped straight through like they weren't there. He was a straight line.

Jerry Dent stood by the bus, smoking. We went wide. If he saw us he'd shoe us away. Dirt trash, he'd say. Stupid old man. He didn't know trash from a tree—my dad said he was Christian now. He didn't drink anymore. Red pushed him down one time and that's why we couldn't be in the station.

Red stood in the doorway, big and proud. Is that your cousin?

He knew it was. I looked over at the desk. Les was there, picking his teeth with a fingernail.

Does he talk to you yet?

No, I said. Not since my folks split.

He's soft anyway, Red said. Fat softy. Choosing sides.

I nodded. But I didn't care one way or the other.

There was no sign of the kid inside so I went to search the bathroom while Red went around back. Turtleneck had disappeared. If he'd caught a ride then he was gone. We'd be out of luck and I'd have to hear about it.

The smell hit me as I walked in—the smell of public places. I hated that smell. Someone was humming in the back stall and I waited. The TV sat in the corner and it wasn't even a new one. Still, I knew I'd like to have it. I could shut myself inside and watch, leave the rain to wash the dirt from the gutters and strip the sidewalks clean. Mom had wanted to be on TV before she left. Maybe if I watched long enough I'd see her—teeth white as clouds, eyes made up. Her hair piled high on her head like a light bulb. She was her clothes, Dad said once. Her clothes and her wishes.

I waited. My face in the mirror was white, pasty—red scabs collected around my mouth and nose. They looked sore. I had a hat on but it looked like part of me—a stitch of bark on an old log. My clothes were my skin, all wet and loose. Waiting to peel off and turn to nothing.

Turtleneck came from the stall. He had big glasses on and he did look like a bird. I saw myself behind him in the mirror as he washed his hands. Even leaning, he was taller. My eyes were blackened from no sleep. I twisted my lips into a snarl but it was stupid.

Where you going with that, I said.

He sized me up. I knew I looked like a kid, soggy and ugly. He didn't have to answer. But he did. Miami, he said.

Can't you get a new one down there?

I don't want a new one. I want this one.

What's so special about it?

He dried his hands on a towel and picked up the TV. Under the sweater his neck looked like a snake with a frog in its belly—he was a birdman, all right. But I couldn't tell if he was more dumb or stubborn.

I followed him out.

Hey, I said. What's your name?

He didn't turn around. He headed for a seat and plopped down in front of the bay doors.

I stood two seats away, pretending to be busy with my own thoughts. Red said to do that—act busy in your head.

Going north, I said. On to Tallahassee.

Hmm, he said. That so.

I didn't know if he was convinced. The board said that the Miami bus didn't leave for two hours, so I nodded, slipped past Fat Les, and went to find Red.

#

An hour later and we were all by the creek. Birdman had come too. I didn't think Red would get him to leave the depot but he did. Red could be convincing, and Birdman listened and followed us down through the mist and the rain, carrying his TV set the whole way.

It was dark but Red had started a fire. Really, we were close to the highway—just a quarter mile from *Jack's* and the buses. But it felt distant. Birdman bounced on his feet. He walked to the creek bed and back, stopping only to kick at the high grass

and the dead branches. He was a mover too. Him and Red were two peas in the same pod.

We'd smoked some tobacco and warmed our hands, and now I was dizzy. Under the canopy of trees the rain couldn't get us and I almost felt dry. I could imagine living underground, far from the sky and the clouds. If I could dig deep enough the sky couldn't follow, no one could. If the rain tried to seep down beneath the mud and the dirt, I'd be faster. I'd out dig the water. There, somewhere, I'd find the sun—a big wash of orange that could drive away the clouds and rain forever. That's where I'd stay—next to the sun. I'd never have to dodge puddles or wait for the drizzle to slow again.

Birdman was fed up. Where is it then, he said. Where's the body? He waved his arms at Red and I waited for Red to say something.

Down by the water, he said.

Then why are we up here making a fire? Don't you guys have lights?

Red shook his head.

I got a penlight, I said. Soon as it came out I knew it was wrong. Red eyed me and then everything was still. I turned away. Behind me, they argued. But a few steps away I could only hear the rain going *swish, swish* as it the dropped on the dead leaves. That rain had a voice, I knew it. It spoke over the sun, spoke louder than me sometimes, louder than Red. The rain chased after my thoughts. It drove Mom away with her wishes and maybe now it was my turn. I could leave the town behind, leave my boots and all my blankets. I could leave both Red and my dad. They'd never notice. They only noticed drinking anymore and I knew that Red would be at *Jack's* soon as he was

old enough. Then it would just be me. And days of rain and gray—endless. And me. Always. I would never grow old enough to escape.

When I came back I heard Red first. He was up on his feet saying enough was enough. All I could hear were the beginnings and endings of words. Then the Birdman shouting.

You guys are full of it. There's no body down here. He looked around. This place is a swamp. Probably the whole town's just a swamp.

Can it, Red said. You look like a damn bird, anyway.

You dummy. You idiot. If there's a dead body down here it's you.

Can that too.

I won't. Birdman stalked off a few paces and spun around. This town is a dead body. You're maggots. You're nothing.

You shut up. Red stared at the fire. It was dying and he looked enormous standing so close, like the shadow of a tree. Usually we just made up a story, a hustle for some cash. Or scared somebody out of a couple bucks. But this was different. I didn't understand why he was letting Birdman go on and on.

Fine. Birdman walked over to his TV and picked it up. How do you get back? I'm leaving. He had the TV in his arms and his bus ticket wedged in his pocket.

Over the hills, Red said.

There weren't any hills. There were only skinny pine trees, hundreds of them. Even to me they all looked the same.

Damn a hill, he said. Which way is back?

Over the hills, Red said. And far away.

Then Red was on him—slowly at first, almost over the fire. Then he exploded. He hit Birdman square in the nose so his glasses flew to one side. Red tackled him and they rolled down the embankment, in the direction of the creek. The TV was between them—as they rolled they were like a wheel. Birdman was up first and the TV ended up on top of Red. I couldn't believe it, but he was down.

You troll, you maggot. Birdman kicked and kicked and Red didn't move. When he did it was only to roll to the side and shove the television from his chest. Birdman stopped for a second and then kicked again—his boot hit Red in the temple.

They were frozen. Birdman's chest heaved up and down but that was it. Red lay there, unmoving, an arm over his face.

Is he dead? He could hardly speak he was breathing so heavy.

No, I said. But when he gets up he's gonna kill you.

He ain't getting up. Look at him.

Oh, I don't know. I knew that I should have been scared. But Red wasn't moving. If he did, there'd be trouble. But I didn't care. I didn't care about Red and I didn't care about the damned Birdman. They were animals. The TV rested in the mud by the creek. Somehow that made everything worse.

You wanna fight, Tallahassee? Is that where you're going? You're not going anywhere.

His chest heaved. I didn't say anything. He looked like he was going to suffocate himself with words. He had his arms out. He looked like a tree—two winding branches, hands scrunched up like nests. His neck was long—he hardly looked human.



His glasses were broken. I wondered if he could see me. I couldn't fight. I was my mother's son.

Well? What do you say?

He took slow steps. The fire was dying. I could hear the rain picking up, showering those leaves. I was my mother's son. We had the same face and I wanted to run but I didn't. The flames pittered out. The ashes hissed with the rain. Then smoke.

My face was my mother's face. Soft. I was still. It never made sense why people were always moving around. Red, and Birdman too. I didn't understand. Always moving—tapping at the ground. Bouncing, their feet like springboards. The world turned so slowly. Maybe they couldn't feel it, that was why. Maybe to them the world had stopped moving all together, the earth was still. Too still. Or maybe they thought they were dead.

He was crying. Birdman was crying. He stood over the TV and cried and blew his nose on the sleeve of his turtleneck. I could see Red moving a little. There was blood over his eye and down his face. But Birdman was crying. Crying over a television set. I wanted to tell him how silly it all was—how this was a joke. The TV wasn't worth it. None of us could fit inside. I wanted to tell him that the earth was moving. It would be OK. The rain would stop. The earth was moving. We were ugly, us. We were. But the rain would stop and the earth was moving and it was just a television set. The fire was dying. I could hear the hiss—steadier now, like a lost balloon. The rain had picked up and I felt it on my face. It was behind my eyes. My feet were wet and damp—my toes were cold, so cold that they were wooden. There were no rainy days on TV. My toes were wood blocks. But I could stay still. I could be still if I wanted because I could

feel the earth moving—I could feel it underneath my feet. I knew it moved. It never stopped moving.

Red groaned but all I could see was the TV. I heard the Birdman crying. You'll be crying now I thought. You'll be crying. Red was a sturdy oak. He would move slow. Maybe Birdman'd see him maybe he wouldn't. I wondered if I was smiling. What my smile would look like. How no one would see. Red and Birdman, they'd come together, sure enough. Like a pair of rain clouds—bobbing through air, moving an inch at a time. Then they'd be one. I could see them: swaying, back and forth. Red led. They were dancing. No noise. Toward the creek. Nobody spoke. I watched them. They could have been real. Maybe not. The clouds were dancing. I saw the TV on the ground but also the tickets. The bus tickets. They could have been real. Maybe not. The bus tickets were on the ground and the clouds were dancing. They could have been dancing. The TV was in the mud. Birdman cried and cried. I could see my mother's face. She wished and wished but she didn't cry.

Then the clouds were in the creek.

#

Walking. It was more like swimming.

The road was flooded with mud and I took care to ride the ridge and stay clear of the water. It was under, mostly. Water and earth. There was no reflection in the night. The ridge went and went and I walked it like a tight rope. There was more water than earth, I decided. Up ahead, I could see two blue lights. One for the bus depot. The other was *Jack's*.

I had the tickets and they were the only dry thing. My clothes were drenched—my shirt rubbed against my chest. Water ran out my boots. I had the tickets balled up in my hand, shoved in my coat pocket. I wished I had his glasses too.

At the station I walked past Fat Les and Jerry Dent. I walked straight through the station and the light hurt my eyes. A few people were gathered by the diesel and I walked right for them. I walked right up and stood in line and handed my ticket to the driver when he asked.

Been through it, eh? You're a mess.

I didn't answer.

Luggage?

He clipped the ticket and I sat down in the back. The air was cold inside. We were in the belly of a whale, I decided, a cold, metallic monster. Then we were swimming, the whale groaned and went throbbing through the blue light. We swam down 3rd Avenue and I saw the houses. They were ugly and dark and I didn't miss them when we swam past. We reached the highway after a bit and picked up speed. Everything was dark out there. A few stars shined but they were far away. It was quiet underwater and I was glad. Fat Les would never know I was here. Jerry Dent—that old fop. Luggage man. They weren't swimming at all. They were buried there on dry land. Fat Les could have his damn side of the family—he could have all the houses and the black top stretched out everywhere like a scab. Dad could have *Jack's* and his drink—he could never learn to swim in that. He'd drown in a swallow of beer.

My skin was loose. I took off my jacket and spread it on the seat. Then my shirt. Outside the world was water but I had the chill and couldn't quit shivering.

Dad wasn't anything like Les, I decided. Or Jerry Dent. Dad had a good face. I could see it. He had a good face, it was shaped like an iron. His eyes weren't clouds. They were sharp. Even in front of a glass of beer they were sharp. If he couldn't swim I was sad for it. Really. He'd belted me a few but he had a good face. Mom was the problem. All that make believe. The roof top that day, not a cloud in the sky. Mom walking toward the well. Looking, wishing. Always wishing. She spent hours at that well. The rooftop that day and I was there. Scaled the side of the house. It was easy. Scaled the side by hopping the fence. Red never could have thought of that. He'd have huffed first. Huffed and puffed. But I did. I went up slow—everything was wet. Rain. The night before. Rain, and the world was wet. Slippery. Had to be careful. I was.

I remember Mom saw me first. She wished me down. Damn wishes. Even then I knew they were nothing. Her tossing wishes at me. At the house. At Dad. Her and her TV-watching and her fat face. My face. I didn't understand why I had to look like her. But I was up there and I wanted to fly. The roof was wet. I slipped, here, there. I fell once. But I held on. Mom pointed to me and said down. I laughed. I could almost touch the clouds. They were close. My head was in a cloud. My hair was wet for it. Red never would have thought of that, of touching a cloud. Never.

The chill. My pants were soaked and I pulled them off. I pulled them over my boots. Stupid. I took off my boots then, afterward. And my socks. The bus was mostly empty. It was cold but my clothes were wet. They were colder. My face in the window. I looked through it. Didn't wish for anything. The world out there and no wishes.

Up on the roof, I said: Mom. But she was wailing. She jammed her finger at me and screamed. I held on but the ground looked far away. There wasn't a big enough

puddle. Red wouldn't have thought about that either, of landing in a puddle. But there were only small ones. They wouldn't do. When Dad came out he didn't say a word. He never did. Before Mom left we spent hours in the kitchen and it was always warm. He'd boil water for coffee and cut vegetables and never say a word. Mom slept late; she was worrying. Always worrying. We said that sometimes, worrying about wishing. Wishing about worrying.

I wondered who would be ready for the world to fill up with water. Through the window I could see a light. Out across the field I could see one. I wondered if the farmer who lived there was ready—or if he was floating now, a bloated bag of complaints. Bobbing around as the water swelled and ebbed. His wife too—maybe she was caught on the eaves. Her dress billowing around her like a sheet in the wind, her arms like a cross. The animals too. They were drifting. Hay bales were expanding, taking on shape. They were clouds made of hay. The world was different underwater—no one spoke. Mouths filled up with water and breathing ceased. It was quiet. Still. I bet even Red was still. Or maybe he was fighting Birdman underwater—they were holding their breath and dancing together—Birdman crying, making more water. His eyes spilling out, out, pale blue facets running noiselessly. Red punching through water—his fist a shriveled thing, a worn acorn. A baby's heart.

On the roof that day he caught me. Let go, he said, and even his words were quiet. Let go. I didn't want to believe him, but after a bit I did. Mom wailed in the background and I hated her wishes. If only she would stop I'd be OK. I let go and slid over the roof. My belly burned—I got chopped. *Choppety-chop*. My belly. *Choppety-chop*. The shingles. I went off the end, like flying. My back arched. I spread my arms.

The clouds overhead. I reached for one but it was over. Dad caught me and pulled me into a heap. You're OK, he said. I couldn't move. His eyes winked like candle flames. You're all right, he said. I blinked and he held me out in front of him. He held me tight as Mom screamed. Then he said let's go inside, under his breath, and when we did, he didn't hit me.

The bus pushed through the water and it was night. Red and Birdman. They were animals too. And Mom. I swam in the belly, rubbed my legs. My shorts were wet but I kept them on. If I got lost in the water I didn't want to be naked. I thought I could swim for it though—I could swim for the surface. But where would the surface be? How much was water? What if water had filled the sky? The sky was water, I decided. The stars floated. The clouds moved slowly because they were floating too. I could float there with them. I could float across the sky and search for the sun. When I found the sun I'd find the sun. It would be easy. I'd find the sun when I found the sun. Maybe the sun was the surface. I could swim to it. When I found the sun I'd find the sun. The sun was a dream, I thought. I'll dream the sun and find the dream. I'd be under the covers—dry. Warmer. When I find the sun I'd find the sun. It would shine over town and bleach the clouds, bleach the houses and the Jerry Dents and Fat Les's. It would bleach and burn *Jack's* and dry up all the beer—it would burn my dad and Red's dad. It would find my mom. Follow her. The sun would find everyone. Even Red. The sun would find Red in the creek with the Birdman. They'd be dancing. The sun would find them and show them exactly what they'd been doing. It would show them and I would be there to understand.

