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## The Boys' Republic

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THE BOYS' REPUBLIC

by

JONAS MUELLER

B.A. University of North Florida, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master in Fine Arts  
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in the College of Arts and Humanities  
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## ABSTRACT

The young men in *The Boys' Republic* live in a world that is continually falling apart. Their houses collapse into sinkholes, forest fires carve out chunks of their towns, plague spreads through their communes, the money runs out on the construction project where they work. This decay mirrors their own collapsing identities, as they are forced to question their mastery of nature, their nostalgia for their youth, their relationships with others, and the value of masculinity itself.

Drawing on the work of writers like Dennis Cooper, Flannery O'Connor, and Benjamin Percy, *The Boys' Republic* depicts men in the midst of both an economic and an emotional recession. Some, like Carson in *Hotel* or Zachary in *Ignus Fatuus*, are trapped in their decaying suburbs by youth, poverty, or habit. Others, like Jared in *Corona Radiata* or Nick in *The Boy's Republic*, have fled or been ejected from them. Either way, they are haunted by them, and by the selfish, insecure, destructive behavior that they learned there. *The Boys' Republic* is about boys confronting their own selfishness, and each other's, in a world that can no longer accommodate it but offers no easy replacement.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Boys' Republic* takes its title from a bonus track on some versions of the Deftones album *White Pony*, an album steeped in the mystique of adolescence, and it is ultimately about that mystique. The protagonists in this collection all dream of their own Boys' Republic, a hidden world of perpetual adolescence that, like the fairy forts of European folklore, could appear anywhere: an abandoned hotel, a dying mall, the freezer in a convenience store. It is an impossible world that I longed for as a teenager, and one that many people, including my protagonists, spend their whole lives pining for.

This collection contains eight stories, bookended by a pair in first person that I consider the most personal in the collection, especially the (almost, barring a change in punctuation) title story. Between these two, we have the stories of boys and men who have become stuck, whether in adolescence or in the harsh realities of a world that has passed them by.

This collection is the product of ten months of labor, and also ten months of discovery. It surprised me on more than one occasion, and required me to think about my work, especially my engagement with the grotesque, in a very conscious way. Perhaps this is the best way to read it: as an examination of the grotesque as it is found in the banalities of hegemonic masculinity, in recession-era America, in the idealism and quivering fear of modern youth.

## THE BOY'S REPUBLIC

Aubrey had wild red hair that he never combed or brushed, and brutally perfect teeth, like pistons. Nowadays, when I'm really drawn to guys, it's something in their eyes, or their slender waist, or their tattoos, but with Aubrey it was those teeth. He had them chemically whitened, so that they didn't look like real teeth, but like porcelain replacements. They glistened in a way that teeth normally don't, even well-kept teeth, and Aubrey took horrible care of his. He drank coffee constantly and smoked so much that his fingers were permanently yellow, but his teeth stayed white.

He started working at the cafeteria of Florida Coast University about a month after I did, and I noticed the teeth right away because of the shit-eating grin he used when greeting customers. His face was flat, expressionless, cold, but when he saw customers he'd glow like the business end of a Taser while he slopped watery mashed potatoes onto their plates. When we finally went on break at the same time, I asked him where he had learned to smile like that.

"Remember the pageant last year?" he asked. "The one in the Coruso Auditorium? It made headlines when that one chick had a breakdown."

"Yeah," I said. "My parents almost sent me to a different school because of her."

"That was my freshman year," he said. "I was working as a stagehand, and I saw these perfect smiles and I . . . took them, I guess."

He flashed his smile; from across the table, it looked predatory.

"So how'd you start working here?" I asked.

"Well," he said, leaning back and playing with his hair like someone in a movie. "It was the weirdest thing. The key to the performing arts building roof went missing, and somehow it ended up on my key ring. Strange world, isn't it?"



He laughed like a child. It was kind of endearing.

I hadn't even introduced myself. I didn't know how to talk to people back then. All through high school, I'd been the withdrawn kid who could have been attractive if he knew how, but I couldn't even bear to try, because someone might notice something different and point it out in a way that drew attention to how I looked before the change. I'd enrolled in college with the promise of a new life, but I hadn't really met anyone except at work, and hadn't really talked to anyone except an elderly black lady who made sure to always have tuna at the salad bar for me. She seemed to think I was some kind of kitten for her to dote on. This conversation with Aubrey was the closest I'd come to making a friend, so I made sure to laugh along.

"I'm Nick," I said. It wasn't really the right moment to say it, but I'd missed that moment already.

Aubrey didn't seem to mind. "I'm Aubrey," he said, and shook my hand—his grip was painfully hard, but left my hand coated in moisture. We talked some more and went back to work.

The end of my shift came an hour later, around the same time that one of the servers called in sick. My supervisor recommended me as a temporary replacement; I'd done it before, and managed to pour ladles of oddly chunky gravy onto dry little steaks without making too much of a mess, which my supervisor said made me "ideal for the job." I wanted to say no, but I didn't know how, so I ended up working next to Aubrey for three hours during the lunch rush. We didn't have time to talk, but when we were done, Aubrey asked if I wanted to join him on the performing arts building roof that night.

"I go up there sometimes," he said. "My roommates and me, we smoke out there. It's nice. Fresh air, no RA's."

“They didn’t make you turn the key back in?”

Aubrey reached into his pocket and pulled out a key ring. He flipped through the keys for a second, then held one up and stared lovingly at it. “Wal-Mart makes copies,” he said.

“Cool,” I said, and it did seem kind of cool.

“So, Nick, you wanna come?” He was mopping the line, a simple task that he stretched out to fill as much time as possible. He could mop a single floor tile for half a minute without looking slow if you weren’t really watching him. I wrapped leftover food for the next day’s brunch.

“Sure,” I said, although I really didn’t. I pictured myself getting caught, taken away in handcuffs, thrown in jail. I pictured my parents having to drive into town to bail me out. I pictured having to transfer to the community college in their hometown. I pictured waking up every morning in my old bed with the polar bear sheets my mother refused to replace even though repeated washings had made them almost rocklike with starch. But then I pictured saying no, and I knew I’d lose him forever, so a couple hours later I met him and his roommates in the courtyard of his dorm building.

There were four people with him: two blocky, tattooed boys with shaved heads, a sullen girl with purple hair, and a dreadlocked kid who looked like a freshman and had a thin little patch of peach fuzz on his upper lip that he must have mistaken for a moustache. At the time, I thought the girl was just someone’s girlfriend, though I would later learn that she was homeless and slept in the dreadlocked kid’s bed. Aubrey sat on a table, with the others in chairs around him. They all smoked cigarettes.

“Hey,” he said.

I'd seen them around. Florida Coast was a fairly "dry" school in every sense of the word, a place where everyone looked pert and clean, and where Aubrey and his friends stood out like green paint on a stop sign. People stared at them and walked in the rain to keep from passing them on the campus's ubiquitous covered walkways. I wasn't afraid of them, but I was afraid of what passing too close to them would say about me. There wasn't anyone else out that night, though.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Nick."

"Travis," one of the tattooed boys said.

"Dan," the other one said. He leaned over to shake my hand. It enveloped mine.

"I'm Nick, too," the dreadlocked kid said. "This is Cassie."

Cassie looked over at me and gave an uncomfortable little wave. Then she stared back at her cigarette.

"You want a cigarette?" Aubrey asked.

"I don't smoke," I said.

"Okay, then," Aubrey said. "We about ready? Sorry if we look lazy; we're usually there by now."

We headed across campus, passing a wandering RA, who glanced at us with too-wide eyes and hurried along. Then we cut through the sculpture garden into the art building. The Other Nick took the lead, holding Cassie's hand. She struggled to keep pace with us.

"So how'd you meet?" Dan asked me.

Aubrey answered. "He's a coworker. We worked the line together today."

"I heard that's really shitty work," Dan said. He had razor bumps on his scalp.

"It's not so bad," I said. "It's easy."

“It sucks, though,” Aubrey said.

