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Press Anywhere: Stories

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PRESS ANYWHERE

by

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ABSTRACT

Press Anywhere is a collection of short stories that depicts the various inadequacies of the third millennium male. Each story concerns a man, a boy, or a family on the cusp of change. These characters, burdened by their family tragedies, try to shake off their histories and renew themselves. But, in one way or another, home always finds them. Set in a shared universe, some characters appear in multiple stories, including one boy who dreams of an unlikely superhero to save him from an abusive sibling, and a man determined to outlive a family curse.

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THE MONGOOSE VILLAIN

Kapuchinsky had been out with mono—or leukemia, depending on whom you asked—since February, and I wasn't in a position to look sideways at a new lab partner in Mr. Moreton's seventh period. It was late March, and spring break was a week away. Most of the kids kept their eyes on their bell work as Moreton showed off the new student: Roland was another black boy in a junior high school rapidly becoming half white and half everything else. But the other black kids took note, like they always did: why's he walk like that, I bet he thinks he's the shit, whose mom buys them red glasses, what kind of shoes are those, does he date white girls, he *looks* like he dates white girls.

I'm Charlie, I said. We were illustrating the water cycle. If you cut out all the labels, I'll glue them on and we can just draw around them.

Roland, he said, and shook my hand. Let me ask you something. On a scale of yes to no, are you popular here, Charlie?

Scale of yes to no? I'd say no-point-five.

Nothing like getting in on the ground floor, he said.

He gave me his schedule while we cut and glued our labels for fresh, salty, and brackish water to the beige poster. Besides science, we shared math, gym, and lunch. He wanted to see a guidance counselor and swap science and gym, so that he wouldn't have to go through the day with the funk of forty minutes of volleyball on him, but I convinced him he'd lucked out: Ms. Millsap, the other seventh grade science teacher, was a boy-hating troll.

I told him where the unlocked teacher's bathroom was if he ever needed to go without standing in a tropical forest of calcified snot and urine, which lunch lady to ask for extra food

before dismissal, and where the best-looking eighth grade girls killed time between classes. He thanked me and said he usually brought his lunch from home.

And not that I'm in the dating market, he added, but I'm gay.

I shrugged, but didn't tell him why I didn't care, and he didn't ask. It was still the nineties, it was still North Carolina, and it was still a risk to use "gay" as anything but an insult in a seventh grade classroom. He purchased stock in me with the information, and I figured indifference purchased as much from him. Besides, my peers weren't knocking each other over to spend time with me.

In that way kids do so easily before the age of six, we formally agreed to be friends. We'd sit together in math and science, guard each other on the basketball court when we weren't on the same team, and gamble for the Oreos his mother packed in his lunch for him. Our most common bets:

1. Two Oreos to Roland for successful firing of stale French fries down the shirt of anyone in a two-table radius.
2. Four Oreos to me if anyone referred to us as a couple.
3. A three-Oreo push if Kathy Shallcross neglected to wear a bra after gym class. (I savored those Oreos.)

I told him my parents died in a car accident when I was three, and that I came up in foster care while my brother Aaron was in a group home. When he was old enough, he sued the state for custody, and now we shared two rooms in an apartment complex three miles from school. Aaron had a lonely, forty-something girlfriend with kids of her own. Her name was

Nona. She came over a few nights a week, but I could have company over when Aaron was at her place.

Roland was an only child, and lived in a new subdivision that hugged the school from its north and west ends. He and his mother would work on the place at night, painting and hammering. His father worked a French cuffs kind of job in Florida, and was training his subordinates before coming up to Brevard to join his wife and son some time before May. He couldn't invite me over before then, on his mother's orders.

Nothing betrayed him as gay other than those fire engine red glasses, and his tendency to punctuate his sentences out loud if he was in an especially good mood:

I got my allowance today, Charlie. Colon, we're hitting the comic book shop after school today; comma, seeing a motion picture of my choosing; Oxford comma, and we're gonna find some high school kid to buy us cigarettes.

I'd never smoked, but I didn't protest. He was buying, and what was I saving my lungs for anyway? For some glorious, pink-lunged, full-throated future that couldn't possibly be.

* * *

You agree to meet Charlie at the skate park. It's the last Saturday of spring break, and your third Saturday in Brevard. You sit on a blue vinyl stool at the counter where disgruntled high school juniors sell snacks and sports drinks under the aegis of an older boy with the most pitiful goatee in all of Christendom. Christ-en-dom. You knew intuitively that such a word must have existed. Ms. Palmisano, your Gifted Social Studies teacher, took as much pleasure in teaching the word as you did in writing it in the pad of post-its you keep in your back pocket. The word isn't in your pocket now. You peel off new words and stick them on two bulletin

boards in your room. You push thumbtacks through the words when it looks like their stickiness is fading. You do this because words cool you out like Hunny Bunny.

You also write post-its for the world at large. In your first week at Charlie's school, you left a recipe for curry aioli in the library's only copy of *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. You leave ballpoint forgeries of La Jaconde in the unlocked teachers' bathroom, and directions to Sardinia on the auditorium door:

1. Rob a bank.
2. Hop a flight to Italy. Stowing away is the most cost-effective option.
3. In Italy, tell a concierge you want to visit their most beautiful, friendly, picturesque island.
4. "No, no," you'll say—"the other one."

Patting your breast pocket, you ask the pitiful goatee if he smokes. He says yes, and you give him a dollar, asking how many that buys you. He gives you three Pall Malls from his red soft pack and you tuck two of them away before he reaches across the counter to light the one at your lips. His hands are bony up to his wrists, crossed with ten or so fading white scars. You wonder why he doesn't cover them up. You take a paper cup of free ice water and turn from the counter, hoping you can finish your cigarette before Charlie shows up. He's running late, and you are on your second cigarette when he walks up with his bicycle, a brilliant purple and silver Mongoose Villain.

Cool bike, you say.

Cool yourself, he says, nodding at the cigarette. Have one for me? He leans the bike onto the grass next to the concrete walkway before the first set of ramps. You take out your last smoke and put it in your mouth, using yours to light his. After stealing the first drag, you hand it to him, plop down onto the grass next to his bike, and spin the tire with your hands, admiring its smooth silence.

It's not my bike, he continues. It's Aaron's. He doesn't really ride it anymore; he has a truck and his fiancé has a car. He just likes to fix it up, keep it looking good.

Does he know you're using it?

He's at work. Charlie takes a long drag and studies the red ember, blows his smoke through it to ash it. Or at Nona's house. Both out of their minds.

People get like that.

They're mental. Like they're all over each other, drunk or not. It's almost better when they drink. They just pass out. And then I take his bike, go ride around, come here, whatever.

By yourself? You put out your smoke and lean back on your elbows. The grass is warm, but the soil under it is cool. You dig your hands into it. That's not safe, Charlie.

Being home isn't safe. Couple nights ago Aaron gave me this. Charlie pulls up his shirt sleeve. There's a wide handprint, purple edged with yellow. Above it, a raw pink cigarette burn.

What'd you do?

What did I do?

I mean, why did he do that?

They make me watch them. He blows through his ember again. The cigarette only has a few puffs left before it's all filter. He hands you the smoke and you take a drag, hand it back.

When they go to their room, or out on the couch. They make me watch them do it. And they have this camera. I make movies of them so they can watch later. So on Thursday, they're watching TV, and I look over at them and see Nona's hand go down his pants. I make a line for the door to the porch to get the bike and he says, No, we need you tonight, cameraman. I go out the door anyway and that's that.

And?

And he's on top of me, squeezing my arm. Cigarette is still in his mouth, you know, like it's the most normal thing in the world to be on the floor like this. And it falls on me when he says the line from that song to me: Don't worry, Charlie, be happy. That's when he stuck me with it. Charlie takes his own cigarette and puts it into the bike's seat. The leathery plastic bubbles into a ring around the heat, and the acrid smoke hits your eyes. Just like skin, he says.

You lean back up, resting your elbows on your knees. In Charlie's face, you see the same resigned look you recognize from the mirror. Why don't you go back to the foster house, the place he got you from when he turned twenty-one?

That place folded up a few years back, he says. My foster father was stealing from the support fund, he got caught, told some lies on my foster mother, and they all went broke fighting it out in court. I could roll the dice on a group home, I guess, but they're as crooked as anyplace else. And if a group home made Aaron into that, I figure I could just easily turn into the same kind of person.

And what kind of person are you now?

You ask a lot of questions, Roland. He picks himself and the Mongoose up off the grass, righting the bike in his hands.

You shrug. Regular amount, I think.

I don't know, he says.

Charlie rides out onto the first set of ramps. He mixes it up, jumping and grinding, and looks over at you after botching a wheelie. You're impressed all the same. He's your new friend, your only close friend, really, and he's sharing a hobby of his with you: performing tricks on stolen bicycles. You write a note, "Want to add some kick to your BMX routine? Steal a Mongoose! See Charlie for details," and walk back to the counter where you met Goatee, sticking your note inside a skateboarding magazine. You see him again in the bathroom and offer him another dollar for three more smokes. He says you're great for his quitting and gives you the pack for free. You see the open smile on his unfortunate face and think there must be someone out there for a generous spirit like Goatee. You hope he finds her soon.

Back out on the pavement, you walk across the open pit to where Charlie is riding. On the far side, equidistant from you and Charlie, two boys are harassing two girls. The girls look to be your age, the boys older.

The larger of the boys, a tan, good-looking kid with gelled hair, just took a Coke slushy from the less attractive of the two girls and is holding it over her head.

Do any of you have a lighter I could use, you ask. I don't mean to interrupt this great flirting technique you have going on. I just bummed some smokes and I forgot to ask for a light, is all. I'll share if you have one.

Why don't you go find yourself a boyfriend, the sidekick says. He's chunky with blond hair. Deferential, but mouthy. You aren't surprised that his insults take this direction. In fact,

you're glad it doesn't immediately get racial. Your too-tight jeans and red glasses are, in that way, a good defense mechanism. It draws attention immediately to questions of sexuality.

The red glasses give it away, you ask. You're a bright boy. The chunky one gets in your face. He's chosen you.

I'm not your boy, queer.

Fair enough, you say. But as long as I'm here, let me give you some advice. I think you've blown your chance with these girls with the slushy stealing routine. Next time, just say hello, start a dialogue. You hope the chunky one isn't about to say what he definitely does say.

How about my fist starts a dialogue with your face? You cringe. The girls back away. Chunk's stale popcorn breath pushes you back and you bump into his larger friend.

You take the cigarette you'd been holding and tuck it back into the red Pall Mall box in your breast pocket. I tell you what, you say, still addressing Chunk. A two on one fight isn't gonna be good for any of us. I might lose, in which case you're the two assholes who beat up a kid half your size. A kid in red glasses, no less. And if I win, you still lose, getting wailed on by a clearly inferior specimen. So here's what we'll do to keep it fair: you tuck in and give me your best punch, right in the jaw. And if I'm still standing, I'll do the same. And we'll go back and forth like that until one of us quits or breaks something that can't be fixed.

Death wish, Chunk asks. He laughs at himself, tickled.

Could be, you admit. Are you willing to bet your face on it? The better-looking one backs away from you, either in befuddled intimidation or to give Chunk room to wail on you unperturbed. You don't care which one it is anymore: Charlie is riding in your direction. You don't know what he's seen up to this point—a dozen or so other skaters and bikers are watching

the confrontation unfold—but you're glad the obligations of friendship have pulled him back to you. Swing, you think, looking into Chunk's eyes. Just one good swing.

He rears back and punches. You can tell from the looseness in his fist that he's had many more fights in his head than on the street, but a punch is a punch, and your head cocks back from it, your chin stings. Chunk falls to his knees immediately, grabs his chin. He's bitten his tongue, you realize. He spits foamy red onto the gray concrete. A blue Zippo pops out of his pocket.

Is the fight over, you ask. You kneel down and pick up his lighter. Thank you.

What'd you do to me, Chunk asks. He turns to his better-looking friend. What did he do to me?

Charlie, you say, jumping to your feet. You almost missed it. Look here. You light up a cigarette, put the Zippo in the soft pack, and hand it to your friend.

Let's get out of here, he says.

You and Charlie walk east from the skate park. He suggests and you agree to go to the edge of the woods behind the high school football field. You follow a trespasser's instinct and turn around as you climb the fence onto the field and notice the two girls from the park, following you.

You lie down with the less attractive girl and keep her occupied with a lazy hand on her breast, kisses on her neck. Charlie and his admirer take up behind twin cypress trees. Though out of sight, you hear their grunts and whispers, the repeated crunch of pine needles into the damp earth. With your girl, you act out the moves you see in films the way you cross items off a grocery list. You bite her lower lip, close your eyes, tug at her hair, tell her she's pretty. She

believes you. You are nothing like other guys. She is so happy to have met you today. You make her so happy.

* * *

When we were alone again, the sun had just set across the field, the way we came. I could still smell Robin, her vanilla lip gloss, her sweat, her saliva on my face, her on my fingers.

That was, I trailed off. Roland sat down beside me, our backs against the cypress trees. He must have known I was grateful. Those girls had to have been following you more than me. Did you, you know, with your girl?

My girl, he snickered. I guess. I don't know. I kissed her, you know. She wanted to be kissed and I kissed her. Roland tucked his knees up toward his chest and lit a cigarette. Before the smoke of his first drag could hit my nostrils, he handed me that one and lit another for himself.

I'll have to pay you back for these, I said.

All told, it only cost a dollar. I think it's the best way to deal with a smoking habit, just bumming. Keeps it under control. Anyway, smoking alone is no fun. He blew his smoke at me and I mock dove away from him.

I saw that guy hit you. Roland looked away, so I touched his shoulder in case, by dumb luck, that was the right thing to do. What happened there? Did it hurt?

I'm okay. He took a long drag and stretched his legs to keep the tingle of sleep away. I'm okay.

You know, I told you the truth on Aaron and Nona.

I know.

So? Me being honest with you is worth you doing the same.

I know.

I know what I saw at the skate park. That kid decked you and he hit the ground like some invisible truck drove into his chin. Why didn't you raise a hand?

I did, Roland said. Just no one saw it. He sighed and took out another cigarette. After using the butt of the first to light the next, he took a short puff and sighed again, as though he were figuring how to explain the rules of chess to someone busy watching a movie with subtitles. Then, he perked up. His expression turned calm, and he closed his eyes.

Hit me, he said. Not too hard. He put his cigarette down on a cypress root with the ember pointing up.

I wanted to protest, but he sounded confident in whatever he was thinking. Where, I asked. He pointed to his cheek.

I wasn't about to hit him closed-fist, so I rubbed my palms together and slapped him one across the face. Immediately, my own cheek was warm and stinging. It was the same feeling I had as a child whenever I started to cry. Like at home, the pain was teaching me.

Hurting you hurts me, I said.

You ever fix a blown fuse? The power stops because the two ends can't talk to each other, can't send electricity back and forth. When someone hurts me, I can see that busted fuse, and fix it. And when I do--.

Electricity.

Bingo.

But where does the pain come from?

You aren't the only one with snakes in the grass, Charlie. He sucked his teeth and reached back for his cigarette, but it had burnt out. He flicked the butt towards the Mongoose.

We lit up again. I thought about the bike, but it was already too late to care about curfews. Aaron would be home by now, and if he was in a moviemaking mood, I'd take hell for not being there. And the bike—sneaking it back onto its rack inside the porch would be too noisy. There at the edge of the woods, I was numb to the thought of going home. Part of me wanted to appeal to Roland, to hide in his house, or leave all together. Maybe hitchhike to Florida or New York. There were bound to be snow birds all over I-95, coming and going, passing through our fair state to some place where snakes couldn't reach us. We'd just have to make it out of the county, ride east until we hit the highway, and raise our thumbs. It could be done, couldn't it?

See if you can do it the other way, I said. I grabbed Roland's arm and held my lit cigarette over his wrist.

Let go of me. He jerked his arm away. You can't work the electricity like that.

I don't mean what you think. I mean, see if you can take pain away when the fuse is connected, instead of doubling down on it.

How would I know what to focus on?

Don't worry. I'll focus on the highlight reel.

No, man. He stood up and started dusting off his jeans, making ready to leave. It won't work. It doesn't flow like that.

Why not?

I don't know.

You said yourself it's like a fuse. It has to go both ways.

Maybe another time. What are you doing tomorrow?

I can't—I don't need it later. You have to do it now. Try. I punched his shoulder, harder than I wanted to. It didn't hurt me: he wasn't expecting it in time to take advantage of the opened link between us. I hit him again. Nothing.

I'm not going to fight you, Charlie.

You will if I'm fighting you. I need you to try. I jumped onto him, and punched him in the mouth. I felt his teeth dig into my knuckle. He caught my fist and rolled me onto my back. When he punched me in the nose, my vision went white, a full locus of pain closing around my eyes.

I didn't notice I was bleeding onto my shirt until a minute later. Roland was back up against the cypress tree, his knees tucked up into his chest. He was staring at his bloody knuckles.

It worked, he said. I saw what you wanted me to see.

I grabbed my collar and pinched it around my nose to stanch the bleeding. How, I said, how do you know?

It was the blood, I think. It needed the blood.

I shuddered and tried to hide my relief. Sitting like that, he looked frozen. I sat down beside him with my hand still pinching my nostrils and tapped his knee with mine. He started, and looked at me.

I'm okay, he said, softening. He straightened out his legs to dig in his pockets for his cigarettes and the stolen Zippo. He took his first drag and sighed. You are one brackish white

boy, I'll say that. But I'm okay. He gave me his cigarette and lit another for himself. You, on the other hand, are in the deepest of shits. He nodded at Aaron's Mongoose, lying in the dirt.

On a scale of yes to no, I'd say you're right.

Punch drunk and laughing, we threw the bike over the fence, crossed the football field, and rode through the school's bus loop, back to a road that would take us home. But it's a small town, Brevard, North Carolina. Every road leads where you're headed if you have enough time to kill.

* * *

You get bored, the two of you, walking on either side of Aaron's Mongoose. You don't know much about bikes, but you marvel at how the glow of each streetlight you pass catches the purple and silver chrome and hangs on it just a second too long. The bike was made for the light.

When Charlie points out his complex, you suggest taking the Mongoose out for a lap around the block. It's before ten, but the block sounds asleep. He rides with you on the back pegs, and you hold his shoulders while you both sing-shout a song you taught Charlie three days ago. You jump off the pegs laughing when you think about a couple of retirees settling in to watch *Gunsmoke* and seeing two kids on a bike screaming, *California! Über Alles!*, like Katherine Hepburn receiving electroconvulsive therapy.

Charlie's complex houses about sixty condominiums. They're gray and blue, like storm clouds, and look more like doublewides cinder-blocked into the grass. Except for the screened-in porches. They all have these screened-in porches, the kind of things the building agent would bill as "verandas" to up-charge you another fifty each month. That's where Charlie took Aaron's

bike from, and where you see Aaron standing holding his empty U-Lock. His video camera is on a wicker table, pointed at you and Charlie. The red light is blinking.

You don't know whether Charlie drops the bike on its side first, or Aaron throws the lock at you, but you are here. Aaron takes Charlie by the arm and tries to pull him from the yard into the house. Charlie is fighting and trying to make himself heavy and hard to drag, like a child.

This should be louder, you think, all this. You pick up the lock by the curved end and swing it sidearm for Aaron's head. You want to see his skull, but height favors him and your aim isn't true. It happens so quietly and you wonder if the neighbors are watching when his hands grip your neck.

The kids at the skate park. Everyone loves a good fight when they aren't in it. You can't hear Charlie, only blood pounding and the heat in your ears. The quiet isn't so bad.

You open the link between your mind and Aaron's to defend yourself and you don't see Charlie above you with the lock. Height favors him, finally.

When Charlie hits him the second time, Aaron's blood talks to you. Three boys and a stray behind a video store dumpster. Smashing fluorescent light bulbs is boring, they say. A cat will walk for you on four broken legs if he has to, Aaron. But you gotta let him bite you. That's the chance you take. If he bites you, though, don't cry. If they laugh, don't cry. If you cry, she'll make you. Don't cry.

You struggle to breathe under Aaron as he falls limp on to you, but it doesn't matter.

Don't cry. The quiet isn't so.

* * *

I made the phone call, and when the police arrived, the camera was still running on the wicker table. They took me to the police station, and set me on a bench outside an interview room. I asked if there was a place for me to sleep, but they had no answers. I saw two officers, ones I didn't recognize from the house, walk past me into an interview room carrying the same box where Aaron kept his home movies. It was labeled 'AFHV,' like the Bob Saget show. They gave me a packet of peanut butter crackers with soda and told me to wait. I waited and fell asleep on the bench, and no one seemed worried I would leave.

It was early morning when they woke me and said I'd be going to the hospital.

Not jail, I said.

No, one said. He was the only officer dressed in a white shirt instead of grey.

Can I take my food with me, I asked.

Leave it, he said. We'll get something better on the way.

When we stepped out to the officer's car, the day was blue and nothing kept the sky from crowding in all around. I asked the officer if he could roll down the window for me, and he opened it a few inches. It wasn't regulation, he said. I sat there with the soda can between my thighs and let my fingers out of the opening in the window to feel.

The hospital the officers referred to was an upstairs wing of the Transylvania County Juvenile Detention Center. I sat on another bench with my take-out container of toast, eggs, and bacon, while the officer in a white shirt talked to a woman at the desk. He left, and the woman showed me to a room with an upright bed, a table, two chairs, two lamps, and a door that locked from the outside. She brought me a plastic spoon and said I could have a rest after I ate breakfast.

Doctor Oliphant will be by in a few hours to speak with you, she said. He works here at the hospital.

Okay, I said. She nodded and turned to leave. Are you going to lock the door?

She tilted her head and smiled. Charlie, is it, she asked.

Yes.

Charlie, would you like me to lock the door?

No.

Then I won't. Make sure you get some rest after you eat.

I finished my toast and bacon and looked out the window. It was painted shut. I couldn't sleep until I found the remote that turned the bed horizontal again. The sun came out, and before long, the woman from the front desk came back with a balding man wearing a brown wool jacket and a red tie. We shook hands and sat opposite each other at the table by the painted window. The room grew warmer as we talked, and when he gestured or moved, I could faintly smell his shaving lotion and the cigarettes he must have had on the way to the hospital.

Could I have a cigarette, I asked.

This may sound silly given the circumstances, he said, but smoking is a bad habit to get into.

Not if you bum, I said. Keeps it under control. He thought for a moment and reached into his breast pocket.

It's not the soundest logic in the world, Charlie.

He lit a cigarette for himself and took a drag before handing it to me. When he lit one for himself, I asked, do you always do that?

What?

Take a drag for yourself before you give one to someone else.

I suppose I do. Does that bother you in some way?

No, I said. I like it. It's a mean kind of friendly. We started using my take-out box as an ashtray, tapping ash onto my uneaten eggs. The room was getting smoky.

These windows are a problem, he said. He moved to the painted shut sill and pulled at the top mold of the window. It was meant to slide up, and would, if the line of paint were broken. He took out a Swiss army knife, cut along the painted line, and pushed open the window. I heard the traffic of people and cars one storey below and remembered.

I know you lost your parents at a young age, he said. He came back to the table and put out his cigarette in the eggs. The officers at the station pulled files on you, from Child Services. It was a car accident?

That's right. We were coming home from a Christmas party. This is what Aaron tells me. I don't know. We were coming home, and my parents weren't drunk-drunk. Just government-drunk.

And they were hit by another driver. Is that right?

He was the drunk-drunk one. He died there, too. Aaron and I were in the back.

Did you ever feel deserted after that, or that you were owed something you weren't given, because of how you lost them?

I didn't think about it that way. I've never been a dad, so I don't know who owes who what. Do you have kids?

Three. All girls.

Do you feel like you owe them something?

Sure, yes. It was my choice that brought them here, so I feel I owe them.

I wanted to say I disagreed, but I sat back and took the last drag of the cigarette before putting it into the eggs. The eggs looked like a cartoon mask, yellow with two exaggerated eyes pointing at odd angles. He frowned and put his hands on the table, like mine. I put my head down and stared at my shoes, and waited for Doctor Oliphant's next question about my parents. It didn't come.

We'd go to the park a lot, I said, finally. I've seen pictures. There's one of Mom and Aaron on a bench, and Dad is chasing me around the monkey bars. I'm running like an idiot, arms up, big smile. And I look at the picture, and I realize my arms are up because I know my dad's behind me. I'm running as fast as I can, but I know any second, he's going to scoop me up and tuck me into his arms and take us home. Get us ice cream, read me a story, whatever. And I want him to. Even though I'm running and screaming and laughing. I want him to.

SPEAK EASY

The referendum passed narrowly on a Tuesday night, leaving only five days to print and laminate and distribute some forty-three million permission cards before the statute took effect the following Monday. State by state, the average margin was just under four percent. Florida surprised no one by being the only state to vote against, albeit by a single percent.

Things had come to a precipice. The P.C. backlash was in full bloom, with commentators pressuring politicians and politicians pressuring one another to put the word up to a vote.

A national vote, they'd say. That's what we need. We need to be done with this. We need to get back to the responsibilities of governance!

That was one point uniformly agreed upon.

In the senate, the larger question of alternative reparations predominated for weeks. The public weighed in, with one large faction pushing for free access to all goods made from one hundred percent cotton. Comedians insisted that companies begin blending their fabrics immediately. Soon, everything would be a rayon blend, and we'd all look like elderly Cubans. Most people just asked for money. Ungodly, mathematically fair sums of money.