## Helpless

I met Maggie Moss in the parking lot of a club where she danced and followed her home, which wasn't such strange behavior for me in those days. Back then I was lacking in a few general ways, and a few specific ones as well. She didn't act surprised, though she did make it clear she'd have no problem murdering me in my sleep. It was the next night that she told me about the boy tied to a cinderblock. I was still hanging around and we were drinking and following the hurricane news on the radio. Listening to them you'd have thought that thing was right down the street. But overhead the sky was clear and the stars were in their proper places. An empty bottle rolled around under the table and the full one was only half full. A breeze lit the tips of our cigarettes and made them glow as a beach ball floated over the crab grass. I'd hoped we might be kissing by then but Maggie Moss could drink and not get drunk, and she'd suddenly found a serious subject.

"There must be something wrong with him," she said. "Or them. Who would treat a kid like that, anyhow?"

We were out back and had the place to ourselves; most of the neighborhood had already packed and fled. But Maggie Moss wasn't the kind to run and she refused to

leave the cats. I was happy to stay, though I didn't know whose house this was. I mean, Maggie Moss lived there, but it wasn't her place. I don't think they were even her cats.

"I bet he's there right now," she said. "All tied up in the rain. It's so sad. Not even a diaper."

It wasn't raining but there was still time. He was a big baby, or a small boy, and might have had a sun burn, she said. He'd at least gotten into some poison oak. And he was tied by his ankle to a cinderblock. There was room to crawl a decent-sized circle but even that was no good since the yard was full of junk and overgrown with hollyhock.

I was right that Maggie wanted me to do something.

"How can we just sit here?" she said. "With that storm coming?"

The hurricane was a class three, scary but unsteady. Probably it would slide by and bop the Carolinas. I still wanted to drink the rest of that bottle and curl up in the king bed I'd seen inside. I was tired of my car. But if that wasn't happening I did want to get a look. I'd never seen anything like a kid tied up to a cinderblock and I was prepared to follow Maggie Moss anywhere. She had sharp, white teeth and hair that covered her eyes, and she had a body built for sex.

"First thing is we rescue him," she was saying. "And then we nurse him back to health and adopt him to some family who wouldn't dream of leaving him tied up in the backyard."

So we finished the bottle and stumbled off through the yard and over the back fence since the cinderblock boy was two or three houses down. That meant more stumbling and climbing and I swear each time I lifted Maggie Moss in the night air and



set her atop a fence I felt like ten men, like there was a storm inside of me that I had never known before, a breaking in my guts that made me want to weep with pleasure.

Of course the yard was empty. But we spotted the cinderblock sure enough, resting in the moonlight under an oak tree. It was wrapped through the middle with a thick piece of rope, a small loop flopping innocently at the end. In the morning I woke up on the floor, clutching one of her shoes. My tooth felt loose and Maggie Moss was asleep behind a locked door. I could hear the single-unit air conditioner purring from where I lay and for a long while I didn't dare move.

By noon I went looking for something to drink but the fridge was full of food. The cats were lined up in the yard crying to be let in and I counted four, five and then lost track. The house was a tiny cinderblock structure with bare walls and cobwebs in the corners. An unplugged TV sat on the terrazzo floor. There was only one bathroom so Maggie Moss had to come out eventually.

The street looked empty, no cars, no people. Thick clouds gathered across the river and the wretched humidity made it hard to breathe. I figured that I'd take a tour and see what sort of stuff people left behind when they were fleeing. I hoped it might include a gas can since my car was low and I didn't want to be stuck if that storm did decide to come our way.

But also I wanted to see the boy. So I headed down the street looking for some sort of a sign, trying the door knobs as I went. The houses were one-story squats, yet these people had locked up against the unknown before running, which made me want to get inside even more. There were sandy yards and rusting mailboxes as far as I could see and just when I was about to turn back I found a house that looked worse than the

rest. The front windows were boarded and a blue tarp covered part of the roof, waving lazily in the wind. A pair of oak trees stood dead or dying out front, flanked by a row of old tires and a few sheets of rotten plywood. But even on my tip-toes I couldn't see much when I peered over the fence, until a woman appeared with a broom. It was impossible to tell her age, but she was rough. She wore a thin dress with holes along the hem and stood there, praying maybe, as I held my breath, but she was watching the sky. The clouds were ringed and purpling, though they still looked far away. I strained to see beyond her, around the house and into the back yard. Finally she turned. I didn't bother to hide and her expression didn't change. Maybe she was used to people staring, watching. Or maybe she just didn't care.

When I got back, Maggie Moss was in the kitchen feeding cats. There seemed to be twice as many as before. Her eyes narrowed when she saw me but she couldn't help but smile. I'd found a half case of beer next door and two bottles of Jim Beam, though I had to break a window and my hand was bleeding.

"Well, what do we have here?" she said, as I staggered to the counter. I watched her for signs of last night but her nightgown was open in the front and she didn't hide anything. Maggie eyed the whiskey as I opened a beer. There were open tuna cans strewn about the floor but she tip-toed through the mess and ran her hand across the label. "Hmm," she said. "You're bad. But nice to have around."

We drank standing up while the cats slept at our feet. Maggie drank with her teeth, mostly. She swished the whiskey around her mouth and laughed, tilting her head back to display a beautiful throat. Somehow I guided us to the couch and for a moment we were touching, but not kissing, until she slipped out of my arms and plopped her feet

in my lap, which was fine. I was thinking about the storm clouds and that house down the street, and I was suddenly very hungry.

“Maggie,” I said. “Did you really see that boy? Did you see him?” I didn’t know if she’d even answer but I also felt content not to move.

“I’m positive,” she said. “But I’m not sure.” The booze had taken over her voice and she sounded like someone else, like she was talking from behind a closed door.

I prodded her to continue but she sighed. When she began to roll over, I shifted to get up.

“Dip a duck,” she said. “I was just getting cozy.” But actually she was out, her eyes clamped tight. Her mouth was parted and the glass sat perched against her chest, sweating into her robe. I listened to the sound of her breathing and stared at her knees. They were scallop-shaped and not at all delicate and there were tiny hairs protruding where her legs disappeared under her robe.

When she started snoring I tucked her into the couch. Then I went to the fridge for cold chicken and flipped the radio on and ate outside under a drizzling rain. The sky had gone the color of a ripe plum. Sure enough, that hurricane was coming. The cats came around one by one and disappeared into the sea-grape bushes as I sat there on a plastic deck chair, gnawing on a chicken leg. A voice on the radio announced a mandatory evacuation the way a store might advertise a sale.

I could feel the power lines humming as I walked to my car, though I knew it was all in my head. The engine turned over and I thought about leaving. The gas needle sat low in the red but it figured that I could maybe make it to the 7-11 if they hadn’t shuttered up yet. I could get a six pack and drive west toward the gulf and ride this out

under a bypass bridge. But in the end I closed the door and started down the street. As far as I could tell the only people left here were me and Maggie Moss and that old woman I'd seen. And the cinderblock boy, if he even existed, and I decided to find out once and for all.

When I found the house again the rain was falling harder and the stray bits of daylight had begun to disappear behind the heavy clouds. I walked through the dirt yard and the tires and kicked something across the cement porch that I realized was a turtle shell. Then I knocked on the door with the butt of my hand and stood waiting.

The eaves were rotten overhead and I'd begun to sweat. I knocked once more, harder this time, and after a few moments I went around to the fence and climbed over, feet first. On the other side there was only a pile of empty pop bottles and cans. I made my way through weeds and small mounds and took the corner as the yard opened up before me. There, sitting in a patch of dead grass beneath an oak tree, was the cinderblock, just as I remembered it. There was a row of blocks, actually, set to the side in a makeshift seat, but only one had a rope through the middle and I gathered it in my arms and turned to face the house. The back wall was black with mold and windowless, except for a door with a long glass pane. I was about to hoist that cinderblock over my head, but there was that old woman, watching me, and I hesitated and dropped it in the dirt instead. Her expression hadn't changed, though I could see something in her hand. It was the shape of a bottle but not the size and she held it as if it might protect her.

"There's a bad storm out there," I shouted. "You need to leave." My clothes were soaked through and my hand had begun to bleed again. I must have looked like a maniac but she didn't move, so I stepped forward and reached for the handle. The smell

hit me as I swung the door open but I didn't give any ground. She had to know I meant business, and I wanted to get a glimpse of that boy if he was anywhere near.

"Jesus," I said. "Can't you hear me out here?" Then I saw that she had a turtle. Behind her there were candles burning in the near dark and a blue light came from somewhere deep in the house. In her other hand she held a paring knife, but she didn't brandish it or even lift her arm. It hung limp at her side. A dog sidled up and plopped down at her feet but he looked less interested than either of us.

"Where's the boy?" I said, but the words were wet out of my mouth. I couldn't stop watching the turtle. Those little legs pumped and the head was out now that it could smell the rain and for a second I forgot about the boy. I forgot about the cinderblock at my feet and I even forgot about the storm and Maggie Moss and about how badly I wanted to be somewhere else, somewhere warm and safe and small and full of light. Somewhere dry. All around the saw palm bushes waved in warning as the wind pushed and pulled at the air. Behind that I heard a voice coming from inside the house and I took a step back. The woman hadn't moved or said a word and before I knew it I was at the fence and over, back to the road, hoping that I knew the way back to Maggie. The street had gathered water and the trees were shaking by the time I found her in the kitchen, hunched against the oven on the floor, the empty tuna cans chattering at her feet. She held a cast iron pan in front of her like shield, but there wasn't time to talk and I reached for her, hoping she wouldn't hit me. I brushed the hair from her eyes in a long, slow movement and she let go. Her mouth fell open but she didn't say anything. There was no point.

Then we were moving. I lifted her by the arms and we were through the house in a few steps as the windows rattled and the roof groaned above us. We made it to the bathroom and I tried to dump her in the tub but she dragged me in after her.

“You left me,” she was saying. “You left me, you left me.”

“Maggie,” I said, but she wouldn’t let go. I tried to pull my arm back but she’d wrapped herself into the shirt sleeve and buried her face into my neck.

“I found him.” I was yelling but it felt like a whisper. “He’s safe,” I told her. “He’s free.” I spoke into her ear, hoping she’d loosen her grip. And when she did, when she moved to look up, I threw her in the tub and dashed for the bedroom. The window had already blown out and the rain came through in a fury. Outside I could see the palm trees bowed over, laying low for what was coming. Then I had the mattress. It was heavy and barely fit through the door but it was our only hope. I dragged it into the bathroom where Maggie Moss had curled up in a ball, the robe wrapped tight around her. If I’d had a moment, I would have admired her there. She’d grown so small, so tiny. It would have been perfect to scoop her up and carry her away, take her far from this mess, from all of it. But of course I dove in after her, pulling the mattress over top, hoping I wouldn’t crush her before I could save us. Immediately the light disappeared and the wind. Maggie reformed around me, clinging with her nails this time, unwilling to let go.

At first I couldn’t hear anything. Then I heard the sound of our breathing, followed by the roof again, peeling back perhaps. Maggie sobbed a little, but mostly she was quiet. Clutched there in the dark I felt surprisingly relaxed, even though we could be swept way at any minute. For some reason I began thinking about the time my friend

Clevenger jumped off the causeway bridge. We'd met a girl at Big Al's bar and we were all walking to the beach to go swimming. We'd already stumbled to the top when the girl changed her mind. She wanted to turn back. I pleaded with her, begged probably. But Clevenger just climbed up onto the railing and took off his shirt and let it fall into the water below. The girl stopped dead in her tracks. I quit with my pleading. Clevenger said nothing. He didn't even look our way. Then he kicked his shoes off and down they went, into the blackness. By the time I reached for him he'd inched up to the top rail and raised his arms in the air like an acrobat. When he jumped, the girl screamed, a quick note that punctured the night and was gone. When I saw him next it was a week or so later, at Al's again. But he had no memory of that night. "If I'd have done that," he told me, "I'd be dead, man." Then he got paranoid. "Are you trying to put ideas in my head?" he said. "Are you trying to kill me?" I wanted to buy him a beer but he refused. He wouldn't even listen when I tried to explain.

Next to me, Maggie Moss was muttering something into my ear that sounded like gibberish. I could smell her perfume and her sweat, but mostly the heavy odor of whiskey. My arm had fallen asleep where she lay on it and my hand ached.

"What?" I asked her. "Huh?"

"Don't you leave." Her words were suddenly very clear. "Don't you leave me again."

I told her not to worry. I didn't say that we'd be OK, but I did tell her that I wasn't going anywhere. "Do you promise?" she said, and of course I answered: "I do." Looking back, we were probably thinking very different things. I had never known a girl like Maggie Moss, though by the time I'd get around to figuring that, she'd be long

gone. I'd be left with the memory of this tub of course, the weight of her body against mine, the sound of her voice in the dark and the feel of us together. Good things, really, maybe great ones when you think about it. So if you were to ask me what I remember about that part of my life, what really stands out amidst all of those bruised and broken days, I guess I'd have to say Maggie Moss. I guess we could start there.



## In Town

He had not been back long before he realized that leaving her that way had been a mistake. The drive from Arkansas took all night but he didn't feel relieved when he found the exit and headed toward the beach; already whole neighborhoods were shuttered up, the windows boarded over with sheets of plywood. Everything here in Florida seemed very low to the ground after the months away. He drifted past the beer bars and secondhand stores but it wasn't until he pulled in at the ocean lookout and found the sun creeping over the blue line of the horizon that he knew he was home. The hurricane was headed straight for the coast, but for now everything was calm and Russell listened to the sea gulls while a warm breeze pushed through the car window.

Summer had been hot in Arkansas. Annie found a pond in one of the hollows and they hiked over to swim once a week, staying close to shore because she was afraid of water. She didn't believe in living by the coast either and made it clear that when he went back to Florida, she would not come see him. He'd laughed at this and she smiled, but Russell understood later that she'd been hurt. They still sat on the porch at dusk as the cicadas sang, and later they crawled into bed, but she wouldn't let him talk. "Russell," she told him. "It doesn't matter what you say." That she never got angry about his leaving only confused him more.

Here on the beach, his sister's truck wasn't in the driveway but he knew Sally wouldn't have gone far. The dog was there to greet him in the kitchen and there were pictures on the walls: one of him with a surfboard, one of Sally and him together, shaggy and sunburned. There was a picture of his mom too, holding Sally's baby girl. Her face was frozen in a tight grin, and Russell looked away.

He found beer in the fridge and thought maybe Joe Cory was back from Mexico. His sister never kept a boyfriend long but Joe Cory had made it a few years. He'd settled down the way people did after thirty, and though he still spent most of his money on surf trips, Russell had begun to accept that he might always be around.

The dog led him to the garage where he found Sally on a plastic chair, smoking a cigarette while the radio reported on wind speed in an expressionless monotone. He noticed her split lip but she would only tell him that her truck was over at Raimie's house. "You're here," she said, looking away. "I didn't think you were coming back this time."

Later, he dropped his bags in the kitchen. Felice was still asleep in the back room and Sally sat with her hands in her lap until Russell convinced her to take his car to the store. The storm was set to make landfall in a day or two. "I need to board the windows," he said, which was true, but he also couldn't stand to see her face that way. When she was gone he went back to the garage. Joe Cory's surfboards were lined up on the wall in a neat row, held snug in place by a series of dowels; otherwise, the place was a mess. He couldn't find a drill but he did find a hammer and nails and a few half sheets of plywood left over from some project. When he dragged them into the yard the wind had already switched; thick gray clouds hung in the distance and he knew there was

lightning bundled inside. Joe was still in Mexico and hadn't called in weeks. Sally had a busted lip and now her truck was parked at Raimie's, which the last place he wanted to go right now. Russell had only been in town a few hours and everything was the same old mystery.