We went in on the first floor. The performing arts building was a maze of corridors linked together with no rhyme or reason. Sections had been remodeled and painted white, but we walked through the older section, which still had peeling wallpaper meant to resemble wooden paneling. It reminded me of the tops of folding tables in high school. “There’s only one staircase up,” Aubrey said.

He now walked ahead of the Other Nick, who stuck an unlit cigarette in his mouth, then took it out to kiss his girlfriend. After a second, Cassie realized that she was being kissed, and reciprocated.

The one staircase upstairs was locked, but Aubrey took his keys out, picked out the right one, and unlocked it. Inside, it was dark. I fumbled around for a light switch until Travis grabbed my wrist. “Don’t,” he said. “We’ll get caught.”

He was right—the stairwell had little windows in it, and the light from the street lamps outside slipped in like fog. We climbed two flights, then Aubrey unlocked the door to the outside and we were on the roof. Aubrey had chosen a night with a new moon, when the roof would only be lit by starlight, making us harder to see. The lights from below outlined the edge of the roof, but the rest was unlit except by the night sky. Someone grabbed my hand and led me over the dark expanse to the space between two humming pillars, which probably held some kind of air conditioning unit. I leaned against it, and it vibrated against my back.

Aubrey and his roommates simultaneously lit their cigarettes, and I could see it was Aubrey who’d grabbed my hand. He’d left the same sheen of sweat on it as when he’d shaken it in the cafeteria.

“So what do you do out here?” I asked.

“Hang out, mostly,” the Other Nick said. “We took shrooms up here last week.”

“Dude,” Dan said. “That’s supposed to be a secret.”

“We can trust him,” Aubrey said.

Cassie rubbed her head into the Other Nick’s armpit until she had enough space to get in.

The Other Nick fed her drags from his cigarette.

“And tonight?” I asked.

“We’re testing the acoustics,” Aubrey said. “And UPD’s knowledge of how this building works.”

“With us on top of it?”

Aubrey shrugged. “No other way. But first . . .”

He had a backpack on, a ratty black thing with the names of metal bands written on it in whiteout. I’d seen kids with bags like that in high school, but he was the only one at Florida Coast to still have one. Aubrey rested it in his lap, opened it and took out a bottle of Roswell vodka. It had a crashed UFO on the label, with a grinning alien poking his head out of a hole in the roof and holding up a bottle. He took a swig and handed it to me. “Go ahead,” he said.

I almost couldn’t get it down. I’d had a shot of vodka before, when my mother remarried, but not Roswell, which had a reputation for disintegrating dead rodents if you left them in it overnight. I had to swallow twice, and the burn in my throat reached my sinuses. I doubled over.

“You okay?” Dan asked. He put a hand on my back and I leaned against it, but after a few seconds I pulled myself together and gave him the bottle. He handed it back to Aubrey, who took another swig before passing it back to him.

We went through a round this way, Aubrey taking another swig before each of us. I felt warm and soft, like a stuffed animal version of myself, and I wanted to lean into something soft,

but the air conditioning jarred and rattled my spine. Last time I'd had vodka, I'd been fifteen, and I'd thrown up in the bathroom an hour later. I felt a little off, but I didn't feel sick. Maybe I'd gotten bigger. When the bottle went around again, I took another swig and kept my composure. The others congratulated me and took turns giving me high-fives, except Cassie, who looked half-asleep. A few minutes later, I was flooded with warmth, and when the Other Nick took out a ukulele with a ridiculous pattern of black skulls on it and started strumming, I hummed along with whatever the others were singing, briefly wandering to the edge of the roof to serenade the empty campus.

Aubrey pulled me back. "Dude," he said. "Don't let them see you."

"Who?" I asked, and right then I saw a cop drive by and turn in to the parking garage.

"Don't worry," Aubrey whispered. "He's probably on patrol. Come here, though—he'll have a perfect view of the roof in a minute."

We hid behind the air conditioning unit and waited. I peeked around one corner, the Other Nick around the other. Dan and Travis tried to look like they weren't scared, and Aubrey sat in between them, his eyes darting around. They didn't remind me of a snake's eyes so much as its tongue, darting in and out of the world to sniff the air for predators or food. Cassie curled up in the Other Nick's armpit.

"Here he comes," the Other Nick whispered. The cop drove onto the roof of the parking garage, circled once, and stopped in the middle of the lot. He opened the car door, got out, and lit a cigarette, which he smoked while walking around on the roof of the garage. After a while, he leaned over the edge and gazed at the night sky, which was purple with exhaust fumes. He sighed, put out his cigarette on the railing, and walked back to his car. Then he drove back down the ramp.

“Is he gone?” Dan whispered.

Aubrey said “Yes” before either of us could. He seemed like a completely different person now: narrow-eyed, pale, his hands clenched, his nose sniffing the air, his lips curled in a snarl over his perfect teeth. Then he smiled, and lifted the bottle of Roswell vodka to his lips, and took a swig. We drank and sang until well past midnight, and I felt like I was floating, my body supported by invisible forces that I could lean into and not worry about falling. We stumbled back to his dorm at one in the morning, tripping through the sculpture garden. I puked in a half-finished birdbath. When we arrived, the others went upstairs, and Aubrey smoked a cigarette in the courtyard. I lay down on the smoking table and joined him. Fluorescent bulbs burned through my closed eyelids.

“You know something?” Aubrey said. “You’re an all-right guy.”

“Thanks,” I said. I rolled over on my side, in case I passed out on the table. The tabletop was made of painted wood with deep grooves of graffiti carved into it. After closing my eyes for a few seconds, I opened them and gazed out over a landscape of scratched initials and curse words.

“You wanna crash on my couch?” Aubrey asked.

I’d anticipated stumbling back to my little freshman dormitory. The apartment-like dorms that the upperclassmen lived in were unfathomable to me; I imagined them huge and glowing, like cathedrals.

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks.”

He helped me upstairs to a tiny apartment that seemed even smaller because of the cramped placement of its grimy furniture, and gave me a glass of water, which I gulped down. He gave me another one, said “You seem really thirsty,” and handed it to me. I sipped it and

placed it on the water-ringed coffee table by the couch. He wished me good night and climbed the spiral staircase to the loft where he slept.

I woke up in the middle of the night, sweat soaking my hair. My body shook; at first I thought there was an earthquake. And I was thirsty, so thirsty that I grabbed the glass of water from the table and gulped it down, then rolled off the couch to stumble through the dark to the kitchenette and get another glass. I made it three or four steps before the room started spinning and a chill passed over my face. I made it to the sink, stumbling and leaning against the wall, odd whistling sounds in my ear, and turned on the tap before I fell down. Only I didn't. I was standing in front of the sink, and then I was on the linoleum floor, my eyes closed, a soft warmth in my crotch. The linoleum floor floated in space; if I opened my eyes, I would see galaxies and star clusters floating by in silence. Everything was still, in a way I hadn't experienced in years, since I walked into a sliding glass door at twelve and fell back, unconscious. The sound of the sink, which seemed light-years away, reminded me of the blood rushing from my nose, which reminded me of lying on a towel placed on my mother's lap. She gazed down at me and tried to staunch the flow with a paper towel. Her eyes were full of love; I told her so, and she asked me my name.

I don't know how long I lay there. A minute. Two minutes. Half a century. I expected to wake up wrinkled and atrophied, with a beard that crossed the floor like the train on a wedding dress. I expected to wake up at the end of time.

I came to with my head in Aubrey's lap. He held my head in both hands. "Are you okay?" he asked. "Should I call 911?"



“No,” I said. “I’m fine.” And then I started shaking, and kept shaking for half a minute, my body twitching while Aubrey held his hand in my mouth to keep me from biting my tongue off. When I was done, he took his hand out. Blood dribbled from a pair of bite marks in his palm.

“You need water,” he said. “And salt. I have potassium pills. Gimme a second.”

He laid my head back on the linoleum, poured me a glass of water and handed it to me, along with a pitcher of salt. “Just a couple shakes worth,” he said, and dug through the shelves for potassium pills. He gave me one, and I didn’t feel anything except the vague notion that everything would be all right.