The president explained the content and language of the referendum to the country in a primetime address. He used a whiteboard with several colorful visual aides. He encouraged everyone of age to vote. Then he said goodnight.

Stores were quick to comply, generally. Barbecue sauces changed their ingredient lists as *acetum,* the Latin word for vinegar, replaced its English counterpart. Vinegar itself was now sold as acetic acid. Balsamic vinaigrette, which was poised for a culinary resurgence, disappeared from restaurants entirely.

In the worlds of sport and finance, contract negotiations became the much cleaner-sounding *arbitration*. No one missed the old word. But nine athletes, two CFOs, and a lawyer all lost their jobs and were slapped with backbreaking fines for, in the heat of arbitration, accusing someone of reneging. The word filtered through corporate e-mail servers. *Renege* was out. *Double talk*, *flip flop*, and *Indian give* were in. A few Native American and East Indian interest groups complained, but their protestations fell on deaf, post-racial ears. Each group soothed itself by convincing its members that the word really referred to the *other* kind of Indian.

Lorenzo Lamas started a small support group outside Calabasas, California. Arnold Schwarzenegger and two former members of Styx joined.

In Brooklyn, the Vinegar Hill neighborhood was incorporated into Dumbo. Those who complained—mostly older residents who hadn't heard of any referendum—were offered vouchers to help them relocate. A few took the vouchers, a few died in that way older people sometimes do, and the rest kept quiet.

As for the word itself, once the cards were distributed, some two hundred seventy million people were left in the lurch. Cardholders had unimpeded permission to use the word and any iteration of its phoneme—the sound *nig*—in both public and private. This was the coup. When one of these forty-three million made a volcano model for the eighth grade science fair, he asked a bagger at the grocery store where the vinegar was kept. Never mind that the name had been officially changed. Some cardholders were cheap at garage sales and stingy with tips, so that they could self-refer as niggardly. A few reneged on contracts with reckless abandon, and told you before, during, and after the fact, exactly what they were doing. What could anyone do? The law was the law.

In the months after the referendum, speakeasies opened up around the country where those who weren't issued one of the forty-three million cards could come and hear the word. Cardholders would go on stage alone, or in small groups, sometimes with microphones, and read out the ingredients to Kombucha, or a recipe for pickling cucumbers, or describe how Miracle Whip achieved its tangy zip. Most nights, a cardholder would ascend the stage just to say the word itself and hear the audience stand in ovation until they had enticed an encore out of him. A second. Then a third.

THE INTEREST AND THE PRINCIPAL

Cliff and the woman sat in a diner, at the front end of its long, peach-colored bar. He had wanted her to sit across from him, at his left, on the other edge of the counter. His habit was to sit with a view of the diner's plate glass window and the people just outside. She sat on his right instead, so with a quick kick, she could feel her purse on the footrest. She explained this to him and he couldn't argue, so she asked why he didn't want to sit in a booth. He said booths were first date deathtraps.

"In what way?" she asked.

"It's just problem after problem," he said. "Which side do we sit on? Should I face the door and risk being distracted by people coming and going? If I face the other way, I might spend too much time looking at you. If I move to sit on the same side of the booth, automatic intimacy. If your body language tells me that's a bad idea, then there's me making some kind of awkward move to slide back to the other side of the booth. It's all bad. And I haven't even brought up the mechanics of putting an arm around someone in a booth."

"Please do," she said.

"Seriously?" he asked.

"No," she said. She laughed because she had got him.

He had treated her to a slapstick romance, and she kissed his knuckles during the wedding scene. He was cautious, and optimistic. They shared popcorn after she made it clear at the concession stand that she would enjoy some of his if he was in the mood for it. He knew better than to buy a hot dog on the first date, for her or for him. But if they both ate the popcorn,

and both wanted to share a kiss in the theater or at the diner, it would be equally corny, equally buttery, for the two of them. That would be fine.

"I had a dream about this," she said.

"About me?" he asked.

"No," she said. "Not specifically. It was more about this night. I had a dream about seeing a movie with a man—I think it was one of those heist movies—and getting to know him in a café."

She leaned back, folded her hands in her lap, and smiled.

"So it wasn't me you were seeing."

"It's you *now*," she said. "The man in the dream didn't look like anyone I knew."

"Oh," he said. He turned to his left and looked out the window onto the street. The diner's sign looked Russian from this side.

He wanted to ask her what the dream man looked like, but the man who worked the soda fountain and took orders at the counter cut him off. His name was Micky, and it was his name that looked Russian from this side of the window. Micky was old, deliberate, and quick about his job. The whole counter was for his customers, the regulars. Waitresses only went behind the counter on the far end to make pick-ups from the two line cooks in back. Micky poured all the drinks, waited on all the regulars, and handled half the money. There was a second cash drawer by the front door where an older man worked his own till.

"What are you having, boss?" Micky pressed his pad against the countertop.

"She will have the grilled cheese with bacon, French fries, and a coke," Cliff said.

The woman scowled at him.

“Trust me,” he said. “It’s the second best thing on the menu.”

“And what’s the first best?” she asked.

“I’ll have the breakfast special, Mick. Also with a coke.”

Micky tore off the orders and put them on the rotator panel facing the line cooks’ station, filled two small glasses with soda, and served the couple.

“These glasses are pretty charming,” she said. “Aren’t they?”

“How so?”

“They’re smaller than usual. And look, no ice.” She took a sip and sighed. “It’s all very continental, isn’t it?”

He was bothered by how she had said *continental*, as though she had invented the word. He had been to Europe once, on a high school trip, eighteen years ago. It was a tour of southern France, and she was right: the glasses always reminded him of those cafés. Years after, he insisted on ordering his soft drinks without ice everywhere he went. When he discovered this diner, it felt like a place after his own heart.

A kid came in and sat down where he had wanted the woman to sit. The kid wore a gray pea coat with the cuffs folded back so they hit his thin wrists just so. He tapped the toe of his boot against the wall of the counter and nodded hello to Cliff and the woman.

“Good evening,” Cliff said.

“You’re not expecting anyone, are you?” the kid asked. He flexed his fingers on the counter.

“No, you’re fine,” Cliff said.

“That’s good,” the kid said. “I was waiting on a good friend of mine all afternoon. Dinner and a movie. That’s our thing on Sundays. First, he stands me up for the movie, now here I am at the diner on my own. He’s a hard guy to pin down today, but I’m sure he just got caught up, lost track of time. I’m starving. What’s good here?”

“He’s having the breakfast special,” the woman said. “He says it’s the best thing on the menu.”

“The best on the menu,” the kid said. “You swear on it?”

“Cliff swears on it,” she said.

“The lady says Cliff swears on it,” the kid said. “Then that’s what I’ll have, too.”

The kid was tap dancing the pepper and salt shakers when Micky came back with two plates. The woman smiled broadly at her grilled cheese sandwich and bacon and poked Cliff in his side after seeing the breakfast special. It combined what were, in Cliff's opinion, the best elements of American breakfast with classics from a full Irish fry-up: toast, fried eggs, mushrooms, a sliced tomato, black and white pudding, shredded hash browns, baked beans, and a thick slice of fried potato farl. Micky circled back and put down a saucer, a small butter knife, and two glass jars.

“What's in there?” the kid asked.

“This one is jam,” Cliff said, raising it on its side to show the strawberry preserves. “And the other is clotted cream.”

The woman leaned in with her eyes wide.

“Clotted cream,” she said. “That sounds so decadent.”

“You should try some,” Cliff said. He cut a corner off his potato farl and spread the cream and jam on it. He would have been forward enough to put the bite right up to her lips, to feed her, but they weren't alone. She took it from him and ate.

“Oh, Cliff,” she said. “This is very serious.” She grabbed his arm, still chewing, and took a sip of her soda.

“It's that good, huh?” the kid asked.

“It really is,” she said. “In fact, I'm a little upset with you now, Cliff, ordering me the grilled cheese.” She huffed and tried her sandwich.

“I told you it was the best,” Cliff said. “But it's a first date, and you having the breakfast special on a first date would break another one of my rules: if kissing is on the menu, black pudding can't be.” He gave her a pinch on the leg.

“I'm sorry,” the kid said. “This is your first date?”

“Yes,” Cliff said. “I don’t think we caught your name, sport. I’m Cliff, and this is, um, this is—”

“I’m Martina,” she said. She reached over their plates to shake hands with the kid. “It’s very nice to meet you—”

“Sport,” the kid said. He shook her hand, their little fingers almost in Cliff’s plate. “That’s what everyone calls me.”

“Sport?” Cliff asked. “You can’t be serious.”

“Cliff! Be nice,” she said. “I think *Sport* is a cool name to go by. What Cliff was probably trying to say is that you don’t have the build of a typical athlete. You’re such a lean young man, is all.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” the kid said. “It’s something I had to grow into. I used to play it all: basketball, football, baseball. But I took an injury. After that, I lost all sensitivity.”

“That’s awful,” she said. “Did you get it back? Did you make a recovery?”

“Yes and no.”

“So, what do you do now?” Cliff asked.

“Well, I can still run. I’m a runner now.”

“What do you chase?” she asked.

“Mostly people.”

They all laughed. Martina’s enthusiasm filtered into everything she did. She had squeezed the kid’s hand firmly, the way he expected men to. And her delight in the creamy potato farl, the kid thought: it bordered on indelicate. Even now, she threw her head back as she laughed, partly covering her mouth.

“Can I be honest with you?” the kid asked. “The way the light's hitting you right now, I don't know, it could be my eyes, but I think you have some kind of a goober hanging right there.” The kid waved his hand around the middle of his face. “You might want to go straighten that out.”

She covered her nose, took up her purse, and weaved down the aisle to the bathroom. The kid's expression changed.

“First date, huh?” he asked.

“You have to promise me something, kid,” Cliff said. “I’m glad you’re here. Relieved, I mean. You have to promise me something: don't stop calling me ‘Cliff,’ all right? Not in front of her.”

“I have to promise you?”

“Okay,” Cliff said. “I'm sorry.” The man put his hands up. “I just. Look. I'm asking you for a favor here. Honestly, I’m relieved you’re here. You don't have to call me anything. I'm just—I'm asking you for a favor here. If you call me a name, just say ‘Cliff.’ Is that okay with you?”

Cliff loosened his tie and pushed his plate away. The color drained from his face. The kid looked puzzled, smiled, and shook his head. He took the man's potato farl, spread on some clotted cream, and took a bite.

“Come here,” the kid said. The man leaned in so that their elbows were touching and the kid could smell Martina’s scent in the space between them: oranges and Murphy Oil Soap.

“Is this some kind of a sex thing here?” the kid asked. “Is this like a role-play thing with you two—cowboys and Indians?”

“You don’t understand,” Cliff said. “Young kid like you, women must fall in your lap six times a week and twice on Sundays. It’s the spice of life. Some people, some people have to make their own spice. You don’t understand.”

“I understand a general lack of restraint, Clifford,” the kid said. He ate some hash browns with his fingers. “And that’s what I think I’m seeing today. And what I’ve been seeing for as long as I’ve been after you: a general, pervasive lack of restraint.”

“I’m not some kind of degenerate here,” Cliff said. “I got caught up, like you said. Here, have my plate. I don’t think I’m hungry anymore. I’m relieved you’re here, but I can’t eat any more.”

He passed it to the kid, who scooped some baked beans onto a bite of potato farl and ate it, smacking his lips. He followed the bite with a mushroom.

“The food’s good here,” Cliff said. “Isn’t it? It’s on me.”

The kid licked his fingers and nodded.

“I need some soda, too, Clifford.”

The man slid over his drink and drummed his fingers on the countertop as the kid drained the glass.

“You got caught up,” the kid repeated. “I can understand that. Things always go right until they don’t.”

“Yeah, sure,” the man said. Cliff felt like a child at his father’s table. Like clockwork, Micky circled back, re-filled the soda glasses.

“Do you know what a cliché is, Clifford?”

“Sure.”

“Do you know how a cliché becomes a cliché?”

Cliff stopped drumming his fingers at the bar and called out to Micky for a glass of water. Micky was at the other end of the bar, but he raised his thumb without looking in the men’s direction.

“A cliché isn’t really a bad thing, Clifford. It’s just something simple and honest that happened one too many times.”

“And that’s what I am now.”

“That’s the word from uptown,” the kid said. “And I can’t say I disagree, looking at you up close, all in Technicolor. Let me ask you something. Where do the two of you leave your rings, when you have these matinees?”

Cliff took the band out of his pocket and placed it next to his plate. The kid tried it on and then tucked it into his breast pocket.

“She keeps hers in the freezer,” Cliff said. “She says she likes how it feels, after.”

Micky circled back with a glass of water. The glass was still warm and wet from the dishwasher, and it made the water feel even colder as Cliff took one long gulp, then another. He thought he could feel the water working its way into all of his limbs. His feet were cooler, his fingers, his chilly eyelashes.

“I'll take her with me,” the kid said. He pointed with the knife in his right hand to the toilets, and ate a forkful of hash browns and eggs. “I can do that for you.”

“You'll take her with you,” Cliff said.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” the kid asked. “You *want* to get square here, Clifford. I think I can see that in you.”

“I don’t—” Cliff started. He cocked his head to the right, toward the bathroom where he knew she was freshening her makeup. The grilled cheese sandwich on her plate was going to go cold. He picked up the untouched half and took a bite. He swallowed, turned back to the kid, and finished his thought: “I just wanted to say it out loud, once.”

“You should leave,” the kid said. “Before she comes out.”

“I should,” Cliff said. “I should leave.”

“And be smarter about the next one, sport,” the kid said. “It won’t always be me.”

Cliff emptied his pockets onto the countertop. He saw that it was enough, and he left.

When the woman returned from the bathroom, she kissed the kid's cheek and sat down on his right. She set her purse down on the footrest and gave it two little kicks. Martina looked at him. What new game was this now? The change left on the bar reminded her of her bare fingers, of the freezing ring, and when she might see it again. What was it worth?

The kid gave her a furtive look and, noticing it, she wanted to comfort him somehow. To bend him down to her chest and pat his back, smelling his smoky hair. Boys work so hard to show nothing but their meanness but, looking at him again, he wasn't a boy at all. Not really. She shook her head and was herself again.

Her sandwich, which had been cut diagonally, now looked like a cartoon heart.

"Cliff," she said. "Did you take a bite of my sandwich?"

"I'm sorry," the kid said with a smile. On second thought, he liked her quite a bit. "I couldn't help myself."

She made an endearing, pitiful face at her plate. "How do you suppose we make this right?" she asked.

The kid pulled her sandwich heart over to himself and pushed the breakfast special to her. She kissed his cheek again, and the orange scent reminded him of a person he couldn't place anymore, someone lost to him. They ate and drank, quietly. Any minute now, Micky would be circling back with more soda.

THE SATURN BOYS

It turned out my mother had a cousin I never knew about growing up, a girl cousin named Molly, and that's who the state decided I ought to stay with once they were done rehabilitating me for killing my brother and all. I think it's best to get that out of the way. I hit Aaron in the head with a U-Lock, four times. The third whack killed him. At the time, I had a friend with me. His name was Roland and, while I thought it was him who did the killing, it turns out he was probably a creature of my imagination. That's what Doctor Oliphant tells me. I more or less believe him.

To be clear, though, Aaron was a sub-par brother. I have the scars to prove it.

That was what I said to Doctor Oliphant and the case workers and the judge, and they all listened to me with their heads tilted just a little bit to the side, like dogs listen. But I guess they believed me. First they made me a ward of Transylvania County—that's the county I'm from, where I did all my growing up and brother-killing—and then they found my mother's cousin after they decided I must've had a good reason to kill Aaron and that I didn't pose a threat to anybody else. I agreed with them. I wanted to move on, and that place didn't have anything left for me, good or bad.

Most of the boys in the county JDC were on drugs. Once or twice a day a nurse would come by with little paper ketchup cups full of pills and watch each boy take their prescriptions. Some of the boys had to open their mouths, say *Ahhh*, and wag their tongues around to make the nurse believe they didn't hide the pills up in their gums so they could spit them out later. Doctor Oliphant said I could take a prescription if I wanted to, that there was something he could recommend, but I told him I didn't ever want to take any drugs. Aaron hadn't been himself when

he was on his medicine, or when he was drinking—and even though he wasn't great to be around when he *was* himself, he was just a different kind of worse on pills. The doctor told me he could let me slide on the pill front as long as I doubled down on shrink time: two hours of therapy a day. Forty minutes in group and eighty minutes with Oliphant one on one. I took the deal. He liked to listen about as much as I do, and since it was the spring and the summer when we were meeting, we could sometimes walk outside the JDC. Hell, sometimes a good two miles away from it, where the side roads meet outside the woods, and where the doctor would sneak me some cigarettes. I could smoke four cigarettes in twenty minutes when I really had a mind to. Doctor Oliphant called that a breakthrough.

It took a few months to get everything in order before I could stop being a ward of the county and just be a ward of Molly, so I finished eighth grade with about ninety other boys in the JDC. There were only about ten weeks left after I joined the center, and I could've passed my finals in my sleep, but there wasn't much else to do in the JDC except sleep and study, so I studied: aced everything except algebra on account of I can't graph an inequality to save my life.

During all that studying and sleeping, Molly came down for an interview with the doctor and probably the case workers, too. They brought me up from the dorms—they didn't call them cells anymore—and I sat with her for a few minutes in one of the classrooms. The JDC wasn't a fancy one-way mirror place, at least as far as I know, and Doctor Oliphant just stood outside the window staring at us as we got to know one another.

"It's good to meet you, Charlie," she said. "You must be about fourteen by now, right?"

I nodded. "I'll be fourteen in September. Do you remember me at all?"

"No," she said. "I met you once or twice. You were a baby then. All arms and legs now, like your dad was." I'd never heard the expression before. Made me think of him, tangled up in his seatbelt, legs through the steering wheel, fingers through the window like he was trying to catch the breeze. I doubt it was as bad as all that, but my imagination gets ahead of me when I let it. She gave me a sweet look, and studied me like she was trying to see my dad inside me. At least that's what I figure, since I was trying to see my mother inside her. They did favor each other, didn't they?

"How old are you, anyway?" I asked.

"I'm forty-three."

"Were you the big cousin or the little cousin?"

"I was the older one, by about a year. Ten months, I think."

"So, there was always a little bit of time, every year, when the two of y'all were the same age," I said. "Did you see a lot of her, growing up?"

She blinked a few times and shook her head. I didn't know what I'd said that made her want to cry, but it looked like she was about to start up, and I couldn't stand it just right then. Doctor Oliphant says everybody gets emotional sometimes. That getting overwhelmed is a part of life, and crying helps get the poison out—that's what he called it. I think he's right. I just don't know what to do with a sad grown-up. If they still get worked up into tears at forty-something, what hope was there for the rest of us?

"No," I said. "Don't cry. I'm gonna change the subject. I'm really smart in English and in science, too, and I read a couple books a month, just for a distraction, you know? And I think it'd be great to live with you. I've never been to New York before, though. Hmm. And sometimes I

talk in my sleep. I'm, uh, pretty good at cooking. I like punk music, mostly Dead Kennedys, but I don't have to listen to it if you don't like it. I could save up and get a CD player, and headphones. You wouldn't have to hear it if I had the headphones. I don't have to listen to it at all."

She cried a little anyway. I looked around the classroom to see if there were tissues lying around I could get for her, but she took a pack of them out of her purse and wiped her eyes before I could get up and have a better look. She breathed deep, and laughed at herself.

"I think it'd be great if you came to live with us, Charlie," she said. "Would that be all right with you?"

* * *

I've only ever moved the one time, but I think going to a new place makes you more of who you were. You don't really think about it, but you're worried in your guts that the new place is going to change you somehow, so you take every tic and little odd thing about who you were and put it on for show when you get away. If I'd been a Christian in Brevard, I bet I would've become some kind of fundamentalist in Harworth. That's just the way it goes. You kind of arm yourself in what you know, the things in your past, and you wear it all over you. I couldn't ever miss Brevard or what I did there, but that and some pictures and a pile of clothes were all I had, so I planned to squeeze all I could out of it. It was that or squeeze my own fists till they bled.

It was end of August when Molly came back and flew with me to Syracuse. On the plane, she gave me a CD player and a headset for me to listen to on the flight. I opened it up half expecting to see something from Dead Kennedys like I'd told her about, but the CD was from a band called Warsaw.

"That's what I was into when I was your age," she said. "Okay, maybe when I was in college. But. But it was what I *wished* I'd been listening to when I was your age." I'd just listened to the first track. It sounded like it was recorded in a bathtub, and like the bassist was the only one who knew what he was doing—maybe the singer, too. Sometimes. The bassist just never let up. He played like he was trying to get somewhere and didn't have time to wait for anyone else to come with. I took the headphones off and pulled the set down to my neck while the next song started.

"Is this Warsaw's first album?" I asked. "I like to listen to a band's stuff in order, if I can."

"Kind of," she said. "But Warsaw is the name of the album. The band's called Joy Division."

I nodded and put the headphones back on. I made it through nearly three plays of the album before we landed.

Molly had said her husband John ran her dead dad's furniture store, and that he used to be an accountant, and he wore his job like a Halloween costume. He was bald up top but kept what hair he had long enough that you could see its waves. He might have been handsome back in the day, especially since he had that everywhere look to his skin, like you couldn't guess where he came from. With me or Molly, you'd name two white countries before you nailed us, but he looked like one of those actors who you see in every other movie of the week on television, sometimes playing a Cuban taxi driver, then the Italian waiter, then the Barbary pirate with a black bandana on his head. He wore brown turtle shell glasses, khakis and a pink Oxford shirt. I liked that he didn't wear any jewelry. Didn't help me with my luggage, either. But not in a rude

way—after he picked up Molly and kissed her cheeks, he opened the bed of his pickup truck and climbed back in the driver's seat. It was enough for me that he dug Molly, and looked me in the eye when we shook hands. I didn't think twice about carrying my own bags.

"That's the store right there," John said. We were in town after a good forty minutes of small to medium talk. I saw out the window a blue metal sign with yellow script: Custom Furnishings. "Why don't we pop in? I'll show you around."

"Charlie doesn't want to see a bunch of furniture after flying all morning," Molly said. She was right. I wanted to roll down the window and sleep a bit with my head out the window. "Do you, Charlie?"

"Bah, it's a two hour flight," John said. "Look at that kid. He's robust. He could handle one stop before home, right?" He looked up at me in the rearview mirror, his eyes smiling.

"I could go for either," I said. "Well, yeah, I'd like to see the store."

"Good, it's settled," he said. "I'll show you around, and Molly, you can go pick up Dan from the sitter. Me and Charlie'll walk back." He had already turned the car around, and pulled us into the strip of businesses that included his store. He parked and pointed across Molly's chest. "Don't worry, the house is only about a mile and a half that way."

The shop didn't look big from the outside, but it ran deep back into the plaza. In the front there were two different sort of living rooms set up, with all kinds of mismatched furniture. There'd be a couch and a bureau that looked like they went together, but then a night table and a desk from some other time and place all together. All the pieces up front were expensive. Behind the two pretend living rooms was the counter where John rang people up for what they bought. He turned on the register and switched the key at the top to a dial labeled *X*—what he called the

“dummy setting”—and showed me how to ring up purchases, add tax, void sales, apply discounts and all that. He asked me how I was with math and I told him about inequalities.

“We do very little of that here,” he said, laughing. “You have my word on that.”

I walked farther back into the shop. The furniture wasn’t arranged into any kind of living room set up behind the main counter. All these pieces were grouped according to color. I started in the browns, kneeling in front of a cedar bureau. I pulled open the middle drawer. It smelled good, like nothing. I sank into a red, tweedy armchair and put my feet up on the cherry red ottoman, closing my eyes just long enough to forget I wasn’t alone. When I opened them, John was at the back door of the shop, looking at me.

“You’re tired,” he said. “Guess I should’ve brought you straight back with Molly.”

“No, I’m all right, sir,” I said. I stood and walked over to him at the rear door. “The chair’s comfortable is all.”

“True, I’ve seen a lot of people nod off in it.” I instinctively brushed the back of my head and shoulders. “Mostly people with head lice, come to think of it.” He laughed. “Come on, I want to show you the back.”

Outside the shop he kept an old copper table. It was mostly green, oxidized, but in a real sweet way. The chairs were the same. There was a hole in the center of the table, where you could put the umbrella that was leaning up against a wall, folded up. What was in the hole then was just an orange ashtray.

“My sense of smell is better than my wife’s,” he said. He pointed at the ashtray. “I don’t mind if you have a bad habit or two. I doubt Molly does either. She loves you already; she can’t

help herself. But I have Dan to think about, too. Dan's our daughter—Daniela. I can't have her growing up around that kind of influence."

"I understand."

"You're going to be like a big brother now. I never had that kind of responsibility. I was the baby. Just ate and ate, all the time. I used to regret it, but," he shrugged, and it turned into a full body stretch. "But what can you do? Everyone plays his role in a family. Sometimes that role changes when it has to. Family changes."

"I killed my family," I said.

"You didn't kill your family," he said. He took out a pack of menthols—I hated menthols, but hated turning down free cigarettes more—and handed me one. "Here. Sit down."

We both dragged the copper chairs back and sat. He lit my cigarette for me and didn't have one of his own. It was the oddest thing. I couldn't imagine giving someone a smoke, lighting it, and then watching them puff away without having one. If he was trying to teach me something, it worked: he was stronger than I was. He could stare at the easy thing and not do it.

"You killed one person," he said, like that was a useful distinction to make. "And I'm sure it was hard for you, maybe not during, you were protecting yourself, but since then. I'm sure it's been tough sometimes, even if it was right. Even if you were right."