#

He met Annie one summer when his car broke down on the way back from seeing his father in California. That was the year their mother died. Russell only had a phone number and wanted to tell him in person. The country was much bigger than he imagined and he drove as fast as he could across the middle states. The first day his father didn't answer the phone and Russell slept in the car but on the second day a woman answered and told him plainly that he worked in a warehouse shaping surfboards. When Russell delivered the news the sun was bright and his father stood squinting in his apron. He didn't take off his spray mask either, but pushed it high on his head like a hat. They had to shout over the noise and when it was done, Russell didn't stay. By noon he was in the desert and after that he abandoned the highway and began winding his way through states he only recognized by their license plates.

Annie was at the counter at the Quick-Stop when he walked in, having left his car a few miles back. They didn't have a parts store, she said. But he could get a tow in the morning. When Russell thanked her and turned to walk back she told him to hold up. Annie was very tall and her teeth showed in a way that made her appear to be always smiling. She had black hair that seemed to have never known the sun, and she wore men's work boots over her jeans. It was her idea to check the fuel pump and when they took her jeep to retrieve a new one from the chain store, they stopped to see her

brother, Cray, and borrowed some tools. Her brother immediately left his food on the table and opened a beer, and soon they were all drinking Budweiser in the kitchen.

When the conversation lolled, Cray lit a joint. He said it was impossible to get good pot anymore with the crackdown on meth and shortly after that Russell told him that he could bring it up from Florida by the trunk-full if Cray knew how to get rid of it.

Annie had to work her second job that night and left Russell to fix his car. When he finished packing the tools he got lost trying to find the road to her place and had to backtrack several times. Annie slept in the den because the roof over the back bedroom had begun to collapse; the whole place was crumbling, really, and wet with the smell of mold and wood. But as he pulled up into the meadow and killed the engine that night it looked to him less like a house than a secret tucked into the hillside. After midnight the sound of her jeep razed him from his spot on the porch where he'd been listening to the crickets, and when he stood and almost stumbled he realized that the light above his head was coming from the stars.

#

After the windows were boarded, Russell checked on Sally's girl, Felice, and then dragged his duffle bag into the spare room and shut the door. He'd lived here off and on for years, helping with rent when he could, leaving his few valuables deep in the closet. A queen-sized mattress and a mess of boxes took up most of the floor and with the window covered the room felt at once too dark and too small. He unzipped the bag and beneath the dirty clothes he found the money, a few thousand dollars tied off in a thick black garbage bag. There wasn't enough to pay Raimie for the weed, since he'd stashed some under Annie's sink in the shoebox where she kept her letters. It was a box

he wasn't supposed to know about but she would've refused otherwise. He was staring at a water spot on the ceiling when the front door slammed and he went to help Sally with whatever she'd found at the store.

They stacked the supplies on the table. She'd remembered to get candles and Russell set them in a row while Sally let the dog in and he ran down the hall. "He'll be back," Sally said. She wore her dark glasses inside and Russell wondered when she'd started doing that, if she always had. "He's gone to wake Felice," she said.

When his niece came around the corner, he greeted her with a hug. Her blond hair hung in curls, her face a map of uneven freckles. "Hi uncle," she said, sleep thick in her eyes. When Felice saw the candles she insisted. "Please," she whispered. "Please, please." She was clapping her hands over the flames to make them dance when the lights flickered overhead. "That's it," Russell told her, snuffing the candles. "If we lose power we'll need them."

Later they sat at the table listening to the wind. It felt much later then it was because of the boarded windows. Sally had made Ramen noodles and Felice picked at hers, smothering them in ketchup. When she reached again for the bottle Sally grabbed her wrist. "Eat," she said. But Felice was more interested in the lightning; every few minutes the glass doors pulsed white, followed by thunder, slow and deep, like a wave crashing.

After a bit, Sally lost her temper. "Eat, damn it. Eat your food." Felice didn't listen or cry. She sat for a few seconds, waiting for the thunder, then walked back to her room. But not before pushing in her chair.

“She’s impossible,” Sally said, but she wasn’t eating either. When Russell didn’t say anything his sister looked up. “She’s like me I guess,” she said. “Like us.” She laughed at this and so did he, but then it was finished. They were alone in the kitchen and Russell pushed away from the table.

“Where you going?” she wanted to know.

He stood silently, waiting for the storm to answer.

“You shouldn’t go over there,” she said. He expected her to say more but she didn’t. He thought the swelling had gone down on her lip.

“I need to see Raimie,” Russell said. “Anyway, we should get your truck.”

For a long time she didn’t move. Then she put her head down on the table and when she raised it her face was different, as if she’d forgotten the matter entirely. She got up and took the dishes to the sink and turned on the water, mumbling under her breath. When he asked, she glared at him. “I said forget the truck,” she said. “I’m not taking my daughter over there even for a moment.”

Outside the sky was going black and Russell took the side streets, tracking the storm on the radio. The ocean lay just beyond the small motels that ran along the beach, and he could hear the waves crashing against the shoreline. There were lights in a few windows and he hit the wipers when the rain began to fall in fat drops across the windshield.

He pulled into the Chevron, idling by a dumpster. Raimie lived around the corner in a low-slung cinderblock house he’d inherited from his dad. Russell had known the house as long as he could remember, first as a kid in shorts learning to surf and then

as a teen, but now he only stopped in to pick up or to drop money. He never stayed long enough to talk about old times.

Ahead of him a scraggly kid leaned against the payphone, illuminated by a beer sign in the window. Russell didn't know him, but he looked like every other guy in town: shaggy hair, tattoos, sun-burnt face. He wore flip flops and long shorts, cut below the knee. There was something ugly about him, the way he stooped to compensate for his height and drank out of a paper bag, the receiver tucked tight against his chin.

Russell opened the car door and stepped into the wind. He walked by the guy on the phone and went inside to grab a case of beer. It seemed like a better idea to grab two. He would bring one to Raimie's and bring one home. He would also fill up the tank. Then he would find out what had happened to his sister's face. He'd pay Raimie for the weed and find out what happened and that would be that. It would be a casual affair.

#

The first trip back to Arkansas went well. He stayed with Annie and only drove into town to drop off the weed with Cray, who paid him up front. Annie still worked nights at a bar and sometimes Russell would tag along and sit while she served cans of beer and poured shots. He spent most of his time on her porch listening to the turkey buzzards during the day and then the insects at night. Occasionally a mining truck rumbled past, but by the time the sound came over the tree line it had been softened so much that it sounded like the hills themselves making highway noise.

One morning Annie showed him a firebreak that led to the top of the hillside. From there you could see the town clustered together in a mess of odd-shaped buildings

and mismatched roofs. Beyond that was Fayetteville, but the ridge was only high enough to spot the railroad tracks heading north. Annie told him the trains used to run coal all day and night, winding through the hills and hollows like an enormous snake.

Cray drove up one day in his Scout and he and Russell drank their way through a twelve pack waiting for Annie to return. They flattened the empties under their heels and fired the smashed cans into the woods. Cray had come to fix the wood stove, which he did in less than an hour to Russell's surprise. After that they sat in silence, the beer gone, and just when Russell was going to offer to fix supper they heard the jeep begin its climb along the uphill grade. When Annie pulled in, Cray reached his meaty hand out for Russell to shake and said so long, see you in a few months. Then he waved to Annie and climbed into his Scout, and before he disappeared down the red dirt road he waved again. Russell knew that things had worked out fine, and when Annie came waltzing across the meadow, smiling without trying, Russell thought that things had worked out even better than that.

#

Now all of the lights were on at Raimie's and the driveway was crowded with work trucks and an old Dodge Fat Boy. None of the windows were boarded. Sally's Chevy S-10 was run into the lawn and Russell noticed Raimie's Harley in the tall grass by the garage. The front door wasn't locked but the music was loud, and no one noticed when he entered. A group was gathered around an enormous TV, watching the weather channel and for a moment Russell felt invisible.

"Where's Raimie?" he said, realizing at once that he sounded too harsh and also that he'd forgotten the beer. "I need to see him."



The music stopped and a man Russell didn't know came forward. He was short and thick with a shaved head, his face like a bruise, and Russell balled a fist instinctively. He heard voices and felt himself turned around and then he was shaking with his free hand. Jack Whit was there and Cobb and Red Peter, and they guided him to the kitchen as rain began to clap against the roof like a series of gun shots.

"Just in time," Jack Whit was saying. Cobb had opened the fridge and lifted a can of beer from the door. After he handed it to Russell he grabbed one for each of them. Russell held his but didn't drink. He asked again after Raimie but Cobb had already gone back to the couch and Red turned to follow. It was only him and Whit in the kitchen.

"He's got some mainland girls he's trying to impress," Whit said. "I guess they ain't rode out a storm before."

"Who's the thug?" Russell said. He regretted it immediately but Whit answered anyway.

"You know Raimie," he said. He drank off the can and placed it on the table. "It's not like it used to be, Russell." Then he told him that he'd had to move off the beach. He was pouring concrete again and hoped for plenty of storm damage. "I have to head home," he said. "But let's you and me go see him first."

Raimie came around the corner before they could move, shirtless and gleaming with sweat, his tattoos shimmering over the muscles on his chest and arms. He locked eyes with Russell, his smile a loose thread. Jack slipped away and Raimie watched, his face unchanged. "Long time," he said finally, turning back to Russell. "Welcome home, buddy."

They walked down the corridor and into the back room—Raimie’s room. The girls were putting their clothes on in front of a mirror but they weren’t in a hurry. Raimie was still smiling when he told them to finish getting dressed. Both were blond with visible roots, their faces painted in dark hues that made them look older and bright red lip stick that did not. Russell stood in the doorway trying not to watch as they slipped back into their mini-dresses, smirking at each other in some triumphant language.

Then Raimie closed the door and sat on the bed. He told Russell to sit but there was only a love seat in the corner stacked with boxes. One of the girls had left her purse on the floor. The bed was tucked in against the block walls and the floor was terrazzo, unpolished and dull. A single window faced the ocean but from this angle only the light from the street lamp shone in. Raimie asked him again to sit but Russell remained standing.

“What happened to Sally?” he said.

Raimie’s smile disappeared and he turned toward the wall and then back to Russell. Instead of answering he reached for a pack of cigarettes and lit one with a match. “Sally,” he said, exhaling. His eyes watered for a moment but it was only the sulfur. The girl who left her purse started banging on the door.

“I’ve got your money,” Russell said. He could feel a headache working behind his eyes. The girl stopped for a moment and started again, this time with both fists. “But if you don’t tell me what happened, I’m gonna kill you.”

Raimie didn’t move and he didn’t look surprised. The cigarette hung from his lip, smoldering away, and his eyes were still watering but he didn’t say anything.

Finally he took the smoke between his fingers and coughed loudly, flicking it at the door without bothering to stub it out. One of the girls was yelling while the other laughed. “Fuck,” he said, looking up. “Russell, man. I’d wanna kill me too.”

#

Each time Russell returned to Arkansas he stayed a bit longer, and each time Annie put him up without question. He would drive straight through the night and arrive mid-morning to the sweet smell of eucalyptus and park beneath the stand of old-growth apple trees that surrounded the house. Annie would be waiting on the porch, her head turned away until the very last second when he cut the motor and stepped out of the car.

Then they’d drive the valley road into Fayetteville to meet Cray. Russell liked that he could unload and get paid up front, though it gave him no reason to stick around other than Annie. At first they remained tentative, testing small talk and gesturing with their hands. They kept their eyes on each other, talking without touching, and this lasted at least until that first night at her place where they stumbled into the house and fell slowly onto the lumpy pull-out couch that she had already arranged for them.

This last summer there was a heat wave and they drove straight for Fayetteville, weaving through the dusty roads because of a string of construction projects. Annie wore a baseball cap low over her forehead and the open windows did nothing to cut the heat. They crept past decrepit houses and crumbling sheds stuffed with old appliances and scrap metal, the yards littered with tires and rusted trucks. Sections of leaning fence cropped up beyond that. Russell listened to the whine of the engine and didn’t speak. Instead he twisted the radio dial until it ran out of room and then began to run it back the other way.

When they got to Cray's he wasn't home, and they let themselves in and sat at the kitchen table. Even inside the heat was too much and Annie told him to shower. Go ahead, she said, and she took his hand and led him down the hall. When he stripped down and slid beneath the cold water he felt better. Annie had returned to the kitchen and he gave in to the easy feeling that everything was alright, that they both knew what they were doing even if it was hard to put into words.

Then he heard the shouting. By the time he made it to the kitchen Cray was storming off across the yard toward his Scout. He didn't drive away or start the engine, but just sat there staring straight ahead as if there was something beyond the windshield other than scrub brush and the pine tree canopy like a green sea covering the hills in all directions.

"It's nothing," Annie told him. "He wants me to give up the house and move to town."

Russell was shirtless, still carrying a towel. He felt the sweat beading on his forehead. Cray didn't seem the type to get angry, but it dawned on him that this was a stupid assessment. What did he know, anyway, about Cray, or about his take on anything?

"I aim to stay in the hollow," Annie said. "I do." She was still looking out the window into the blinding sunshine but Russell had been invited into the conversation. Instead, he hung the towel on the back of a chair and went to retrieve his shirt from the bathroom.

“The money’s in back,” she said over her shoulder. “Let’s get it and go.” As they left, her brother still sat behind the wheel, his hands flat on the dashboard as if he were afraid of losing sight of them even for a moment.

Cray didn’t come around for a month and when he did finally pull up in his Scout he looked at Russell as if he were surprised that he was still there. But the moment passed and they lapsed into their polite silence, drinking on the porch after Cray had checked the pipes in the cellar. When Annie arrived in her jeep he nodded and drove slowly down the hill. This time he didn’t wave.

Then one night Annie didn’t come back from her shift at the bar. They’d worked their way into a routine and Russell fell asleep on the porch waiting. When he woke, the hollow felt much too quiet, but it was a trick of sound; what he heard was bird noise, and just over the ridge the sun had begun to warm a small spot in the sky. There were lines of cloud to the east and the crick in his neck told him that he’d spent the night outside. Annie had not woken him because she had not returned.

He hung around most of the day waiting. Finally he hiked up to the bluff and over the hillside, returning only when he heard the familiar grind of the jeep on the rutted road. By then it was late afternoon. Annie didn’t tell him where she’d been and he didn’t ask. She disappeared in the back of the house for a while and later Russell found her asleep on the couch just as the sun began to set. Shortly after that he heard about the tropical storm on the radio. When the storm grew into a hurricane overnight, he knew it was time to leave for Florida. The season had changed on him and he hadn’t even noticed.

#

They went to the garage to talk and Raimie stood shirtless in his blue jeans, smoking another cigarette while the garage door shuttered in the wind. There were surfboards everywhere, leaning on the wall or racked in the rafters, and there was junk—junk tools and roadside trash and car parts. A single uncovered fluorescent bulb hung in the middle of the room and they sat on empty buckets while the light flickered overhead.

“Joe’s not coming back,” Raimie said at last. “He didn’t go down to surf this time. He went down to stay.”

Russell had been waiting for answers, but this wasn’t what he expected to hear.

“I thought Sally knew,” said Raimie. He was staring over Russell’s head, blowing broken smoke rings in the air. “But then she showed up here. She was drunk.”

“So you told her?”

“I didn’t mean to,” he said. “But I’m glad I did.” He smiled somewhat, a slight upturn of his cheek as if he was embarrassed. “She came at me with a knife, Russell. She might not remember that.”

“But you hit her.” Russell didn’t say it as a question and Raimie didn’t answer right away. Instead he stood and looked down at Russell, considering.

“She was hysterical,” he said. “So I took her home. End of story.” The bulb flickered over his head and he fiddled with it but it didn’t do any good. It was the storm outside playing off the power lines. “I’m not a monster,” he said. “I made her leave the truck.”

“I’ll bring your money,” Russell said. “After things calm down.” The bulb went out for a long second and they listened to the garage door as it shook in the dark. Then the light was back and Russell started to get up.