“We probably shouldn’t call a doctor,” Aubrey said. “You’ll be fine, and they don’t need to know that I gave a freshman alcohol.”

“Yeah,” I said. He seemed calm, his face serene and expressionless, and I felt like everything would be all right. He carried me back to the sofa, gave me another glass of water, and stayed with me for half an hour or so. We watched TV on mute—some reality show about modeling. With the sound off, everyone looked like their movements hurt. I fell asleep a minute after he went to the loft.

I woke up in the morning. Light flooded into the room. My head felt like it was too big for my neck. Aubrey was making coffee.

“You made it, I see,” he said. He had that smile on. “You want some coffee?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Cream and sugar?”

“Sugar,” I said.

He gave me coffee and I sipped it. It tasted too sweet, like coffee made for children.

“You scared me last night,” Aubrey said. “You need to learn your limits.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be,” Aubrey said. He gulped down his steaming coffee. If it burned him, he ignored it. “Think about it as, like, a learning experience or something.”

I went back to my dorm around noon, still a little wobbly, the coffee and sugar making my thoughts bouncing cartoonishly in my head. I spent the whole day with alternating currents of sludge and tabasco in my veins, then fell asleep promptly at dusk. The next day, I worked another shift with Aubrey, and he said that he and the roommates were going bowling that night. He asked me if I wanted to come, and when I agreed, he told me he’d call me after work. I spent the whole evening waiting for his call. At eight, I tried calling him, left a voicemail, tried again at ten. I got a call back at midnight.

“Hey man, sorry I didn’t get your call.”

“We still going bowling?”

“Just got back, actually.”

“Weren’t you gonna call me?” I was pacing around the room—all evening something had clawed at me from the inside. I thought of how a cigarette would take the edge off things.

“Oh, yeah.” Aubrey sounded genuinely confused. “Oh my god, I totally forgot. I had it in my head that you didn’t want to go. To be honest, I’m kind of surprised you did. Doesn’t seem like your kind of thing.”

“You’re right, but I was looking forward to hanging out, and ...”

“I dunno. But look, I’m sorry, okay. You wanna come by tomorrow? Nick . . . umm . . . the Other Nick got hold of this really terrible Italian film called *Bloody Pool of Fear* or something. We’re gonna get drunk and watch it.”

“Sure,” I said. “Though I’m not sure about getting drunk again.”

“You just gotta learn your limits,” Aubrey said. He had a way of grinning in slow motion, like the Grinch hatching a plan.

I showed up at his place the next evening, a few minutes early and not too sure that the wrinkled polo shirt I’d worn was the right choice for impressing him. I wondered if I should have brought anything along as a gift, then remembered that I couldn’t buy alcohol and didn’t know anyone who sold pot, unless one of Aubrey’s roommates did.

They were all gathered around the table in the courtyard again, smoking cigarettes while Dan strummed a guitar and the Other Nick sang something in a foreign language. Cassie wasn’t with them.

Travis nodded when he saw me, and Aubrey got up and gave me a hug. “Sup?” he said. “Sorry about last night, by the way.”

“It’s cool,” I said. “And I’m not doing much. Got class tomorrow.”

“Anything due?”

“No.”

Aubrey shrugged. “Skip it. We got two bottles of Roswell. Try not to die again.”

The others snickered, except for Dan, who was caught up with his guitar.

“They know?” I asked. I felt a burst of shame, but then everyone said hello to me. The Other Nick called me Pukey, but it sounded like a nickname, not an insult, and at nineteen I’d never been worthy of a nickname before. I bummed a cigarette off Travis and instantly felt better—the predatory feeling that had been chasing me all day and the day before slinked away. The movie was awful—Dan had watched it the night before—so everyone took a shot before even beginning. *Bloody Pool of Fear* starred a badly dubbed Mexican wrestler in the role of a dapper and oddly sweaty Italian millionaire who moonlighted as a serial killer, and who invited

rich socialites to his house so that he could torture them to death. By the time the film began, he'd killed dozens without anyone suspecting a thing, despite the fact that they all died at his mansion during exclusive parties. Aubrey promised me at the end of the movie's opening credits that he'd cut me off if he thought I was too drunk, but he never did. By the time the movie ended, I couldn't stop laughing. Then I threw up a little in my shot glass and ran to the porch to puke over the railing.

Aubrey followed me out and grabbed my arms. For a moment, he held me while I retched, then pulled me back inside. "Dude," he said. "There's RAs here. They'll see you." I bounced against the wall, then against the Other Nick. "Hey," I said. "Where's Cassie?" I'd been wondering about it all night, but hadn't really thought to ask until then. I still don't know why. The Other Nick shrugged and glared at me.

"Aubrey," he said. "Can I talk to you a minute? After you get Pukey somewhere he can sleep it off."

"Sure," Aubrey said. He led me up the spiral staircase to the loft where he and Travis slept. The stairwell was so narrow and tightly wound that it looked like a staircase for a doll. Aubrey let me fall on his bed, rolled me over on my side, and promised to come back with a glass of water. He ran downstairs, his feet clanging on the metal steps. I wondered if I'd been that loud.

The loft was cramped; the ceiling loomed barely four feet over me as I lay on his bed, and a pirate flag covered the skylight. The walls were covered with posters for various metal bands. All the men in the bands were covered in tattoos, and their faces shot through with piercings. Inverted pentagrams and demonic faces surrounded me, made me think of how far

away I was from my family. College suddenly seemed like the grand vacation I'd imagined it being. I felt like I'd been kidnapped by goblins.

Aubrey didn't come back for half an hour, and when he did, he didn't have a glass of water.

"You awake?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"I was talking to the Other Nick, and . . . look, can we walk and talk? I've got a full pack of cigs."

He led me downstairs. Dan and Travis were playing video games. The Other Nick sat on a stool in the kitchenette, looking over the counter at them. He glanced at me, and his brow furrowed. Aubrey and I headed out the door.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked.

"The Other Nick?"

"Yeah."

We climbed down the stairs. I was amazed at how sober I felt after just lying around for a while.

"He's a little bitch," Aubrey said. "That's what's wrong with him. He was getting all pissy at me about having you over tonight."

"Why?"

Aubrey stopped in the courtyard, stuck two cigarettes in his mouth, and lit both of them before handing me one. I inhaled; it tasted stale, like it had been lying around in the sun all day.

"I don't know. Probably the whole alcohol thing."

"Sorry," I said. "I thought you were gonna stop me."

“Why?”

“You said so.”

“You sure? I can’t remember. Must have been drunk.” He laughed and then had a coughing fit. After every cough, his teeth slammed together with a sound like the tomato slicer in the cafeteria kitchen.

We walked away from the dorms and talked more about the Other Nick, about Dan and Travis, about Cassie, who’d locked herself in the bathroom that afternoon and supposedly threatened to call the RAs and report that Aubrey and his roommates were letting her stay there. Aubrey, I found out, hated her, called her the Bored Girlfriend.

“There’s one with any group of guys, and she’s always bored, and it’s because she’s not really interested in anything but being seen with boys.”

The truth is, though, he hated all of them. Travis was a bore. Dan was an idiot. The Other Nick was crazy. I didn’t really know—they seemed all right to me, but Aubrey was so sure of it. He smoked cigarette after cigarette, smoke fuming out his nostrils, and I tried to keep up, but had to stop after three cigarettes because my throat was so dry it felt like it might split open. We passed a vending machine on the way to the art building, and I put a dollar in to get a soda. That’s when he first kissed me.

It wasn’t romantic. It wasn’t even competent. I put a dollar in the machine, and it spat it back out, so I put it back in, and then he slid his hands in my front pockets and tried to kiss me on the neck, but missed and put his lips to my polo instead. I didn’t know how to react, so when the soda machine spat my dollar out again I fed it back in before asking him how he knew.

“I didn’t,” he said. “I . . . I don’t know. I felt so uncomfortable, dancing around the issue.”

“What issue?”

“You.”

I turned to look over my shoulder at him. His saliva had left an imprint of his perfect teeth on my shirt. “It’s okay,” I said. “I . . . I was scared, too.”