I nodded.

"Anyway, family's like whack-a-mole. You get rid of one, now you have three more. I guess you're just lucky. But not so lucky you can smoke in my house. I have to protect Dan. So, you'll do *that* here." He pointed to me and I looked at the ember of the cigarette before taking another drag. "And you'll work for it. Ten hours a week."

"Will I get paid?"

"Absolutely. Once it's legal. You can't earn money legally until you're fifteen, which Molly tells me is a year from next month. That right?" I nodded. "Okay, then thirteen months, times minimum wage, plus bonuses, minus cigarettes, plus you're my wife's cousin, is five thousand dollars. When's your birthday?"

"September thirtieth."

He took out a check and showed it to me. It was printed with his name and the store's name on it. My name too, and in the amount of five thousand dollars. It had the date of my fifteenth birthday on it.

"Moll says you like books," he said. I folded the check once and put it in my pocket as careful as I could manage sitting down. "Take that, put it in your favorite book, page fifteen: something to look forward to."

"Thank you," I said. "Maybe I'll buy that red chair."

"You could do worse than that chair," he said. "I find that chair in a moving sale four months ago, springs busting out of the seat, obviously worn to crap. Took me two hours to fix the whole thing once I find the right springs and some tweed that matches. Easy fix, and I'm telling you the chair broke my heart first time I see it."

* * *

I fell for Dan pretty quick. Not in a romantic sense, just in that sense where I didn't have to pretend with her. I didn't know whether John and Molly had told her why I had come to live with them, but she knew we were cousins, and that was enough reason in her mind for her to

look up to me. She was eleven, and didn't have any other cousins nearby. John didn't have any family to speak of, and Molly was an only child.

Dan was real mousey, kind of bookish like John, and dark like him, too. Even though it was Indian summer when we met, she always wore baggy clothes. I guess that's normal for girls her age, going through whatever they're going through. Their bodies like these secret laboratories, making all these things that'll get them into trouble for the rest of their lives. She wanted to keep it all hidden until she knew what to do with it, or what it'd do with her. She let me read her Brian Jacques books, and I turned her on to everything Chris Claremont was up to with the *X-Men* in the year she was born. She'd quiz me on the five members of HI-5, this Korean pop group she loved. She fell in love with them from a poster she saw at Trung My, a store in Ithaca that sells manga, anime, music, and Pocky in every color of the rainbow. There was a clear laminated panel over the poster, the one she bought that day and hung over her desk, and it was where she practiced writing *I love you* in Korean and drew hearts around the lead singer's face in washable marker. To his credit, he was the only member of the group who had what I'd consider a man's haircut.

One day, I was rearranging some dust at the furniture shop and I asked John if Dan knew anything about why I came to live with them.

"She knows you're an orphan," he said. "I guess she's too polite to bring it up with you. But you might want to talk with her about it."

"Does she know about Aaron?"

"No. As far as she knows, you're an only child." It was stupid, but when he said that, I wanted him to put his hand on my head. "If you want," he said, "you can leave it at that—but I

imagine at some point you're gonna want to be honest with her. That's what family does. Makes you do stupid things for smart reasons."

I suppose it was the fact that I still felt like a guest in the house, but it was hard to get comfortable enough to sleep at night, those first weeks. I'd go to my room, the room they set up for me, across the hall from Dan's, and listen to a CD with the headset around my neck so I could only partly hear the lyrics. Mostly I could just hear the bass or the high end of the drums, and I'd try to sleep, but it wouldn't come. So I'd get up and pace the hall, go downstairs. I tried heating up a mug of milk in the microwave. I heard that kind of thing worked for people. Not me. I just ended up running through milk at an embarrassing pace. I felt bad about it pretty quick and stopped doing that. Started doing things that didn't cost John and Molly any money. So that they wouldn't notice.

I'd do a whole bunch of pushups, trying to wear myself out. I'd do them until I collapsed, and it would knock me out for a few minutes, but I'd wake up again just with sweaty fibers from the carpet stuck to my cheek. I tried jerking off, too, but after a couple nights I just took to walking.

John had given me a key to the house that first night, and I would put on my socks and a pair of gym shorts, sometimes a shirt, too, and get out of the house as slow as I could. Thing about going slow when you're trying to sneak away from someone is it takes a very long time. the longer the better. You have to be slow about it if you don't want to be noticed. So from my bedroom door to the front stoop, I'd spend about fifteen minutes just easing my way out. Eventually I learned which floorboards creaked and how to hug the wall in the hallway, brace myself against the banister so I'd be a little lighter going down the stairs.

There was still the front door to deal with, and that took two nights to get right—opening it slow enough that the only thing you could hear, if you put your ear right up against the door, was the slow action of the lock turning left and letting itself drop. But where would I go? Mostly I just walked, out of the neighborhood and down the main roads, including the same road where the furniture store was. There weren't that many cars out that time of night. Sometimes they'd slow down.

I was tall for my age, but I still looked like a kid. I'd like to think people were just concerned, seeing a boy walking in the middle of the night. Like maybe I'm lost, maybe I need you to help me, can you help me, but every time someone slowed down enough or rolled down their window to ask me if I was okay, they didn't look the helping kind of people.

I'd walk around the strip of shops where John worked and to the back patio, which butted up against a fence that separated the stores from a big expanse of field. It was the football and baseball field for the junior-senior high school where I'd be starting. I'd put my hands through the space in the chain link fence and stare at the field. Imagine myself being popular or just having friends, or a girlfriend.

The second night I found myself back there, I climbed the fence. Just to walk around in the baseball outfield. I took off my shoes and socks and walked in the grass. It wasn't cold most nights. Just wet. And I'd have to sit on the concrete by the fence when I was ready to go home again and wipe the dirt off the soles of my feet for a few minutes before I could put my socks and shoes on, and walk the mile and a half back to the house.

One night, when I got back and made my way silent up the stairs, Dan was in the hallway outside my bedroom door.

“Where were you?” she said.

“I went for a walk,” I said. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“Well, if you couldn’t sleep, you should tell Mom, or tell Dad. Maybe they can take you to a doctor or something.” I told her I didn’t want any medicine. I just needed to wear myself out a little bit.

“And how’s that working out for you?” she asked. She could probably see the exhaustion in my eyes. I didn’t need a mirror to know I must have looked like I felt. She put her hand on her hip. She was trying to act like a mother, like my mother. It looked funny, but it kind of suited her.

“It’s not working so well,” I told her.

“It’ll be easier once school starts up,” she said. “You’ll see. I think the problem is you just don’t have any distractions. You need to be a little bit stressed out, and then you’ll probably go right to bed at night, just to get away from all that, you know?”

I nodded.

“You shouldn’t go walking anymore. The whole neighborhood could be full of weirdos. We don’t know.”

“Why don’t you know?” I asked. “People don’t talk to neighbors here?”

“God, no. I only talk to the lady next door because she stays here when the parents are away. I don’t really know anyone else in the neighborhood. Just people from school. Maybe that’ll change once I start at the junior-senior.”

“Are you worried about it?”

“No,” she said. “You’ll be there.”

"I'll look out for you. We can have lunch together if you want."

"Oh yeah, that'd make me real popular: having lunch with my cousin."

"Well, we could just pretend not to be related," I said. "I could be your cool, ninth grade friend. I could get a tattoo." She covered her mouth to stop herself from laughing.

"Where did you walk to?" She asked me a second time.

"I walked down by the furniture store. I saw the high school."

"Are *you* nervous?"

"No," I said. "It's just one more new thing. Mix it in with all the others."

"You don't worry about a lot of things, do you?"

"No," I said. "Not anymore."

* * *

Huong was a junior, and the first friend I made at the new school. It didn't happen at school. On the first Friday of the new year, there was a big pre-season football game. Our team, the Harworth Lions, had lost the pre-season opener the year before to the New Canaan Warriors. I'd decided to blow off the game and was at the furniture store doing homework in the front office. I could hear a young-sounding couple looking through the bedroom sets by the entrance. The woman sounded pretty, and I went out front to see for myself. She was pale, freckled, with dyed black hair. I straightened my shirt and was about to offer some help when I saw an older pickup truck with smoke coming from the back. The driver was revving the engine.

She put the truck into gear and drove it into a new looking Saturn parked in front of the gelato place next to our store. It was a short distance, so she was probably only doing ten or fifteen when she hit it, but all that acceleration—it was a nasty crunch. Sounded like bone. The

couple started panicking, and John and I went out front. The Saturn's alarm was already blaring and Huong was backing up. She crashed into the car a second time, then a third, and reversed back into her parking space. She climbed out the truck and was wearing the Harworth varsity cheerleader uniform, but she looked like she belonged more on the field than on the track in front of the bleachers leading cheers. She was tall, taller than me, and had well-defined muscles. She probably wore the largest size uniform, but because of her size, a lot of her stomach muscles were exposed, and most of her thighs. She could have done as much damage to the car just swinging a bat as she did with her truck. Her hair was black with a light brown highlight near the front, and she kept it in this defiant, long ponytail. I'd seen the other cheerleaders that day at school and during the lunchtime pep rally, and they all had short bob haircuts or wore their hair in tight Princess Leia buns on game days.

John was on her in what felt like a second and had her by the wrists, up against her truck. By this point a crowd had gathered.

"Call the police," he said.

"I know her," I said. John let her go, though I don't think he could've held her much longer either way. John stepped away to get the portable phone from inside. He told the crowd to go back inside while he dialed the police.

"Are you all right?" I asked. She nodded. "Whatever the guy did to deserve that, I'm sure you're in the right." I looked at the Saturn, which she had turned more or less from a coupe into a hatchback.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"I'm new."

“You’re lucky.”

We didn’t talk much more that day: police were already on hand at the school for the game, and they came right over. I couldn’t stop thinking about Huong, her legs, all of her. She had spotted a smaller girl doing aerials at the lunchtime pep rally. I started going to the weight room by the boys’ locker room, during lunch, and after school, until I ran into her again. I had to wait a week on account of she was suspended for threatening a student off campus, but she came back, and that was where I saw her.

She told me she had been seeing the Saturn boy, Kevett Onetsky, all summer. He’d never take her out places, like she was his secret, but he’d sweat her when he was by himself every chance he got. Notes in her mailbox, phone calls, the whole thing. But he didn’t want to be seen with her, not by their mutual friends. She put up with it because he was beautiful, she said. He played on the offensive line, and was one of maybe five guys at Harworth Junior Senior who could actually make her feel small, protected. A few weeks before the crash, he’d told her he loved her, and she had sex with him every day until school started. But by the end of the week, the calls and notes had stopped, and another cheerleader told her he was dating someone else. I respected that she didn’t take it out on the new girl, just went straight to the source and had her revenge. She said the same thing, more or less, happened to her the year before with a guy from the basketball team, but he’d graduated, and she never got a chance to hurt him back.

“What would you have done to the first guy?” I asked. She had stopped lifting and we were sitting at neighboring bench presses. I tried not to laugh at the fact that she had two forty-five pound plates on hers and I had two twenty-fives on mine.

"Well, he didn't have a car," she said. She took a towel from the front of her baggy sweats, wiped her forehead and tucked it into the collar of her gym shirt. "But he had a bike. He was kind of poor. I would've felt bad, maybe, doing something to the bike."

"You don't feel bad for Kevett?"

"I feel bad for his parents. He didn't buy that car. He just loves it. And it was the first place we, you know."

"Oh."

"I think I'm done with boys. Hooking up. All of it. Sorry if that's why you were interested in me."

"No, not at all," I said. "I mean. You're—I just kind of admire you, is all."

"You admire the crazy loser bitch who smashes cars?"

"You're not a loser. You were hurting, and you let everybody know it. Lots of people don't do that. They can't."

* * *

I had a good routine going after those first couple weeks. I would go to school, lift weights during lunch or in my free period, and see Huong either in the weight room or back at the furniture shop. She was pretty health-obsessed, which brought me down to about two cigarettes during daylight hours, when I could sneak them before school or at the shop before going home. Then, I'd have dinner with the Molly clan and wait for everyone to fall asleep before sneaking out of the house. I still wasn't sleeping right. I could keep this up for two, sometimes three days, and by the third day I'd nod off in class and sleep for twelve hours right

after dinner. Molly didn't know what to make of it, but they'd never had a teenager in their house before, and, since there were no pentagrams or goats in my room, they let it lie.

My body felt different. I could feel the muscles in my legs when I took the stairs between classes, and I appreciated the days of soreness when Huong told me about the strength that would replace all that pain. I didn't stop smoking, but I cut back. My walks in the middle of the night were turning into runs, and I wanted to see how far I could go in the space of an hour. Then two. Then more. I was trying to see how this new place looked at speed. My eyes would prioritize what I needed to see, and filter out things they decided were unimportant or unthreatening. I loved how they adjusted independently. It was as if they could gather all the stray light from streetlamps and televisions left on inside houses and pull it all before me. I never slipped.

Weekends were busy at the furniture shop, but I did my hours during the school week so that I'd have time for Dan and Huong. Her truck had been fixed days after the parking lot, but Huong's parents were only letting her use it for school and cheerleading. So it was Molly who would take the three of us to Trung My to shop for mangas and semi-new K-Pop albums. To hear Dan tell it, America was always months behind Seoul's pop scene. She'd tell me when a new album would come out in Korea, based on her careful attention to online K-Pop forums, and then guess how many weeks or months it'd be before she would be able to find the same album at Trung My.

"She has it down to a science," Molly said.

Dan shrieked in front of the CD display. "Charlie, it's the *Age of Love Innocent* CD! The one I *told* you about!" When Dan first showed me her HI-5 album collection, the *Age of Love*

Innocent film soundtrack—a soundtrack for some kind of 3D movie the group allegedly acted in—was the one gap in her collection. Even though it was mostly techno-influenced, Dan said, the lead singer wrote all of the music himself. This was some kind of milestone. I stopped her from unwrapping it right there in the aisle.

"Your sister's really losing it," Huong said. Dan beamed. I mouthed *cousin* to Huong. "Oh, right. Cousin. Hey, Daniela, let me take it up front and see if I can get you a discount, okay?"

"You know the owners?" Dan asked.

"No, but I'll just lie and say I go to their church or something."

"Oh my God, you're the coolest. Charlie, your girlfriend is the coolest!"

"We're just friends," Huong said.

* * *

"Charlie's coming with me on a little road trip tonight, aren't you?" John asked. We were at the dinner table. It was my birthday, and we had just finished a homemade yellow cake with chocolate frosting. I'd forgotten that Dan had asked me what my favorite cake was the day I moved in to the house. That was almost five weeks ago. I still took my runs at night. I couldn't even hear myself anymore when I snuck out—I had the whole escape down to one breathless minute. If I ran into John in the kitchen, I was just thirsty. If it was Molly, and I had my sneakers in my hands and my socks in my pockets, I was sleepwalking, and I'd put my sneakers and socks in the dishwasher real carefully until she noticed and guided me back up the stairs trying not to wake me.

John hadn't mentioned any trip.

“I’m glad you aren’t this forgetful in the store,” he said. “I offer to buy Charlie a new mountain bike from Tugley’s in Silver Hill and he forgets.” Molly and Dan were surprised, but I didn’t see the harm in playing along with John. He had been what he seemed to be since we met. And I wasn’t against lying, really, not as a rule. You just either had to have a good reason to do it, or you could only lie to stop someone from getting hurt. I lied because I couldn’t sleep. Maybe John couldn’t either.

* * *

“You’re like me, aren’t you?” The question was out of my mouth before I thought about what it could mean or what I’d do if he answered the wrong way. I didn’t know what the wrong way was. We were in John’s truck, heading south.

“What do you mean,” he asked.

“I mean, you’re like me. The part of you that used to get afraid—you, you broke it. Like I did.”

“Oh.” He was quiet a while. Kept moving his thumb back and forth on the steering wheel. He was driving left-handed, right hand moving like he wanted to find a new station on the radio even though the sound was too down to hear. “Yes, we’re alike in that way. Maybe others. But the thing about getting attached to people, and doing all those regular people things, it makes it hard to stay broke the way we are. People keep fixing you. Molly fixes you. Dan fixes you. And the fear comes with it. It just comes back with them.”

“And now this—”

“Now this thing we have to go deal with.”

“Does it have to do with the suitcase up under your bed?” He looked at me a second.

"Would you be surprised if I told you it didn't?" We both laughed in spite of ourselves.

"Once you have people, bad shit will just come and find you. The fear's all in losing them—something you made yourself."

John told me he used to take care of money for people who couldn't keep their money in banks. Criminals, crooked cops, that kind of thing. They trusted him because he had some dirt in his past, too, mostly from half a lifetime before that. He had a lot of stories that came half a lifetime before the first half a lifetime. He'd lived three or four total lives, by my count, before he ever settled down with Molly. Anyway, these guys whose money he was taking care of, they trusted him more than they probably should have, he said, and he started to notice he could take a little piece of the money off the top and they wouldn't notice. Just take it, and see, nothing. And he wasn't afraid someone was going to stop him. He didn't need the money, wasn't desperate for it—they paid him pretty well for the privilege of not having to keep what was theirs in a bank. He was their bank, and he was a kid, it was more money than he knew what to do with anyhow. It's just there was nothing inside telling him not to.

"One of them was a cop, and I guess he was better at arithmetic than the rest," he said. "I should have known a little better. He was a thief is what he really was, and there was a lot of money to be had in that environment. So, he'd make these meticulous notes of whatever he took in a drug bust, leaving out whatever portion he wanted to keep for himself, and he'd give that to me to keep."

"What was his name?"

"Lessing. So, one night, I go out, have some drinks, see some friends, and I'm back home trying to sleep, and I can't. I keep seeing Lessing in my head. And I know, I know just like I

know the sun's coming up the next day, that this guy has done the arithmetic on me and it's just a matter of time."

"I don't believe you," I said. "How do you just know something?"

"I'm telling you, it was just an inside thing. It wouldn't let me sleep. You think I'm lying for the sake of an interesting story?"

"I don't know, I'm just saying."

"You're just saying. Well, here's what I know. I can't sleep, Lessing's in my head with some kind of Hare Krishna glow, like an aura, around his head, and the next day I'm alive and he's in a hole in the ground. If you're gonna question the story, I'm gonna skip the good parts."

But he hadn't skipped the good parts. I didn't want to believe him—that he could go to bed with a picture in his mind and know without any wiggle room that a particular person was thinking about him, was wishing him harm. Oliphant told me that, for all we know about the brain, it's fairly infinite in how it folds in on itself. It can surprise you. I don't know how something can be *fairly* infinite, but that was his word, not mine. I just know what he said to me after that, that not only is the mind stranger than we know, there's a good chance it's stranger than we *can* know.

"So there was no reason for this policeman to be thinking about you, right?"

"He was a detective. And, no, there was no reason. He saw me maybe four times a year, two deposits, two withdrawals. We weren't Christmas party close. And like I said, there was a color around him."

"Who's Harry Krishna?"

“Some guy who wore orange a lot. Anyway, it was orange, and orange was bad. I learned that much.”

I was quiet for what felt like a long time, and I wondered what color aura I had when I was thinking the word *bullshit* as intensely as I was right then.

“What about Molly?” I asked.

“What about her?”

“When she thinks about you, what color is it?”

“Molly’s a good woman. When she thinks about me, it’s green. It’s always been green.”

* * *

We stopped for gas a few miles north of some city called Nyack, and I broke away at the station to call Oliphant. His card stayed in my front pocket, even though I’d had the number memorized for a long time, and I rubbed it between my fingers before dropping my quarter to make my call.

“Is this you, Doctor Oliphant?”

“Charlie? How are you?”

“I don’t know, sir. Where did I move to?”

“You moved to Harworth with your mother’s cousin, Charlie.”

“Did you meet her?”

“Of course. You saw me meet her. What’s going on?”

“What’s her name?”

“Molly. Her name is Molly. And her husband’s name is John.”

I spit near my foot.

"But you never met the husband, did you?"

"You know I didn't. Is everything okay? Has John hurt you in some way? Has Molly?"

"No, sir. I'm fine. They have a daughter. Her name is Daniela but everyone calls her Dan. She looks up to me. She didn't say it but I can tell."

"That's good. It sure is good to hear from you."

I could see John coming out of the gas station.

"But what's *my* name, doctor?"

"You're Charlie Magnus. You're from Brevard, North Carolina. That's where we met. Six months ago. And today's your birthday."

"Come on, Charlie," John said, one foot inside the truck cab. I hung up and went back to him. "Who was that?"

"I heard it ringing and went over and answered it. I think it was a crank call. Probably someone who can see the phone from their house or something."

When I got back into the truck, we headed on our way and I listened to the sloshing of the gas in the plastic can. It was in the bed of the truck so spillage wouldn't be a problem, but the rear window was open, and I could smell it if I craned my head back a bit.

"You'll have to take the head with you," I said. "Maybe the hands, too. If you fought with him at all. There might be something under the fingernails."

He grunted, and went back to adjusting the radio. He stopped on a sports station. The Knicks were losing to the Raptors. It wasn't even close anymore. I sat with my head against the window trying to beam into John's mind the thought that I was going to jump out of this truck and leave him behind—that he would have to do this alone. Tried it for a full five minutes, and if

he could feel my thoughts, he didn't show it. We were doing about sixty when I opened up my door a crack and told him to pull over. I needed to be sick, I told him, and he pulled off the road. I didn't know where we were exactly, but I knew enough to know we were going south, and we'd been driving almost two hours. I climbed out the truck and walked off the road toward the woods on my side. I spit in the grass a few times, thinking maybe that was a necessary preamble to throwing up. I hadn't done it since I was a little kid, maybe the flu or something, and I couldn't remember. It didn't come, so I doubled over and faked it. Really sold it, and kicked the dirt around in front of me like a dog covering its shit. My door was still open, and I walked back toward the truck. When I was close enough, John threw me a bottle of water. I took a sip, gargled, and spat out the water behind me.

"You can go ahead without me," I said. I tried to say it as matter of fact as *I'm gonna go take a leak.* "I'm gonna walk back towards home." I knew if I said it like there was any doubt, if there was any room for my mind to be changed, he would change it. John was right in that I wasn't afraid. Making a body dead is a lot harder on the mind than just seeing a dead one, especially a long dead one. I just didn't want to be connected to another person in this way, didn't want to have *this* be the common ground between us. I came up to the truck and took my bag from down in front of my seat, shut the door and started walking in the other direction. I thought a couple times about asking him for some money, like maybe I could find a sporting goods store in the nearest town and get a bike to get me home faster, but I'd have to settle for finding a payphone and making calls instead. It was early enough in the evening that I'd be back at the gas station before it was full-on dark. The attendant could give me directions to give

Huong. I could sit in back where they kept the beer and dip and a little television. I could work on my patience.

* * *

Huong tried to play it cool when she picked me up outside the gas station. I told her John and I were going on a trip to the city, but we got into an argument and I'd left him near the gas station.

"You ever been to Manhattan?" she asked.

"No."

"Must have been some fight, then."

I shrugged. Something about the weather—Indian summer had broken this week and the first fall chill was in the state—made me feel like I could sleep right then and there. That, and Huong. I reclined the seat and slept most of the way back to Harworth.

"You think I'm pretty, don't you?" she asked.

"What?"

"Don't make me ask you again."

She had unbuckled her seatbelt and turned toward me, one tracksuited leg under the other. I couldn't help thinking that, in a single move, she could either pin me, or leap through my open window onto the sidewalk. I wasn't afraid of her. She was broken, but all the stronger because of it. It was a crush, the thing between us, but I had to think it was more than that. She helped me turn my mind off, and let me live in my body instead of anywhere else. Sure, I wanted to kiss her, but I also wanted to cheer for her. I wanted to learn from her. I wanted everyone,

starting with the people at school, to know she was my champion. I wanted to teach her how to live without any fear of what a man does to you.

I would have told her all of that, but I didn't want to scare her. I didn't want her to reject me either. Maybe she'd been playing me this whole time, I thought for a second, like I was another Saturn boy waiting to happen. But I wiped that idea out of my head real fast. Mostly, I didn't want to look like I was taking advantage of something, because I know that people like you more after they do you a favor, even though you think it'd be the other way around.

"Yes," I said.

* * *

Molly was in the hallway when I went upstairs. She closed Dan's door and turned to me with a finger over her lips. I followed her to her room.

"I just put Dan to bed," she said. "She was checking Korean music forums. Apparently, that group broke up yesterday. Her favorite." I moved to go check on her but Molly stopped me.

"It's all right now," she said. "I was about her age when the Beatles broke up. Girls killed themselves over things like this."

"There's probably girls killing themselves in Korea, too. Have you seen the lead singer's hair? What's a girl to do?"

She covered her mouth just like Dan.

"Your sense of humor is your mother's. She'd go to the darkest places sometimes. Is John still in the truck?"

"He went back to the shop. Might be late."

She sat on her bed, and I stayed near the doorway. She looked at herself in the vanity mirror on top of the dresser. She tried to muss up her hair, but it was almost belligerent with how straight it was, and it just fell right back into place.

It had been weeks since I'd looked at a picture of either of my parents. When I tried to remember what my mother looked like, just her face, Molly's came to me first. I could remember Mom in motion, though. When she danced with Dad in the driveway the night he came home with the car they'd die in, or seeing her pass in the hall through my open bedroom door. But in stillness, nothing was there for me to see.

"Tell me about her," I said. "What dark places?"

Molly waved away the question.

"Come on," I said. "It's my birthday."