Raimie shook his head slowly. “You might as well keep it,” he said. “We’re done here anyway.” There wasn’t much in his voice. The light flickered again and Russell stared at the ugly cement floor beneath his shoes. Then he waited for his friend to turn his head and when he did he took a wild swing, missing wide and clipping him in the ear instead. Raimie stumbled over an engine block but managed to keep hold of his cigarette. As he propped himself on his elbows he stuck it between his teeth. “Russell,” he said. “My man.” Then the light went off for good and he was laughing in the dark, saying it over and over again.

The neighborhoods were blacked out and the rain was coming steady when Russell pulled away from Raimie’s. The wind howled steadily too, but the lightning had moved on and with it the thunder had stopped. He passed the Chevron without stopping though the payphone was empty. It wasn’t too late to call Annie but he had already made up his mind.

Sally was on the couch and he covered her with a blanket and lit a few candles. Felice was sleeping too, snoring with the dog at her feet. Russell filled the tub with fresh water and found a few blankets in the closet. There was a crank radio around and he needed batteries so he carried a flashlight into the garage, taking tentative steps in the dark. The roll door was still open to the night and the wind filled the room immediately; outside a row of palm trees bowed in reverence until the gusts let up and then stood

back at attention. The dog rushed past him into momentary calm as a generator hummed down the road and he guessed another hurricane party must be gathering strength.

Russell stood in the open garage, waiting. Joe Cory's surfboards were lined up to his left and he tried to remember the last time he'd been in the ocean. The boards were all different sizes, each a graceful projection of simplicity—the best way to glide through moving water, to cut and rise evenly across the clean face of a wave. Russell remembered the blue one, a perfect little squash tail that Joe loaned him one day after Christmas. Joe had moved in that month, and the next morning they went paddling together while the girls slept. Joe rode a larger board, one that Russell also admired: the smooth glass job, the perfect angle of the nose, and the slight concave pressed into the fiberglass. They surfed for hours and when they returned Sally was making pancakes and they ate all together on the floor.

Now Russell just wanted the boards gone and he decided to toss them out into the wind. He dropped the flashlight and lifted the blue squash tail from its spot on the rack. It was sturdy in his hands but also light, buoyant, and he went through the open mouth of the garage and into the driveway. The wind picked up again with a shriek and Russell held the board at arm's length. With a flip he could send it sailing over his head and across the yard, maybe straight over the roof like a kite. If he timed it right the board might sail up above the palm trees and disappear into the night.

When the dog came crashing through the bushes, barking wildly until it reached the safety of the garage, the sky seemed pressurized, like the whole neighborhood was under water. Russell stood with the board in his hands as the dog whimpered, but he didn't think to look down until he felt the crabs brushing against his



bare feet. Then they were everywhere all at once, hissing against the pavement and brushing over his toes and ankles. Russell knew they were fleeing the storm surge, running from the beach and into the neighborhoods, and he also realized that they knew more than he did about what was out there. When the power came back on in a sudden charge of light he saw first the bright blue shape of the board in his hands, and beneath that the hard pink mass of crabs scuttling sideways, so many that they covered the ground and made it appear to vibrate and heave like an exposed lung. He began to kick his way back to the garage, slowly, holding the board over his head, but every time he swept a path with his feet it filled again in seconds.

The wind whipped and tried to take the board from his hands but this time he resisted, frozen in place, one leg stretched out in front of the other. Standing there in the driveway he didn't think of Annie alone in the hollow, her silhouette on the porch those times when he climbed out of his car and waited for her to turn her head. He didn't think of his sister either, her busted lip and her sunglasses, the lines along her cheeks like cracked glass. Instead he closed his eyes and leaned forward, hoping that when he opened them the light would be gone so that he could walk back to the garage in darkness. He stood, crouched slightly, holding tight to the surfboard as the dog cried out in the face of the storm and the wind whistled past his ears like a secret rising in the night.

## Girl with a Dog

Each morning at dawn he entered his small kitchen and started the tea water, returning in time to catch the kettle before it whistled. Through the window the old man could see the blue-green tall grass lining the road outside. But as the stove warmed, he shuffled away to wash his face and teeth, half asleep and busy in dream. He'd pause in the hall to fill his lungs, stretching his arms like a bird, and when his chest could hold no more he plunged down and ran his fingers over his toes, exhaling until his throat hurt from a lack of breath. He repeated the motion two or three times before returning to the kitchen, his body awash in a wonderful rush of blood.

His wife had drowned long ago and the man grew old alone in the tiny home, content that he might one day join her. He'd built their house from granite gathered from the hillside, taking only what he needed. Eventually the town itself began to shrink as the inhabitants moved away and didn't return. His remaining neighbor never forgot to remind him of this fact, but the old man had no intention of leaving. He was prepared to wait. If the hills wanted to take back what they had given, they could swallow his shelter one rock at a time.

He had a single hobby left and this was a form of carving he did at the kitchen table. The backyard was littered with stones, and he would collect enough to fill a bowl

and carry this bowl indoors where he set the stones side by side in a row. After the tea was poured he worked with a fishtail chisel, making simple cuts. When he closed his eyes at night, he never saw faces or days he'd once known; he didn't dream of mountains or valleys, or horses or even of love. He'd trained himself instead to dream in shapes: lines connecting with other lines, intersecting, bending to forms that surprised him. Occasionally these lines clustered together and he could detect an object or image. But he'd learned to look through them so that only shapes emerged and it went on like this until he woke, a parade of indecipherable figures moving slowly through his dreams. He spent his waking hours cutting stones to match the patterns, though it took him a very long time to finish even one, and when he did, he tossed it outside and began another.

One day as he was out collecting stones, the old man noticed a girl walking a large dog. She led the animal along the road, which was nothing more now than a slash of dirt and gravel littered with trenches. The girl wore a white dress that seemed much too big for her and a frayed and broken straw hat that covered her face. The dog followed obediently, though it was twice her size. He watched them trundle down the lane until they shrank to pinpricks in the distance. He stood and waited for them to return, wondering if his eyes were playing tricks. It had been a long time since he had seen anyone except the neighbor who brought potatoes each month and so when they didn't double back he made a note to inquire and went about his business.

But that night the shapes gave way to a light blue moonless evening and he found himself on the deck of a ship. His wife stood over him staring at the reflection of thunderheads on the water. Her skin was smooth and pale beneath her hairline—but he

was still an old man, and even in the dream he felt too weak to stand. The engines roared in the background and a fishing boat crested into view with a sail like a white giraffe. He knew that soon she would lean over the rail for a better look, and when she did, he knew that she would fall.

When the sun came up he set the tea water on the stove, but instead of washing he stood in front of the window and waited. The dream was already fading but he had no desire to handle the stones or to carve them into shapes. When the water was hot he lifted the kettle before it could whistle and watched the empty road. There he remained as the tea cup cooled in his hands. Eventually his legs began to cramp but he didn't move until he heard his neighbor outside.

No one knew about the girl with the dog. The neighbor looked peevishly about, his eyes on the carved stones in the yard. Don't be foolish, he said. The old man thanked him but he wasn't done. Maybe I'll leave too, he said. Then how will you get on? Afterward the old man gathered the potatoes and boiled a few for supper. But he never took his eyes from the window; he watched the road until the sky went from deep purple to gray and then to black.

That night he couldn't sleep. Just before sunrise he lay like a statue, concentrating on the moments of his life, picturing each scene, wandering through his past like a stranger. He remembered riding as a boy, how his father taught him to mount a horse and to handle the reins, how he could never remember in time to pull them tight. He conjured an image of his wife in her wedding gown, her hair tied back. She had a tilted nose and small ears and her face turned brown as a berry in the sun. They'd honeymooned on a ship and after three days below emerged to find the ocean a

fluorescent green, smooth as glass, and they fell asleep on the deck tangled in each other's arms. When they woke a crowd had gathered for the sunset. The man helped his bride to her feet and twisted his wedding band. He wanted to tell her he'd dreamed about her, though he had not, when suddenly the parade of parasols and white gloves streamed forward and a woman shrieked for joy. They were sailing into an enormous cloud of butterflies swooping seaward to greet them. The horizon melted and the commotion unfurled like a storm of multicolored stationary, the butterflies immense and very beautiful, and when they descended the man waved his arms to snatch one weightless from the sky. Soon everyone had corralled a butterfly and the deck grew busy while the people read their fortunes in the patterns of the wings. The air remained alive as if someone had swept loose the flowers of an enormous bougainvillea.

Morning arrived and the man climbed out of bed. His back ached but he marched to the kitchen, wiping his eyes as he went. When the water had been set he began to carve, listlessly at first, without care. Then the chisel seemed to come alive in his hands and he worked at the stone until his fingers bled. Before long, his nails started to wear through and he stopped in time to catch the kettle before it whistled. He drank the tea in two short gulps and began to grow hungry, but he kept carving until the stone grew wings. By dark he'd scraped enough so that he could see the thorax and the abdomen, and though the single stone wouldn't give way to legs, he managed to coax a hollow spot near the head for a compound eye. When he finished there were bruises forming along the creases in his fingers. But on the table, next to the smooth bend of his empty tea cup, rested his new work: a butterfly. It leaned on a single wing, unable to

support itself without assistance. The cuts were crude. It wasn't at all like the ones they'd seen but he knew with a night's sleep he could begin again in the morning.

So the old man fell into a new routine: instead of stretching his arms like a bird, he carved wings. Instead of filling his lungs with air, he blew dust from the table top and let it collect in the corners of the room. He stopped tossing the finished stones outside: now he lined the kitchen with his butterflies, some big, some small, but all of them carved in the fashion of the first. They lined the countertops and the windowsill, and when there was no more room, they began to crowd the cabinets and the sink. He got rid of his dishes and pots, bowls and spoons and glasses. He kept only the kettle and a single cup for tea and a dish for boiling potatoes though he rarely ate. When there seemed to be no more space the old man placed the butterflies on the floor, so that often it took him some time to make his way from the table to the stove. He still watched the road every morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of the white dress and straw hat. Once in a while the neighbor pounded on the back door, but that was all. He stood silently while the water heated, shaking loose tea leaves into his cup, ready to catch the kettle before the whistle could sound.

Then he began to dream only of the girl and the dog, and it was the same dream every time with one slight variation. Each night he saw the girl in the distance, noticed the white dress as it puddled at her feet. Her dog followed, never straying here or there but walking a straight and regal line behind, as if its only desire was to walk forever. The girl would adjust the straw hat every few steps without breaking stride, always with the tips of her fingers, always tilting her head toward the sun. When they were directly in front of the window the old man tapped the pane, hoping for a smile or even a look,

though this never happened. But what he had begun to see was that in each dream the girl grew just a little, just as the dog appeared to shrink. Though impossible, it was true enough: she was growing into a woman. In time the white dress no longer hugged her feet: one day it touched her leg just above the ankle, then slid to her calf, then to the knee. Her hair fell long against her shoulders which had grown sinewy and strong beneath the straps. Even her face had changed; her cheeks no longer bounced when she walked. Her lips had become her fullest feature and her nose bobbed like a ripe fruit. Though he tried to ignore it, the old man couldn't help but notice a swelling in her chest.

Despite the dreams and his morning ritual, he never saw the girl. The neighbor had stopped coming with potatoes and the old man couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten. The kitchen had become so cluttered that he swept his feet when he walked, nudging the stones to clear a path. Occasionally he had to make a new pile and when he did he worked gingerly as his back had become bowed and his fingers were so covered in scabs that he wondered if they still carried prints.

Then one night the dreaming stopped. When he woke, he remembered only darkness, as if he had been sleeping underneath the bed instead of on top. In his dream he'd waited, waited for the familiar sight of the gnarled gravel road, framed by blue in the sky that stretched up to the edge of the window. He waited to see the girl in her white dress—a woman now, really—and her dog, the animal no more than a puppy. But none of these images came. For what seemed like an eternity he watched the endless dark. He watched until he became bored, then angry. When the anger dissipated he felt fear, and shortly after he opened his eyes and found the day there to greet him.

He dragged himself to the kitchen, favoring his swollen knees, using the walls to balance. The stone butterflies were piled everywhere, waist high in some places, and it was a struggle to move. He could feel them beneath his feet; he'd long ago quit worrying about their fragile wings. Even the empty kettle proved difficult to lift, so he filled it with the cup, pouring water through the spout a little at a time. The day outside was overcast; gray storm clouds gathered, swallowing the light as they moved. When he'd set the kettle the old man placed his hands on the stove and peered through the window. Out of the corner of his eye he saw movement on the road and before he could turn his head he knew they would be there. The girl came along in enormous strides, her legs cutting the air like a blade. The white dress held her nakedness at bay, but barely—the hem line rode her swaying hips, and she swung her free arm like a fierce pendulum. The rain clouds continued to devour the sky and the wind kicked in gusts, blowing bits of dirt and gravel but the girl marched straight toward the storm and when the wind took the straw hat from her head she didn't reach to catch it. Her hair blew in a frenzy and she marched on, quickening her gait.

The old man felt the stove warming but he didn't move. At that moment he caught sight of the dog, a legless dash of fur struggling to keep up. The pup ran its line behind the leash but couldn't gain on the girl, who seemed to pick up speed with each stride. They were nearly in front of the window when the man rapped his knuckle against the glass, but it hardly made a noise. Then the pup stumbled and the leash jerked it from its feet. The girl strode on without missing a step, legs pumping, and the man watched as she began to drag the dog behind. He banged his knuckle harder on the pane, banged until he thought the window might break; but it didn't matter. The dog



had stopped squirming. Instead the tiny figure bounced occasionally against a rut in the road, like a kite come to earth too soon.

By the time he realized the stove had begun to burn him, the old man was already stumbling away from the window, peddling through the mass of carved stones, wheeling his arms in the air as he went. He banged into the table and scattered one pile of butterflies, then another, and found the chair without looking. For a long second he couldn't catch himself, and he thought at that moment that he would die. But the moment passed. He took stock of the room as wind shook the walls and fat rain drops struck the roof.

The storm had enveloped the house and it was almost dark in the kitchen when the kettle began to hum, a sound the old man had not heard in a very long time. As the spout flickered and the steam issued forth he heard something else, something like an enormous rustle, and he placed both feet firmly on the floor. But it was only when the whistle caught and the kettle began to cry out that the old man noticed the mass of butterflies rise in a slow swarm, their wings chasing a cloud of chalky dust through the air. He smiled even as he felt them crowding fast, warming his body while they pressed close and forced him deep into the chair. The parade of movement continued as the butterflies erupted from the piles and a stream of color exploded in the dismal light. The kettle called in the background but he'd closed his eyes and begun to surrender his breath, forgetting all that he knew while the mass multiplied around him, filling the room with life.

## Passenger

You've never before noticed the buses that run to the beach but you don't hesitate when the driver lets you on, that's for sure. Your skin is crumpled paper from the pills and for all you know your brain is showing. The driver doesn't flinch. He's hunched over a fan, absorbing the breeze like a black hole. The bus is small, turtle shaped, and you head for the back and try not to look out the window. The sun's too hot, the clouds too close. Palm trees spring up unannounced and it hurts to turn your head.

The hospital is somewhere back there, flanked by a retention pond and an endless row of alligator ditches. From the beach, at least you can hitch south along the two-lane and go see Jim Lemon. He's the most relaxed person you know when he's not sore and anyway there's a story this time, a good one. How many people can say they've fallen off the roof of the ER only to end up on a table inside? That you gave them the slip and dashed into the Florida night free as a Friday must mean your luck is changing. Jim Lemon will sure be happy about that.

Still, your head is bandaged and the ocean seems far away. At a stop light you spot a clump of hollyhocks growing out of the weeds by the side of the road and close your eyes. Then you're riding by a gas station and a chain grocery store and an outlet

that sells lumber and screws. This, this you expect. You work your way to the front, weaving through the empty seats, and wait for the driver to say something. You sit down behind him but still can't feel the fan.

“Hey,” you ask. “Are we really going to the beach?”