“Why?”

“I’m a virgin,” I said. The word suddenly gained new meaning: unicorns bowing their heads before maidens, swans and showers of gold descending from the sky.

“Cool,” Aubrey said. He smiled for a second, tilting his face away in theatrical anxiety, and suggested we go to the roof. Most buildings on campus were open 24/7, so we went inside and he led me through the maze to the stairwell. He kissed me again on the second floor landing, slowly this time, his hands in my hair. I tried to run my hands through his tangled hair, but he pulled away and led me to the remaining flights of stairs.

Upstairs, a sliver of moon floated above us, a sliver that made me think of collarbones. We kissed again, Aubrey's lips wet and his tongue busy inside my mouth. Then he put an arm around my shoulder and sat on the floor with me. I leaned into his armpit, the way I'd seen Cassie doing.

"You're a good kisser," he said.

"You too," I lied. The skin around my lips was coated in spittle.

"Thanks," Aubrey said. He played with his hair. "Felt a little . . . out of control, though."

"How so?" In the distance, we could hear the color guard drilling. Their voices were like the roaring of bulls.

Aubrey shrugged. "It's different with a guy," he said. "Like, I feel like it changes me."

He didn't look any different. He looked as cool and flat as ever, his eyes half-closed, his shoulders slumped forward like a starving model's. We stayed there, and talked, and decided to wait a while before we tried anything. Then, on the way down, he kissed me again in the stairwell. This time I pushed him away.

"I thought you wanted to wait," I said.

He shrugged. "I did. I waited till the second floor, didn't I?"

And then I reached over and took his hand in mine, and we stood at the top of the last flight of stairs, and for a moment I had the faint notion that we were about to begin some kind of adventure. I pictured us, ambiguously gendered figures with frail bodies and impossibly wide eyes, heading downstairs to be torn apart in a blaze of glory by tentacled monsters. I didn't tell him any of this; it made me feel stupid.

Aubrey got a text from Dan saying that they'd gone to get food, and we went back to his empty dorm.

I stumbled at the top of the stairs, still a little tipsy, though I'd sobered up a lot in Aubrey's bed. This time, I noticed the terrarium under his bed, the bearded dragon that lay inside, warming its belly on a rock while a bug crawled on its head.

"That's Alice," Aubrey said. "She's, like, the love of my life."

"Why's she not eating that bug?" I asked.

"She will," Aubrey said. "Just gotta wait for her to get hungry again."

He sat down on the chair in front of his computer, so I sat at Dan's desk. Then he put on some music and jumped onto his own bed. He took a pack of rolling papers and a baggie of marijuana out of a drawer in his nightstand and started rolling a joint. I went and sat down at the



foot of the bed. He kicked off his sneakers; I did the same. He licked the joint, sealing it, and lit it.

"You ever smoked before?"

"Pot?" I asked. I'd never even been around it before. I was surprised by how it smelled, like something at once rotten and delicious.

"Yeah," he said. He sucked on the joint and held it out to me while holding the smoke in his lungs. I stared at it; I probably looked stupid.

"I think I'm pretty fucked up already," I said. "Maybe some other time."

He let the smoke out in a series of rings, said "You sure?" and took another hit.

"Yeah," I said. "Thanks, though."

The door opened downstairs, and Aubrey shoved me off the bed with his foot.

"Hey, guys," he called out. "I got a joint going up here, if you want in on it."

Everyone climbed the stairs, their feet making a racket on the metal steps. The Other Nick held two bags of tacos in his hands. Cassie was with them.

"Hey, Cassie," Aubrey said, and offered her the joint. She took it, hit it, and leaned against the Other Nick before exhaling into his mouth. Then she passed it to the Other Nick, who hit it and asked Aubrey "Is your boyfriend having any?"

Aubrey laughed. "Pukey here? Nah."

"Good," he said. "The courtyard fucking reeks."

"Sorry," I said.

"You need to learn your limits," He said.

Again I said, "Sorry."

I walked back to my apartment at dawn, slept through my classes, woke up at dusk, and walked a mile to the nearest gas station to get cigarettes. The first cold front of the year had hit while I slept, and I'd left the apartment in shorts and a T-shirt, so I was numb and shaking by the time I arrived. I could barely get my ID out of my wallet. I bought a pack of cigarettes and a cup of hot coffee to warm my hands.

Aubrey drove by when I was halfway back. It was fully night by then, and the humid Florida cold soaked through my skin and straight to my guts. My lungs burned as if I'd been running, and the heat of the coffee only warmed my hands and, when I took a sip, my face. Aubrey's Camaro was a bright blur, and Aubrey drove with one hand on the wheel and the driver's seat tilted almost back. He slammed on the brakes right next to me, rolled down the window and grinned.

At first, before I knew whose car it was, I thought maybe someone had stopped to kidnap me. I imagined fighting them off, running, being whisked away to safety by the cold wind. He leaned out the passenger window, which was easy since he wasn't wearing a seatbelt. "Hey," he said. "You want a ride?"

I got in without saying anything. He had the heat on so high that I had to lean away from the vents.

"Thanks," I said.

He shrugged. "No problem," he said. By now, he'd started driving, and we were close to his apartment.

"I was thinking," he said. "We could stop by my place. The Other Nick has this old winter coat that I think would fit you, if you don't have one."

"Would he be cool with that?" I asked.

Aubrey laughed. "Not if he knew about it."

"But he'll see it," I said.

"Why would he?" Aubrey said. "We're not hanging out with him tonight."

We went to his apartment, which was empty. As soon as he closed the door, we kissed, and this time his lips seemed almost too controlled, like he'd planned every breath, charted the position of every drop of saliva in advance. He handed me one of The Other Nick's coats, one with the name and logo of a metal band on the back and elbows. I'd actually stolen one of their albums once, as a kid. It disappeared after my parents did a monthly room inspection.

"I wanted you to see something," he said. "Out on the nature trails."

Our campus was built on a nature preserve, which was shot through with trails and boardwalks. After we'd warmed up, Aubrey led me a quarter mile down a trail before we turned onto a narrow service road with no discernible tire tracks from maintenance carts. "That means they don't come here often," he said, and when I asked him why, he grabbed my wrist and led me a few more feet down the service road before turning left into the undergrowth.

I followed him through a thick growth of pine trees and ferns until we came to a clearing dominated by an old sinkhole. Murky water pooled in the middle, and dead, waterlogged plants jutted out from it. Around the perimeter, wilted marijuana plants grew at odd angles from the tilted ground. They were tied to long wooden stakes, which stabilized them.

The smell took a while to hit me, during which I stared at the sunken landscape and Aubrey said, "Well, there it is."

"Is it yours?" I asked.

He laughed. I could hear his teeth slam together. "It is now. I found it, like, a month ago. Pretty much dead. Whoever planted it bailed."

The plants were still half-dead. Some were all dead, shriveled and torn, others had live leaves on top of dead stalks. A few, close but not too close to the center, were still alive.

"So you grow your own pot?" I asked.

"It's not that good," Aubrey said. He lit a cigarette and I reflexively did the same. "I've been selling little bits of it to this new kid, though."

"At work?"

"Yeah," Aubrey said. He wandered through his stalks, fingering leaves, then turned around and kissed me on the cheek. "He's dumb enough to actually buy it, so why not?"

"Cause he's an idiot," I said. "He blurts out the most private stuff. Like, a couple weeks before you came, he got one of the bakers fired by talking about her . . . being with a subordinate."

"I wouldn't worry too much," Aubrey said. "I know how to handle myself."

We went back to his place. Along the way, he held my hand, hurriedly pulling it away when a jogger ran down the path. We came back to his dorm, and he started making out with me in a way he hadn't before. At one point, he pulled back the neck of my T-shirt and bit me, hard, in the flesh around my shoulders. I bit him on the base of the neck and sucked hard, the way I'd read about in a sex advice column. He moaned and sucked air in through his teeth, and we moved deeper into the kitchenette.

"You are so *adorable*," he said, and for a minute the way he said it scared me. It sounded like the kind of thing you say to a hamster before you lock it in a tiny plastic cage for the rest of its life.