"It's nothing. She could be very deadpan, just drop the joke and walk away and leave you rolling, or leave you scratching your head, you know? She had all these imaginary friends. And I'd get so annoyed with her, because of course she named one of them after me. But she insisted it was *Mali*, like the country. She had Mali for years. Brought her up every once in a while, never let me forget it. And I'm a year older, so I go through certain changes before she does. And I talk to her about it, and she's very quiet and she goes away to play. That night, we're going to sleep, and she hasn't mentioned Mali, so I ask her about it. She says Mali got pregnant and moved away to a continuation school, rolls over, and goes to sleep. I'm not saying that's the whole picture, but it was in there."

"The next time I remind you of her, will you tell me?"

"Of course," she said. "You do the same for me."

In my room, I held my ear up to the door to try to hear Dan. I'd never heard her sleeping through the door before. She wasn't loud anywhere except in the aisles of Trung My, but, then again, I'd never tried listening before, on account of I was pretty concerned with going unnoticed all the time. Anyway, I couldn't hear anything. Even though it was after midnight, Molly would be staying up for a bit to see if waiting up for John would be worth her time.

I think that's what defines us. What we stay up waiting for. Dan hasn't found anything worth the wait. If she's lucky, she hasn't even started looking yet. Molly stays up until she feels that everyone—this new, odd family—is all within reach. Safe. She looks at me sometimes and I can tell we're both trying to see her, looking for a scrunch of the nose or a dimple that has my mother inside it. We're both worried about disappointing the same ghosts. I want to tell her not to worry about fucking me up, that the upfucking is over and done with and, as long as we stay here, on opposite ends of the hall way, there's a real good chance of unfucking me up. She doesn't know how good she's doing, just being not dead. That's huge for me, as far as parenting goes.

And John's just waiting to be sure he hasn't been seen. I think I'm the only person who's seen him in a long time, but then again, marriage is kind of a mystery to me. Could be Molly knows exactly who John was and who he is and loves him for it. She might fall asleep to stories from his lifetime half a lifetime ago. I can't think of anything more equal parts sad and pretty than that possibility. But it'd be sweet if it were true. It'd mean I could tell Huong about Aaron some day, and I could tell Dan, too, when she's older. When she would understand.

BUCKY LIVES!

Dear Mom,

It's Tuesday, just after nine. Dad and I got to the cabin, or the summer house, whatever you want to call it, just fine. It's smaller than I remember. You were right about that. The place stinks to high heaven. Dad said we have to air it out. I went exploring, and here's what I found out:

Tuna lasts too long. We have cans in the pantry from last time we were all here, and Dad's been funking up the place eating them since we got in too late to go grocery shopping.

In related news, the nearest store is twenty minutes away and closes at seven. Upstate New York can bite my bag.

The yard is bigger than I remember. Fence is falling apart, though. I yanked one of the posts out: Full. Of. Grubs. Or maybe they're fat termites? I would look it up but, wait for it,

There's no Internet here. Please kill me. Hire a hitman, give him this address, and have him put us out of our misery.

When we got here, Dad said we should make a toast, since it was the Fourth of July and all.

I asked him what we were going to toast and he said Independence. He was holding a big grocery bag that he'd taken from the trunk. We were in the kitchen. He took everything out of the bag and lined up its contents on the counter: there was an orange, a jar of maraschino cherries, a yellow and white box of sugar cubes, a small green bottle, a big brown bottle of Wilson Creek

Kentucky Bourbon, and a clear bottle of club soda that was still sweating out the cold. He handed me a cereal bowl and a teaspoon.

He told me to put a few sugar cubes in the bowl, and hit it with a few drops from the green bottle.

I did what he said while he took out a big metal cup and put some ice in it. The cup was the kind we get at Tom's when you get a milkshake and they have a little extra left over. Then he cut the orange in half and cut one half into wedges. Then I smashed up the sugar cubes and scraped them into the cup like he said. I put my nose right over the bowl. It smelled like fruit and cinnamon. He poured a full second and half's worth of bourbon in the metal cup and looked at me.

He asked me if he should put in a little more, and he had that grin he gets when he eats dessert before dinner.

I said Yeah, more, why not, and he poured another second's worth of bourbon into the cup. So then I put some of the cherry juice in there too, and held the lid over the mouth of the cherry jar so no cherries would fall in while he took out a couple milk glasses and put ice in them. I asked him if I was doing all right so far, and he took a look inside the milkshake cup and said I was doing "berry good," like when he does his impression of the sushi chef from that place. So he took the milkshake cup and squeezed a wedge of orange into the cup, and then he put a lid on it that looked like an aluminum Christmas hat. The ones with the balls on the end.

I shook it and shook it like he told me to. He took the knife he used to cut the orange slices to spear out a cherry for each of our glasses and put an orange slice in each one, too. I gave him the metal cup when I was sure I couldn't take how cold it was anymore and he popped off

the aluminum ball on the top and poured some of the drink in each of our glasses. I took up my glass to drink, but he stopped me and said I should have some club soda on top. I told him I could have it however he had it, and he gave me that look and shook his head. He put his hand on my scalp and I could feel the condensation from the cup on his palm.

"You're a good man, Charlie Brown," he said.

He poured some club soda in my drink and in his.

I don’t remember his toast word for word, but he told me the drink is called an Old Fashioned. He said his grandpa made him one during Hanukkah when he was about my age. He couldn’t remember what they toasted then, but it didn’t matter, he said, because we had to make a new tradition now, just the two of us. So he told me I should say something, and I thought for a second, but the drink was freezing my hand, and I didn't want to put it down to have to give my toast.

So, I just said: "To divorce, apple pie, Barack Obama, turkey sandwiches, baseball, and freedom."

And he said that was good enough.

We drank.

It was stupid, but I didn't want to stop drinking until he stopped, so I ended up downing half the glass in my first gulp. Overall, not my best decision. But I didn't throw up. Are you proud? I think you should be.

Anyway, I miss Morningside. I miss school. Since I know you want to know: Yes, I also miss you. I hope everything’s copacetic at home. You better be writing me, too.

Your son,

K.

* * *

Virginie,

It's Tuesday. Wednesday if you're being strict about it. The drive was good. Keegan won the battle for radio dominance. I pick my battles, I guess.

It's 1:11 in the morning. What are you doing right at this minute?

Are you as mystified as I am that he's my height at thirteen? I have to thank you, always thank you, for having a dominant gene for height. And for never going fully vegetarian. Is there such a thing as meat-based height? I think that's what we're dealing with here, with this kid. Is his excessive knuckle-cracking a cause for concern? Does he talk to you about girls? Does he talk to you about boys?

I hope that Kitty is OK and that you remembered to renew her prescription. I want to ask you not to start calling her by another name, but, of course, it's your right. I can't help that the cat had the same name as, well, you know. Add it to the list: Things I Can't Help.

Things/People I Can't/Won't Help. On the list: you, me, him, us, her, that.

Did you see the fireworks? Or go to a party? Look, I'm drowning here. And not in water. Just a bunch of reticulated pythons. I know that Keegan's writing you, and I hope you'll write him back. However much I need you, he needs you more.

I gave him a sip of my bourbon yesterday, but that was the extent of my good parenting. Sometimes I'm at a loss and I just wish he would go out and fall off his bike so I could know exactly how to do my job.

If you find yourself in Brooklyn, could you water the plants for me?

Happy Fourth.

x

* * *

Dear Mom,

It's Thursday, just after lunch. We had fried chicken and brown rice, so you can only be half-pissed. We have a blender, so Dad has us on these smoothies with kale and pineapple and almond milk. Did you know that kale, fresh out the blender, smells like baby poop?

Found out we have a neighbor this morning. He lives in the nearest house—"about two miles through those woods," he said, pointing through the kitchen out the door to the back yard. He was in our living room. His name is Henry. Henry the hunter.

When he knocked on the door, Dad and I were playing hold'em in the living room. This was right after breakfast. Dad was losing, so he answered the door. The air wasn't working, so we were both in our boxer-briefs, you know, like a couple of gentlemen.

And Dad greets the guy and he says he's Henry and asks to come in.

Dad eyed him for a second, and by this point I was up off the couch and beside him. Henry had a rifle strapped over his shoulder. He looked like a duck hunter: the rubbery boots with jeans tucked into them, white shirt tucked into the jeans, fishing hat, the whole bit. So Dad asks him to leave the rifle on the porch and invites him in. And I go upstairs to put on some shorts and to get some for Dad because, I mean, come on.

Henry said his father left him his cabin and a little bit of land four years ago, and he'd lived there ever since. He said they weren't close at the end of his life because they had too much in common, and then he punched my shoulder like we spoke the same language. I remember making a special effort not to be moved. He was working in a repair shop in West Nyack before coming up here and just generally not taking life too seriously. He told his old customers he could fix anything that ticks, except the obvious. "That didn't fix itself," he said, "until I came out here and started taking ownership over what I killed and ate." Then he asked us if we were vegetarians.

I got defensive: "No, we eat meat." He said we were a couple of killers, same as him, and he asked what my favorite meat was. I told him we were a chicken family.

"A little pussy," Henry said, waggling his hands like he was about to give the least effective massage in the world. He said our chicken preference was a little femme but understandable because it's versatile and cheap, and that was exactly when he asked if we were Jewish.

I was about to tell him. I've read books where people ask that question. It's stranger in person, like there's a sword hanging over your head, or a hand cocking back to punch you, depending on the answer. Or maybe they don't care about the answer at all. I think people who ask that question already know the answer they're going to get, more or less. I was about to tell him all this, but Dad moved between us. The way his hands were up, palms facing Henry, he could've been making to shove him or to apologize. His lower back was slick with sweat.

Dad said: "Okay, Henry. It's been good meeting you." Then he went on about the busy day we had planned and started telekinetically guiding him to the door. He wouldn't touch him.

He just kept his hands up and kept walking and Henry moved too, until he stopped in the doorway. Henry tried to explain that he was a venison man himself because he thinks the harder something is to bring to your table, the better it is for you. The more it gives you, is what he said. He offered to take Dad and me hunting in the woods that ran between our house and his.

Dad said we aren't the type for it. Now I was sweating too, but from embarrassment. We were in a new place, after all. We could be whatever type we wanted. Then I wondered if you were becoming a new type of person, too. Given everything.

Henry offered, one more time. He said he had a deaf daughter who was about my age who'd be coming with us, and that she can read lips as long as you aren't mumbling at her. That surprised me. That he could raise anyone with a weakness.

He took up his rifle from the porch and said that he agreed with Dad: we aren't the type for hunting. But that shouldn't matter, he said, because no one is the type until they are.

We didn't say anything to each other for a bit, after he left. I was angry with Dad for showing him the door so soon after he showed up, but I couldn't say why. He looked at me for a second with his mouth open, that almost-sneeze face, like he was about to forbid me from taking Henry up on his offer. I could tell he wanted to, but he knew if I asked why, he wouldn't be able to give a reason. I like that kind of fairness, but it can't be very good parenting.

I went up to my bedroom until I smelled the fried chicken downstairs, and I thought about this deaf girl I was bound to meet. Whether she had Henry's Roman nose, what her voice sounded like in her own throat, and whether, like her father, her shoulders were impossibly broad.

Your son,

K.

* * *

Dear Virginie,

Other than that one time which, upon reflection, I roundly deserved, have you ever punched a man right in the mouth?

x.

* * *

Dear Mom,

It's been three days. I've read two of the books for school, the one about the transcontinental railroad, and the French one. Maybe now, you can send me something new. Something good.

The air came back, and Dad’s been distracting himself with movies, gambling, and drinking with me. I'm up forty dollars in hold'em. We made Manhattans last night instead of Old Fashioneds. I read the vermouth bottle, and it turns out vermouth is a kind of wine. You probably knew that. I always figured wine wasn't meant to be mixed with other things. And it tastes like it shouldn't be. We both were all smiles on the Fourth, drinking our sweet bourbon and fruit, but we frowned and grimaced our way through the Manhattans. Me more than him, obviously. I asked him why we were drinking this instead of any of the other things we could have made. "This'll get you there faster," was all he said.

He goes to the shopping center, sometimes without me. I think he has a crush on someone in town. It has to be that, because six minutes is the maximum amount of time an antique store can be interesting to a person unless there's someone there worth kissing.

When he was out, this afternoon, I stood at the kitchen sink trying to make coffee as good as yours. We don't have any of the heavy whipping cream you use, so I was trying to froth up some almond milk. Out the window above the sink, I saw Henry and a girl on our side of the woods, just outside the backyard. I waved, stupidly, and went out to meet them. They stood and watched me walk up, but as soon as Henry greeted me and introduced his daughter Audrey, they took off back into the woods with me trailing behind. She looked about my age, with wavy brownish hair that was up, high and tight. The flyaways near her forehead and her small, scrunched nose—obviously not Henry's—made her look kind of bookish. If not for the rifle slung over her shoulder, and how it swung as she walked in unison with Henry's, she could've been the kind of girl I'd compete against in an academic decathlon. I couldn't pay attention to the woods around me, or where we were headed. Didn't want to. I looked at my shoes, at the pair of rifles, the width of his neck, the curve where her ass met her thighs.

Henry asked me if I had Dad's permission to be going out on a hunt with them. I thought about how much it bugged me when you would talk to me while standing in front of me and expect me to hear you, but the woods were so brightly devoid of all other human sounds, his voice carried right over his head and directly to me. He spoke softly, softer than when he was in our house. I told him Dad was in town antique shopping, and he laughed and said, "That sounds about right. Audrey tapped him on the shoulder and signed something to him. He told her where Dad was, hands on her shoulders, over-enunciating everything. He said that you left Dad, and so

he was at the antique store, looking for love in all the wrong places, while his son came out to the woods to learn something important. Or maybe, Henry said, maybe he's just a horndog who started waiting for us to come by so he could meet my daughter.

Audrey turned around to look at me with new eyes, to size me up. I wished I had something, a rifle of my own or something purposeful, to occupy my hands. I had to fight the urge to put my hands in my pockets, or strike some other lame pose. She was eating me. I couldn't read her expression until she smoothed the flyaways in her hair. I'm an expert in the field of self-conscious gestures.

"So, what's the story," Henry asked. "Are you a horned toad? Some kind of usurper?" He had the same look from before, like he and I were the only speakers of this private language. It made me feel a flash of sympathy for Audrey, but for all I knew, he was a different man with her. Better, maybe. She looked strong enough to handle him. He said not to be ashamed of it if I was a usurper, if I was gunning for his daughter, because "all the sexiest things that ever happened to me in life happened before I was your age."

I spat reflexively and wished for a moment that Dad were there to put his hands up how he had that first morning. Even if it achieved nothing. I didn't want to have all the responsibility for when I went back home.

When Audrey spotted the buck ahead of us at the far edge of the woods, Henry's edge, she grabbed her father by his shirt and signed to him. They both squatted where they stood, and I sort of crouch-waddled over to them. With my back against a tree, I could focus on the insects making their way down my shirt instead of on my chronic and persistent lack of a rifle.

They muttered and signed and planned and checked and checked again while the buck sniffed bark and relieved itself on a stump. Seeing the hunt up close felt like an itch that needed to be scratched, and the small part of me that wanted to call it off or interfere was easy enough to silence. I had to see something, to feel something, even if it only confirmed that I would never need to see it or feel it again. I think that was how I felt about the two of you, ending how you did. At least it burnt away all the uncertainty, all the waiting. Now there's just this summer, and whatever you decide comes after that.

Audrey fired from flat on her stomach. Henry took his shot standing. I thought, maybe, I had heard a gunshot in Morningside once, a crack that jumps you out of your chair or kicks you awake from light sleep, but I don't think so anymore. That must have been a car muffler or a firework. Nothing but a shot can sound like a shot.

I watched a documentary a year ago. It was online, annoyingly broken into nine-minute chunks, and it was about people who had jumped off this bridge in California. One of the subjects in it had jumped when he was a teenager and survived. Tons of broken bones—he had to be pulled to safety by a seal that happened to be sealing by him at the time. He said, as soon as he let go of the bridge, the awfulness of his decision hit him, and he began to hope he would survive no matter how much it all hurt him. As soon as those twin shots tore through the air, I knew I was rooting for Bucky the buck. I had named him at some point in the past three seconds, and let out an embarrassing whoop when I saw Bucky was alive and darting off into the woods. Henry smiled at me, pointed at my crotch and said I passed the piss test, so there was some hope for me after all. I don't know. Am I hopeless, you think?

I asked him if he was disappointed that they didn't hit the deer and he said he was, but that no one misses forever.

"Do you feel different," Audrey asked. It was the first I'd heard her speak since we met. She had pushed her rifle away from her and was wiping her hands on the thighs of her jeans. Her voice sounded like bells being rung underwater. I knew I was supposed to feel different, but the only thing I was sure of was that the world was louder now than it had been a minute before. Everything else was burning, uncertain—but nothing had been burnt away. Nothing gets subtracted. We just add more shit on top of us. It's not like you aren't married to Dad anymore. You are, because it happened. You're just other things now, too, on top of that. You're whatever you are to me. And if you're, like, dating someone new, which is kind of awful, by the way, but sure, good too, then you're something else on top of that. Even if I died or something, you'd still be a mother, always, because you've been a mother already. It all gets piled on. Nothing slips out.

So, I looked at Audrey. "Yes," I lied. "I feel different."

Henry adjusted the rifle on his shoulder and started heading in the direction of his place, without Audrey and me. The echo of the rifles had fully faded, and I could hear the earth under his feet. He swatted at something on his neck, and switched the rifle to his other shoulder. I would have said something, called after him, if I thought I'd never see him again. When he became too hard to see, I looked at Audrey again, and asked her to walk me back because I didn't know the way.

She nodded and handed me her rifle. I walked behind her and would grab her shoulder when I wanted to ask a question about her or Henry. I grabbed her shoulder, thinking I was going

to ask her something about her mother, but she kissed me twice instead. I didn't do anything especially kiss-worthy, other than holding the rifle, maybe. I guess people value that.

Sometimes she would turn around unprompted and look at me. I asked her if she was making sure I wasn't disappearing on her.

"No," she said. "I know you aren't going anywhere."

Yours,

K.

STEPHEN'S SONG

You and Anya invite Mallory and Stephen on a couple's getaway. A camping trip just off the trails in the Kanawha Reserve. Stephen has been texting you for the past two weeks. He thinks Mallory is going to leave him. Your wife confirms things are on rocky terrain from Mallory. You can't let this happen. You are couple friends. You each own complementary Settlers of Catan expansion packs.

On the drive to the camp grounds, you and Anya listen to an old mix CD. Anya teases you because it's not much of a mix. All but four of the songs are by Queens of the Stone Age. You quiz each other about who packed what for the trip. You have everything. You pull into a rest area about ten miles from the camp grounds and kiss like teenagers.

When you pull into the camp grounds, find Mallory and Stephen, and walk half a mile off the trail for a good camp site, you stay downwind. You smell like Burt's Bees, deep woods scented Off!, and sex. It makes you self-conscious.

Stephen helps you look for dry wood after the four of you erect your tents. You build a very competent fire, drink wine and whisky out of copper-lipped tumblers, and talk about the new album Mallory just bought online. It's the soundtrack to a TV show about gangsters. Stephen makes a joke about the lead actor in the series and Mallory laughs, giving you and your wife permission to laugh. When Mallory gets up to find another bottle of wine, you and Anya give Stephen exaggerated thumbs up, as though this is their first date. Later, when you break for your separate tents, Anya tries to listen for sounds of reconciliatory sex. The whisky puts you to sleep.

In the morning, you and Anya sleep in. Stephen calls your name. He sounds like a far-off car alarm. You unzip your tent flap and see him standing a few yards away by the designated pissing tree. In the clearing, thirty yards away, there is such a bear. That is how the words come to you, on your knees, watching Stephen.

"In my tent," Stephen sings. You read that people have been known to sing-speak when they meet wild animals on camping trips. It's part of the fight or flight response to danger: partial occlusion of the vocal chords. Or something. You aren't as close of a reader as you used to be. "My red Jansport with the grey stripe. Get it. Throw it to *meee*." He holds the last note.

The bear is chewing something and though you can't hear the bear, you imagine its chewing sounds like meat falling onto the floor in great big pieces. You wonder if it's eating something sticky, like honey, then wonder why you ever think anything at all. The bear looks up, sees the tents first, then Stephen.

You do what Stephen tells you. In his tent, grabbing the red Jansport, you wake up Mallory. "There's a bear outside. It's really such a bear. Please go back to bed." She asks you why you are singing, accuses you of shitting her, and screams when she sees you aren't shitting her. You throw Stephen his backpack.

Anya is out of her tent now, and the bear is too curious. You look from her back to the bear and a shot rings out. You shout. Your wife shouts. Mallory is frozen. Stephen walks up to the bear while you run up behind, following him. Stephen shoots it again.

A bear being shot looks just like a human being shot, in a soap opera. Its big limbs flail, it rolls around and howls. It's bad Shakespeare.

More than the shot, you know that you will always be able to recall the sound of such a bear falling into the earth. The sound of another man bringing you safety like a torch in the darkness. You embrace Stephen from behind, pressing his back into your chest until he drops the pistol and his hands touch yours.

“Okay, it’s okay,” you say.

“It’s okay, we’re okay,” he says.

You leave your sleeping bags and cookware and hike back to your cars, backpacks on, tent poles and flaps under your arms.

The ride back home is silent until Anya says, “Stephen’s taller than I remember.” You fight the rest of the way home. “It was just a cub,” you say, defeated. “Such a goddamn fucking cub.”

CUSTOM WHITE

Late summer, 2004

The call center was laid out in four rows of sixteen stations. Each agent had a station and sat in a hub with three other agents, divided by Plexiglas that stopped six inches above eye level. Each station had a computer, a phone with a headset hookup, and a bell. Barry Joyce shared his hub with Antonio, Pam, and Richard, all veterans.

Barry was fifty-seven now, and his parents raised him and his sister on the family lore that the men of the family died early, a fact they both took to heart in different ways. Lorna was four years older, and kept her brother at a distance. She loved him fiercely in spite of her coldness, but she couldn't shake a semi-conscious fear that he would die prematurely. She would alternately exclude her brother from her outings with friends to avoid growing too close with him, or shadow him from minute to minute to make sure he didn't drop a bowling ball on his head or roll down a hill in a refrigerator box.

Barry took the family's bad string of coincidences (he couldn't call it a curse) in stride. Instead of fearing every busted seatbelt clasp, every flu, every undercooked piece of chicken, he lived the first fifty years of his life as though they were guaranteed. He took risks unprecedented in the recorded histories of Jewish sons: he drove fast; he changed careers often; he married a black woman, Rachel, whom he met at a jazz concert on campus. While they were young, she loved his changeability—"You're such a soft touch," she would say, meaning he could be buffeted by gentle suggestion. He was her lark, and then, he wasn't. But there were no hard

feelings, no children caught in the middle. She sent a birthday card every September 1, good-naturedly feigning surprise that he'd lasted another year.

In his forties, during his Los Angeles phase, he worked for an ad agency in Studio City where he developed the racially ambiguous casting policies that changed the face of television commercials permanently. Companies would cast white Hispanics, or bilingual white Americans if they conformed to the proper aesthetic—"The key is that color; it has to be coffee with six creamers," he'd said—and shoot commercials in English, then in Spanish, saving themselves hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. Because he had the foresight to patent the idea, Barry cleared enough to work at his leisure before his fiftieth birthday. He'd told his sister that he'd earned his "fuck you money."

Work became a hobby that he could pick up and put down at will, and he continued to let suggestion lead him about. Now, at fifty-seven, Barry saw his life very differently. He was, in nearly every aspect of his life, living off of interest. He had worked enough, seen enough, screwed enough. So, ten years ahead of schedule and already seven years into his bonus, he moved to Palm Beach County.

While he was driving to Target for lamps for the new house (a rental in the late 1940's style), he'd seen a billboard for a telemarketing job with The Star Sentinel, a newspaper that served Broward, Dade, and Palm Beach counties. He repeated the name to himself while lamp-shopping and phoned them that afternoon, scheduling an interview for the next day. When he hung up the phone, he knew when he would be offered the job, this post he didn't need. He could feel it. It would be before the second glass of water, after he told the interviewer about his most recent sales experience: in the early seventies, newly married, he'd worked in New Jersey as a

door-to-door cutlery salesman. Rachel would drive him to a neighborhood and idle while he sold kitchen and utility knives out of a custom white satchel that looked like a hybrid of messenger bag and chef's knife roll. "I doubt they make them like that anymore," he would say. "I doubt they make 'em like you anymore," the interviewer would say.

Selling newspapers over the phone from eight till noon was, to Barry, a job fit only for a few types of people: the chronically unemployable, who flamed out of the job after a month and were responsible for its high turnover rate; older women like Pam who were pleased to net a little over one hundred dollars a week for the chance to be "out in the world a bit;" manic sociopaths who thrived on persuading people in any setting; and natural-born closers, like Antonio, who, in practice, were hard to distinguish from the sociopaths (unless you saw their paychecks).

Richard was harder to place. When he was selling well, he could be manic; he would move his hands in a "Please, no, you go on" gesture as though he could see the sale about to happen. On a bad day, he spun in his chair, paced, talked too loudly, got pushy with potential customers. He looked about thirty, and his leanness made him seem tall—that, and his tendency to spend most of shift on his feet, staring at his bell, waiting for it to grant him sales, magically. To say he wore a blue windbreaker would be inaccurate; he failed to wear a blue windbreaker, clutching it to his sides, one shoulder of it always on, the other shoulder hanging off, about to fall, like he was a pop video starlet.