There's a pause before he catches you in the rearview. “Sure,” he says.

“Which one?” you say, a stupid question. You try to think of a street name but your head won't cooperate. You try to think of a town. You fell from the tallest part of that double roof and surprised the nurses by waking up. They had to tell you to close your mouth. You don't know what direction you're headed, only where you've been. Outside the buildings are all one story. The bus passes another gas station and then a second-hand store where a woman sits smoking in a plastic chair out front, miscast in the bright light. The look on her face says she's waiting for the right time to hang herself.

“We're going to Patrick.” It's the driver. He has wild hair, but it can't hide the dent in his forehead. It's a real crater, like he's been hit by a shovel. You wonder how often he catches people staring. “Then north,” he says. “And buddy—sit still.”

He holds up a finger as if to punctuate the request. You cruise by a few strip malls in silence and try to keep from talking with your hands.

“I work at the hospital,” you're telling him, though this is only half true. You worked on top removing old shingles but that might be over now. The driver nails you again in the rearview and you're off, back to the back with heavy feet.

After a mile cars honk and it isn't friendly. The bus stops by a tangle of saw palm bushes and a cement bench emblazoned with an advertisement for a law firm. A

lady gets on, weighed down by plastic bags. A white blouse hardly covers her arms, and she doesn't appear to be wearing pants. She slides in behind the driver. You hope Jim Lemon still has butterflies in his backyard and a hammock. He's a mailman and you've decided that it might be better if he isn't home when you arrive.

But pretty soon you're making your way to the front. You can't sit still after all.

The lady is saying something but the driver isn't listening. Or he isn't answering. The bags bounce in her lap as the bus bumps along. Her fingers are laced through the handles and there's skin missing on her knuckles and scabs but she doesn't seem worried. You slide into the seat across from her and look out the window at a motorcycle shop that also advertises jet skis.

"My husband," she's saying. "He eats and eats but he can't keep the weight on. He's got this leg thing and this arm thing so he can't leave the house. I put the TV on but he can't eat during the commercials. They make him sick."

You can tell now she isn't wearing pants. Beneath the blouse she wears a bathing suit, and stuck to the bottoms of her feet are a pair of rubber sandals that have flattened to a pulp. You wonder if she's going to the beach, and if so, what she'll do when she gets there.

"Sometimes he sleeps for ten hours," she says. "Then he gets up and eats. But those commercials, boy. He puts his fork down soon as he hears the music."

All at once she's staring and you wonder if you've been talking the whole time. You want to ask her about that husband but maybe you already have. She pauses, mouth open. Her eyes are dull, too close together, and her lips are red and blue. But her nose is perfect—beautiful, actually. Just the sight of it makes you rejoice.

“I swear,” she goes on. “He’ll eat anything. As long as there are no commercials, he’d eat the animals at the zoo.”

Then the brakes. There’s no sound but you’re sliding forward. Sideways actually, since you’re facing the wrong direction. The driver grunts as the doors open. When you pull yourself out from between the seats a man is fitting nickels into the change slot. The driver grips the wheel, looks straight ahead. The new guy is shirtless in the aisle, carrying a stringless guitar.

You shut your eyes again. A moment later he’s still standing tall. The driver is driving, telling him to sit down. But guitar guy’s anchored there and he’s enormous.

“Rawr,” he says. “Fucking rawr, man.”

He’s big, hairy and glistening, and something about that guitar triggers the fear. He’s a huge, broken smile attached to mostly muscle and beef. You try to duck as he looks your way.

“I know you,” he says, but you shake your head. You assure him that he is incorrect.

“Nope,” you tell him. “Not possible.”

He stares past you, out the window. The driver barks but you can’t make it out. It’s impossible to concentrate on anything except this smiling maniac.

“Jesus,” the man says. “Are you working on my body? Are you working on my mind?”

He’s getting louder. The bus slows and you hope the driver will escort him back into the street where he belongs. What right does he have? What right does anybody have? In the hospital they asked if you wanted to pray. That was the first night and you

took it as a bad sign. The nurses circled the bed, kneeling down in their bright, white uniforms, a constellation of lips and teeth. They said you were brave, but you knew better. Maybe they prayed for you, but probably they were praying for their sons, or for the husbands they lay with in the dark. Even then you were dreaming about Jim Lemon's house, the hammock out back and the warm shade of the papaya tree. You knew you would run as soon as there was a chance.

Guitar guy takes a seat behind you, still mumbling, and you hug your knees tight to your chest. The bus moves and the bag lady keeps on about her husband. Guitar guy stops to take a breath. Then he's banging around and back to his mumbling.

Out the window a sign flashes for Lake Surprise, followed by a billboard in Spanish. The palm trees drift and the sidewalk is stretched across the ground like a careful incision. You can smell booze and sweat as you fiddle with a bracelet on your wrist. The driver says something over the loud speaker and the ride might be coming to an end. The brakes whine and you brace yourself. Guitar guy barks from the back seat. The bracelet comes off in your hand and there's panic, but you're not pulling yourself apart. You're too busy examining the number printed along the band.

The bus pulls over and you slide down to hide. It isn't a hospital bracelet. It's from the county lock up. Correctional Facility, it says, and the building rears up in your head, a metal strongbox tied together with wire. You're standing by the side of the road waiting for a ride. You fight the vertigo buzz of insects as they swim against the weeds, but no one picks up here. So you walk. The ground is littered with cow parsley and purple flowers. Wood storks waddle back and forth in the distance as if they too were waiting for something to happen.

The ride is over but you're consumed with the nurses that never were. Their white uniforms disappear like the loose end of a dream as the driver opens the doors and hurries into the sunshine. You wait for guitar guy to go first but he's hunkered down. The bag lady cranes her neck, eyes wide like she's viewing a car crash. Then the bus is filling up with children, but you can tell immediately that something's wrong. The children stare straight ahead, eyes vacant, and wander delicately down the aisles. It's like they're made of glass. A pair of stern-faced women usher them around, whispering orders. They carry clipboards and put two in a seat, pushing them down gently like planting candles in a cake. No one looks at you even though you're dirty and bandaged, cowering from the floor. The bus is suddenly full and full of silence—a fact that only dawns on you as the driver yanks the vehicle back into the street. There you are, drifting toward the beach and behind you guitar guy has also gone quiet. The bag lady fidgets in place. She scratches her ear with a shoulder as you climb the seat to get a better look.

At first it's hard to tell the boys from the girls. Their faces are oval shaped, bright and blank at the same time. The clip boards shuttle from seat to seat, scrubbing cheeks with sun lotion, adjusting hats and collars. Occasionally they pause to wipe a spit bubble from the corner of a mouth and move on, leaving a trail of white cabbage heads in their wake. You stuff the bracelet in your jacket pocket. It doesn't matter that you've been lost, or that you have nowhere to go. It doesn't matter that your shoes don't match. The clipboard women have started a sing-a-long, and though you don't know the words, you clap anyway. In one cheerless voice the kids are naming things they hope to find at the shore: sea shells and sea gulls, sunshine and beach balls. They mangle the harmony, but even that doesn't matter now. You're surrounded by angels and you want

to warm your hands on all this light. There's some sort of paradise up ahead, and this time you've been invited.

The bus coasts through a turn, rumbling past an abandoned marina. The slips are empty, grown over with pepper trees and then you're going over the causeway and headed for the barrier island. The river is spread out beneath the bridge like a glimmering parachute, the surface dotted with boats. At the bottom of the bridge you can make out the horizon just past the dunes. When the ride is over you'll file out and head to where the sand turns into surf. Guitar guy will come along and the bag lady and the driver too. You'll lead the way to the surf and the beach will open up like a scroll. You'll read the future in the rising tide. Then you can wade out into the sea foam, giving thanks for the mistakes you've made and the ones you'll make again, for the lazy lines you've painted with your life and the hangovers and the rusted cars you've abandoned, the lies and the cigarettes, the times you stole from Jim Lemon and went right to the pawn shop, the fights you had with your mom, the friends who hate you now.

But even as your heart swells and the bus slides into the beach lane, you can feel the fear returning. The yeasty faces all around you begin to lose their shape. The singing has curdled and the children fidget in their seats, fat arms churning like oars. The clipboards are hurriedly preparing for the exodus. The bag lady is shouting at the driver and guitar guy kicks at the seat. Ahead, the ocean sparkles. The sky is a flat blue painted with see-through clouds, but you're left wondering why God decided to go and dress you all like monsters and send you out into all this brightness. This, you think, is something you'll never fully understand.



## The Interloper

It would take longer to bury the rabbits than to burn them but Carter Martin worked at the dirt beneath the big elm all afternoon, avoiding the roots where he could, digging a string of small, tidy holes. When the last one was dug, he sat for a while listening to the phone ring in the shed. Anyone would think him a fool for going through all this trouble, but he'd kept the animals at least as long as he'd raised his own daughters and he wasn't about to hurry them out of existence with a match.

It was his intention to finish well before the sun disappeared. The day had been a bad one and he thought he could save it by making the lookout before the light was gone. There was a place there that he could sit and watch the families as they gathered, clustered shapes pinned in silhouette against the long blanketing sky. A few weeks back he'd found the youngest Musgrove girl wandering the woods behind his house like a wild animal and he'd made a habit of checking on her when he could. The Musgroves were one of many clans that had come in the last few years, a large family and a sturdy one; they thrived here beneath the blistering sun—even the children worked year round, climbing the branches and carting peaches home in their arms. It would be faster to drive the Buick, he knew, instead of walking, though the car needed attention: he'd have to patch two tires and do something about the windshield. If he hurried, Carter

could take the woods, arrive at the lookout spot well before last light and enjoy the stray color of the evening as he sat shaded by the live oaks. From there he could watch the children play as their kin came straggling home across the fields, waving hats in their hands as if they could still the night or hold the silver-gray glow from sagging in the sky.

Some days Carter's life seemed to show no mark of time. His own girls had moved away, one and then the other after high school. He thought he'd miss them more than he did, but they'd grown up fast and pretty and without a mother. It was a relief to see them married. They were old enough now to call, but too young, he guessed, to visit, though it always entered their minds to remind him about his bad eyes and that he was alone out here in Black Key. They liked to tell him too whenever they had the chance that raising rabbits was a bust and always would be, though it wasn't clear what else a man his age should do. So he waited. The house was his and he was prepared to hang around until the end. He'd been the Rabbit Man of Black Key for as long as he could remember and he wasn't about to leave for anyone or to answer to any other name.

As he picked himself up he felt dizzy. He leaned on the shovel and studied the yard. It was growing wild, losing shape since the saw grass had begun to encroach. Soon it would creep across the collapsed fence and climb the wire hutches. The holes were laid out in a long line, as if the earth had begun to split and might continue if he dared to turn his back. Still, he made his way toward the house. His shirt was soaked through and he wanted to cool his lips. The rabbits would wait; this he knew for sure.

It was much darker inside but cooler too, and Carter realized that he was still carrying the shovel. At first he could see only the outlines of things and he froze in the kitchen, unable to go any further. A small fire had broken out and he'd been without electricity in the main house for a week, but there were candles set up in a row on the table and he put down the shovel and moved to light them. He had a hot plate in the shed outside and a kettle but he missed the radio more than the lights or even the stove and especially how the stations would come in clear only when he opened the icebox. He used to stand staring in at the shelves and close the door slowly, trying to trick whatever faulty connection had been established. It was a game he played and anyway, it kept him from his own thoughts.

Through the front window he could see the mailbox was down again. There were black trash bags scattered where the gravel road curved close to the driveway and at least one had split open, emptying across the sandy grass. It was no great sin in Black Key to dump but he didn't understand why they threw it here. He'd seen the oldest Musgrove boy on Toroda Creek Road a half dozen times that week, driving his yellow pickup back and forth down the dirt strip, letting the engine out in long, heavy breaths as he passed. The road led only to the lookout, or hooked south and eventually fed the swamp. But there was Wade Musgrove regardless, his face full of venom, rumbling past, it seemed, day and night. Some nights the clamor seemed just outside Carter's window, so close he wanted to call out.

The phone began to ring again from the shed and suddenly Carter felt very tired. The sound seemed small and far away, like the narrow noise of a single scrub jay crying out in the distance. He couldn't remember ever hearing the phone this much and the

sound made him uneasy. But he knew also that he'd stopped paying attention lately, and this was dangerous. He was alone out here and yet he wasn't, and this was a thing he had never thought about before stumbling upon little Rosamund in the woods. Ever since he'd found her and set her back adrift with her people he had begun to feel lonely.

By the time he made it to the yard again the phone had stopped and he thought that maybe the rabbits could wait until morning. It was later than he thought and his legs had grown weary. A few short clouds worked across the sky and gave him something else to worry on. If it rained, the holes would fill. But worse than that, the hutch might take on water and he'd have to deal with the stink, separate the wet bodies one at time. It didn't seem right to let them sit. Still, he turned away from the line of tiny graves and went to the shed in search of some patches for the tires and a crow bar for the windshield. It would be quicker to drive the Buick, he thought. Even if he had to work the glass out entirely, it would do him good to see those people, to see Rosamund, even for a short while.

A month had passed since he'd found her wandering the edge of the creek. She'd been making her way across the marsh in a plain white dress, teetering beneath the overhanging branches. He crouched in the brush and watched, lowering his rifle. It would not have been the first time that he'd chased through the swamp in search of something that wasn't there and when he was sure she wasn't one of his rabbits escaped from the yard or a loose dog, he approached; her cheeks were pinched and dotted with moles and he could tell that she was lost and scared.

On the way back he held the gun askew and asked who she was and where she lived, but she couldn't speak, or wouldn't. When they came as far as the house she

stopped and looked at her. She was an ugly child, with a sizeable forehead and a nose like a shovel tip. She stood staring at her toes so he talked to fill the silence. He told her he had lived in the house all his life and raised two girls there. He told her their names, and he told her his. Then he showed her the big elm that seemed to grow up out of the broken earth at an angle and had a hawk's nest in its branches. By then she'd seen the rabbits. There were three dozen or more packed in the hutch, rabbits with full-white coats that shook as they trembled. They were fat and well fed and she marveled at how they sat atop one another and refused to move even when she rattled the wire cages. He left her and went to find the gas can so he could start the Buick. He didn't know who she belonged to but the sun had dropped over the trees and someone down the road was missing a child and should be fairly frantic by now. At least he hoped so. But he also knew there was no reckoning with people anymore.

Of course she refused to climb into the car. They stood for a while staring at each other while the cicadas chirped in the bushes, the sound steady as a pulse in the background. Then he hobbled over to the rabbit cage and opened the door. He could feel her watching and when he lifted the first rabbit by the scruff of the neck and brought it back to the Buick he thought she brightened a bit. He made several trips, trying each time to coax her onto the seat. Eventually she climbed in and took hold of one the rabbits by the feet, dragging it across the vinyl as it whimpered and began to shriek. Carter drove slow and easy, bumping along the dirt road, locked on the soft, gray line ahead. He knew that this was something strange and wonderful, and yet for some reason that wouldn't come to him, he had never been so excited and so afraid in his life.

It was only later that he'd found the tires flat, and a few more days before someone tossed a brick at the windshield, which he now worked at with a crow bar, trying to chip away the broken bits of glass. He'd begun to receive visitors in the night though he'd never seen their faces; they were always gone by the time he came out with the gun. Now the sound of the phone startled him and the crow bar slipped. He saw blood before he felt anything. With a quick motion he drew back and struck suddenly, attacking the windshield until he was out of breath. Glass covered the dash and the vinyl bench seat but there was enough of a hole to see out and he dropped the crow bar on the floor and closed his eyes.