We went upstairs. He leaned against the bed, and I leaned into him, my body moving of its own accord, shaking with fear. I glanced around, afraid to close my eyes, afraid to look into

his. At one point, I glanced at the bearded dragon, which stared back at me, flicking its tongue in and out. There weren't any crickets left in its terrarium.

"I love you," I whispered, too quietly for him to hear. I knew I didn't mean it. I just meant that I wanted to be able to say it to someone like him, someone whose teeth glistened like porcelain and who could use a smile as a weapon, someone who grew pot and owned a bearded dragon and who could listen to music that I'd been warned against for so long that it scared me to listen to it. Someone whose back I now had pressed against the side of his bed. In my hunger I mouthed it over and over, gnawed it gently into the lobe of his pierced ear. I didn't hear the door open, or the pounding of booted feet on the stairs. I didn't understand why he suddenly shoved me away, and why when I looked at him his face was cold and predatory, the way it had been when the cop almost caught us on the roof.

"You were right," Aubrey said. He wasn't looking at me. "He wanted me."

I stepped away from Aubrey, who I assumed was trying to look just as awkwardly calm and collected, then glanced back at him to find him still leaning against the side of the bed, his face glaring at me like an enraged Halloween mask. The Other Nick stood at the top of the spiral stair and grinned. "Looks a little more complicated than that," the Other Nick said.

"Well yeah," Aubrey said. "It got a little complicated, didn't it?"

He glared at me—I didn't know anyone could glare like that. And then he winked, as if it were all a game.

"But that's his fault," he continued. It seemed so unrehearsed, so natural, him standing with one elbow on the bed and the other gesturing towards me, grinning as if he were addressing a particularly stupid argument by a particularly stupid politician on a TV talk show. I believed him. "I tried to tell him we were just friends, but it's like he won't get it. Or won't accept it."

"But . . . but . . ." I couldn't get it out. It wasn't that I couldn't admit what I'd done, but I couldn't attach it to him. I imagined the word as a kind of viscous substance that clung to my body, like the feeling of unwashed hair in the morning. I couldn't imagine it coating him, or him feeling it.

"But what?" Aubrey asked. "Just because I feel sorry for your dorky little ass doesn't mean I want to bone you. And even if I did, you can't just pull people on top of you like that. There are fucking rules, Nick."

I turned away from him, afraid I might cry but knowing that I wouldn't. My head was full of a noise like the buzzing of crickets, and although Aubrey kept talking and the Other Nick added a few choice words, I couldn't hear them. I shoved the Other Nick out of the way and ran down the stairwell. I almost made it to the bottom step, then tripped and fell face-first onto the carpet. My forehead ground into it, and my scalp burned, but I didn't stop to look at it. I got up and limped out the door, out of the courtyard, and back to my tiny room in the freshman dorms.

They avoided me after that. I would see them, and sometimes talk to one of them, but they never invited me over, and they often left for class shortly after running into me. Aubrey, though, never talked to me at all. He ignored me at work, convinced my supervisor to stop sending me to the line, glared at me whenever I passed by him on my way to restock the salad bar. After a couple weeks, he quit without a word. He tore off his apron, shoved it into the chicken a la king, and walked out the back door. I only saw him once after that, at a distance, and he crossed the campus green to avoid me.

One night, when the abrasions on my forehead started to slough off and reveal pink new skin underneath, I took a walk to the art building. I tried the door to the stairwell that went to the roof and found it locked, so I walked back outside and made my way up the stairs of the parking

garage. On the second-to-last floor I left the stairs and climbed the ramp that cars took to the roof.

It was a cloudless night, the kind when I could actually see stars despite the glow of the city. I had a clear view of the roof of the performance art building, empty, and for a while I wondered if maybe they were hiding from me, behind the air conditioning, breathing heavily, Aubrey's eyes wide with carnivorous fear. Then I heard the sound of an engine behind me. A cop car pulled up, and parked in the middle of the parking lot, and the same cop that I'd seen earlier got out.

"You need help with anything?" he called out. He probably thought I was planning to jump.

"I'm good," I said. "Thanks. Just admiring the view."

"It sure is a pretty night," he said.

He was right. The moon seemed paler, as if artificially whitened, and the air pollution gave the horizon a purple halo that shifted to a deep plum and then the starlit blue-black of the open sky. In the distance, the highway hummed.

"Yeah," I said. "It is."

"I'm surprised no one's out on the roof of that building," the cop said.

I faced the roof and leaned over the railing, afraid he'd see me blush and then turn pale.

"You can get up there?" I asked. I wondered if he noticed me stuttering.

"Some people can," the cop said. "I see them sometimes, on nights like this."

"Do you arrest them?" I asked.

“Nah.” He smoked his cigarette. “Those kids not worth the effort. There’s a half dozen of them. That’s four hours of paperwork, and then I gotta get my supervisor in. Waste of time, I think. Gotta pick your battles, you know?”

“I guess,” I said.



## BLISS

A month before leaving for Boston, Galen and Christian went to see the circus exhibit at the San Bibiana Museum of Modern Art. Its highlight was a scale model of a Gilded Age circus, with tiny performers and spectators in an assortment of tents, wagons, and booths. The exhibit was in a gigantic glass box, and Galen and Christian circled around it on a walkway with a rubber floor that stuck to their sneakers. As they circled, they paused to read little signs that explained parts of the scene frozen and shrunken down before them. The lights periodically brightened and dimmed, signaling the start and end of numerous days.

“I love this,” Christian said. He was staring at a group of little jugglers who rode unicycles in an endless circle amid a crowd of expressionless children.

“It’s kind of cute,” Galen said. “I like how the crowd is showing no enthusiasm whatsoever.”

“Well,” Christian said. “They must be a tough crowd. Juggling’s awesome.”

“It’s . . . okay,” Galen said. “Maybe. If you’re eight years old and stupid.”

They’d been dating for over two years now, and living together for almost six months, and Galen had begun to lose patience with Christian’s excitability and refusal to think critically. He thought of Christian as a person with embarrassingly low standards, and worried about what would happen to him if they broke up.

“Did I tell you I used to juggle?” Christian said.

“Really?”

“Back in high school.”

“It’s okay,” Galen said. “We all do stupid things in high school.”

He liked the word *stupid*, the width of its sideswipe, its finality.

“It was actually a lot of fun,” Christian said. “You shouldn’t be so cynical.”

“I’m not being cynical,” Galen said. “Don’t be so defensive.”

They walked around the tiny circus, Christian noting details that Galen mocked. Galen didn’t feel especially clever for pointing out that the proportions on the models were all wrong, or that the horses looked misshapen, or that the miniature clowns looked warped and inhuman, but he felt clever enough, and afraid that someone else at the exhibit might think he was impressed, so he mentioned these things anyway.

“This is my favorite part,” Galen said, the second time they passed the sideshow. Garish little signs advertised the Leopard Woman, the Siamese Triplets, the Man Made of Stone. “I like how they made the figures.”

“I wonder if little kids ever pretended to be these people,” Christian said. He had recently been laid off from his job at a daycare center. “Like they do with superheroes today.”

“I don’t think these freaks were much like superheroes.”

“Kind of, I mean, in a way.” Christian hunched in for a closer look. The Siamese Triplets stood on the stage, their arms outstretched like sun-worshipping priests, cartoonish grins on their faces. “I mean, isn’t a big part of the superheroes’ appeal the fact that they aren’t like other people? That they’re outcasts, weirdoes, freaks?”

“But superheroes are powerful,” Galen said. “They’re heroes. They’re super. These guys, these guys are . . . weird.”

“I guess so,” Christian said. “But I still think they’re cool.”

“You think that about a lot of things.”

\*

Galen had met Christian while working as the graveyard shift cashier at a convenience store. Christian came in one lonely night to buy a pack of cigarettes, then abruptly decided mid-purchase to quit smoking.

“I shouldn’t be buying these,” Christian had said. Galen made eye contact with the photo on Christian’s driver’s license: Blue eyes, greenish-blue hair, nothing like the mousy young thing that now stood in front of him.