Barry and Richard had the same bad habit of taking extended bathroom breaks after making a sale. It was a way of gaming the system. If you made a commission, it was in your

interest to have it spread out over three-and-a-half hours instead of four when it came time to cut the checks and see who was keeping their heads above water.

"How long have you been at this?" Barry asked. He and Richard were in the toilets, Richard at a urinal and Barry in his preferred stall with a paperback closed and in the hammock of his downed briefs.

"Um." Richard's voiced echoed too loudly. "This is my second year. But only just."

"Do you like it?"

"Perks are okay. Free papers." Barry could see Richard's feet at the sink. "Did you see the story on A20?"

"No, not yet."

"Oh."

"What do you think of Latoya?"

"She's good at her job. It took me a week before I decided she wasn't in my imagination."

Richard left and Barry laughed again, repeating Richard's joke to himself. He took a copy of the newspaper from the spool before he went back to his desk and opened the front section to A20. There were two stories that had jumped in from the front page: one, about a fifteen-year-old girl who was an accidental victim of a stray bullet in a drive-by. She had survived brain surgery and her condition had been upgraded. The other story was about a car fire on Interstate 4. An unidentified man had driven the wrong way with his lights off and had crashed into a nightclub bouncer coming home from a shift. Analysis of cameras from a tollbooth show they were both doing about sixty.

* * *

After one week, Barry knew the scripts and the commissions for selling The Star Sentinel in all its various permutations: a daily service commission paid him thirty dollars; a Wednesday to Sunday, twenty-six; a weekend package, twenty; Sunday-only, the easiest to sell, paid ten. No pens or pencils were allowed on the sales floor—too many problems with stolen credit card numbers in the past—so agents used thumbtacks to prick holes in pre-printed spreadsheets to keep track of their sales week to week. Barry kept no such records, and usually celebrated a sale with either an extended bathroom break or by switching from one paperback on his desk to another; by his accounting, three sales, no matter how small, kept him over minimum wage. For this job, for however long he kept it, that was an acceptable standard. It was only a competition with himself, and since the money wasn't especially important, the only assignment was not to get fired. He imagined that could change eventually, and he might try to find an inventive way to get shitcanned. But not now. Maybe not ever. He liked having a reason to set his alarm for seven a.m., and he liked coming home at half past noon to sit on his front porch bench and watch the neighbors jog.

After two weeks, Barry was in on the inside jokes of his hub—"Shrimp fried rice," "Extra beef!"—and was being invited out for lunch after shift, happy hours that went past dinner time. He started an inside joke of his own with Latoya, one of the shift supervisors (Barry couldn't understand how shift supervisors, shift managers, and team leaders all seemed to perform the same tasks). Now, at any slow point in the shift, he could blame a lack of sales on "bad voodoo," and she would crack up.

No one in the call center could explain what Latoya did during shifts. It was true, she occasionally manned one of the master computers in the center of the room, transferring agents from one campaign to another, but that comprised the smallest portion of her duties. Mostly, she glided. Holding a clipboard or a short stack of papers, she would make purposeful-looking circuits up and down the aisles of the call center. If life were a cartoon, Barry thought, you would hear drums when you watched Latoya walk. Men and women flirted with her shamelessly. Journalists, janitorial staff, Star Sentinel employees who had no reason to visit the sales floor, would manufacture reasons to check in on the workings of the call center, just to see "Toy."

She was part chameleon. Her job, such as it was, necessitated code switching between employees of three different races, four age groups, and five sexual preferences. She was certainly black, but lighter, even in the summer, than Barry himself. She kept her hair in an afro with a loose curl, and never gave her body the unfair advantage of revealing clothes. Latoya left everything to the imagination, and everyone imagined. More than any one thing, it was she who made Barry take notice of Richard's other eccentricities—Richard never showed a passing interest in Latoya, despite it being part of her job description to personally congratulate agents on every sale, to coach them through slow shifts. Nothing.

* * *

Barry knew what Lorna would say about Richard. "He sounds like a problem," she said. Barry had called her, three weeks into the job.

"He's a young man," he said. "It's a stressful job. Maybe he has a wife to support. Kids."

"Please," she said. "Dahmer had a stressful job, too. Chocolate doesn't inspect itself."

“These are all facts,” he said. He would step outside the conversation when Lorna got like this.

“We miss you,” she said. “I was just saying to you-know-who, we were going to invite ourselves down to visit, for Thanksgiving, or earlier in the month, I don’t know.”

“I would love to see you both,” he said. “The grandbabies. If you could rally them to come.”

“You could come any time,” she said. She paused. “I saw on the news, about Hurricane Charley.”

He sighed.

“I know, I’m sure you’re taking every precaution. I hope you’re taking every precaution. Right now they say one thing—they say Gulf of Mexico—but no one knows anything. You could just come here. Barry?”

“Yes?”

“Just mull it over for me? Mulligatawny?”

“For you, yes. Mulligatawny.”

* * *

The Friday happy hour went late. Spending most of the night trying to coax Richard into a conversation had the unintended consequence of making Latoya more interested in isolating Barry. They’d had a moment in the bathroom before, Barry and Richard, and Latoya was at the center of it, but Barry wanted to know about Richard outside of work. He wanted to see that life wasn’t hard on him. If they could only get close, maybe he could find a way to help him, even if it was just giving him some money.

“What are you drinking?” Barry asked. There were a dozen employees spread out over three tables at Sportstown. They were on the side by the electronic dartboards, and the loudness of the machines gave Barry good reason to invade Richard’s space a bit.

“Cider,” Richard said. He turned the bottle label out so Barry could see.

“Next one’s on me, all right?”

“I’ll just have the one. Don’t want to get too foggy.”

The cider was four percent. Barry laughed.

“Wait, you aren’t joking,” Barry said. “It’s hard to tell with you.”

“My friend tells me I’m intentionally inscrutable.”

“Why didn’t you invite them here? Antonio brought his wife.”

He made a tipping-it-back gesture with his hand and shook his head.

“Anyway,” Richard said. “I like to keep the parts of my life separate. Besides, you guys wouldn’t like my friend. He’s a real weirdo.”

Latoya was adamant about seeing Barry’s home—“I have to inspect it for bad voodoo,” she said. Her laugh came so easily, and in the parking lot, she insisted on following him to his house to make sure he got in safely.

“Oh, you have spider plants,” she said, pointing at the short, green and white shrubs in the gravel just before his porch. Barry sat in his favorite bench, which left her the rocking chair on his right.

“Are those bad?”

“No, they’re all over the place in Florida.”

“Then I’m fitting in,” he said. “My house has just the right amount of voodoo.”

“I think so.” She smiled. “But you aren’t fitting in all that well.” She paused. “You like to read, don’t you?”

“I do.”

She stood up and stepped off the porch into the gravel where the spider plants were. It was after midnight. When she wasn’t in arm’s reach, Barry had a quick flash of fear. If someone, a mugger, came up the sidewalk, anything could happen. Latoya crouched down and started pulling long fronds from a spider plant. She had three in her hand and was wiping the dirt from the roots on her jeans when Barry suggested they go inside. She made a face, shrugged, and followed him into his kitchen.

“When I used to go to summer camp,” she said, “we’d make bookmarks out of spider plant leaves. I’ll make you one.”

Barry leaned on one end of the island while Latoya braided the fronds into a flat rope. After every four links or so, she would stop and twist both ends of the ropelike a helix. She tied off the tip, but the fronds were all of different lengths, making the end look ragged and incongruous with the artful green and white braid. He opened a drawer in the island to look for a pair of scissors or kitchen shears, and Latoya started biting the split ends.

“I have scissors here somewhere,” he said.

She waved him off with one hand, the bookmark between her teeth. Barry hadn’t seen someone take a plant out of the ground and put it in her mouth since he and Lorna were kids. They would put pine needles in their mouths and pretend they were gangsters and sophisticated lounge singers, smoking cigarettes in long, ivory cigarette holders.

“No, this is better,” she said, handing him the finished bookmark. “When you use it, you’ll think of how I made it for you. You’ll think of my mouth.”

“I’m going to paraphrase my ex-wife,” he said, looking at the bookmark in his hands. “Latoya, you’re a bad, bad woman.”

“Not bad enough to sleep with you,” she said.

Barry laughed. “I didn’t know I’d asked you to.”

“No, it’s just—”

“It’s for the best, anyway,” he said. He swatted at her with the tattered tip of the bookmark. “You could singlehandedly destroy morale in that place if people knew you were off the market.”

“You’re not kidding,” she said.

* * *

When Richard came in with his satchel, custom white, it was the Monday before a weather-mandated hiatus. Charley had ignored the experts and would touch Florida in twenty-four hours. Palm Beach County, in thirty. The paper would continue, if possible, with a skeleton staff, but the sales floor would be empty from tomorrow until executives unknown to the sales staff decided it was safe to return.

Sitting at his desk, satchel by his feet, Richard was two things at once. Until something happened, Richard both was and was not what Lorna said he must be. Barry felt he knew what was in the bag, the types of things that had to be there, but there was nothing he could do. That same brief flash of fear was in him and he thought, just by watching Richard as he was, that he was somehow influencing whatever was in that bag. It occurred to him, the principle of his life;

he could pick up his two paperbacks, be down the stairs, past security, and in the parking lot in ninety seconds. This professional experiment, the job, maybe even what was happening with Latoya could all be over that fast.

The shift started and Richard made a sale immediately. Sometimes the computer held callback records for employees who were about to close but something—another call, a misplaced credit card, a knock at the door—stopped them from wrapping up in the first call. That must have been what Richard had now, ringing his bell, taking up his satchel, excusing himself to the bathroom. Barry decided then he'd quit his job, and he'd ask Latoya to quit too, and his only vocation for the rest of the morning would be to follow Richard. To keep him safe if he could.

Barry pressed his fingertips against the men's room door, unsure if he'd risk his life by opening it. He thought it'd be warm, as if whatever Richard could be doing would generate energy instead of drain it away. But the door was cold. He couldn't open it yet.

"Richard," he said. "Richard, can we talk?"

A toilet flushed, but Richard either couldn't hear Barry or didn't want to.

"Richard, you never told me about your wife, your kids. Why don't we go away? You should come and have a drink with me. Can I call somebody for you?"

Barry opened the door and took several seconds to adjust to the new color.

Richard had taken his life in his best approximation of the Japanese style, as though there weren't enough points on the body to express his unknowable hurt. There was no note in the satchel. For the seconds Barry stood outside the men's room, serving unwittingly as a lookout in Richard's death, he'd felt complicit, and told the security officer as much.

Later, Latoya came to his house and sat on his bed with him until he fell asleep. When he woke, she was asleep next to him.

* * *

Charley passed. It was bad, but not as bad as Miami a decade before, and not as bad as the southern Midwest during tornado season. There, whole neighborhoods and small towns were leveled. Here, folks were just unlucky. Every neighborhood had a house or two that was newly smashed at the top level. The older trees came down. The water in the street was clear and full of dark green, healthy leaves. Everything that was weak died.

A reporter from The Star Sentinel came, despite the mess from the storm on all of the residential roads, to talk about Richard. Barry told the reporter about the custom white satchel, and asked where Richard had found his, but the reporter didn't know. They drank coffee in the kitchen and, later, on the front porch. The reporter would have stayed longer—"Between you and Richard and the storm, this is all the news we've got!"—but Barry stopped freshening his coffee, and the reporter got the message.

When he was alone again, Barry walked in his bare feet to the Handy Pantry around the corner, careful to step only on his neighbors' lawns. The wet sidewalks would have felt invigorating, like in the summers in Ithaca, when the fire trucks would come out to the grocery store parking lot, and the firemen would wave to him and to Lorna and the other kids and turn on their hoses and spray down the asphalt until it cast shimmering oily reflections up on their faces, but too many branches had been downed, and too many firm, green acorns were on the pavement.

Many of his neighbors were out, too, seeing whose shutters had held, and who would have to call roofers during the coming weeks. Barry didn't know them, not to speak to, but the storm had everyone talking. A few of them were frowning into their cell phones, but most looked relieved, even happy, as though they had been waiting all year for a chance to learn the name of the family who shared their mailbox, the dog who ate their daffodils.

"You lose your shoes?" a woman asked. Barry had been high stepping on her grass, looking at his feet to avoid stepping in dog shit. He recognized her wild reddish-brown hair, which matched her dog's fur down to its grey streaks. She was a frequent jogger.

"No, I was barefoot on my porch," he said. "Thought I'd go buy some cigarettes if Handy Pantry is open."

"I don't know," she said. "Did the storm get you?"

"I didn't take a good look, but I think we're okay," he said. He had no idea why he said we, other than it felt like a word people used in these situations. Maybe he meant the two of them. He noticed her dog on the porch and made an excuse to head back on his way to the store before the conversation could take a turn toward the meaningful.

At the Handy Pantry, Barry bought three packs of Marlboro Lights and a Bic lighter, red and gold with a bald eagle looking over its right wing. Before paying for the lighter, he found himself in an argument with the cashier.

"Any store that sells cigarettes ought to have free matchbooks," Barry said.

"I'm very sorry, sir," the man said. "We used to, but it became too expensive."

"Look, I sympathize. I'm just saying. What about the people who are just starting out smoking, or the ones trying to quit?"

“Sir?”

“Those people don’t want to commit to smoking for the full life of a cigarette lighter,” Barry said. He was getting angrier and he didn’t know why. Everything was wet and green outside and his feet were bare. He was alive. That was it, wasn’t it?

“They could just give their lighters away, sir.”

“No one does that!” Barry said. “I’m sorry. No one does that. They either use the lighter or they lose the lighter. No one gives them away.”

“I’m very sorry, sir. I think you are right about that. Maybe you’ll be lucky and lose yours right when you don’t want it anymore.”

“Well,” Barry said, a little deflated. “It’s just not a very handy pantry, then, is it?”

The man smiled and nodded. Barry walked to the door and thought about matchbooks, about those words printed on every generic pack—Close Cover. Strike Gently. It was such good advice, now that he took the time to think about it.

He left the store with a pack in each front pocket and one in his hands, which he unwrapped right there on the corner. He lit the first cigarette, took a short drag, and resolved himself to quit before the fire went out.

COLLEGE GIRL FULL SERVICE HOUSE CLEANING ACT NOW

Of all the reasons Peter loved Virginie, her inability to conceive a child with him stood at the top of the list. That it was his secret didn't matter. It carried all the force of fact, of truth. He'd mouth the words to himself when he studied his newly sagging chin in the mirror. His mind would shout it when they made love. He'd once had a nightmare that he'd said the words aloud to her in his sleep and, waking with a start to find Virginie sleeping beside him, he'd ducked under the blanket to kiss her empty belly. That she feared her infertility would damage or end their marriage didn't concern him—he loved her more, perhaps, than he ever had. He would give her every effort. He would see any doctor, follow any regime, and when they failed, he would hold her in his private joy until her heart changed.

Peter had met Virginie when he was a junior at Columbia, idling through a semester at Reid Hall in Paris. She was in her final year at lycée. When he returned to school, they flirted in letters when they could have e-mailed. He wanted to court her nobly. He flew back to Paris twice, first to propose and then to introduce their respective parents, who brunched all together in their second languages while Peter watched Virginie swoon at the sweetness of their effort. She was the child-bride. That was Peter's father's word for her, and it became his son's word for her, too. That was eleven years past, she thought, but the disappointments in herself occurred to her, with increasing regularity, in doctors' offices and doulas' sitting rooms. She was embarrassed, now, at how her body, which she had always been able to control and shape and wield, was betraying her so fundamentally.

Peter had asked her, in a bathroom argument, if she ever wished it was he who was unable to give her a child. She said no, but her answer was so flattened, so devoid of accent or

tears or sighs, that she became inscrutable to her husband for days after. That this endeared her to Peter all the more didn't surprise him. He was odd, especially to himself.

And she was funny, funny to them both. She lured him into an arrangement after they had lived together for seven years. It started as a joke, but lasted for several months before they bowed out. One night, a mutual friend had asked them to a restaurant opening in Carroll Gardens, a soft open, no frills. Virginie asked Peter if he wanted to go, and he laid there on the sofa with his legs draped over the arm, trying to shrug with just the top third of his face.

"It's completely up to you," she said. "I know I drag you places all the time."

"I appreciate that," he said.

"But you can't make up your mind."

"Correct."

She was wearing a purple, lace blouse over a camisole, all of which she promptly untucked from her white linen pants and said, "Come to bed with me."

"Are you trying to affect my vote?" he asked.

She shook her head and pulled him into the kitchen. Their first doula told them that sex in unconventional places—up against the kitchen sink, in front of the open freezer—was a boon to conception. After, she went to the bathroom for a cigarette. She turned on the small electric fan a previous tenant had built into the window. It made for cold showers in the winter, but it was the one place you could smoke without changing the smell of the whole apartment. She was on her tip-toes, adjusting the window shade and he could see his reddening hand prints, perpendicular, on her backside. Between his wife and the famous French actress who shares her name, Peter reckoned four out of five dentists would choose his wife.

“Virginie,” he said. “Let’s go to the restaurant opening tonight.”

She turned around and flicked her ash into the bathroom sink. She liked the lingering pain in the inch of flesh on her hips. She had goaded him into roughness, and she enjoyed not having to ask for it. The moments when he could read her, in a look or an arch of her body, made her think her marriage was the only one like it. They weren’t perfect, though: sometimes, in the morning, she’d give some knowing nod or frown, and before going to sleep that night, they would crawl together to the center of the bed, and Peter would sigh and say “So what was that face you pulled at brunch,” and Virginie would answer, “Oh, I thought you knew—your mother wants to meet us for lunch tomorrow.”

Peter liked these surprises less than when he surprised himself.

She wrinkled her freckled nose at him. “I could get used to all this certitude,” she said. “You should always get off before you make up your mind about something.”

“I should.” She went to him and kissed him—and his hands, reliably, found their way to her narrow hips.

* * *

In the kitchen, Peter watches Virginie use a teaspoon to pop the tab on a can of Ennio’s sardines. She drains off the olive oil into the sink until the last few drops plink into the basin.

“Do you want lunch, too?” she asks.

“I’ll order something before the cleaning woman comes.”

“Have a sardine. Have half.”

“I didn’t finish. I called a cleaning service. It’s all college girls, cleaning.”

She turns on the hot faucet. Peter steps closer and sees how the water is slowly pushing the oil way out to the sides of the basin in widening rivulets, like the pictures he drew in grade school workbooks—concentric, oblong. It was very important that the lines never touched, no matter how odd the shapes became.

“What do you know about this college girl cleaning service?” she asks.

“Just that they’re girls, you know. College girls. And the company is bonded. They have references, I think.”

“Did you ask to see the references?”

“No. They offered. But I don’t know how they’d give me references over the phone. It all sounded on the up and up.”

With the hot tap off, Peter can hear the crunching of a hundred rich bones in her mouth. Her third doctor says sardines will help her conceive. Peter maintains her doctor’s stock portfolio is heavily diversified in the preserved and canned fish markets.

This is what people do in the tenth year of a marriage, after they have put new built-ins in the kitchen, and installed a yellower, grander bathtub, with bubble jets that come in two sizes and three settings. This is what people do before turning every piece of furniture in the living-room one hundred eighty degrees, so they can entertain from the kitchen without breaking meaningful eye contact. These are the things people do before children.

“Okay,” she says. “Good.” She is embarrassed by the flicker of distrust. She knows this man, at least as well as he knows himself.

There is a bead of golden green oil on her lips when she says “good” and it has been six days since they last made love. She doesn’t begrudge him self-pleasure, not outwardly, but he

tries to honor whatever new piece of advice drives her. It took discipline, and while the downside to all the waiting was that it made him fuck like he was a teenager again, the upside was that he got to fuck like a teenager again.

"I'm going to order chicken from around the corner," he says.

"When will your college girl arrive?"

"It won't be long."

"What rooms will you have her do?"

"Whichever," he says. "It's an hourly thing. Certainly the office and the bathrooms. And there's still that juice stain in the fridge."

"Order some chicken for me, too," she says. "I can have it cold tonight. And you can get some for the college girl—what's her name?"

"Alyssa Schumacher. The man on the phone said Alyssa Schumacher."

* * *

Alyssa puts down a white bucket in Peter's office, which must have gloves and specialized cloths underneath all the bleaches and spray bottles. She shakes hands with both of them.

"Where should I start?" she asks.

"I'm surprised I hadn't thought of it," he says. "I'm sure you have a system. You can start with that, and I'll come get you if something takes priority."

"I thought you said office and bathrooms," Virginie says. She's smiling, and Peter wonders if it is because Alyssa is prettier than Virginie, or because she isn't. Some people are lovely to look at right away, and others don't become lovely to look at until you see them

entirely in their element. Until they show what they do well, or if they're graceful in what they do badly. She's taller than his wife, anyway—some women admire that. The buzzer goes.

"I did," Peter says. "You can start here, then bathrooms, then there's a collection of juice stains in the fridge I'd like you to have a look at. Or use your system. Or mix and match."

"Okay," Alyssa says. The buzzer goes again.

"The chicken," Virginie says.

"Oh, right," Peter says, and excuses himself.

"Should I start now, or wait for you to get back?" Alyssa asks. "Most people like to watch."

Peter has a teenage feeling. He hopes. She could be one of those types. Gin's face: nothing. What's that sound Charlie Brown makes? Does the U come before the G?

"Staet without me, if you don't mind," he says, finally.

Downstairs, he pays the deliveryman and eats a bite of drumstick. He's just hungry enough to dance, for a moment, in the elevator, with his opened and steaming box of chicken and rice cooked in coconut milk. Upstairs, he sets three plates on the kitchen island and pours three glasses of water from the filter-top pitcher.

"Virginie," he says, leaning over his plate and its half-eaten drumstick. He pauses before calling Alyssa, too.

They come in and huddle next to the plate he set for Virginie.

"She was just telling me about a film she saw on campus," Virginie says. "*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. It's one of your favorites, isn't it, Peter?"

"Yes," he says. "Virginie can't stand it. She thinks it's hokey."

He picks up a fork. “I had this food delivered,” he says. “And I’d feel like a heel if I didn’t offer you some, too. I know Virginie likes it cold, but I think it’s best just like this.”

He gives Virginie one of the silent looks they have yet to perfect, and it registers. She starts in on the coconut rice. Alyssa is opposite Peter, on Virginie’s left, and she starts to eat one of the wings on her plate.

“Is this Raymundo’s?” Alyssa asks. They nod.

“Try the rice,” Virginie says. “They make it with coconut milk.”

“This is funky.”

“Good funky or bad funky?” he asks.

“Good funky.”

“*Absolutely* good funky,” Virginie says.

“Are you from the city?” Peter asks.

“I’m from the Midwest.”

“That’s beautiful,” Virginie says, speaking over her chicken breast. When it wasn’t sardines, Peter could watch her eat all day.

“Have you ever been to the Midwest, babe?”

“No, of course not,” Virginie says. “But the *idea* of it.”

“Are you from the city?” Alyssa asks. Each time she looks around the kitchen, Virginie becomes momentarily self-conscious about the unwashed dishes, the dust in the corners of the molding.

“I am,” he says. “She’s from Nantes.”

“Why don’t you like *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*?” she asked.

Virginie laughed. “Cherbourg. It’s France’s Midwest. And the story—it’s too much like *Romeo and Juliet.*”

“Except no one dies,” he says.

“But, Genevieve and Guy’s story—it’s much sadder than *Romeo and Juliet*,” Alyssa says. Is Virginie charmed by the way Alyssa points with the tip of her chicken wing?

“We have it here,” Virginie says. She takes a long drink of water. “You can watch it while you do the office.”

“Do you babysit?” Peter asks.

Virginie had asked her the same question before, while Peter was downstairs. She knew the answer, but she wanted to hear it again. In Alyssa, in the fullness of her body and the way she never grunted or sighed when going from one cleaning task to another—it was patience, wasn’t it? Virginie saw patience in this girl, and she wanted some of it for herself. She wanted Alyssa for her children who danced on the plastic edge of her imagination all the time. Virginie studied her husband. She was not, she *could not* be upset by the things he did for her.

“I have. Not professionally. Not recently.”

“I think you’d be good at it,” her husband says. “You have a quality.”

“Do you have children of your own?” Alyssa asks.

“No,” Peter says.

Virginie adds: “Oh, no.” The U comes before the G.

After a moment, Peter drains his glass and gets up to put his dishes in the sink. He turns on the hot and cold taps and Alyssa comes to the sink and squirts some soap from the mounted

dispenser into her hands, and washes his hands with hers. She grabs one of her washcloths and scrubs his knuckles, his cuticles, under his short nails.

Leaning into the edge of the sink, he can feel his own hardness more and more, and the meal and the hand washing make him drowsy for a minute. “All done,” she says, and washes Virginie’s hands in the same manner. She pats their hands dry with paper towels.

A minute speck of soapy water lands on Peter’s glasses—the left lens. Or it might be a speck of oil from the chicken. He can’t tell how long it’s been there, but he closes his right eye and tilts his head to look just beyond the light over the sink. He’s done this since he was seven. He knows nothing of the science of it. He closes one eye and blurs his vision. If it’s on the right spot, somewhere on the periphery of the light, he can see through the speck and everything just beyond it goes warm and hazy, and things move that didn’t move before. His college roommate, a neuroscience student, told him the blur comes from phosphenes, but Peter stopped him before he could explain further. It meant everything to preserve the mystery. And when he looks away from the light source for a few seconds, the warm haze stays with him. He sees Virginie and, before the haze leaves him, he looks behind her at Alyssa, who is inspecting the juice stain in the refrigerator.