It had been a long time since he'd had a smoke but he wanted one now. He thought there might be some loose tobacco in the shed or a cigarette left over from the last time his girls had stopped in. He didn't really think so, but he checked anyway, striding across the driveway, cradling his bloody hand. Inside he found his boning knife and kept busy ripping a strip of cloth for a bandage. There were still five or six pelts hanging over the workbench, leftover from the last time he'd killed for food. As he wrapped his hand he realized they were all he had left. There was no point in messing with the rest, not with the way the poison had ruined them. It had taken too long for Carter to realize that something was wrong, that his rabbits were sick. The days went by and they refused to eat. They huddled in a tangled mass while their breathing slowed and one by one they began to close their eyes. But Carter hardly noticed. He was watching the woods instead, wondering about little Rosamund, whether she remembered him, if she ever turned away from home. While his rabbits choked and

died he'd been picturing her in the woods, following a path back to his house through the marsh in the moonlight.

The phone rang again. Carter clutched the knife in his good hand. His daughters had stopped calling when he'd told them about the girl. They said it wasn't natural for him to act this way. Maybe they were finally coming home now, speeding down the highway in their husband's trucks, ignoring the speed limit signs as they cut through the warm summer wind. But he knew it was just the sheriff again, calling to warn him off, to tell him to keep his distance from the Musgrove place. The sheriff had tried to help, but Carter knew he wouldn't intervene again. They'd done their talking; now there was nothing to keep them from coming back, from finishing the job. He dropped the knife and walked out into the twilight. Beneath the big elm he saw his holes lined up, waiting to be filled, but the thought made him sick. When he got back he knew that he'd burn them after all.

The Buick started on the first try and he pulled out along the gravel road. It was hard to see in the gathering dark and he listened for the sound of another engine behind him as he drove. The speedometer didn't budge but Carter could tell he was going fast. It would be sheer luck if the patches held. The thick air poured through the hole in the windshield and he had to slow down around the first curve. The steering wheel felt at once too thin and too heavy in his grip and he remembered the bandage; he'd been driving with his hands together as if in prayer. When he made his last turn toward the lookout spot he could hardly see the narrow brown leaves of the oak trees that lined the road. He cut the engine. The field opened up before him but there was no one there. He was too late to catch a glimpse of anyone coming home for supper.

Behind him the road was empty. The night air was humid. It seemed to lift itself up and close around his face. Through the broken windshield he could see a distorted version of the sky and in this sky there were wide spaces between the stars. The sheriff had told him to stay away but he didn't listen. Across the field he could see the Musgrove house, the red painted siding and the long slanted roof, the brick chimney. He tried to picture an outline of Rosamund on the porch, her tiny hands clinging to the rail, her face scrunched-up and gay. But his mind was black. He'd saved her from the woods but now he could only remember the weight of the shovel, the pain in his hips as he broke the earth, his weakened knees beneath him. He dug one hole and then another, piling grass clumps, sifting sand, counting. These were the thoughts he entertained as headlights melted the shadows behind the Buick. There were three sets, maybe four. They'd finally come for him. The yellow truck was up in front and for a moment he wished that he had remembered to bring the rifle, or at least the boning knife. But when he heard the first door close in the distance and the first voice call his name, Carter only held his breath. He stared into the night thinking that a storm was coming soon and that lately this had been a land of little rain.



## Consilience

Jessup Gator had eyes the perfect blue color of water on a map, and if he was not an especially handsome man, neither was he an ugly one. Otherwise there might have been more talk about how he never wore sunglasses or how his eyes appeared to change during hurricane season and never seemed to blink. But years in the sun had at least forced him to squint, and the salt water behind his knees reduced him to quarter-stepping down the dead-end street and over the two-lane highway on his way to the ocean each morning, where he fished now that he could no longer surf, always in the peaceful manner of catch-and-release. It was on one of these days that he found a perfect Florida orange on the ground, the fruit having come loose from the great tree on the property next door; but it was on a different day that he decided to build a boat in his front yard, and on another day yet that Raimie, his long-time neighbor, began to watch him as he worked, finally inviting the whole block to gather in the driveway as they sucked vodka out of plastic cups and washed it down with laughter.

Boats were not uncommon on the barrier island; Raimie had one himself, a yellowing skiff for sailing that sat alongside his low-slung, cinderblock house. Across the street Bill Sparrow had a wide-bottomed bobber with a splintered, fiberglass hull and lettering along the edge in Spanish that had faded with time and now said nothing

of consequence. A few folks had canoes and a few more had purchased yacht-like vessels during the high times of the real estate boom, though most of these only guarded the yards like tanks, perched harmlessly on trailers, miscast now as refuge for nesting squirrels or curious egrets.

Even Jessup's two sons had boats: Ruby captained a fishing trawler on the other side of the state in the Gulf, and Ty Ty drove an airboat for swamp tours, though truthfully, neither owned the rigs outright. This made Jessup an odd man out, a fact that had never once bothered him, at least until the dreams began. He'd been fishing one day in the shore break, counting the hours until noon, casting a lazy line in search of pompano or jack. Instead, he caught a single ladyfish, delicate and slender, and in his haste carried it back accidentally, the pole wedged between his free arm and hip, the fish riding high in his shirt pocket.

At home there were fans blowing this way and that, circulating the light breeze through all corners of his small, crumbling beach house; every scrap paper napkin shook as if in a quiet fit of ecstasy. Jessup was expecting his sons. He placed his reel along the windowsill in the kitchen and stood admiringly as the last of the late-morning sun streamed through the gauzy, quivering curtains. It was at that moment, feeling cheerful and tired, that Jessup smelled the fish and noticed a tail peeping from his own front pocket. Though it was very dead, he was shocked to see the soft, gray finger admonishing him for his carelessness.

When Ruby called to say that he'd be late on the visit, Jessup didn't bother to quarrel, and when Ty Ty called to beg out entirely, he merely said: OK. Then Ruby called back, sensing his father's lack of enthusiasm and soon Jessup had another day to

himself. Since he didn't drink, he was no longer popular with the neighbors, who thought him queer anyway for his habits as a sportsman. Aside from his catch-and-release philosophy, he also fed the squirrels out back and the herons, and by default, the raccoons. The grass was never green since he never watered it. But he left seeds for the doves and dropped walnuts along the fence. Hawks circled overhead, alert to the menagerie of animals in Jessup's otherwise overrun backyard.

That afternoon he had a dream that he was driving downhill, picking up speed. Since he didn't own a car and hadn't in years, he didn't consider the gear shifter or the brakes or even the suspension. As a Floridian, he had little experience on hills, but he didn't worry about this either. Instead he concentrated on the feeling that something was washing up behind him, something too big to fit in the frame of his rearview. Jessup knew that he had to keep going, even if the steering wheel seemed to be growing smaller in his hands and the car itself waffled out like a spent accordion. There were shiny cars to his left and right but none of the dream-drivers shared Jessup's sense of panic and he laid on the horn as he passed each vehicle, gesturing, though he had nothing specific to yell out the window as he sped by.

When he woke from his nap on the couch, he returned the dead fish to the ocean, carrying it gently in his palm. It sunk like a stone. Sea foam collected around his knees and the rushing surf touched the edges of his shorts. Jessup tried to draw meaning from his dream and then from the present moment, but he'd never been a deep thinker. So he turned away from the cresting waves and quarter-stepped back across the highway, down the lane and into his tree-lined yard where the sun sat pinned to the horizon like a soft, pink pillow.

In the morning his animals were waiting, chattering as the day warmed. A swarm of egrets stood in line as if waiting on some advertised event, while a pair of fat squirrels tip-toed along the power lines. A few more reared up on their hind legs in an odd prayer before racing through the sandy yard, unable to keep still. Raimie was at the fence line, hauling a load of beer cans to the trash. He gave a quick salute as Jessup commenced with the feeding ritual, leaving a string of extra walnuts by the base of the saw palm and a messy load of seed in the shade of the over-hanging sea grape, sure to attract a few late-night raccoons to his neighbors' chagrin.

As a retiree, Jessup worked little and spent less, but he collected plenty from the curbside trash that his neighbors dragged out each week for the trucks to haul away. He kept most of these items in a wide-mouthed garage, which was otherwise empty since he had no car to stuff inside. Now he entered the garage and surveyed the scene: there were tire tubes for floating and a cluster of dried bamboo; three ancient long boards, each over nine feet in length and adorned with a single fin; a set of deck chairs made of PVC, the cushions stained by dirt and rain. There were tools too from Jessup's days working roofs and plenty of tree-trimming equipment. If he'd never invented anything of worth or saved a life, Jessup had at least put a string of roofs on the houses that dotted the barrier island—solid ones, the kind that didn't blow off every time a storm came across the Atlantic. And he'd trimmed more coconut and date palms than anyone could count, taking care not to damage the trees any more than he had to in order to please the most meticulous of his various employers, all of them in love with their yards only after they'd been redrawn in a series of unholy straight lines that stood with all the grace of a pile of bones.

As Jessup slid the garage door back, Raimie watched, a puff of smoke rising from a tiny cigar. First Jessup hauled the bamboo and the tire tubes into the front yard. Next he dragged out the giant surf boards, along with the deck chairs and all the old clothesline he could find. When the sun rose over the house in a flash of brilliant white, Jessup changed course, arranging the boards beneath a towering hibiscus. After that he went back for a few scraps of plywood and stood in the shade for a while, contemplating the opening stanzas of his homemade boat. Raimie leaned over the fence, his face a balled-up question mark.

By the time Ruby and Ty Ty showed up the following weekend, Raimie had gathered a crowd in his driveway to watch Jessup work. He'd constructed three different ramshackle boats during the week, disassembling each the next morning, only to begin again with a different plan. For the current model Jessup had wandered the neighborhood in search of green coconuts, asking at the door before he shimmied up the trunks of the palms with a boning knife between his teeth. Then he rolled the coconuts along the road, two at a time, returning every few paces to shepherd them along the edge of the street for the world to see.

Ruby arrived first and parked his F-150 in the drive, taking up the entire concrete slab. He sat and finished his beer, soaking up the AC while the radio played. He was used to his father's eccentric ways and it didn't bother him in the slightest that the yard was full of tools and junk and coconuts, or that Raimie and his clan were partying in the middle of the day for no reason other than the spectacle. When Ty Ty pulled up in his identical if slightly mauled F-150, he parked half on the grass and half on the road, narrowly missing the mailbox. Unlike his brother, Ty Ty sprang from the

truck, slamming the door so that rust dropped to the ground. His boots were barely beneath him before he was standing in front of Raimie, shouting for him to mind his own business and return his fat face inside where he could fold himself into his fat couch and die. By then Ruby had opened the door of his own truck, which happened to be newly waxed. But he didn't get out right away. Instead, he reached behind the seat for another Busch and gently shook the ice chips from the rim of the can, scanning the scene with a pair of deep-set eyes, the same perfect blue as his father's. "Dad," he said, in a voice barely audible, and when Jessup failed to look up from lashing together the barrage of PVC pieces, Ruby only blinked and popped the tab on his beer and waited.

That afternoon they sat around the kitchen table. Ruby and Ty Ty drank beer out of Ruby's cooler while Jessup squeezed orange juice into a glass pitcher. When Ty Ty had been unable to relocate Raimie, he did the next best thing he could think of—remove the fruit from his famous tree. The lawn-chair crowd took cover as he attacked the tree, shaking the fruit loose, growling all the while under his breath. By then Ruby had sauntered over and together they gathered the bounty and brought it inside to their father, since they hadn't until that moment thought to bring him anything at all to mark the occasion of the visit.

As Jessup placed the pitcher on the table, his boys were still peppering him with questions, Ty Ty with his declarative, hard-nosed retorts, and Ruby with two-and-three-word sentences that sounded like they came from fortune cookies.

"Dad, I mean, a damn boat made out of coconuts won't float," said Ty Ty.  
"Don't matter how many boards you ride under the bow." He placed his empty can on

the floor and smashed it with his boot heel, leaving a mark in the shape of a half-moon on the terrazzo.

“You’re just bored,” Ruby said flatly. He was taking an inventory of the house, trying to remember what, if anything, his father might have kept from the early days when their mother had still been around, when the house seemed always flooded with nice things, vases for flowers and glassware and silver plates, wall hangings and lamps and ornate, decorative stuff that Ruby honestly had no names for.

Jessup didn’t answer. He stepped back, looking, it seemed, as much at his biological life’s work as the freshly squeezed juice. Then he went back out the front door and resumed his work lashing the links of PVC together so that he could connect them crossways with bamboo and attach the long boards and then the coconuts. He’d figured out a way to get his piecemeal contraption to float without tipping, and though he loved his sons as much as a father possibly could, he wanted to finish before he changed his mind and had to start all over again.

Both boys stayed the night. Ruby sipped beer from his position on the front stoop and watched his father tinker. When the sun began to drop in the west, Raimie returned to his lawn chair and fell into a deep sleep, until he snored himself awake and retired for the evening. Ruby waved him good night and waited until they were alone before addressing his father.

“Pop,” he said, easing in beside the hibiscus tree, admiring the clap-trap vessel in the dark. “What are you gonna do with this?”

Jessup wanted to tell Ruby about the dreams, but he didn’t have the words. He worried about his animals, the squirrels and egrets and the doves and herons, even Bill

Sparrow's miserable dog, but there was no way to explain this either. Raccoons patrolled the island at night, slinking over the mess of chain-link that had grown recently between the property lines and Jessup worried about them too. He was confused about the Neighborhood Watch Program, and a new push for recycling meant that blue and yellow bins floated curbside all week in the streets. There were posters on the telephone poles calling for lagoon refurbishment and a cry for speed bumps to slow traffic—even a ban on gas-powered mowers. Some days Jessup didn't recognize the place except for Raimie, but until the dreams, he never worried. Now cars were the size of trucks and no one went outside. Condos grew from the dunes and everything was on wheels and the wheels wore dark-tinted windows and shimmered like cheap jewelry.

“Pop. You there?” Ruby loomed above him, a boyish grin in denim..

“I'm just passing time,” Jessup told his son. Ruby was a man now really, calm and quiet if not wise or kind, his face a familiar family map of slopes and creases.

“Don't worry,” Jessup said. “I know what you think. But I got it all under control.”

When Ty Ty woke the next morning, he insisted that Jessup dismantle the fool boat and stop with the lashing and the coconut collecting, standing in the yard all day while he soaked up too much sun and got laughed at by the neighbors. “Damn it, Dad,” he muttered. “Old Raimie's watching you like a circus. You're scaring the neighborhood. We're a month into hurricane season and instead of trimming the trees back you're making a mess.”

As Ty Ty lectured, Jessup stood in the breeze, counting the seconds between the crashing waves. Even from the porch he could hear the swells falling against the shore; over time his ears had tuned out the traffic and embraced the sea. But Ty Ty reminded



him so much of his mother then that Jessup grinned. The thought came suddenly, and though he'd previously made up his mind to continue, he considered dismantling the vessel. At least he'd tell his sons what they wanted to hear.

Ruby seemed pleased enough when his father agreed so amiably to quit that he leaned against the mailbox and watched the open band of breaking daylight, disinterested in anything else. Ty Ty remained sour. He swore he'd return the following weekend, and the next and the next, though he and his brother only came around once or twice a year. When Ty Ty drove away that morning, Jessup waved from the street. Ruby had gone inside to survey the house again. He'd gained permission to take what he liked. By the time Raimie rose from bed and leaned over the fence, Ruby was drinking his way through a new six-pack, the radio cranked as he flew like a bullet back to the Gulf to catch the second half of the football game on his new TV.

Jessup dreamed again that night, this time of a blinding white. He'd only once seen snow, in a picture his wife sent from her family farm in Kansas. One day when Ruby and Ty Ty were old enough for pimples, she left to visit her parents. She didn't say when she'd be home. Christmas passed, then New Year's. That weekend Jessup enlisted the locals to help fix his roof. The neighborhood was young then, full of friends with young faces; they often worked and surfed together, and when the sun went down over the island they ate and drank together too. They finished on a Sunday evening and a swirl of purple clouds passed overhead while the guys gathered ladders and scoured the grass for lost nails and fallen bits of tar paper. The sky framed his house so perfectly that Jessup stood back and bumped into the mailbox. When the door fell open he reached blindly inside. Ruby and Ty Ty had quit fighting long enough to find a hammer

and a nail and took turns trying to make it disappear into the square face of a hibiscus stump. Only when Jessup realized he had something in his hand did he look at the homemade postcard, a picture of his wife.