“Neither should I,” Galen said. He’d gotten used to customers making stupid jokes, especially in the awkward silence of the convenience store at night. Galen always turned off the piped-in Top 40 music after his supervisor went home. On some nights, he could hear the syrup moving inside the soda machines.

“No,” Christian said. “I really need to stop. Like, I work with kids and shit.”

“Really? What do you do?”

“I work at a daycare center. Mostly manual labor and glorified babysitting.”

“You need a degree for that?”

“No. I mean, I have one, but you don’t really need anything, long as you can pass a background check. Here, you can take these back. Can I have my ID?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. I’ll . . . I’ll see you around.”

Galen wasn’t attracted to him. He found Christian nervous, twitchy, with boring hair and a T-shirt one size too big for his small frame. He could tell, though, that Christian was into him. The way Christian walked away, like someone debating in his head whether or not to play a midway game he’d just passed by, told him everything. So he wasn’t too surprised when, half an hour later, the day care worker came back.

Galen assumed he'd given up and come for Galen's number, a pack of cigarettes, or both. He didn't want to be rude, at least not during his 90-day probationary period, so he resisted the urge to wave a pack in Christian's face. Christian turned away from the register and stared at the magazine rack before turning to the automotive supplies.

"Can you put some music on?" Christian asked.

"Huh?"

"Some music. Talk radio. Something."

Galen shrugged. "Sorry, man. Manager's orders."

"No," Christian said. "Really. I need some music or something or I'm gonna . . ."

Galen realized he was supposed to do something, but he didn't know what.

"Sorry," Christian said. "I'm . . . really weird tonight. Like, I've had cravings before, but not like where I knew it was gonna last forever."

"It doesn't last forever," Galen said.

"You've quit, too?"

"Yeah," Galen said. "It got too expensive."

"What was it like?"

Galen didn't know whether he was supposed to discuss this with a customer. It seemed like bad business to help someone quit smoking, and he wondered for a while whether he could get in trouble. Christian was staring at him, though, so he realized he had to say something. "It kinda sucked."

"Yeah," Christian said. He kept scratching his head. "I mean, I'm only half an hour in, and I'm already losing it."

"The first couple days are the worst."

“Yeah. How’d you do it?”

“Honestly?” Galen hadn’t really done anything special, but he understood that the situation needed him to list something special. “I kept busy, went out, met people.”

“So,” Christian said. “I’m on the right track, I think. I mean, I met you.”

Christian bought a pack of potato chips and a cup of coffee, then consumed them in the store while Galen cleaned the slush machines. He left a little dot of crumbs on the floor, which Galen had mopped before Christian arrived. Galen couldn’t stop staring at it.

“Sorry for sticking around,” Christian said. “Am I loitering?”

“It’s fine.” Galen found Christian’s presence annoying, but didn’t feel like sending him back outside.

“You got any music?”

“No,” Galen said.

“I’ll be back.”

Christian ran out of the store and appeared again, breathless and sweating, a few minutes later. He held a little plastic radio that looked like it came from a toy store. They listened to talk radio and talked about nothing between customers, and then Christian showed Galen how to make origami paper boats. Compared to Christian and his twitching, lurching mess of a mind, he felt calm and composed and saintly in a way he hadn’t felt since he got his college degree. Then, when Christian left, Galen felt the halogen lights flood him, body and soul, and wanted to curl up behind the counter and weep. Instead he took some receipt paper and made a boat, and another, and another one, and realized that he’d had a fairly good night.

Christian came again the next night, and the next. At first it bothered Galen a little, but he enjoyed the attention. Galen’s friends had all long since moved out of town or fathered children

that dominated their lives, and Christian had never really been at home in San Bibiana. He told Galen that on an almost nightly basis, until Galen gave up and offered him dinner.

Christian's favorite joke was "What does a lesbian bring on a second date?" the answer to which was "A U-Haul." Galen always responded with "What does a gay man bring on a second date?" the answer to which was "What second date?"

When they moved in together, something Galen suggested after his roommate moved out and he realized that he didn't know anyone else, Christian started referring to them as lesbians. Their first fight as a cohabiting couple happened when Galen didn't think it was funny anymore.

\*

Galen hadn't wanted to go to Boston in the first place, but Christian wouldn't stop talking about how much he missed the city where he'd grown up, how much he wanted to go back, how important it was to him that Galen see where he'd come from, until eventually Galen felt he had no choice but to indulge him.

He'd surprised Christian with the plane tickets on the day after one of their biggest fights. They quarreled often, usually over Christian's spending and habit of clumsily breaking things or Galen's cheapness and what Christian called his arrogance. The night before Galen bought the tickets, they had fought over Christian spending money on a series of little plastic cephalopods that could stack on top of one another. Several of them were identical, which was what had finally driven Galen over the edge. Overwhelmed with anger, Galen had broken a lamp and screamed at the ceiling, and they watched TV in separate rooms until bed.

That night, they lay in bed together on their tiny air mattress, Galen face-up with Christian wrapped around him. The alarm clocks on their nightstands cast a dull red glow over their faces.

“Galen?” Christian whispered.

“Christian?”

“Have you ever been on a bus? One between cities, I mean.”

“No.”

“I want to take you on one.”

“Why?”

“It’s . . . it’s such a weird experience. Like, with a plane, you’re kind of crammed into a corner, and you can’t even think straight, and even in the dark it’s just a migraine waiting to happen, and during the day there’s nothing to do but look at clouds, but on a bus, there’s a kind of weird peace to things. Like . . .”

They lay in silence for a while. Galen looked at the clock. “It’s getting late, Christian.”

“We don’t have anywhere to be tomorrow.”

“But we gotta keep good habits.”

“Not now,” Christian said. “We can worry about that in the morning.”

“Hey,” Galen whispered. “It’s a red-eye flight, so you can stay up as late as you want on the plane.”

“But that’s in a month,” Christian whispered. “I don’t want to wait that long.”

He dug his face into Galen’s arm.

\*

As they got out of the plane and onto the jet bridge, Galen felt cold air seeping in from outside, and realized what Christian had told him while they packed: the thin leather jacket he’d brought along wasn’t going to be enough, that an early cold front was moving in, that a vicious

and unnaturally early cold front was about to strike New England in mid-October, and he should bring a coat. He didn't say anything, but crossed his arms and shivered.

"You okay?" Christian asked.

"Yeah," Galen said. "Just a little cold."

"Me, too," Christian said, although he didn't show it. "It usually doesn't get like this until December."

Galen followed Christian through the empty airport and underground, where they got on a bus so long that it had a flexible rubber portion in the middle to enable it to make turns. Galen was afraid it would snap in half, but all the seats in the front were taken, so he sat next to Christian, holding his hand, and stared anxiously at the rubber, looking for rips, cuts, tears. By the time they arrived at their stop, Christian had to nudge him to get him to notice. Galen followed him out of the bus and into the frozen air of a street lined with old brick houses.

"I was awake, you know," Galen said. "You didn't need to nudge me."

Christian didn't seem to hear him. "I've missed this," he said.

"You miss what?"

"All these old houses," Christian said. "I don't think we have anything this old in San Bibiana. I don't think we have anything this old in Florida."

"They're pretty," Galen admitted. Christian was leading him by the hand to a subway entrance that glowed with what Galen thought of as malicious light. Then Christian stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and pointed at an especially old and overgrown house.

"The family that owned that house," Christian said. "The women were all hermits. After their husbands and brothers died, they spent twenty years in that house. A servant brought them food, and they wandered around their rooms until they died. When the last one went, my parents



took me to the estate sale. It was weird, walking through all those empty rooms where those old ladies paced back and forth, waiting to die. They collected those mail order plates that come out whenever some famous person dies or gets elected. They had all these salt and pepper shakers, too. Like, hundreds. My mom bought a pair shaped like little penguins. ”

“What’re you getting at?”

“Nothing.” Christian shrugged. “We should get going. Sorry.”