Inside the pantry, he takes out a tin of Ennio’s sardines, opening the tin and pouring the oily fish into his hand in the same motion. He places the tin in a ring of gold-green oil on the kitchen island and clumps as much of the fish as possible into Virginie’s hair.

“What on earth is wrong with you?” she asks. Other than below average impulse control for a man his age, nothing is wrong with him. He could reproduce, certainly, if he wanted to. That’s something. It’d be nice to have something wrong, something real and heavy and

tumorous. Tumoric? No, too much like the spice. Something like eighty percent of marital problems are completely made-up, just pulled from the ass, to pass the time when there's little else to talk about. If you don't like eating with somebody, once the fucking dries up, you're done. Was that Cosby? No, no, he never swears. Chappelle, maybe.

She swings her fists at Peter, her childish swings, and he takes her wrists in his hands. Every place he touches her becomes gold-green.

Peter lifts her chin to try and make one of their deeply communicative faces, but their marital ESP is so tenuous when only one of the two is covered in sardines. In his mind he is Guy and she is Genevieve, and he is telling her that the space of years can't separate them. That even when they lose each other, their kitchen, their bed, the fan in the bathroom, all these breadcrumbs can lead them back.

She bites his index finger, hard. The childishness of her brutality stings him in its sweet frankness. He goes to the pantry but there are no more tins of Ennio's sardines left. He takes a bottle of maple syrup and squeezes some onto his head. Virginie laughs at him, for long enough that he finally notices Alyssa's silence. He can feel the syrup running down the nape of his neck and over his temples, and he sweeps the syrup over his ears like hair. This makes Virginie laugh harder.

Alyssa closes the refrigerator door.

"Look at the two of you," she says.

"It was all *this* one," Virginie says, shoving her husband. The last time she'd laughed this hard, she and Peter were spending the night with her parents. This was just after the wedding. The child-bride. Her mother had fallen asleep on the couch watching a movie and farted herself

awake again. They'd all thought they were going to die. Even now, if Peter mentioned it, he'd have her just the same.

"She needs a good shampooing," he says. He holds his bleeding finger over the sink.

"The both of you do. What a terrible couple of kids you are. I turn my back for one minute."

She walks Virginie into the bathroom and he can hear the bathtub running. From the hall linen closet, he takes a bath towel and wraps it around his head, piled high on top. He thinks of Brooke Shields—thinks he remembers her wearing a towel like this in a film, or a commercial. It takes a minute of rifling around, but he finds the disc for *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* and puts it in his laptop and presses play. When he brings the laptop into the bathroom and props it up on the counter, he sees Virginie in the grand, yellow tub. She's in her underwear, water up to her ribs and rising. She's so thin.

Geneviève is selling an umbrella.

Alyssa is plucking whole and broken sardines from Virginie's hair and dropping them into the water. When she opens her eyes, Virginie is convinced for a moment the fish are swimming. That the water was all they needed. And that today, that this girl, was all she needed. He'd cared about her always. Since she was a child herself.

Geneviève is about to meet the great love of her life.

Peter looks with one eye and through a speck of soap or oil at his wife, the woman washing her hair, and several sardines. And Virginie, with closed eyes since Alyssa lowered her into the grand, yellow tub, is thinking only of the cleaning girl's hands on her scalp, the fingers in her curled, wet hair. It's getting late. The sun sets so early in winter. When it's quiet, Peter's

breathing. She could stay for just a little while. The faucet is off now. Alyssa's hands, greater and more calloused than her own, on her shoulders. She opens her eyes and sees her husband. Couldn't she stay for just a little while?

JUST PRETEND TO LAUGH IS ALL

He sat in his little black car for a while, eating four dollars' worth of burgers and fries, and regretted being sober enough to know just how much money he'd spent to become only half drunk. If he had been drunker, though, seeing Sana that night—which he had, only an hour earlier—would have sobered him up anyway. If he'd felt that he'd ever had her, he could've referred to her as the one who got away.

Months before, they were matched up on a dating website. Ninety-seven percent. It was unprecedented. His highest match up to that point had been 93 percent—a mark plenty of women had hit, but they were mostly young, fair, dark-haired, hip girls, whom he'd be lucky to get a first or second date with. And *thin*. Thin was problematic, if it went with young. Because while he, at twenty-five, straddled a line between young and old, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that two hundred ninety pounds didn't qualify as thin. Nor did it qualify him to date thin, young women. Thin, older women? Sure. Younger, fatter women? Sometimes.

He was at Clicks, a sports bar and pool hall around the corner from his apartment. After eating his fill, he went inside and ordered a club soda with two lemons from a curlyheaded, blonde bartender. All the bartenders wore plaid skirts and black tank tops with red suspenders. The tank tops said Clicks on the front and, when his bartender turned around to put his dollar tip in a jar by the register, he saw the backs of their tops said "It's our business doing pleasure with you."

He took his drink outside and placed it on the hood of his car while he checked his phone. He had sent Sana a barrage of dirty text messages after seeing her outside a bar in the Milk District, a row of bars on the opposite side of the street from a dairy plant. They had flirted

before, but his list of questions was almost clinical now. Her answers were equally matter of fact: *Yes. Yes. If I've been with the guy longer than a month or so. Rarely. If they want to. Not now, but I probably will later tonight. Yes.* He ignored the slight ache in his dick as he played the match game with his questions.

* * *

They were a mutual match, according to the dating website, which meant that they had both checked out each other's pages and clicked the little blue heart next to their profile picture. Clicked it from blue to pink, which sent a message to the other person if they had *also* clicked the heart. He messaged her on his way to the temp office where he and his buddy Ray worked the phones, and he and Sana pinged back and forth for thirty-odd hours before she asked him to meet her at a loud bar around the corner from downtown. He'd been to The Peacock Room before. It was one of the few places that served liquor, still allowed indoor smoking, and had proper furniture. Furniture comfortable enough to distract from the overloud music.

"My friend's band was supposed to play here tonight," she said.

"Oh?" he said. They had hugged for three seconds too long when they met, as though she'd taken him at his word when he said that anything over twenty-four hours of constant messaging was tantamount to at least two dates.

"Niggatron," she said. He laughed. "Have you heard of them?"

"No, but I feel like I'm missing out. I have a sixth sense."

"They were better before Kim left. She played bass."

"Was she the nigga or the tron?"

She made a high-pitched, thinking sound that made him pull up the neck of his shirt to cover his mouth. He soaked it in whiskey and soda. He could've kissed her, but he grabbed his stomach instead and called her a monster. She watched him reaching around her for napkins.

"Can I touch your hair?" she asked.

"Yes. Wait. Why?" He touched her head and his. She had brown and blonde dreadlocks but kept her hair short on the sides. It looked better in person than it did in her pictures. Most of her did. She was heavier than her pictures, and her face was prettier. Her skin caught light differently than other people. She hadn't smiled in any of her pictures on the website, but in person she had one of those smiles that could make you fear death. It wasn't a bad thing to be bad at fake smiles. He happened to be good at them. Just pretend to laugh is all.

"If I told you it was a fetish of mine, would you stop asking questions?" she asked. He stopped talking and she touched his head. Their hair was similar, but his was softer, thinning. She had more than she could manage. It was kind of theme with her.

"I had to Google 'sapiosexual' when I read your profile," he told her. "I suppose any man who you're compatible with is pretty smart."

"I'm an amateur phrenologist, I think," she said. "You have a big head. And intelligence does do it for me." He swallowed, and knew better than to say anything. He had to remind himself, sometimes, of the power gained in letting a person talk. What they give up to you. What they imagine is behind silence. "But there are so many kinds of intelligences. Well. I think I mean competence?"

"I think you do," he said.

"And where is your competence?"

“Almost entirely in things I can’t talk about on a first date.”

“Oh, this is a date?” she asked.

“If it isn’t, I’m going to need to be reimbursed for that,” he said, putting his finger into her drink. He sucked off the whiskey.

“It’s the future,” she said. “Nobody dates here.”

* * *

A police car accelerated by Clicks with its lights on, no siren, and he could feel his heart. He had done unkind things, selfish things too, and he thought about when and if they would ever catch up to him. He could convince himself that he wasn’t exceptional in this way. He had once gone on a date with a woman, and when she fell asleep, cuddling, without fucking him, he left the house with an expensive bottle of vodka from the freezer. He didn’t like vodka, and he didn’t like her, but he liked his beating heart and wondering whether anyone could tell what he’d gotten away with. He had kept the bottle in his freezer until the morning when the woman called him and told him she’d report him to the cops, that she already had, in fact. He poured the vodka down the drain, put the bottle into a brown paper bag, the paper bag into a black trash bag, and dropped it in a dumpster at an apartment complex several miles from his house. He wasn’t sure if he should apologize, if she was recording the phone call or something, but in the end he took the chance and said he was sorry. She admitted that she hadn’t called the cops, but that his behavior had scared her. He shook something loose in her. She didn’t want to speak to him or see him again, and he agreed to delete her from his contacts.

He called Sana. It was the only reasonable thing he could do to stop himself from driving back to the milk district, and looking into every window until he saw her. Maybe caused a scene. It had just turned two, and if she wasn't in bed—.

"Sana, it's me."

"I have caller ID. Those were some inappropriate texts you sent me."

"You answered them. They weren't that bad."

"I'm mad at you."

"That's been going around," he said. They didn't talk on the phone often, and the effect of hearing her end any sentence with 'you' was profound.

"I saw you outside Spacebar and you barely said one word to me."

"You were with someone. I didn't want to tap dance into all that. I'm no good at tap dancing."

"He's my friend," she said. He waited for it. "*You're* my friend. Friends can talk when they see each other on the street. Where did you go?"

"I went to another bar," he said, turning to the plate glass window at Clicks. Inside, the bartenders were closing up. He hadn't noticed, but most of the dozen or so drinkers and pool shooters had left while he was poring over his text messages. A couple remained, a few cars down, talking. "You know me. I'm bad at being your friend."

"I know, and it's shitty, because I like your company."

"You should," he said. "I'm funnier around you. So are you."

"So?" She asked. "Be my friend."

"That's hard," he said.

"Why?"

"Have you—*seen* you?"

She laughed. "I don't see what the big deal is."

"Well, no, you wouldn't. You see you every day. You're bored with you. I see you twice, maybe three times a month. I notice new shit every time. All I want is the chance to become as bored with you as you are."

"You're ridiculous," she said. "I hope you change your mind. I miss hanging out with you." This was the wind-down. The telephone equivalent of asking for the check. At any second, one of the two of them would have to say "well," and that'd be the end of it. Until the next time, and the time after that. He wished he were either drunker or less drunk. He had been a fair-weather friend since the first night they met, but he was being honest with himself, and with her. There had to be times when straight men and straight women, with some degree of acknowledged attraction, could be friends. He'd done it before. He'd been to middle school. But to him, it couldn't happen with her. The unanswered questions were all asked too loudly.

"Anyway," he said. "Why I called: I'd like to give you four hundred dollars to come to my place and have sex with me tonight."

"Fuck," she said. The effect of this particular word, said in isolation. "Are you serious?" He only had a second to think. He could probably take it back. Or hang up. But she would call back—hanging up was just an admission of cowardice on top of the solicitation. He was serious. He'd considered it since the drive-thru that night. Turned it over. What could he afford? What could she afford to say no to?

He knew he was willing not to speak to her again if she called him what he sometimes felt he was. He had cruised before. Well, that term was unfair. He didn't buy. He had looked before. Three whiskeys at a downtown bar would pull him behind an obese woman on the dance floor. He danced enthusiastically, like he was motivated more by music than by unfocused lust, and sometimes he would leave with a dead-end phone number, or a night of sour kissing, or even sex. It ran the gamut. But most nights, he'd leave before last call and cross west, over a couple sets of train tracks onto Orange Blossom Trail. Women walked there, and it was enough to see them walking. To slow down and take a look at them in their clothes. They looked normal. They looked like people.

When they looked back at him, or waved, his blood would rearrange itself and he'd accelerate until he couldn't hear his pulse. He'd go six or seven miles, pick up something at a drive-thru, and play the same game heading home to jack off and call it a night. Even in his car, the strangers frightened him.

It would be easier, in a way, never to speak to Sana again. Even if she said no, at least the asking of the question would change their relationship. Change of any kind, he realized, had to be better.

"Yep," he said. "Yes, I'm serious. But it has to be tonight. Anything I want. And I'd need to film it. With my phone, I mean."

"You're like a crazy person."

"I don't think so," he said. "I think it'd make it easier for us to be friends, the way you want to be, if we get this out of the way. I can't keep wondering what it'd be like to do really, just, genuinely bad things to you." He was trying to make her laugh. "If we have sex, then all

that mystery goes away, and we can be human people. I like being human. And I like you as a human."

"And the money?"

"You're like the only adult I know who is broker than I am," he said. "You need money more than I do. I need you more than you do. I don't know. That's my whole pitch."

"I can't believe no one's asked me to do this before," she said.

"Actually, I can't either."

"Can I think about it?" she asked.

He groaned, and said she could. He put his empty glass on the windowsill outside Clicks and waited in his car. After seven minutes, he texted her, "Think faster." He cracked his window and lit a cigarette. He turned the radio on low and listened to BBC updates on a disputed election in Ivory Coast. Another four minutes.

"500," she texted back.

* * *

It was hard, from the start, to separate truth from put-ons with her. When he'd asked her what she did for a living, she talked about her band and some plans to return to college for the fall semester, or later perhaps. She grew up in Caracas, in a good neighborhood, but had been kidnapped once after a party in the wrong part of the city. She made it sound like a rite of passage, like buying her first training bra.

"I convinced them my parents weren't rich and I guess they got bored with me," she said. "They dropped me off near my school and gave me money for a cab."

Her parents were alive but largely out of the picture. They lived in Spain. Her mother worked in government and her father did charity work through a church. She wanted to visit them, but she didn't know when or how, or how long she might stay.

"I don't want to put more stress on them, money-wise. They already gave me this." She showed him a credit card—heavy, metallic. He could carve his name into the arm of his seat with its edge.

"It started out just for emergencies," she said. "But I use it for gas now. Food, cigarettes." At the mention of the last, they both lit a cigarette. She smoked menthols. He hadn't seen a man smoke menthols in years, he thought. It was refreshing to him, for her to do something that so many other women did.

"Rent, too?" he asked. The dating website said they lived near each other. In spite of himself, he thought about the future, about the ease of spending time at each other's houses.

"I'm actually living in my car right now, most nights. Sometimes I crash out at a friend's. My guitarist is cool like that. We used to be more than that, but he's getting married now, so that can't be a thing." He had no idea what to say. She didn't sound like she was joking, but he'd never met a woman who seemed intelligent and was clearly good-looking who didn't know where she was sleeping from one night to the next. Weren't they all just okay, always?

It occurred to him that maybe she was crazy, mentally unwell.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" she asked. He laughed, and it came out deep enough that it sounded more like genuine surprise than being caught in an embarrassing thought. But he copped to it, anyway.

"You don't *sound* crazy, but you still might be. I'm reserving judgment." He took another drink. The whiskey on the front of his shirt had blended into sweat. He felt un-self-conscious for the first time. Wouldn't she want to be kissed by a man like this? It was the goof of all time, a great practical joke, that it was so easy to kiss a woman you aren't sure you want to see again, but sitting next to a woman who filled him with the thoughts of the *next* time he'd see her, a woman he could think of *only* in the future tense, he was romantically, sexually, paralyzed.

"It's not some great mystery," she said. She hadn't been reading his mind, after all. "I just don't like working. Not if I can avoid it. It's kind of an experiment, seeing how long I can go without it. I'm doing the same thing with sex." He groaned inside himself and hoped she didn't hear it.

"I'm doing the same thing, actually," he said, affecting a Valley girl voice. "It's been really good for my chakras? And, like, clarity in general?" She leaned over him and grabbed his face, smiling. He could hear her fingers in his beard and sideburns. Their foreheads touched, as wet as kiss.

"Don't be disappointed," she said. "I like you more than you think. I just think sex ruins everything."

He was disappointed. He grabbed her arms in the fullest part, behind the elbows.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She said yes, she could eat.

* * *

The only reason he had begun with such an un-round number, four hundred, was so that he could go as high as five hundred if he needed to. He was prepared for that, but nothing else.

The excitement and dread that followed her agreement sent him, chain-smoking, in search of an ATM affiliated with his credit union. He thought this must be the last stage of a panic attack, the adrenaline that accompanies renewed safety. The worst part was over. He had thrown away the empty vodka bottle. She had said yes. The money was just money. It would be a big loss in the short term, certainly—he would have to *think* of a meaningful birthday gift for his mother and sister, whose birthdays were both in September, instead of giving them each several small, poorly considered gifts. But it was just money. There would always be more money.

"Can we reschedule for tomorrow?" she texted. "I need to shave."

He didn't wait for a red light to text her back, "No, it has to be tonight. I don't care if you're shaved or not." He put his phone down and took a sip of the free cup of water he'd ordered with his burgers and fries. He added, "If I change my mind, I'll shave you myself."

When he pulled into the ATM at the credit union, he looked in his wallet and found sixty-six dollars. He withdrew another four hundred and put it in the top center console of his car. It wasn't what was agreed upon, but he figured it would be enough. She wouldn't really be the type to ask for money up front anyway, he thought. She called him as he pulled away from the bank to drive back to his house.

"I don't think I can do this," she said. His heart in his chest again. He thought the text about shaving her had spooked her. It was a risk. All of it was. "Are you sure you need this tonight?"

He flipped up the top center console again and looked at the twenty bills folded once inside, next to a fresh pack of cigarettes and on top of several CD's.

"I'm sure," he said. "But I understand. Why don't you just come over, and I'll give you a hundred, and you can just be a good citizen." He thought back to other conversations they'd had, a story he'd told her in a bar about getting head and calling the girl he was with a good citizen. That was her, right? He hadn't told the story to someone else, had he?

She sighed. "And then what?"

"I'll give you the hundred, and maybe you'll feel more comfortable, and then you can do more for the rest of the money. If not, then you can go home."

"Did I tell you I'd always wanted to do this?"

"No, I just think more people want to do it than will admit. And I wouldn't have asked if I thought you'd say no. I hope you don't think that's too fucked up of me to say." He lied.

* * *

In his kitchenette, he re-heated half a chicken and some potato wedges from the Publix up the street. While he watched the Tupperware bowls rotate in the microwave, she changed out of her too tight jeans and into a red pair of his gym shorts. The domesticity play moved him, but the intimacy of it was tempered by the very material truth that she was unsexying herself before him. Still, her sneakers *were* off. She was in his kitchenette, beige, unpainted toes on the cold tile.

They moved to the living room and put on a movie about a traveling stunt driver. He couldn't pay it proper attention. He kept watching her eat. She ate the way he fucked. Grateful, and desperate.

* * *

She came in barefoot, wearing high-waisted black jean shorts and a cut-up white t-shirt. He put his finger over his lips for a moment, and walked her into his bedroom with his index

fingers through her belt loops. He stood her between the bed and the short, black bookshelf and, from behind, unbuttoned and unzipped her shorts. With his hand on her throat, he turned her head back and to the side so he could kiss her, and she let him while she started to wiggle out of her shorts. He slid down with them, and took in for the first time an uninterrupted, unsexualized view of her ass. She didn't tan. The color was unbroken, unchanging. He could smell the parts of her no one else could. He was part of a club that had, what, twenty members? Thirty?

He pressed into her back, and she bent over the corner of the bed where he tasted her in a lazy line from her spine, down and up again. She was quiet, louder when he bit her cheeks, her hips. He'd left two marks on her, and reached for his phone to take a picture of the bruise-to-be. He could smell her in his mustache. She pushed her face further down and took off her t-shirt and the bra underneath while he sat in an office chair before his desk, continuing to photograph her. What reason did he need other than she was beautiful and temporarily his? He unzipped and took himself, half hard, out of his underwear. The first video of the night was her taking him wholly into her mouth, his hand in her hair, waiting to correct her if she couldn't read his mind. She stopped once to spit into his garbage can, and later to ask him to fuck her. He pulled her hair from the base of her dreadlocks and found the rhythm that would make him come. He couldn't fuck her yet. The first one comes too easily, and he'd been saving it, in his way, for months. Since the Peacock. It was for money, but he still didn't want the first time he fucked her, really fucked her, to be over in just a minute. Money purchases selfishness, but she was still his date. They had had the drinks already. The dinner. All of it, months before. This was just the sex that they forgot to have when they met. She would have every reason to lie, to fake her orgasms, to kiss without breathing, to suck with her eyes closed, but he wanted to impress himself. Be

undeniable. He wanted, mostly, not to have to pay her. Certainly not to pay her the full five hundred. As if, the more he paid, the less this could mean.

"You remember the party we had," he said, after. "You invited all my friends. Roger was there."

"Roger…" she said, affecting the same voice.

"I saw Ben Yamin Israel was there as well. I thought Yehuda Yeshiva Ben Gurion David Ben Gurion also came. And my friend Teddy Hannukah was there. They all were there." She laughed and he took her breast into his mouth. They couldn't stop. It was her bit, originally. She would call him Mortimer, or David, in that voice, all wifely exasperation, and they would riff until they couldn't finish thoughts. "That's my new character: older Jewish man who doesn't know a lot of Jewish names so he just substitutes in holidays."

"You remember Billy Yom Kippur, don't you?"

"Well, I know his daughter Shawna Rosh Hashanah; she told me, the other day—"

"Oh, their beautiful son, Manna!"

"Oh, of course! You remember Manna. He comes from up north. He came down, he was up in a tree, and he fell down on top of everyone, and all of a sudden we weren't hungry anymore. It was very bizarre, frankly—"

"Well, you remember my nephew Frank Lee—he's half Asian—"

"We don't really talk about him, but Frank Lee, he's a good man, and Frank Lee, I say, all the time, I always say 'Frank Lee, you have to get your life together,' and he says 'David…'"

"He wants you to get out of his business, he's told me so, and he's very perturbed."

“Well you’ve heard he’s dating a lovely girl now. Now, her name is Samantha Holocaust, and here’s the thing—” Both of them dead.

His primary regret after that night would be that he hadn’t propped up his phone, filming them, on his bookshelf. That he wouldn’t be able to convince anyone—on a long enough timeline, he wouldn’t be able to convince himself—that the transition from laughing to fucking for the third and final time could be so seamless. At some distant point, he wouldn’t believe it had happened.

“I think I have daddy issues,” she said. Chestheaded, legfooted, bellyhanded, the two of them.

“You got turned on by me doing Eddie Murphy doing an old Jewish man. I think that’s pretty clear.”

“Hmm.”

“Is that who you usually end up with? That guy I saw you with today, was he a father type?”

“I’ve never slept with him. I don’t sleep with every person you see me with.”

“No, you answer texts too fast for that.”

“I usually end up being the mother. I end up babying people.”

“You’ll grow out of that.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you?”

He squeezed her ass for the thousandth time in an hour. “I don’t know. My mind could change tomorrow, but I think I already have everything I’d like to have.”

“Then I should take my money and run,” she said.

“I only have a hundred on me,” he said. “I put the rest back in my account when you called me all hesitant.”

She pulled herself away from him. “Do you know how many people I could send to beat you up?” She laughed, but she could mean it for all he knew. Musicians probably ran in the same circles as some bruisers. Any friend of Niggatron, etc.

“I don’t. How many?”

“At least three.”

“One would be enough,” he said. “I’m not very strong.”

“I need a cigarette. You’re an asshole.”

“Cigarettes require pants,” he said. “Fine. I need one, too.”

“Are you sure you only have a hundred?”

“That’s what’s in my car. I might have a little more in my wallet. Walking around money. I’ll give you that, too.”

He sat in his car with it half-turned on. Warm air blowing ash in his face. She was on his front stoop, smoking a cigarette he’d given her. He took out the four hundred, counted out five twenties, and put the rest back in the top console. From his wallet in the cupholder he took out the sixty-six dollars he’d started his night with.

“Here,” he said, and put different amounts in her pockets and the cups of her bra. She looked less pissed off—cigarettes did that. Unless—

“You know, you could have had me that first night.”

“What?”

“We could have had sex.”

“You said you were celibate.”

“I was in your house, in your clothes—it was a sleepover. I’m just saying, you could have fucked me.”

After she left, he stood on the stoop in the weak orange glow of the aluminum awning. After three cigarettes, he went inside to try and sleep. When it wouldn’t come, he plugged his phone into his laptop first, and then his desktop, and uploaded the pictures and videos of her, of the two of them. He put copies of them in each hard drive and each external hard drive. He opened the first video on his phone and used his thumb to jump from one bit to the next, the middle to the end and back to the beginning. It was all there. He slept.

* * *

The having was enough. It was so much enough that it was weeks before he watched any of the videos or studied any of the pictures. Sometimes, after work, he’d look at the thumbnail image of the first video, his cock at the edge of her bottom lip, and go to sleep without opening it. He masturbated less. He didn’t miss the money anymore. Peace of mind was valuable, and he felt a little shitty that he hadn’t given her more. Closer to what was agreed on.

The gods of homelessness had relented and Sana was renting a room in a house two streets behind the Milk District.

“As soon as I got the room, my car kind of exploded,” she said. He’d run into her at Sportstown. She was with an impossibly short, blond man in beautiful jeans and a tight, gray vest.

“You’d like John,” she said. “He’s pretentious.”