She was sitting on top of a bright-red barn, smiling, her long legs slightly bowed. She wore a wool cap pulled tight around her cheeks and pink galoshes with rubber bottoms. Everything else was snow: the white ground below her feet, the short ridge riding behind the barn like a low-lying cloud; even the roof itself was white. On the back he found a stamp, a short message, and a series of misshapen hand-drawn hearts, each smaller than the last, scribbled until there was no more room. She wasn't facing the camera. Jessup wondered who, exactly, she wasn't looking at.

In the dream he walked a long beach, side-stepping jellyfish that had been swept in by the tide. The jellyfish were blue-gray and yellow. In the distance he could make out a wedge of driftwood and he trudged on as the waves covered his feet with sea spray. The driftwood resembled a man on horseback, or a giraffe. The sand was spongy and water pooled around his ankles. As the beach narrowed the giraffe began to look more like a pocket knife, half-opened. Jessup was making little progress. He stopped when the snow began to fall in warm, heavy flakes, covering the shore and blotting out the jellyfish until they were reduced to outlines in the sand. The snow gathered on his shoulders and the backs of his hands and he stood motionless until the outlines vanished. Then he knew for sure it was a dream.

Ty Ty showed up the very next weekend, arriving early enough in the morning that Jessup wondered if the boy had slept. He was out of his truck in a flash, checking first for any sign of Raimie or the boat. He paced the front yard and the driveway and

after a bit he lifted the garage door, face pinched in concentration. But inside, everything was back to normal. He recognized the spare cuts of wood that had served as a boat frame and rushed over, hands clenched. But the cuts leaned peacefully along the far wall, innocent now. The deflated tire tubes hung from a series of odd nails banged into the concrete and the PVC stood at attention in an opposite corner. Overhead, the longboards were braided into the naked rafters, an old surfer trick for keeping them off the ground.

When he entered the kitchen, his father set down a plate of pancakes and he went to eating, smothering each bite with syrup. Jessup joined him at the table, his back to the window. He'd already taken care of the animals and they ran amuck behind him in the back yard, carrying on as the sun dried the dew on the grass.

"Why, Dad?" Ty Ty asked, breaking the silence. He held the fork in one hand, but his eyes were focused on the scene outside where he'd suddenly noticed the swarm of animal life. "Why 'd you let Ruby take the TV?"

Before Jessup could answer, Ty Ty was eating again. Jessup went to the fridge to retrieve the milk and poured a glass, setting it by the near-empty plate. Ty Ty drank it in two gulps, mumbling appreciation. He no longer seemed interested in his own question.

When he'd finished, he pushed the plate across the table. Jessup went to grab it but his son pulled it back. "I got it, Dad," he said. "I got it."

Jessup waited for him to ask about the boat. Usually Ty Ty did the talking. Still, he enjoyed his son's bravado, his wounded instinct—he was a little brother for life, regardless of time or place.

Outside, the squirrels were burying walnuts in the sod, and Ty Ty laughed. He still held the plate, but his eyes darted out the window. Jessup swiveled to look. They'd dig and stop, rising on their hind legs to chastise a band of doves that stood watching in the background.

"Those dudes are funny," he said. "They're crazy, Dad."

They watched the squirrels. Eventually the herons would cruise in out of the sky to waltz awhile. The doves pressed their bodies against the chain link, scouring for leftover seed, and the squirrels chirped in unison, as if to chant the big birds away.

Ty Ty dropped his plate in the sink and opened the fridge. He scanned the shelves and let the door swing closed. "What are we gonna do," he said. He chewed his lip momentarily. "What are we gonna do today if we got no TV to watch TV on?" Jessup climbed out of his chair. He knew his son was checking for booze. He suggested that they do some surf casting. To sweeten the pot, they could stop at the Mobil on the corner and grab a six-pack of tall boys.

By the time they made it the beach, Ty Ty'd popped the first can. He didn't seem interested in fishing, so Jessup tossed his own line into the shallows. Since the silverfish, he hadn't touched his pole. But he had to admit that it felt good to be casting again. How easy, he thought, to forget, to start over each day. His son squatted in work boots and jeans and kept busy digging a hole with a clam shell. When he'd finished the beer, he dropped it in the hole. Then he lifted another from the brown bag and kicked his legs out, planting himself in the sand.

"You should do a beer, Dad." Ty Ty had closed his eyes. His sun-bleached hair fell over his unshaved cheeks. The sky was dotted with clouds. A light off-shore wind

came from the west and the clouds cast shadows on the glassy surface of the ocean. The beach was busy with joggers but there was little noise except for the crying sea gulls circling overhead. They were waiting, watching Jessup's line, hoping this would be the day he left a meal behind.

Jessup didn't catch anything. By the time he'd packed the rod and reel, Ty Ty was burying the last can. They had to pass between a pair of beachfront condominiums in order to get back. A few residents sunned themselves on a patio and Ty Ty stopped at the chain-link fence to gawk at the pool-goers. A man in a red swim suit sat swishing his legs in the clear water. He held a red plastic cup and laughed as a pair of blondes in bikinis horsed around the deep end. They called the man to join the fun, but he only laughed and swished his legs. One of the women noticed Ty Ty and waved. Then they were all waving and laughing. Ty Ty pinned his chin to his chest. One of the women began to remove her top, and when she'd finished, the other did the same, whipping the bikini over her head as they hollered, laughing still, treading water behind their large, white breasts, which appeared to be fighting their way out of the pool. By this time Ty Ty was down the path after his father.

Jessup tried to get him to stay, but Ty Ty was already climbing into his truck. He had tours in the morning, and he still had to work some kinks out of his airboat motor. "I'll be back next weekend," he was saying. "You know it."

When he pulled out onto the street he laid on his horn twice and sped away. Jessup waited until the vehicle disappeared. Then he retrieved his machete and pulled down the garage door. The urge to finish the boat had never been stronger. A group of birds watched from the power line as he grabbed a coconut from the pile of leftovers

and began to hack away at the hard, green husk. When he got to the shell he split it with a deep cut and tipped it to his mouth. The water was warm on his lips and sweet. He tossed the empty in the bushes and found another.

As he worked at the coconuts, the sun sank behind him to the west, a great wash of dingy orange. He watched the reflection in his front window. The pile of empties grew larger in the bushes. Raimie pulled out his lawn chair as the evening began. Bill Sparrow's dog barked across the street. Soon it would be dark.

The storm that week didn't come without warning. The National Weather Service tracked it from the beginning as a category four, and plenty of residents grudgingly packed up and drove to the mainland. The causeways were clogged with traffic for a day. Then it was quiet. The barrier island had witnessed terrible storms before. But when the evacuation went mandatory, people stopped boarding up windows and left. Jessup assured his boys that he would go with Raimie, or get a ride with Bill Sparrow. Ty Ty was the closest but Ruby's place was bigger. So it was decided that he would find a motel.

Jessup went to the beach in the morning but didn't bring his rod. The sea was still calm, though the jagged line on the horizon told a different story. The wind blew in gusts as the waves broke sideways. Even the sea gulls had disappeared. By noon, Raimie had his car packed. Jessup found him leaning against the side door, out of breath, his shirt soaked through with sweat.

"That's it for me," he said. "You sure I can't change your mind?" Raimie tried to whistle but the sound was wrong.

“I’ll be alright,” Jessup answered. Raimie wanted to go north to Jacksonville, toward the Georgia line, but Jessup had no desire to leave.

By nightfall, the wind howled. The hard rain had begun. Jessup thought he could hear Bill Sparrow’s dog yelping across the street but he didn’t want to know for sure. The water came washing under the door at midnight. By then the power was out. He went through a few towels before the terrazzo was under one inch, then four. The storm surge had run over the two-lane and flooded the neighborhood. He moved everything out of the fridge and onto the high shelf in the kitchen. Then he filled each cup and plastic bottle with water from the tap. Eventually he pulled himself onto the counter and fell asleep.

At dawn, Jessup waded into the front yard to survey the scene. The water was black and came up his waist. The mailbox was partially submerged. Loose palm branches collected where the tin door hung open. Rain fell lightly and the wind had subsided. He stood for a long time listening to the silence, wondering if he was alone with the eye of the storm.

When the water level rose a few more feet, Jessup gathered his food in plastic bags and made for the roof. It was a slow process. He found a few blankets that weren’t soaked through and made a nest of provisions on the flattest section of the house, above the garage. By sundown the wind picked up but not the rain. He thought too late about a canoe he’d seen down the street when he’d been gathering coconuts. The water continued to rise as night fell. Jessup leaned back and tried to sleep, and when he couldn’t, he tried to see past the gray cloud cover and find a star.

The first hint of day came and Jessup found the water lapping at his bare feet. Two of his jugs bobbed in place a few feet away, and he could hear sea gulls crying somewhere behind him. Beyond that the neighborhood had been reduced to a series of roofs jutting out of the dark water and a network of telephone lines. He thought he could make out the mainland to the west, but it was hard to tell. When he wrestled himself to his knees he noticed the debris. Tree branches and plastic trash can lids drifted past him and shapes that could have been lifeless animals. There were beer cans and sheets of plywood and even a few coconuts, leftover, he guessed, from his pile.

For most of an hour he waited as the roofs disappeared around him. Rain fell in sheets. He'd inched up to the highest part of the house and sat wrapped in blankets, steadying himself on the wet shingles. The gulls began landing on the roofs and then the telephone poles, a few at a time, as they filled the air with the music of their complaints. After a bit they took their first tentative steps out along the wires, tip-toeing the lines to find more space.

When a blue streak appeared in the sky, Jessup untangled himself from the blankets and set them adrift. The birds were silent for a few long seconds, and he knew they were watching. He stripped his shirt off and then his belt, letting them sink beneath the surface. It was difficult to balance. Still, he worked one leg free from his pants and the other, standing, finally, on the small, sloped patch of remaining roof, knees bent, his left hand spread over the peak of the house.

The gulls took up their cries again as Jessup let go. Overhead he could see a faint impression of the moon hung like a ghost in the heavens, and the water around him appeared pale in the half light, a shimmering sheet of ice. He wondered how long it



might take to reach land if he were to walk, picking his way carefully across the rooftops. His feet were already underwater as he shook the sleep from his body and noticed a last gull coming toward him, late for the moment, wings locked in an effortless dive nonetheless. The gull appeared to be flying out of the sun and Jessup knew then that it was time to go. He could feel the tug of excitement then as a hunger in his belly and he stood there in his undershorts, arms raised like a conductor. The storm had come, just as he'd imagined. It had come and changed everything, but Jessup didn't feel any different, even as he stood looking out over a whole new map of the world.

## Start With Stars by A Sea

The sun rises over the ocean each morning around six, breaking the steady line of the horizon in a slow, orange rush. But unless you're on the beach facing east, feet in the sand while the tide pulls at the shallows, waves gliding over the broken shells as they dissipate into puffs of foam, unless you've crossed the street and walked the dune, taken the wood stairs down one at a time in the dawn light, you won't see a thing.

The condos came, a cluster of cinderblock and beige where the shrub trees once lined the dunes. Someone sprayed graffiti on the temporary walls one night, and there were plenty of broken bottles every morning when the workers arrived. But eventually the buildings grew out of the ground like sand castles, and all the talk about protecting the beach and honoring the view turned to talk about work and no work, about how hard it was to keep going when the tourist season slowed, and about other ways to make a living besides cutting lawns and waiting tables at beach joints with terrible names.

So they were left with the condos, the steady wash of cement, noise all day as the ocean disappeared behind the block walls, the maze of scaffolding. The roofs went on in a flurry of men and trucks, hauling in and out, and only after the glass had been installed did the structures look habitable, though no one from the surf ghetto across the street could have imagined a life behind those enormous windows, or nights spent

watching the sea from the third and fourth story balconies that jutted out through the salt air like diving platforms.

Now the small apartments that make up the surf ghetto feel even smaller in comparison. The highway runs north and south, parallel to the ocean, but there is less water to be seen from the road. When Snickers wakes in the morning he has to wait an extra hour to feel the sun, so he lies in bed, clutching a floppy cap against his chest, knowing that Mom is serving pancakes somewhere, and that she'll be serving drinks in the afternoon because it's summer. He also knows that he should love her more, but it's hard when you're twelve, harder when your dad splits for the left coast and leaves you with a nickname and a handful of memories. So he stays in bed, eyes half closed, as the light crawls over the new buildings across the street.

The older boys tagged him Snickers on account of the floppy cap, because of the candy-bar insignia embroidered across the front. He wears it because his dad wore it, and he wears it so often that only his mom bothers to call him Russell. It's a cheap hat, with a flimsy brim, but his father never took it off. Not to shape his surfboards, or to cut lawns with the beach crew during the season. He took the hat on trips to Panama and Nicaragua each winter, and to Mexico. He wore it at night in the garage, where he'd pass the hours reading about flotation and board design. And one day when he'd had enough, he left for northern California—a place, he said, where a man could still belong. It was hard to believe the hat had not been purposely forgotten, as everything else had disappeared: the few pictures, his clothing, the station wagon. He took his books: *Naval Architecture of Planing Hulls*, *Surf-riding at Hilo*, and his Bible, James Kinstle's *Surfboard Design and Construction*. Even the posters were gone from the

garage, shots of the big wave riders that he loved so much. The man had so completely disappeared that the cap seemed like a treasure. So Snickers wore it to school, to check the surf. And after it became clear that the man wasn't coming back, he took on the nickname, first from the beach crew, then from the neighbors in the surf ghetto. Though it too had been his father's, he was glad that they knew him as his father's son, that they recognized him at all.

Now he stands under the shade of the eaves, plucking buds from a basket of azaleas. The apartments are lined up like barracks, a shabby row of quarters surrounded by sand and dead grass. They are one story and sit too close to the highway. The sun beats down and he looks at the dusty ground in respect.

"Little man." It's Vader, eyes hidden behind dark glasses. "Those don't grow overnight."

But Vader's not looking anyway. He stares out over the roof tops, hands at his sides. These days Vader roams at night, spends most of his time indoors, unless the surf is up. They stand in silence for a while before Vader retreats. "Stay cool," he says. But Snickers doesn't laugh at the joke.

An hour later a squad car pulls in, half on the grass half in the drive. The men that crawl out are not small; one is clean shaven and blond, tall. The other is squat and hairy, his face full of lines and blemishes. He wears a thick mustache and his mouth is slightly parted.

They knock on Vader's door, then every door. Snickers knows there are people tucked away in the air conditioned rooms, but no one answers. Dale Trudy is home, and Trip. They never leave. Trish and Cal were smoking in the garage earlier, he could

smell the marijuana. Bicycles are parked around the lot; a minivan rests in the dead grass collecting rust. But no one is home and the cops laugh as they do rounds.

Snickers watches from his window as the car drives off, running over an aloe plant. Across the way, Vader pulls back the blinds; other windows stir with the same careful movements. He can hardly wait for his mother to get home so that he can tell her the news.

“At least we’re by the beach,” she often says, but as his mom comes through the front door swearing under her breath it seems that even this admonition won’t be enough to calm her nerves. Snickers wants to pounce—but it’s never wise to rush her. She needs a drink. Then a beer to wash down the gin. This is the safest version: on the couch with her feet up, watching the black and white television set.

But he’s anxious. In the living room he stands like an auctioneer. The words come before he can stop them. “Cops,” he says. “At Vader’s.” And though it seems impossible, his mother slaps him with one hand, opens the door with the other, and disappears before he can even feel the pain.