\*

Galen hadn’t been able to sleep on the flight or during their layover in Memphis, and halfway to the hotel, exhaustion caught up with him. By the time they arrived, he could barely speak to the boy at the front desk. Christian helped him fill out their paperwork.

Their room for the next five days was a cramped, dust-colored cube with an unusually large bathroom and a mini-fridge full of “luxury” bottled water and cheap beer. The bed was so large compared to their mattress at home that Galen felt intimidated by it, but was so exhausted that he collapsed on it anyway and immediately fell asleep.

Christian shook him awake an hour later.

“Hey, baby,” he kept whispering.

“What?”

“I’m going out to get some food. There’s this really nice little falafel place near here that’s open all night, and I’ve been craving it since I got on the plane.”

“Can’t you wait till morning?”

“I would,” Christian said. “But I’m, like, crazy hungry right now, and I need something in me fast.”

Galen sat up. “You sure you’re gonna be safe?”

“You can come along,” Christian said. “That’s why I woke you. Are you hungry?”

“No,” Galen said. “You got your keycard?”

“I was hoping you’d come with me,” Christian said, and Galen heard something moving under those words, so he dragged himself out of bed, still wearing what he’d worn when they arrived.

The falafel place, it turned out, was two miles away, and they walked through a frozen city. Everywhere Galen looked, light from open restaurants soaked the streets, as if they’d all been left on after closing, but when he looked in their windows he saw customers and wondered if they were like the people on television who spent their entire lives in bars and restaurants, never leaving for work, never going home, never getting sick. Was this where they all lived, the television people? He thought about it for a few moments, then realized that Christian was getting too far ahead of him and ran to catch up.

\*

Late the next morning, they went to the aquarium. It was a bitterly cold day, and Galen shook when they left the subway and walked into the crowded streets. Enormous buildings towered around them, looming in all directions. Galen had never seen buildings this large outside of movies before, and he felt tiny, helpless, almost suffocated by their mass. He tried not to look up, and focused on the people around him, some of whom shivered their light jackets in the unseasonable cold.

Christian clung to him and grabbed his hands. “You’re freezing,” he said. “I mean, you’re absolutely freezing.”

“I’ll be fine,” Galen said, sputtering out every word.

“I know a place we can get you a real jacket later on,” Christian said. “I checked this morning, and it’s supposed to freeze tonight. It might even snow later in the week.”

“Shit,” Galen said.

“Don’t worry,” Christian said. “It’s really pretty and a lot of fun, at least when you don’t have to shovel it or drive in it.”

The ground floor of the aquarium was a balcony overlooking a pool full of penguins. Christian kept looking over at them, taking pictures and pointing out everything that the little blue penguins did. The only time he paid attention to any of the other animals was when Galen showed him the cuttlefish, which changed color and shape to threaten Galen’s crabbed hand.

“Are you sure it’s good to scare them like that?” Christian asked. “They look upset.”

“It probably happens all the time.”

“Well, I wish you’d stop doing it. It’s kind of rude.”

“Rude?”

“Leave the squid alone and look at the penguins with me. They’re about to get fed.”

Galen sighed. “Cuttlefish.”

“Come on.”

“Look.” Galen momentarily considered throwing Christian into the penguin pool. “Why don’t you check out the penguins? I want to look at the jellyfish for a while.”

The jellyfish floated in a series of bulbous fish tanks built into the aquarium walls. They moved slowly, mindlessly flailing their bells against the water. He stared at them for a long time, lost in the delicate flowers of their stomachs, the flow of their poisonous tendrils. He liked the comb jellies best, because they were utterly alien even to the other jellies, and because there was a solidity, a wholeness to them that he admired. They were pill-shaped, translucent creatures

lined with iridescent cilia. They didn't swell and collapse endlessly like most jellyfish, but dragged themselves through the water by twitching the little hairs along their sides. They reminded him of how he saw himself: calm, rational, not given to the vanity and easy emotionalism that defined Christian. He found it ironic that these were the very things that he loved about Christian and decided to check on him soon, and perhaps buy him something from the souvenir shop.

There was a placard on the wall, where Galen learned that the comb jellies were an invasive species. They had invaded the Black Sea in the 90's and wreaked havoc on the ecosystem, and had more recently appeared in a number of other seas, including the Mediterranean. They came in from the open ocean. Galen imagined them twitching their way into the Mediterranean Sea, devouring everything in their paths, then rising onto the land and covering the world. He felt proud of them.

Before they reunited by the shark tank, Galen stopped by the souvenir shop and, after looking for toy cuttlefish, bought Christian a stuffed little blue penguin. Christian accepted it with an excited squeal that made Galen shush him, after which Christian stared at the penguin in wide-eyed silence until Galen suggested that they go eat. They had lunch at a vegan restaurant near Harvard, where Christian sat across from Galen in a booth with an overturned door for a table. The stuffed penguin sat on the table corner, leaning against the wall by the salt and pepper shakers. Christian kept glancing over at it. They talked about their plans for the rest of the week: they would walk around Harvard the next day, then tour the gardens and the museums. Christian mentioned that there was a traveling funfair in the area.

"Is it coming here before we leave?" Galen asked. He didn't really like the idea of going to the fair, and hoped that Christian would drop the subject.

“No,” Christian said. “It’s in this little town west of here. There’s a bus route that stops there on the way to some other city, though. Shuttle bus, really, or I think it was. My family went there for the harvest fair every year when I was a kid.”

“Do we have time?”

“Well,” Christian thought about it. “We’ll have to cut out some stuff, I think. But I have a friend down there we could stay with.”

“Have you talked to him?”

“We chatted earlier,” Christian said. “He’s working at this catering place, but he says he has Thursday night off.”

“That’s our last night in town, though,” Galen said.

“We can take the bus back the next morning,” Christian said. “Plane doesn’t leave until that evening, remember?”

Before Galen could answer and explain the importance of arriving at the airport early, the waitress came by with their salads. Galen’s was piled high with stringy vegetables and oddly colored bulbs of what he thought looked like goblin fruit, Christian’s with mounds of dark lettuce and fake white cheese. Outside, the window frosted in the chill air.

\*

Sometimes, Galen thought that the only times they were both horny were the times that they were angry at or afraid of one another. The time Christian came home from a party and Galen smelled cigarette smoke on his breath. The time Christian’s favorite high school teacher died, and Galen only wanted to talk about his own high school experiences. The time Christian burst into loud, savage tears in the middle of a funny movie for no reason, and wouldn’t stop until Galen ran into the kitchen and started screaming. The times when they would shout at each

other until one of them ran to the bedroom, lay down, and refused to speak until the other one wrapped his body around him and kissed the back of his neck. They would make love, alternating between tenderness and violence. Sometime afterwards, they would slide into unconsciousness without knowing that they were even tired.

After the sex, they would fall into vague, halting sleep, no matter what time of day it was. Galen would wake up in a daze half an hour later, covered in sweat, with Christian lying next to him, still asleep and breathing so slowly that tense seconds passed between his breaths. Galen would get out of bed and make coffee in their French press, and the smell would wake Christian. Groggy and incapable of speech beyond a few delicate grunts, Christian would drink his cup of coffee and come to life in under a minute. Then they would shower together, get dressed, and go somewhere for dinner. For a few hours after sex, neither of them worried about anything whatsoever.

Reality would intrude on Galen late in the night, or early the next morning, or at work that afternoon: he'd spent too much on dinner, or on mini-golf, or at the movie theater. He thought about his money in terms of how many hours it took him to earn it, and the missing forty dollars not only endangered his ability to pay his phone bill, but took away seven hours of his life. It was as if he'd been abducted by aliens, held for the duration of an entire shift, and brought back with his memory wiped and his bones tired from a day's worth of probing and implantation. He would go home and have a talk with Christian about money, and they would be frugal for two or three weeks, clipping coupons together and taking the bus whenever they had the time, and then one of them would do or say something stupid and the other would explode in anger, and the cycle would begin again.

\*

On their second night in Boston, the temperature dropped below freezing, and Galen woke up shivering under his comforter. The sounds of the city filtered in through a half-open window, and the blinds floated in and out. Christian sat under the window and rested his head on the ledge. He clutched his stuffed penguin and took slow, deep breaths.