He and John laughed, and his voice more or less confirmed what she said. They were drinking underpriced beers on a bench with Sana between them. He asked John where he bought his clothes and drifted to Sana while half-listening to John's answers. There was no way to get her alone. Bars were her element, and she was too quick to engage a stranger or acquaintance in conversation, to promote her band.

He shouldn't be snarky. Life would be easier if he could approach people the way she did. Maybe he should buy a gray vest.

"Let me walk John back to his car," she said. A fight had broken out earlier that night, and enough people felt a thrumming in their ears, a caveman-era antecedent to more violence, that the place was beginning to empty out. He waited outside with the last two gulps of his beer on the hood of the little black car. When she came back, she took the cigarette from his hand and had a drag.

"John seems like a sweetie," he said. She kissed him. When she went for a second, he took back the cigarette. "What's going on?"

"I thought you wanted this," she said.

"I do," he said. "Wait. What this? What is this?"

"A freebie." Singular, he thought. A discrete bundle of sexual energy, ready to shoot through him. It would evaporate him, but he always coalesced. Blood always found his dick. It was some kind of damn hunter. He would always reconstitute into the same thinking, groping, eating thing. He told her no, if only to put off for a while the night when he'd say yes. And because saying no to her felt as good as saying yes, just different. She left, and sent him a text message, trying to save face. "I'm on my pyramid anyway." She didn't bother to correct herself.

He drove through downtown and came out on Orange Blossom Trail, heading south. Brand name chicken joints and gas stations became off-market rip-offs after a few miles. The women were less predictable. Everything you could guess, in almost every kind of dress. At first he thought he'd want one who looked like Sana—short, thick but athletic, with natural hair. He'd slow down from thirty five to twenty five if he thought he saw an ass like hers, struggling against cheap leggings. Slowing down was risky, always. How could there be so many cops, all the time? How did anyone do this? He'd have better luck pulling over a cop, explaining his situation: Officer, it's always coming back together for me, all the strings come snapping back, it's not embarrassing to me, no, if you could see her I really think you'd understand, she just brings all this weight down on me, and she takes it all away again, it's a thing with her, wait, I think I have a photo of her, do you see what I mean, about the smile, that's her real smile, have you ever seen it, have you, I think just some sherbet would do me, and just cleanse the palate, wipe it right fucking clean, excuse me, pardon me, it'd just get a clean slate with her and me, and no, you haven't seen it, you're not looking hard enough, officer, sir.

PRESS ANYWHERE

It's during the fourth minute of "One Bourbon, One Scotch, and one Beer," the minute when you know there are still two minutes before George Thorogood sings the chorus for the *first* damn time, that you're confident white people are playing a joke on you. They lured you to Merced, California, with a scholarship to the newest UC school and a stipend on top of that. It's more money than you might ever read printed above your own name ever again. They lured you with brochures and mailers and invitations on card stock so thick you could clean your nails with it. And phone calls. They must have hired every wannabe actress in town to call you and sell you on the campus life and the new graduate research facilities and the two gyms and the newest dorms and the organic this and raw that. All the callers managed to sound thoughtful but flirtatious, like the only time they might take their nose out of a book would be to blow you. You wonder if other schools run this kind of game, and if they run it for every kind of student, every kind of sexuality. There would have to be a research intern, constantly Facebooking her ass off, just to keep up. But you were duped, weren't you. You came, you saw, you were overwhelmed by desert. Now you think it wasn't any young, wannabe actress on the line all those nights in the spring before you made the decision to come. Maybe it was just one lady, the woman who made copies and coffee and brought doughnuts on Fridays. Somebody's secretary. Maybe she was married, and her cankles had matching patches of hair that she no longer gave enough of a fuck to shave. Maybe it gave her a thrill. But you should have known better. Merced, California. Has to be about the only city in the fucking state that ends in a D, which should have been enough of a warning.

Looking up the professors' biographies online had been a bit of a joke, too: an even mix of folks who the decades had calcified into irrelevance, and some newer fish whose publications were thin at best. One name stuck out in the whole of the computer science department. Thora Bjornsson. Late forties, bred in Iceland, only tenured a few years back, and the woman gave more symposia than Plato. You e-mailed the department head about her and half his reply came back in capital letters. Thora Bjornsson was their superhero. "We poached her from one of the IVIES," he wrote. "CAN'T say which one. But they wanted her, BADLY." He added a postscript: "OK," he said. "It was the one named after a color." It didn't take many more e-mails before the department head arranged a phone interview between you and Thora, the kind where you end up finishing each other's sentences and open up a new tangent each time one of you tries to hang up. Bjornsson sewed it up. She's why you came.

And you're the reason she's standing next to you at The Partisan, one of three craft beer bars in Merced. She likes George Thorogood a hell of a lot more than you do. But you're of an age and a generation where liking things is an extravagance.

"This is a whole other kind of English," she says.

You hand her a glass of Fat Tire.

"This song upsets me."

"I can understand every word," she says, "But if I—what am I trying to say—if I dilute my attention on it for a second, just a second, it all sounds like nonsense."

She has a point.

"And you enjoy this," you say.

"It's interesting nonsense. When is this show starting?"

A nervy flash plays in your fingertips, making you extra aware of the sweating beer glass in your hands. This is the kind of supplemental fear you don't need. The kind of fear that smoking—weed, even a cigarette—has been known to quash for you. But you are sober, your lungs have been devoid of any fresh tar since you caught a bad case of bronchitis last month, and this beer, your third, might as well be tap water.

"It's after ten," you say. "This has to be the last song, now."

"I think it's very brave that you want to tell your jokes in front of me," she says. "Most people don't want to do badly in front of people they know."

Thorogood's second chorus stirs all the non-comics into singing along. You can tell who the comics are, who they must be, because they aren't singing anything. They either flip through Moleskines or practice their shoegazing. You have a mottled black and white notebook from the drugstore. Very small and full of every funny thought that's occurred to you since you bought it nine weeks ago. Funny to you. And even then, not always. You gesture for Thora to hold your beer and write something in a middle page. Then, you say what you wrote, into her ear.

"What are the chances this song caused 9/11?"

* * *

It is, of course, a serious school. Serious people studied there, and you treat yours and Dr. Bjornsson's research with an appropriate level of respect. Your proposal involves artificial intelligence and music composition, and Thora saw a natural complement with her own AI research in computer-assisted cognition therapy via what she called the mapping of dreams. It was more complicated than all that—sometimes impossibly more complicated—but part of Thora's charm, to you and to all the academics in her ever-expanding orbit, was her almost

Kaku-like ability to simplify complex scientific principles into what sounded like your basic weed talk. She had a book in the Barnes and Noble. She'd pop up on talk shows and science channel specials. She could drunk dial Jon Stewart, and did.

And you, what do you do? "I'm a research assistant," you tell men. "I'm a doctoral candidate," you tell women. You file and type and propose and catalog. You sketch and scheme. And you swap out your manila folders for fresh ones when the originals have been covered in bits and one-liners and precious tags.

The tag, in your opinion, is the everything of a good bit. For most people, a punchline is enough. And a good punchline will always get you where you want to go. It's a classic pop song in 4/4 time. No one could be disappointed with a good punchline: that's why the chicken crosses the road. But the tag is the response after the response, the comedy equivalent of kicking a man while he's down. It's what the pregnant pause is pregnant *with*. Even when a tag is written and well-rehearsed, the fact that it has to be delivered after a punchline—while an audience is laughing—makes it feel ad-libbed. It can't help but sound spontaneous because you have to ride out a rolling laugh and find the right place to deliver it. And we're simple creatures. Give us a good punchline and we'll call it craft, maybe even art. Pull a tag out of the fucking blue and plant it in the stage like a flag, and you're really more of a conquistador than anything else.

You aren't there.

Where you are is in Merced, a city where pollution sometimes turns the sky Armageddon brown in the middle of the afternoon, a city two hours from every interesting city in northern California, and at the beck and call of a professor who really ought to hire a personal assistant and stop blurring the lines between research and chauffeuring.

“But why have a Mercedes if I’m always carting you around?” you ask her, on a mid-week trip to a talk at San Francisco State.

“It’s very important to the state of California that I never, ever drive again,” she says, flipping down her laptop to answer you. She adjusts the air conditioning vents on her side, and flips the screen up again. Thora has a way with the endearing gesture.

* * *

Your mother told you the sun made your father sick, but the adult facts, the facts you could be given later, were that he was prone to seizures, he found the seizures very exhausting, your mother insisted he take medicine to prevent the seizures, he insisted the medicine made him feel caught, just caught, and he insisted he couldn’t explain it better than that, and she insisted on driving him to and from work when he went off the medication, and he insisted on his independence and crashed into a tollbooth, and you were eight.

To this day, you still equivocate like a motherfucker over your mom leaving the casket closed. You know yourself. What your imagination can do. Maybe the indelible concreteness of seeing his face caked with foundation and rouge to mask sloppy stitch work and compressed bone, the artificial tightness of the skin on his hands, or the way his suit would have fit better because so much of him would have been gone already, elsewhere, down drains and in medical waste containers, maybe seeing that would have been better for you. When you close your eyes, then, or smelled oxtail or curried goat, the image of your dead father would be fixed. That would have been a mitzvah.

Woody Allen was his favorite stand-up, and the two of you wore out his album on vinyl, then on cassette. This was before you knew what a tag was. Everything was just jokes. Your

father's laugh, so much higher than his speaking voice, was all that you knew to be absurd in this world. But then one of your cousins came to the funeral and told you that his hamster died last month and he knew how you felt. You just knew, dumbly, that your father would have laughed at that. And you did. You laughed loud and high enough for the both of you. You fell out cackling and to this day you don't remember your mother carrying you, a big boy already at eight, out of your father's funeral with your legs wrapped around her hips and her fingers locked under your ass to hold you up. She took you home and turned out the lights and sat with you in your bedroom until she couldn't tell when her eyes were open from when they were closed. Until she couldn't tell your laughing from your crying. You believe her when she tells the story—it sounds like you, but you don't remember it at all.

* * *

Merced is a city on the brink, caught between a bunch of cities who decided on their character decades ago. When you hear someone is from Oakland, you know what to think of them and their experiences. Same with San Francisco, or Santa Cruz. Even the smaller, wealthier communities like Moraga. It comes with a picture. Merced has no picture. The highways run through desert, the old church downtown is, by far, the grandest building in the county, and everyone in the city earns money either through the university, the medical center, or in agriculture. The city is half white, half Latino, and half invisibles. People like the fresh influx of Hmong immigrants, or the illegal migrant workers, or you, to an extent. You hope the university thrives, ultimately—that it eats up more and more space so that Merced's criminals, who own certain avenues adjacent to MLK Street on the weekends, never get their shit together. When you talk to your mother, who still lives in Asheville, you undersell the precarious position of the city

you've called home for a little under a year. *It's not bad, Mom. I just focus on the research and whatever Thora tells me to do.* But she's not an idiot. She knows her way around a search engine and she's worried about you, not in a constant way, just when you don't return her Sunday calls until the following Thursday. She loves you in spite of yourself. Has been constant even during an almost four-year period when you actively blamed her for your father's death. You did notice her taking a lot of deep breaths when you'd intensify your pubescent scowl at her, like when she'd ask you something as cunty as "Do you want Shoney's for dinner," but she never lost it, not in front of you. Just those deep breaths, and the occasional night out with a single girlfriend, to the movies or a wine bar. She couldn't roll with her married friends anymore. Not in a serious way. The two of you would be in the Food Lion and you'd pass Mrs. Samson, searching the cereal boxes while her daughter, a little older than you and already a woman as far as you were concerned, pushed the cart. You'd see a chicken in there, a whole fryer, wrapped surgically in plastic, and both of you knew Mr. Samson was on his drive home, and he wouldn't crash, and he'd be getting the big piece. The breast, maybe, or both thighs. Now, in your home, such questions were a toss-up, like everything else. No one knew where to sit at your table anymore, and you'd eat together in front of the television, or at separate times altogether. She didn't push you, and at the time, you resented the shit out of her for not slapping the grief out of you, shaking you back down to her plane. In death or even in divorce, it's true: you end up hating the one who stuck around to deal with your shit. It's unfair, and you're glad you realized it a little sooner than the other kids coming up with only a mother. By the time you were thirteen, you were reformed, a mama's boy. She looked at you a little funny when you went back to dad's old comedy albums at fifteen, and was relieved as all hell when you started showing a serious interest in computers.

You could have both, and she could have you, without him. It was a peace. The détente felt good, for both of you.

* * *

You are a funny person. But you aren't a funny comedian. Not by a sight. You go to the race well a little too much. There's a bit about how every white person you know has one black friend, and that friend is you, and it's impossible to make black friends, because of your ever-expanding commitments to show up at game nights and barbecues and weddings to darken the place up. The bit works, even though you haven't found a tag for it yet, but it niggles at you anyway. You have a bit about Michael Jordan's new Hitler mustache, the kind of obscene fame it takes to be able to rock a Hitler and have no one in your orbit who can tell you no, tell you that it might not be the best idea to sell underwear with genocidal facial hair, how only Jordan, Chaplin, and Hitler have ever been famous enough to do it. When you get into the percentages, and say over thirty-three percent of people who've worn that mustache have committed genocide, that's when you get the crowd. It's not a killer tag, but because you laugh at the punchline that precedes it, a true Dave Chappelle type of laugh where you lower the mic and let it slap your thigh, the audience sees you enjoying yourself and they echo back your pleasure. It's not a closer, but as far as middles go, you're satisfied. You vent your frustration to the crowd: all your best impressions are of white people. They laugh at this more often than not. You talk about the uselessness of a Philip Seymour Hoffman impression when your skin makes you hard to see at night. You have some one-liners that might go over better in an alternative room, a place in a bigger city where hipsters would appreciate references to A.J. Benza and Dean Cain, celebrities who are so un-famous, just being asked to remember who they are can elicit a laugh. You are

afraid to do crowd work. You've never been heckled, and you're glad of it, but part of you wishes you could get the practice. You have quick, waking nightmares when you're holding your Fat Tire, about to do your six minutes, that you won't know how to address a heckler. Open mic crowds are usually gentle, though. It's the people who are paying money to see a comedian who feel entitled, emboldened to liven up a set with their drunken contributions. You can't even think about that next step, if you'd ever get to that level. You need a voice first, and experience to inform it. At some point you might need to catch an STD just so you have something to riff on. Oh, and you close with black superheroes. One in particular: Brother Voodoo. Created in 1973, Brother Voodoo was perhaps the most racially offensive black hero ever to grace Marvel's pages. He lost his brother to gang violence, and studied witchery and other black magic in order to fight crime. His two great powers, which you repeatedly emphasize are true and can be independently verified, are that he can create smoke *accompanied by the sound of drums (*you repeat this line slower and louder, which can be a risk if the crowd isn't with you). So, he could replace a drum kit and smoke machine in any night club. But the real beauty part of Brother Voodoo hearkens back to that dead brother. Voodoo can summon his brother's spirit into his flesh and gain his strength. You cap the line the same way every time: "So, he can be as strong as *up to two men*." You delight in the line and tag it with an intentionally unfinished thought: "So if he's *really gotta move a couch…*" You play out a scene in which Brother Voodoo gets evicted from his place and has to relocate while other, truer superheroes wait in vain for a phone call asking for their help. This last moment involves a bit of acting and you only get it right a third of the time, but when you do, the applause doesn't stop until you get back to where Thora is standing with your next beer.

* * *

Thora calls you on a Wednesday afternoon, your day off, but you don't answer. The night before, a little after midnight, you got a text message from one of the students in your discussion section. Priya Adhia had been working you hard all semester. She kept her hair wavy and loose, and punctuated her every sentence with a flip of it or some kind of tug. You were coming out of a real earth mother phase as far as women go, and the best looking woman to recently fill your bed had had hair like an Isley brother, so this Priya girl could get it. She also rocked yoga pants like nobody's business, and granted, it was the undergraduate norm to wear them, but because of the aforementioned hair games she was playing, you felt like the yoga pants were somehow just for you. She insisted, weeks ago, on getting your phone number.

"It's on the discussion board," you said. "Everyone has access to it."

"I know," she said. "But I want you to give it to me."

She handed you her phone. Your name was already programmed in. All you had to do was type ten digits, and you did.

"Emergencies only," you said, unsure if you were flirting but sure that you wanted to be. The university frowned on fraternizing between students and professors or T.A.'s during semesters in which said professor or T.A. had control over said student's grade. They turned a blind eye to what happened after exams, though. But how were you supposed to lust after someone all semester long and then try to consummate it in the next term or, God forbid, over summer vacation? It was impractical. The classroom environment was too charged. Accidents happened. So when she texted you at a universally understood hookup hour, writing only "it's an emergency" and her address, you knew the shape of it.

So, you go to her house. You don't even reply. You just go. It's all appointed in the finest IKEA separates, and the same art deco prints you see at the downtown art fair every month. She's twenty. Her house looks twenty. Twenty is never going to stop being an attractive number to you. But even in your position as a T.A., even though you pulled down her yoga pants in the kitchen when she tried to mix you a vodka soda, even if you learned that she didn't own a single bra because she never needed to, even if she lied when she said she would only use her mouth, even if what was about to happen did happen, you could still count on a single hand the number of times you went to bed with a student. It happens.

Thora's message isn't urgent. She apologizes for calling you on a day off and is glad you didn't answer because she would feel bad for waking you with something trivial. She's been invited to speak at UNC Asheville on a panel and is going there for a long weekend. She must be candid because you are friends. She will be staying with an old flame called Bo Ellen James. Her words. She must be candid again. You should go with her and see your mother. Boys need their mothers, and mothers need their sons, too. She won't need the hotel per diem, and she'd like you to have it, just because. You can get a hotel or stay with your mother or stay with her at Bo Ellen's place. But do come. Yes, do.

* * *

Asheville. For the uninitiated, Asheville is a lot of people's best idea of everything America has to offer. If Santa Barbara and Pittsburgh had a baby, it'd be Asheville. People usually smile, the food is good, the art is earnest, and the white boys are dreadlocked. And then there's the university flavor. It's a college town for people in their forties. If you hadn't grown up there, you'd have drunk the Kool-Aid, too. You're not blind to its objective charms, but it's

familiar to you. And the same familiarity that's in your genes, that familiarity that stops a guy from fucking his sister or his first cousin on his father's side, that stops you from wanting to fuck with Asheville. You can do without. But Thora laid it on just right with her soft sell, got you thinking about your mother and the kind of son you had been lately. Not returning calls in a timely fashion, not checking in, not even pretending to need some extra walking around money, like when you were an undergrad, so she could feel needed.

Bo Ellen's place on Hilliard and Grove is done up in the reformed hippie style that you might see on a sorority girl's Pinterest next to recipes for cheesecake blondies and unironic photographs of Peter Saarsgard. It'd be a lie to say you don't like the look, too. The place was functional and lived-in, with three big bookcases and an easel in the parlor. The charm is no joke. The furniture is kind of no-nonsense, though, like it was designed by someone who'd rather be in their garden. Which is why you weren't surprised when Bo Ellen showed up with cutoff overalls and a tight white t-shirt on in her bare feet, even though it was after midnight when you and Thora came calling. Is it some kind of Jungian thing that makes white women look good caked in fresh earth?

She shakes your hand and you could see a little of what Thora liked about her. The broad smile, the thick and messy blonde hair that made your professor's seem flat by comparison. She was a photo negative of your type from your earth mother phase. People like her always have brown eyes. Anything else would be unreal.

She takes Thora's arm and gives you both the penny tour while showing Thora the little improvements she's made to the house. You drop a bag off in the guest room and take Thora's suitcase into Bo Ellen's room to set up her bi-pap machine on the nightstand. She doesn't have

the kind of sleep apnea that comes from having too much neck fat, or an oversized tongue, or enormous breasts, or any of that. You're not an expert weight-guesser—you're an embarrassment at the county fair—but there's no way Thora weighs more than one-forty. She has the neurological kind of sleep apnea, which is more disconcerting to a man like you. She says her brain "is going go-go-go all the time, and I *think* in my sleep, and I *write* in my sleep—I'm not surprised my brain sometimes forgets to tell my lungs to breathe." But you were, and you looked at her differently for a little while after that, even caught yourself turning off the radio to hear her breathe if she nodded off while you drove. It got to a point where you were nervous about having separate hotel rooms on the road, and you knocked on the adjoining door one night in Tallahassee.

"You know," she said. "I have to take my sleep mask off to get the door every time you knock," She had parallel lines around her mouth and nose, one set from life, the other from the clear plastic mask and its silicone contacts.

"I was worried."

"You need not be. I trust the machine, and it's my life. You should trust my trust."

You looked at her, and hoped the dumb expression communicated a few things: she was right, of course; you were going to worry anyway, because your father's mind betrayed him; you were sorry.

"This is embarrassing," you said. Together, you would have made one fully dressed person—she in a t-shirt of band you didn't recognize, you in UC Merced gym shorts.

"No. I'm not blind. I appreciate that you worry. Here, help me put it back on."

She crossed back to the bed and sat on the edge close to her pillow. After taking a sip of water, she loosened the Velcro straps and put the mask over the top of her head, with the face piece balanced on the bridge of her nose.

"I can't talk once I put it on," she said. "When I take two breaths, the sensor turns on the humidifier. So if you have anything to say—" you shook your head.

Once she pulled the face piece down, you took the male ends of the Velcro strips and tightened them into place. She made a speed-it-up gesture with her right hand, so you undid the strips and pulled them tighter.

"Perfect," she mumbled. The machine was on, making its comforting white noise. It sounded medically safe, sure, but that's not the same as safe-safe.

"You sound like a Batman villain," you said. She squinted, and you realized laughing eyes and confused eyes are more or less the same. You stood up and she worked herself under her blanket. You stood beside her bed until she flipped up a corner of the blanket on the opposite side, and patted it hard enough that you knew it wasn't a seduction. She wanted you to sleep beside her so you could wake in the morning, see her and the machine breathing together, and bury this dread of losing someone once you understood they were capable of being lost. Like any parent at this time of night, she wanted you to grow up.

* * *

"It's not the same thing," Thora says. "It's not the same at all."

The three of you had ordered fried noodles, spicy garlic shrimp, and miso soup from Heiwa Shokudo up around the corner. Rather, Bo Ellen had ordered the food for you and Thora while you were landing and taxiing and renting a car, and re-heated it once the bags had been put

away and you knew where the towels were. You debated going straight to your mother's house—you hadn't told her you were coming home—but reasoned that it could wait until the morning. You didn't want to be rude to this woman who offered such spicy, garlicky kindness to strangers. True bread and circuses shit. Even when the power went out, Bo Ellen went to the kitchen window and said, "Huh. Looks like it's rolling around downtown. This happened last spring, too. Something about refining the grid." Then, she took a half gallon of butter pecan ice cream out of the freezer. "I won't make the same mistake as last time. We'll eat this tonight, too. Anything that melts: fifty percent off." She pulled candles from bathrooms and bedrooms and turned on a couple camping lanterns, the halogen ones that throw off that blue-white light. The house would have looked like a rave or a crime scene to a passerby, but inside was beautiful, blue and warm and white.

"It's like—" Bo Ellen was reaching for something, and Thora found it.

"It's like speaking Latin."

You wait. This is what Thora likes to do. Start at Z, and build the alphabet backwards to show you how she found her way.

"It is. You grow up with this interest in this arcane thing that used to be a lot more prevalent hundreds of years ago. Everyone was into it—"

"Everyone in the western world," you say.

"Yes," Thora says. "Forgive me. Everyone in the western world was all right with it. They had a facility with it. Everyone knew a little Latin. But then you get to now, and a few kids here and there grow up speaking Latin at home, by themselves, in secret, wearing these special

robes and reading special books that they can't show anyone else until maybe they get a little older and move away or go to university or something."

"And even then—" Bo Ellen is fully invested. She touches Thora's forearm to say that she could pick up from there, and her eyes are wet and glassy. She looks at Thora the way you imagine she looked at her the first time they met.

"And even then, being at uni might not be enough. There might not be a Latin club. You just have to go to cocktail parties—"

"And mutter something in Latin," you say.

"Yes! And hope that someone there knows their *Ars Amatoria*."

"And then you prance off to a land of hard consonants," Bo Ellen says.

You laugh. The girl is funny. There's a thing about comedy, even just joking with a stranger at the expense of someone else. You see someone differently in the moment they make you laugh. It's a shared vulnerability, and that makes you notice them more completely.

"You make fun," Thora says. "You go ahead. I think I'm making a good point."

Thora refills her wine glass and excuses herself to the kitchen. You can't tell if she was being playful or if she is in a mood. Everything about the weekend, about Bo Ellen, it was producing a different shade of her. She had a familiar center, but the edges were unrecognizable. Bo Ellen leans over to you and says, "Not to make Thora feel old but, of course, there was a Latin club when I was in college." You say, "Me, too."

The conversation turns to your hobby of standing in front of acquaintances with a microphone in your hands until you develop body odor, and Bo Ellen tells you something you had told yourself two or three times on the flight into North Carolina. Athena's, a college bar

downtown, hosts open mics on Wednesdays. Tonight. The bar is too close not to go, even if it was one in the morning. Bo Ellen gives you a spare key, and Thora gives you her key ring on account of the lipstick-sized pepper spray mounted to it. You figure they need as much of the night to themselves as you can give them, so you took your three sets of keys and leave.

* * *

Athena's is close enough to walk to, but you drive it anyway. Blackouts, especially short-lived ones, tend to make kind people kinder, and Asheville has an above average percentage of kind people. Every down traffic light becomes a friendly four-way stop, and you make it to the bar before the BBC news readers can finish their segments on Africa, which is to say, fast.