Later, the moon in the sky, a white circle surrounded by stars that twinkle despite the glare of the streetlights. Doors open, close. Tenants whisper in the dark, argue and scatter as crickets hum and the air conditioners make noise in the darkness. In his room, he stares at the commotion, then the lack of it. Soon a group will assemble on the couch in the living room; when things begin to kick his mother invites them in. His father chased them away. But it’s different now: bad news comes right through the door invited, while Bob Marley plays on the stereo and nobody listens to what he has to say.

Vader knocks first. Then Dale Trudy and Cal's girl Trish. Cal's at the Wal-Mart, stocking up. The conversation is hushed and Snickers squats in the hall, bathed in shadow. They pour gin in plastic cups but only his mother drinks. Vader sits. Dale Trudy looks mesmerized. They speak in hushed tones, faces pinched.

"The money," says Vader. This is clear enough. Money is dollar bills and change from the jar in the kitchen. Snickers listens intently, but they are silent, as if the room were holding its breath beneath the buzz of the fan.

Cal busts in, face flushed and slick with sweat. "They're out there," he says. The room moves and Vader is gone. Trish stands with her hands at her sides, Dale Trudy kicks carpet. Only his mother remains sitting, sipping her drink from a ceramic mug. Snickers inches closer and realizes that something might happen, big enough to disrupt even the stillness of the night.

Now the sun creeps over the condos, shines on the rusted minivan resting in the early morning dew. The garage is open and Snickers finds himself looking at the row of closed doors. All night they whispered, Cal watching for cops who weren't there, Dale Trudy pacing, his mother asleep on the couch. Only Vader spoke to him. "Your dad," he said. "Would never let this happen." My father, he thinks, would've been gone before anyone could call a meeting.

He crosses the four-lane highway and walks between the condominiums to the ocean. The footpath is small, a few feet; enough for a person to slip through the sea grape, between the tall, wooden fences. Snickers feels the sun as he approaches.

The ocean is a cool blue, the color lighter where the sand bar sits below the surface. The crest of a wave hangs a moment, then breaks in a spatter of white wash: not large, a couple of feet at most. The wind is calm. On a different morning the crew might be over here measuring the height of the wave faces, counting the intervals between sets.

He hurries back to grab his board. It's an eight footer, an old cruiser that his father shaped. He can remember when everyone made boards in their garages. But now, whatever takes place behind those thin sheets of tin isn't shaping. It has little to do with surfing at all.

When he returns, Vader's out front packing a cooler with brown bags in the shade of the bushes.

"Swell," Snickers says. "Maybe shoulder high."

"Yeah," Vader says, but he doesn't look up or stop loading. The cooler is almost full, bags stacked like bricks. Snickers leans in but Vader shakes his head.

"Get your board then," he says. "We'll get wet."

His mother on the couch, the fan humming and sweat glistens on her forehead. She looks older, a different woman than the one he remembers. Her face is puffy, hair limp and colorless, falling in her eyes. He stares a moment and then slips into his trunks, a pair of black baggies that hang loose over his hips. He grabs the board and tiptoes out, not stopping to look at anything at all.

Vader waits, a pack strung across his back. He carries a fishing pole. Everything looks out of place in this adventure but Snickers scoots ahead until Vader tells him to slow down.

“Stay with me,” he says. “Right next to me.” Instead of taking the road they walk behind the garage, through the dead grass and soft sugar sand, along the bushes. They continue, side by side, and Snickers half-steps to keep from getting ahead. Vader drags the cooler and it slows him down. When they reach the highway, Vader looks back at the gas station, then the surf ghetto. Snickers looks too, but he isn’t sure why. Everything appears the same: the apartments lined up like shoes on a shelf, the flat, tar papered roofs—the whole mess strangled by the sun.

By the time they make it across the four-lane and approach the foot path, Snickers knows something is happening. He tries to look over his shoulder but Vader drops the fishing pole and nudges him forward. “Don’t stop,” he says.

There is shouting behind them and car noises, the screech of tires, but Vader urges him on. They duck under the sea grape branches, between the fences, flanked by the hulking beige condo and the other to the left.

“Keep moving.” Vader is ahead now, dragging the cooler. Snickers tries to keep up but Vader disappears through the last of the brush. He follows, board in tow, and when he hits the shore Vader grabs him, tosses the board against the dune and works the backpack over his skinny shoulders.

“Head north,” he says. The bag is heavy and Snickers freezes, unable to comprehend.

“When you get up the beach, hide it good.” Vader is looking around, steadying himself. The seconds tick by and Snickers wonders if he’s changed his mind. “Go, Russell,” he says. Then his legs are moving underneath him. He climbs backwards over the dunes, scuttling until he’s up against a wooden staircase. As he slips away he sees



men streaming down the beach. They look out of place in their dark clothes and suit jackets, but stranger still is the sight of Vader in the shallows, pushing the cooler ahead of him like a paddle-boat. As he makes it past the first breaker, the surf surges and the water is waist high, but the men don't hesitate—they follow, rushing the ocean like a pack of dogs.

Snickers turns, takes the stairs and sprints past the pool and the deckchairs laid out in a perfect row, through the glass doors and the *Residents Only* sign—doesn't stop until he's inside the condo, until he feels the chill of the air conditioning. The carpet is maroon, thick between his toes. Even he understands that this isn't his world, that he has to be careful. Armchairs adorn the large hallway, pointless pieces of furniture that he's sure no one has ever used. The building is right here on the beach, but it feels like a museum.

He hides in the hallway until a young man comes rattling around the corner behind a cart full of cleaning supplies, his blond hair tucked into a bandana. Snickers isn't sure which of them is more surprised.

“Shit,” the guy says. “Is that you out there?”

Snickers doesn't understand the question but he's nodding anyway, more out of excitement than affirmation.

“Check it,” the guy says. “Unless you wanna get found.”

They take the stairs. “The elevators are full of people,” the guy says. Then he says his name. “Hound Adams. Maybe you heard of me?” But Snickers hasn't.

They're on the roof. Below it's easy to see the commotion for what it is. The suits swarm like ants around the surf ghetto, which looks even more impoverished from

above. Squad cars are parked every which way across the lawn and in the street, some marked, some not. They've ripped everything out of the apartments, littered the driveways. He can see old couches and chairs; blankets, suitcases, articles of clothing. Even a few surfboards—Dale Trudy's and Cal's, he guesses—but his mother is nowhere to be found.

“Dragged them all away,” says Hound, as if he was a mind reader. “That’s the first thing they did. They dragged a dude from the beach as well. Beat his ass, yeah.”

Snickers pictures Vader, still wet from his trek in the surf. All of the possibilities float through his head an instant before he remembers the pack on his shoulders. Again Hound taps in a moment before he should: “What’s in the bag, bro?”

He pretends not to hear. “My mom,” he says instead. “I think they grabbed my mom.”

Hound looks at him, squinting. It doesn't seem as if he's buying the act, but just when Snickers is ready to move for the stairs, Hound looks back at the ground below. “Bad news, man. Mom, Dad, whatever.” He shakes his head.

They watch a while, until Hound says they should split. Being this close isn't safe, and the residents won't hesitate to call the cops on a kid, especially a barefoot grom with a pack big enough to be a parachute.

Hound has a pick-up, parked by the dumpster in the lot. Snickers notices the rust, how different shades of paint peek out at the edges, along the windows and the wheel wells. “Nice truck,” he says. Hound just laughs.

They're on the road in no time, heading south. The suits are so busy they don't even turn their heads. Snickers clutches the bag in his arms and watches the buildings go by, the low, one-story beer bars and the thrift store windows and groceries.

Hound passes cars like he's racing. A few times he hits the horn, the sound long and mean. Snickers can't help but notice the man's ticks, his energy. He taps his foot on the floor, his fingers on the wheel. He hums a bit and then breaks into a whistle. Then laughs under his breath, as if a joke had just occurred to him alone.

After only a few miles the truck brakes and Hound swings them up a dirt path between a fence and a split-level apartment building. There are two floors and Snickers realizes that he's never seen a two-story place in town, there just aren't any. But the place is still a dump. A sign hangs loose on the side of the building. *Sea Crester*, it reads. But the sea is a few long blocks away, and there are junk cars and an overflowing dumpster. As he follows Hound he wonders if there's anything between the squalor of these surf ghettos and the false splendor of the condos by the beach.

They take the stairs two at a time. The apartment is decorated with surf posters and abstract art. The paintings look homemade, and the posters are not new. They remind him of the ones his father admired, the big wave riders from the '80s, the Hawaiians—the big guns. Hound throws open a bedroom door, and the two of them enter. There are boards hung along the walls of the small room, sticks of all shapes and sizes. He tells Snickers to grab one.

“C'mon,” he says. “It's what we do.”

They walk the three blocks to the ocean and Hound talks the whole time. When they arrive, the surf looks bigger, and Snickers stops, wondering whether the waves will

be too much. But Hound surprises: he guides them out through the breakers and into the lineup. Once there, his expression changes. He becomes stoic; he only speaks to tell Snickers where to sit, when to paddle. When a set glides in from way outside, Hound sets up deep and takes off late. He disappears behind the wall of water, and for a second Snickers is sure that the wave has gotten the best of him. But then Hound reappears—a flash of whitewater and a huge top turn. He’s paddling back to the spot, a grin on his face the only clue to what took place in those unseen moments.

They ride for a few hours, taking turns. The swell holds up and Snickers gets the hang of the new board. Hound shows him how to get under the breakers and how to bail out when things get rough. When they’re finished they stand on the beach and watch a few sets, marveling at the clean, empty waves and the smoothness of the surface.

Back at the *Sea Crest* they use a hose to rinse off the salt and Hound cuts strips of aloe from along the fence to use on their sun-scorched arms and neck. Upstairs Snickers dresses in the man’s baggy clothes, and stares intently at the posters on the wall. The waves are as big as buildings but the riders look straight ahead, their faces expressionless, as the water stacks up behind them. Hound talks in the background but Snickers is lost in thought, not listening. Instead he wonders about his mom and Vader. He wonders if Hound will eventually tell him what to do.

But Hound has other ideas. He opens a can of beer and finishes it off in a few violent swigs, carrying the rest of the six pack by the empty plastic ring. They head for his room and Snickers holds up his pants with one hand, drags the pack in the other. “Let’s get high,” Hound says, and they sit on the bed like brothers, the beer between them, eyes slowly acclimating to the dim light.

Snickers wakes first, finds himself on the floor. Hound is crashed on the bed, empty beer cans in a pile by his feet. The sun has set and the sound of thumping bass comes from down the hall. Snickers stands, head heavy, shoulders sore from the surf. Though he's a kid, or a little man, he knows how to get high—and how not to. While Hound took long pulls from the bong, holding them, coughing as his lungs compressed, Snickers took small tokes, tried not to inhale. He kept his head while Hound smoked, drank his beer, lay down. He didn't mean to fall out, and now he wants to get out before Hound wakes up, before he can ask any more questions.

In the hallway the music is louder; people mill about on the upstairs landing. More pot smoke emanates from below. The stairs are packed, and a keg floats in a sea of ice, tilting slightly in the plastic garbage can. His path is partly blocked, as the people are lined up, holding cups of beer, waiting for a refill, or simply waiting.

He freezes at the top of the stairs. The song changes, a steady pulse echoing through the building. He looks around, but the stairs appear to be the only way out. Then a hand reaches for his collar and he's surprised to see a woman's face when he spins around, ready to shout.

“Hey,” she says. He can't put a name to her, but he knows this is a friend of his mother. The woman is about the same age, thirties, maybe older; she has the same map of wrinkles around her eyes, crow's feet, compliments of the sun. She shows her teeth as she smiles and puts her hand on his shoulder again, gentler this time.

“I heard about the raid,” she says. “What are you doing here?”

Just then, Hound comes walking out of the open door. “Kid,” he says and, reaching past the woman, he knocks a cup of beer from her hand.

“Whoa,” she says, waving in Hound’s direction. “No way.” Hound makes another lunge but she stops him, forces him against the wall by his hair. Snickers stands a moment, scared, but he realizes Hound isn’t going to hit her. He’s scuffling, fighting her off, all arms and elbows.

Snickers breaks for the stairs. Hound hollers but the music is too loud. The crowd parts as he pushes, spills a beer or two in the process. The people laugh, watching him hustle, wide-eyed, strapped to the pack. No one moves to stop him and he’s finally in the parking lot, underneath the sky again.

He makes for the ocean. The moon guides him, and anyway, he can hear the pounding of the surf. The beach never lies: there’s only north and south, an endless stretch of sand in each direction. He finds the highway, realizes the surf ghetto is a few miles up. The cars come, dashing past, lights blazing. Then the road is empty and he walks across, finds the stairs and heads for the shore.

The stars are out and he walks on the hard sand, close to the ocean. The waves break out of sight—he can feel the power though he can’t see them. The wind is calm, and he remembers how his father used to stand in the near dark, watching the surf until the swell lines disappeared, arms across his chest. He’d stand for a long time as the trucks pulled out of the dirt lots, loaded with boards, the riders thrilled to have caught such perfect conditions. But his father hated to leave. He thought the end of the day was a test, and many would fail by going to the beer bars, living for hours that had already passed. Come morning, those same guys would be groaning in their beds while others—better men, perhaps—waited patiently for the silver sky to come fully over the horizon. They’d be out there, adrift with the sea foam, while gulls shrieked overhead and the day

started over. If the swell held, they'd angle for waves, their bodies rising and falling with the peaks, the water beneath them smooth as glass. Men, his father told him, are not the same. On certain days they are not remotely alike, even if you don't know what to look for.

Snickers knows the pack is stuffed with money, that his mom's in jail. Vader too, and Dale Trudy and Cal and Trish. He knows they'd been trying to catch the easy way. His mother worked two jobs. But the rest of them laid low, sold in bulk so as not to draw attention to their ghetto by the sea. But if he knew this—even partly—how could they have thought no one else did? How could they pretend?

He wonders about the west coast, what his father might be doing. Probably shaping again, working on the big boards. Running his hands along the rail of a nine-foot gun, the muscles taunt in his arms as he sands, rubbing the same spot over and over until the fiberglass is flush. Every few months he sends a postcard. They all say the same thing: *Russell. Take care of your mother. If you run into trouble, start with the sea. Dad.* He's easy to picture, covered in dust from sanding, apron wrapped around his waist. They had a warehouse once. A small place on the mainland that overlooked the river, nestled along the base of the causeway, a two-mile bridge that connected back to the barrier island. His father let him play outside under the bay tree sometimes, even fish the river, though he never caught anything. It was the furthest Snickers had ever been from the ocean, and at night the lights on the causeway flickered on, illuminating the way home. Occasionally they would sit under the tree and his father would tell stories about the places he'd surfed, and the places he hoped to visit again. That year a hurricane hit. The warehouse flooded, lost half the roof. Even the bay tree

fell. “This tree was struck by lightning,” his father said on that last day, staring solemnly. They were salvaging foam blanks and sifting through the mess. There wasn’t much to save but they worked slowly, pausing between each task. “Lightning,” his father said again as they left, and Snickers remembers him smiling after that, a soft smile. His clear, blue eyes never seemed to change, but at that moment he looked proud, as if being struck down by something powerful and impossible was the noblest way to go.

Snickers stops along the water and watches the sky. Thunder sounds in the distance, sure sign of an eastern storm. He feels older than his twelve years, and younger, as if he has seen too much of life and at the same time, not enough. He’d like to see his father, but really he has questions, questions about what he’s supposed to feel, how he should act now that he thinks he’s become a man. The world, he thinks, is not a small place, and he keeps walking the beach. Sometime later he begins wondering about the money, and when he does, thoughts of his father and the west coast are replaced by a dull fear, and by the lonely sensation that next to him lays an enormous dark sea that even the beauty of the crashing waves cannot entirely conceal.