The bar has a good crowd, considering. There's one of those blue-white lamps on the far end of the bar, near the register, and candles along the bar itself. The stage is unlit except for the glow on the comic's face. He's working out material from notes on his phone and your coming in rattles him. "Wait your turn, chief," he says. "I'm making history over here." The audience gives him an eight because of his confidence and because a room is never safer than when people can't see your face. It's that dark. If you want to be seen, you have to turn on your phone, like you were telling a ghost story in the distant future.

Even a city that has a lot of blackouts will still have, what, only two blackouts a year? Maybe three? Tonight is special, and they know it. There is a microphone in the stand. Whoever was using it when the power died out could have killed if he had the right tag. It might have been this guy. You can't see him. He sounds tall.

You order a Newcastle that's only a little colder than the room you're standing in, and put your name on the list. Two more comics go up. Everyone shouts their acts, and everyone

kills. Bits that would get a four if the lights were on are getting eights and nines just because of the absurdity of shouting at people you cannot see. You can only make out faces when someone is checking their phone or responding to a text. One woman checks her phone and the comic tells her she's beautiful. Another woman checks her phone and the comic says, "Dad? What are you doing here?" You would've cut the second question, but it was an ad-lib, and you can't fault someone for being in the moment when that's still something you can't nail down.

Most brown ales warm pretty well, but this Newcastle isn't one of them, and you're glad to leave it on a stranger's table when you take the stage. You fuck around with the mic on the mic stand for a good twenty seconds, waiting, hoping, and then a voice calls out the obvious. The next twenty seconds that you adjust and move the mic get a solid nine. You wish Thora were here. She loves when you do the kind of shit Eddie Izzard would do. *You* love when you do the kind of shit Eddie Izzard would do.

"Can everyone see me?" you ask. "Or should I smile?"

* * *

You're so thankful that the power doesn't come back on during your set that you leave almost immediately after, worried that if the lights come on before dawn, what happened at Athena's won't have really occurred. You drive back to your mother's house on Aurora and Kenilworth, but her car isn't there. This concerns you for the few seconds it takes to remind yourself that your mother might have a social life outside of the house she raised you in. You hope she is on a date. Better still, you hope she's on a date with a man who has kids of his own.

You go into the downstairs bathroom which doubles as the laundry room. Your shirt is soaked from an hour in Athena's with no air conditioning, and you're still coming down from the

adrenaline dump. You take off the shirt and the one under it, but remember that you won't be able to run the washer until the morning. Your mother has this big basin sink in there with industrial water taps, and you plug the drain and fill it up with hot. You pour in some of the hippie hemp oil soap your mother uses to wash her clothes, her dishes, and probably her hair, and push your shirts into the hot water. You knead them into the soapy water until the heat is too much, stopping to wipe your hands on your jeans.

You stop a third of the way up the stairs and come back down to the kitchen, not knowing which room to go to. A few steps up, on the wall, is a picture of the two of you, from a few months after the funeral. She had taken you to a theme park and you had done a strip of pictures in a photo booth. The first flash caught you by surprise, looking at your shoes while she stared into your hair. Then she asked you to smile real big, even if it was fake, and you did. For the next two, she said just to smile for you, or don't smile at all—*do what you feel*, she said. You closed your eyes and looked up at her. That's the last two pictures on the strip. You with eyes closed, waiting for anything to happen.

She had the first picture, the surprise, blown up. That's the one on the wall by the stairs.

You debate going up to your room and going to sleep while you take off your jeans and throw them to the top of the stairs. You turn and go to the kitchen, and tear a page from the shopping list pad on the refrigerator and write out a note that says: *I'm home for a few days. Everything is fine. I should've called first. Sorry for not. And where were you last night, lover boy?* You fix some tape to the top of the note, open the front door, and stick the note to the door knocker. You want it to be the first thing she sees so that she won't be frightened when she comes in. You want her to see the note before she sees you, like the card on a gift box.

When you wake up, in your old bed, your side of the old bed, the power is back on. The ceiling fan that you broke in the ninth grade doing windmills cools the sweat on your chest. You stumble with crust in your eyes back into your jeans and down the stairs, into the living room where an episode of a house hunting show is on the television and a white man is breathing heavy on your mother's sofa. That's the order in which you see: television, white, man, breathing.

At the kitchen sink, you splash your face and mouth with water and spit into the drain like you own the place, and you do, compared to whoever this man is on the sofa.

"You must be the writer," the man says. He has his arm up on the sofa back so he can study you a minute.

"What?"

"The note on the front door," he says. "I feel like I know you, the way your mother goes on. Which is odd since—"

"Since I don't have any idea who you are," you say.

"Barry," he says, standing and crossing to you. He shakes your wet hand. Up close you see he has at least ten years on your mother, handsome, but in a way that'd have to wear you down. He looks like he could march to the sea. "I'm exactly who you think I am."

The two of you talk for a minute and you like him in spite of an evolutionary reticence, that entrenched loyalty to the dead, the ones who never lived long enough to disappoint you. Barry is disarming in that same way Thora is—they are the kind of people who are so transparent, so pleasantly uninterested in pretense, that you can't help but create, and then become enamored with, the little mystery novel you write to fill in the imagined gaps of who

they are. *Oh, you aren't a spy? Are you sure? It's just that, I've fallen in love with you in my mind and you were a spy when it happened—trained in deadly hand-to-hand combat and fluent in all the languages of Eastern Europe. Yes, in my mind. Could you say something in Latvian? Could you put me in a sleeper hold?*

He explains why you found him out of breath. He came over that morning to surprise your mother with a dresser of his, or a chest of drawers. The difference between the two is lost on you. Add bureau to that list, as well. You go outside with him, now that the two of you are acquaintances, and the late morning sun mixes with the breeze and reminds you of the shirt, the shirt you wore to Athena's, the shirt which still sits in the hempy, oily suds in the laundry room basin. You're in blue jeans in your mother's driveway with an older man, staring at furniture. You wish for a second that a stranger would pass by. In the short, round driveway, is Barry's pickup truck, a sensible white. Behind the truck bed, a few yards closer to you, is the chest. You've decided on "chest." And on top of the chest is what Barry calls a bard owl.

"Not that kind of bard," Barry says. "It doesn't play the lute. *Bar-red* owl. Look at the dark stripes."

You stare at it from a safe distance as it preens. It's a zebra of an owl. Cream colored—it looks like winter in the spring. And the bars, dark grey almost black, create shifting patterns when it lifts its head from its armpit—wingpit?—to look at you.

"What do you think he wants?" you ask.

"You're one of those people," he says. "People who assign genders to animals. I bet you think all dogs are boys."

"And all cats are girls. Yes."

“We need to get this inside,” he says. “Your mother, I don’t know, she admires it. More than I have, at any rate. I want her to have it.”

“The owl?”

He slaps you on your naked back for that joke and it can’t possibly hurt because you are staring at an owl together. You remark on its size and Barry tells you the Great Horned Owl is even bigger. It, along with the Snowy and the Barn, are the prototypical owls. Great Horneds are opportunistic hunters, he says. They’ll eat your cat. They’ll eat a Barred Owl.

You imagine one of these thorny birds swooping in to make off with your visitor. You think you’d laugh at the impossible image, the predator’s claws in the skull of its prey, like it was giving the bird a lift home. Would the smaller of the two, the almost meal, open its useless wings and try to fly away? There’s a word for the image in your head. You can’t think of it, so you explain your train of thought to Barry, and he pulls a cigarette from a pack in his breast pocket. He lights it and takes a short drag.

“You’re thinking of a biplane,” he says, and offers you a drag, which you accept. It’s been months, but you take the smoke without thinking deeply about it. Then, you dismiss the breaking of your abstinence as an out of town transgression. What happens in Asheville, et cetera.

The owl doesn’t get carted off to its death. It calls—once Barry points out how the call sounds like “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all?” that is all you hear—and flies off with the kind of flourish that makes you jealous of birds and Prince and Liberace and anyone who has ever been secure enough in their manhood to wear a cape. Barry puts out the cigarette

on his sneaker's sole and puts the butt in his pocket. You follow him to the chest and he grabs it from two ends, rocks it around, making a study of it.

"It's not especially heavy," he says. "It's just the shape. The shape makes it a two-man job."

You nod, and the two of you work out, quickly, a course for getting the chest down the drive and up the steps and into the foyer, after which, you agree, you'll set the chest down and plot how to get it up the stairs and into your mother's room. You can learn a lot about a man from the way he moves a chest: how well he estimates his own strength, his endurance, whether he's a talker, if he prefers to walk forwards and navigate, or walk backwards and put his trust in someone else. Even a single piece of furniture, if moved a good enough distance, has a way of bonding two men.

"Sesquiplane," he says in the foyer. You both breathe heavy, your hands on the chest, his hands on his hips. The cigarette, though essential to the contemplation of owls and furniture, was a bad idea. You make a face. He holds his left hand over his right and folds the fingers of his right hand into a half fist.

"More of a sesquiplane than a biplane, when you think about it."

* * *

You clean sentences. You listen to the Athena sets, yours and the five others you heard, and you dust the grime off the sentences, one at a time. In the same way that editing is easier than writing, sweetening a joke is easier than writing one. But practice is practice. Two different comics, the first of whom was the only woman to do time tonight, used seventeen as their go-to arbitrary number. Your college roommate came home from a psych class once and told you that

seventeen is one of the most commonly reached-for numbers, at least for English speakers. Could be the sound, could be the that it's prime. Either way, knowing that pearl of wisdom killed all the comedy in seventeen for you, and you've sworn it off. Nine is funnier: everything seventeen can do in a throwaway line, nine does better. "Of course I broke up with her—she had nine different hues of precum on her blouse." That's a sweetened line from tonight. No one can tell you that "hues" isn't in the top forty funniest words, and "blouse" is firmly in the top eighty. The comic you're sweetening said "shades" and "shirt." Just lazy. You think on it, and change your mind: "flavors," in this case, would be better than "hues." It's more viscerally evocative, and coming from you, engenders a quick moment of unexpected gay-friendliness that could easily get a seven from most people your age. You affect so little gay energy, on stage or otherwise, that the idea that you've thought enough about the taste of precum to comment on its flavor is a comforting shock because, some lesbians excepted, *everyone* has considered the taste of precum. The formula, for this bit, and for comedy in general, is simple enough to make you sick. Surprise, and recognition. That's it. And the fact that the formula hasn't changed, that there are no improvements to be made, that all the work of Pryor and of Carlin and of Cosby and of Allen is a variation on a theme, arpeggios in increasingly dexterous scales, comforts you. This is the math you do, and it satisfies you more than writing code for Thora to clean up in her sleep. You wonder if that's unfair, if you aren't giving the art of your research its due. The work has an elegance, and beta testing—its fits and starts—it was an open mic, too, wasn't it? You're intellectually promiscuous. That's what it is. Having both is too much, and one isn't enough.

* * *

“You can’t have everything all the time,” Thora says. “I’m a firm believer in having everything, but all at once—” she shrugs with her lips in a way that was more French than Icelandic. “—all at once is untenable.”

The two of you sit in Bo Ellen’s backyard, the afternoon after the blackout. The cloud-filled sky and the humid breeze could convince you that the sweat on your back was only fresh rain. The back porch has a wrought-copper table with four chairs in the same style. Thora sits in the shade of the green umbrella jutting from the center of the table, in a white dress, with sunglasses she doesn’t need pushed up and into her hair. The sun had gone state’s witness.

You mill about Bo Ellen’s garden, stopping to press your thumb against the skin of a still-green tomato, then to ask Thora if these were sugar snap peas you’re plucking.

“Dedicate yourself to a phase,” she says. “You can have this phase, then this phase, then this one. Maybe the phase is a year, two years, or maybe it’s just a holiday.”

“That’s what you call your girlfriends—holidays?”

Thora puts her hand on her forehead and narrows her eyes at you. She scrunches her lips to the right. The gesture is so adolescent. Sometimes, when your mind wanders, you think about where and when she acquired all the tics and inflections that made her a Thora. This gesture was from 1997. Stuttgart, you decide. The way she tucked herself into bed, that was London. That was 1999. Her rare hugs, those were Cincinnati, post-9/11. You thought it must be hard to be so many things to so many people. People tend to fall in love with people like that. An average person meets maybe ten dozen people who could fall in love with them in a lifetime. A beautiful person, or a clever one, probably ruins about two lives every month in this way. Thora’s on pace

to clear a thousand before she turns fifty. You don't even want to think of what will happen when she ages into that self-assured Helen Mirren phase of her life. She'll be a love terrorist.

"Holidays," she says. "Sure, the fleeting ones are holidays. I don't like to define my terms."

"No," you say. "Just mine."

"I'm human: of course it's easier to label you than to label myself."

You tell her she's an academic—that's what she should have said. That being an academic is what makes it easier for her to label you than to label herself. Most people *enjoy* labeling themselves. They just have a knack for getting the label way—the fuck—wrong. And that's your primary malfunction. Everything that brought you to California was a consequence of mislabeling. You want to believe you're too—good? ambitious?—too *something* for this research and this position and those Indian girls and that too-bright limestone school out in the valley.

"I think I know what you want me to tell you," she says.

"No one likes change," you say. "But if nothing changes, how do you ever know when you used to be happy?"

Thora waves her hands and stands up from the chair. "This is getting too lofty," she says. "Wait here. I'm going to make a sandwich."

Minutes pass, during which time you read new text messages from your mother and from Priya IKEA, the undergrad who is doing groundbreaking research in the limits of Lululemon's tensile strength. Your mother bought you some new clothes while she was out—if you could come by this evening to try them on, she would appreciate it. Priya's text, which is worth about a

thousand words, most of them “damn,” prompts you to ply her with some bullshit about how, if you were blind, you would still read her in Braille. It was a stupid thing to say, but you laugh when you type it. It passes the smell test. Patrice O’Neal said you had to always be willing to take the L when talking to a woman, high stakes or low. It is worth it to say the ridiculous thing sometimes, just to remind yourself that it can be said.

Thora comes back with a plate and sits at the table under the green umbrella. She asks you to share her sandwich, which has curried chicken salad, apple slices, and some kind of cheese on it. Fontina, or maybe just provolone. You take a bite and there’s another flavor, sharper, with less crunch than the apple, and acidic.

“What you’re tasting there are ramps,” Thora says. “Bo pickles them.”

Ramps. The name was familiar. Ramps were big on Top Chef—that’s where you’d heard of them before. You continue to chew and the apples and cheese diffuse the spring oniony taste, the vinegary splash on your palate. You take another bite and start to tap your foot. There must be people who don’t dance when they eat, not even in a small imperceptible way, but you don’t ever want to meet them. These are the same kinds of people who reply to group text messages, hate professional athletes for switching teams, or pay for pornography.

“I’ve never tried these before,” you say.

“I didn’t think so,” she says. “I feel like this is the time for me make an analogy between trying new foods and trying new careers. I thought about it while I was making this sandwich.” She takes a bite and tilts her head, miming thoughtfulness. “And then I thought, I should tell you this sandwich has special properties, and once you eat it, it will give you the clarity to know what to do. Like the cookie scene from the Keanu Reeves movie with all the black people in it. And

then I'm putting a thin layer of butter on the toast for this sandwich and I'm thinking, these are the kinds of things I would do for a child, and you aren't a child, you are an adult. You know. There is a trust there. But you're at this point, and because of our relationship, I am in a position to help you. I *see* that I'm in a position to help you."

She goes on for a minute, and you are terrified and relieved to hear that she is firing you as her teaching assistant.

"So you can go and be funny," she says.

That's her first pass. The way Thora says the most direct version of what she intends up front, and then follows it with a softer, more Americanized version, is something that you liked about her from the first. It's a little different when the speech is about you, directed to you, and you sit there and take it, with one great big corner of sandwich pressed between your thumb and index finger, making your hand cramp. You put the food down. Even though you can feel the early, low tides of relief begin to lap at you, the conversation has enough markers of a breakup to pump warmer, fresher sweat into the back and armpits of your shirt. Thora will write you a letter suggesting immediate, indefinite leave from your program. She will find an adequate replacement from the comp-sci department to cover your discussion sections. She will take cabs. She will revert to strapping on her CPAP mask herself. She will remove the plastic and metal cube from within her CPAP machine, fill it with purified and de-ionized water, and re-insert the cube into the machine herself. She will turn off the overhead light in her hotel rooms and leave on the ceiling fan to keep just herself cold. When she leaves Bo Ellen's house, and returns to Merced, she will sleep on her own. She will give you eighteen hundred dollars. Any more and she might resent you when you don't pay her back.

You excuse yourself to the kitchen and come back with a filtered water pitcher and a glass that looks like a little mason jar. The glass has CITY FAIR imprinted on the side and its seal is a weathervane. You fill up the glass and drain it, fill it again, take another sip, and pass it to Thora. She takes a long drink herself, from the same side, and the two of you eat the last corners of your sandwich in relative silence while an impotent sun tries and fails to touch you.

* * *

When you get to your mother's house, you see that she's been crying. It's not a death cry, or even a losing-the-farm cry, but her face is damp, and if she were the type to wear makeup, it would be smeared. You don't know what it is about black women and their crying faces, but it always makes them look like they are on some back of the bus shit when their tears come down. You ask yourself if you're really trying to punch up a line while your mother is hunched on your childhood bed with her face in her hands. You are some kind of dirtbag.

"What's wrong?" you ask, but you know already.

"Nothing," she says, by default.

"Did the two of you have a fight?"

"No," she says. You sit down on her left, on the side of the bed you never slept on. "The fighting part was two, three weeks ago. This was just the—" she moves her hands like she's describing how snow falls.

"Are you hungry?" you ask.

She shakes her head. "There's chicken and rice in the fridge if you want some."

This is too much for you. There is a period in every person's twenties when, if you came up with a good parent or two, you grasp the scope of their selflessness, and it temporarily sickens

you to know that it's impossible to pay it back to them directly. She bought you a bicycle every year from ages five through eleven, and you didn't learn to ride until the fifth grade. What happened to those four wasted bikes? You remember one, a black mountain bike with yellow touches, remember it rusted out in a fenced-in section of the backyard. The endlessly renewable optimism of it all. The patience. It exhausted you, finally, to see her, to think about what she does. It's a sentiment you could turn into a bit if only you were older, if you had children of your own, to inform your voice.

You don't know what to say, and you lie down, realize it's a mistake, and sit back up. You want to ask her if she's tired, or if she wants to be left alone, or to go for a drive in Thora's rented sedan. It's just after sunset, an hour you associate with dinner time ever since your mother went back to work full-time after being widowed. She was there for you, in the morning and at night, but the afternoons were your time to cultivate your own hobbies, your own innocent perversions. And to miss her. You liked the silence, walked around the house with your headphones on, even after she'd come home from work to cook or to eat the Hamburger Helper you left covered on the stove for her. What were you listening to? What was more important than this?

"Who does this fool think he is, anyway?" you ask. Your mother snorts and turns away from you. "Do you want me to beat him up?"

You run out to the hall and grab tissues from the box by the banister. You bring them to your mother and close your eyes, try to close your ears as she blows her nose. You shudder the same way you did as a child, as though every time she acted human was a personal affront. But

you were different now, and told her to wait there, not to move, that you would bring her something to help.

In the kitchen, you fill a Tupperware container with ice and water. You grab clean washcloths from the laundry and press them into the freezing water before carrying the little tub back upstairs.

"Here," you say. "Lie down."

She does what you ask. It all feels like a performance. Other than cards on holidays, or those dinners you made for her after school, you never try to care for her in such concrete ways. The way you cared for her was by being there. Being there, so she could care for you. You press the freezing washcloth into the ice water again and wring it out a bit. You fold it once, dip it again, wring it out again, and place it over her eyes and forehead. One edge of it perches on the tip of her nose. She sucks in a breath, but her face must be hot enough from the crying that she can't help being comforted by it. You are doing something correct.

"Don't forget about the clothes," she says, still under the washcloth. Still acting for your benefit. "And don't beat up Barry. I know you're joking, but he's not a bad person."

"I know," you say.

"You made a good impression on him the other day."

You suck your teeth, and find the Gap shopping bags by the closet on the far side of the bed. Emptying their contents onto the bed, you say what you would have said even if your mother had no sense of your taste in clothes: "Oh, these are beautiful. Thank you, Mom. Really."

She briefly lifts the cool white washcloth from her eyes to give your face the sincerity test. You pass. You take off your shirt and undershirt and try on the best of the shirts from the

bed pile, a blue and gold classic plaid shirt with long sleeves. These are your school colors—the kind of thing a mother keeps in mind when shopping for an only son. Your heart breaks. You will tell her everything about Thora's offer, what she is doing for you, and what you plan to do in your time away from school. Open-ended, that's going to be key. Repeat the phrase "open-ended" and she will understand, won't she? You're determined, but flexible. You're determined to be flexible. You'll tell her tomorrow. Maybe.

You roll up the sleeves on your new shirt and go back to the little tub of ice water, where the alternate washcloth waits.

"Time to switch," you say, taking the now, nearly warm compress from her eyes and plopping it into the ice water. Her eyes aren't so red, their lids not so puffy. You wring out the waiting one, fold it once, and place it back over her eyes. She peeks out at you from under it.

"You thought of everything," she says. "The shirt looks nice. I think it fits."

"You did good," you say. "Scooch over." She grabs the pillow from under her and slides over on to your side of the bed so you can sit beside her.

"How's Dr. Bjornsson?"

"Thora's good." You take the first washcloth, which has now become the alternate, out of the little tub and wring it out. You fold it and press it to your forehead, partly for the feeling and partly to distract yourself from the impulse to check your phone. You tell yourself there would be no point in checking it now—every person you need to focus on is in this room with a cold rag on their head.

"She treating you well?"

“She’s great. She taught me how to drive stick in Tupelo a couple months ago. She’s like a second father. Tell Barry to go kick rocks.”

Your mother laughs.

“You’re bad,” she says. “Taught you to drive stick in Tupelo.”

She buzzes. That’s what you call it. You and your father sucked your teeth to show disapproval. Your mother presses sighs up and against the back of her palate, making a soft buzzing noise. It’s almost meditative.

“Do me a favor,” she says. “The next time you get a chance to go to Mississippi, don’t. Oh, God—”

“What?” you ask. She squirms, but the washcloth is too heavy with symbolic import for her to take it off herself. She takes care of you by letting you take care of her, and you think of macaroni artwork on the freezer door, of cheap jars filled with multicolored sands and covered in glued-on googly eyes, everything with your name written on the underside. And a rushed *I love you*.

“Tupelo Honey. I knew that name was familiar. Barry loves that album.”

“Oh, God,” you say.

Every girl you ever cared about has ruined at least one band for you. You want to tell your mother this, that you relate, that there is a girl you can point to in your senior yearbook who wrought so much fuckery on your heart and mind that you can’t listen to Joy Division or to any band who *sounds* like Joy Division.

Mom, you want to say. *Do you know how many bands sound like Joy Division?*

But here is what you say: “Mom, I’m sorry.”

“I’m like a teenager over this,” she says, reading your mind. “It’s silly.”

“Isn’t it better to just feel it when you feel it? Let it hurt while it hurts. Don’t you think?”

“I’m certainly doing that,” she says.

You are too platitudinous for words. This is, of course, why people write music. Platitudes sound better in 4/4 than they do almost anywhere else. You want to tell her. Just tell her. Tell her that Thora did you a favor, that your mother did you the greatest favor, that you’re going to take a chance on your platitude, that you’re going to follow your platitude, that if you love platitude, let it go, and if it platitudes, it was platitude all along. Wouldn’t she be relieved to focus her attention on your upheavals rather than her own? That’s something you can do for her. More than the coldest, wettest washcloth. You can tell her what cliff you plan to jump off, and show her where to stand so that, when you fall, you can crush into her directly and always, always, spare yourself.

Instead, you repeat the washcloth swap and put a new freezing cold rag over your mother’s eyes and forehead. You lie down next to her, on the side of the bed you never slept on, and do the same. Enough night comes in through the wooden window slats that the difference between keeping the washcloth on and removing it is negligible. Everyone should be so lucky as to be cold, in the dark, with someone who would look for you if you disappeared.

“Here,” you say, and take the phone out of your pocket. You open your archived audio clips and find the Athena sets from the night of the blackout. The clip starts with your set and goes on for another fifty minutes after. There’s a quick burst of sound until you pause the recording and hand your phone to your mother.

“Press anywhere,” you say, and she does. The two of you hear the ambient bar noise, followed by the voice of the local comic who emceed in the dark. He brings you up, with great, unseen ceremony, and you begin audibly playing with the microphone stand, to the audience’s delight. You don’t say anything else, because you’re smiling too hard now, reliving the night in full. Even sweating as if you don’t know *now* what you’re going to say next *then.*

“Is this you now?” your mother asks.

She puts your phone down on her chest, muffling the audio for a second until she flips the phone over so the speaker points up. You did the same thing last night, deciding between whether you wanted to hear the set in your ears or feel it in your chest.

You don’t want to break whatever magic resides in the two of you lying in bed with your eyes covered—you don’t want to, but you lift an edge of your washcloth, the original alternate washcloth, off your nose, just to confirm that she’s still in the dream. That she’s still pretending that *you* are the one who fixes *her*. That she is the baby and that you have some slight clue, just a remote, outside inkling of what you’re doing now, and that you aren’t at a complete loss as to what to do when the light finds its way back into this room. Into this house. When the rags are warm and dry.

“Yes,” you say. “It’s me.”

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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