“Christian?”

Christian didn’t turn. He took one more breath and said, “I’ve missed this so much.”

“What?”

“Fall,” Christian said. “And some winter. Come here and smell it.”

Galen sat up, and the comforter slid to his waist. The cold sent him scurrying back under it. “Oh my god, Christian. Put some clothes on.”

Christian was wearing nothing but a pair of moth-eaten briefs. He didn’t look cold. Galen walked to the window with the comforter wrapped around him, then opened one arm to envelop Christian.

“Smell it,” Christian said.

Galen rested his head on the windowsill. His face burned with cold, then slowly went numb. Cars honked and rolled down Massachusetts Avenue, a distant radio bleated into the night, and muffled conversations travelled through the icy wind.

“What’s it like?” Christian asked.

“What?”

“The smell.”

“I don’t smell anything. It’s just cold.”

“Yeah, but what does cold smell like? I mean, you’ve never smelled it before, have you?”

“I don’t know,” Galen said. “You tell me.”

“It’s . . . it smells kind of metallic, but with a kind of wooden smell to it, too.”

“So which is it? Metal or wood?”

“Both.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

They sat there in silence for a while. Neither of them moved. Christian kept sniffing the air.

“Sorry,” Galen said. “That was stupid.”

\*

They spent the rest of the week exploring Boston, arguing about what, if anything, was beautiful about Harvard, or the Athenæum, or the Emerald Necklace. Galen kept forgetting about money, then kicking himself for spending so much of it on Christian, then spending more. Christian tried, on more than one occasion, to pay for things himself, but Galen kept stopping him, then regretting it, but the thought of being in that position, of owing Christian something, frightened him. He called his bank’s automated hotline and checked his balance at least three times a day.

On the fourth day, they took the subway to Revere Beach. Galen hated the subways—the trains were jittery, insectoid things that constantly jolted him, and they were crowded with tattooed hipsters, grim businessmen, bovine tourists, and homeless people who smelled like construction sites and glared at the windows across from them. He had to sit down, or else wrap himself around a pole and cling to it with both arms. Christian stood in place, holding one of the leather straps that hung from the ceiling with two fingers or else simply standing in place, swaying side to side with the movement of the subway car, fiddling with his phone or adjusting



his fur-lined bomber jacket. He always seemed to be a second away from falling over, and Galen felt the urge to leap over and catch him.

At Revere Beach, they walked along the shore, shivering in their jackets and occasionally pausing to stare at the shattering waves. The ocean and the sky were two shades of grey, the sea wall a third and the sand a fourth. They saw none of the blue skies and white sand of Florida's beaches.

"This place used to be toxic," Christian said. "They've really cleaned it up."

"It looks depressing," Galen said. He almost had to shout over the wind.

"I never thought of it that way," Christian said. "It's got a life to it. The beach back in San Bibiana needs an offshore hurricane to get like this."

Galen gazed out at the horizon, and was relieved to find that it was as flat as the horizon back in Florida. Still, he half-expected the sea to pull away and then lurch forward against Revere Beach with a gray hundred-foot wave, obliterating the two of them. He realized that he was being stupid, and felt tired.

"I want to sit down a while," Galen said, and they walked over to the seawall. At first they sat on it, but the wind threatened to blow them over, so they jumped it and scuttled over to a bench on the other side. It faced the street; they watched cars go by for a minute.

"I remember," Christian said. "My family used to come here in the summer, and I always wanted to go swimming, but my mom said the water was diseased. Now it's clean, but it's too cold to swim."

"We should come back in the summer," Galen said, and then regretted it, because Christian would think he was serious.

“We should live here,” Christian said. He peeked over the seawall, then stood up, leaned on the wall, and breathed deeply. “We should live on a boat.”

“You don’t know how hard it is to live on a boat,” Galen said.

“Okay, then,” Christian said. “How hard is it?”

“I don’t know.”

Galen stood up and looked out at the ocean. It threw itself against the beach with an almost sexual abandon, spraying foam from the greenish-gray water. He imagined them out there together, in their little boat, surrounded on all sides by gray water. The image made him sad, and he leaned on Christian, who leaned on him.

“What if one of us gets sick out there?” Galen said. “Or we spring a leak?”

“You’re probably right,” Christian said, but his voice dropped, and whatever he said after that disappeared under the sound of the waves.

\*

Christian took care of the business surrounding the fair. He texted his friend throughout the day, checked bus schedules online, tracked down directions to the bus that would take them there. Galen insisted that they not take the subway, and so the two of them waited in the freezing cold for a bus. It was the middle of the day, but they’d decided to investigate the small town, which Christian promised Galen had “Lovecraftian charm,” the day before.

The bus station was about the size of a gas station restroom, and the ticket counter about the size of a toilet stall. A television on an end table in the corner spat out local news; a major storm system was heading their way from Canada. Stern-looking news anchors in red parkas took turns using words like “unprecedented” and “October surprise” and warning them to stay inside.

“Are you sure we should be doing this?” Galen asked.

“Why not?”

Galen pointed at the screen.

“Baby,” Christian said. “You know how all the tourists in Florida freak out every time a category one hurricane comes close?”

“Fair enough,” Galen said.

They bought a pair of twenty-dollar tickets from a tired-looking Chinese woman who sat behind the counter and occasionally yelled into a CB radio. Galen guessed that she was talking to one of the drivers.

“Don’t you speak Chinese?” Galen asked Christian.

“A little,” Christian said.

“What’s she so upset about?”

“The driver’s lost.” Christian sat down next to a large Chinese woman who held a fat dachshund in her arms like a loaf of bread. Galen sat down next to him. The people in the waiting room, most of them exhausted-looking men in various jumpsuits and restaurant uniforms, stared at them, and Galen suggested that they wait outside.

“Are you sure?” Christian asked. “It’s freezing.”

“I think I’d be more comfortable,” Galen said.

Outside, they shivered and clung to each other. “You sure you don’t want to go back in?” Christian kept asking. Galen cycled through excuses: the smallness of the room, the staleness of the air, the woman behind the counter screaming directions at the driver. He didn’t want to tell Christian about the stares; he was afraid that Christian would be afraid, and then Galen would be sure that there was something to be afraid of.

The bus came an hour late, its brakes squealing down Massachusetts Avenue as it pulled up to the curb. Traffic oozed around it, and its door opened with a hiss as the driver got out. It was a small bus, the kind normally used for airport shuttles, and years of use had sucked the color out of it. The woman behind the counter went out and shouted at the driver for a minute, and then he took their tickets and they boarded the bus, along with three or four other people who came out from the waiting room.

The bus jerked into the road and sped off shortly after they sat down. The dachshund barked at the sound of the engine when they accelerated, then barked louder when they braked. After a few minutes, it shut up, and Christian leaned over to Galen and whispered, “I have to pee.”

Galen looked around. There was no restroom on the bus. “Does it stop anywhere?”

“I don’t know,” Christian whispered.

“Well, when did you last go?”

“How does that make a difference? I have to pee now.”

“You wouldn’t have to if you went at the station.”

Christian sulked.

The driver sped through Boston, past MIT—where Christian pointed out the generators and mentioned the underground corridors over which they were driving—and through glistening suburbs and places rotten with poverty, then out into the woods. Galen kept looking past Christian at the wilderness outside: bright orange, yellow, red forests that rose up around the highway like canyon walls. For a while, the woods flew anonymously past the window, leaving Galen’s mind empty except for looming questions about whether or not to hold Christian’s hand. Every once in a while, he would glance around, but everyone seemed blankly focused on the

back of the seat in front of them, or on a cell phone screen, or on the passing world. Then he would look back at Christian, who gazed intensely out the window and crossed and recrossed his legs.

“How badly do you have to go?” he asked him.

“I think I can make it,” Christian said. “I mean, long’s the road’s not bumpy.”

They passed clumps of snow on the leaf-covered ground or stuck in the branches of pine trees. It existed only in thin patches, like the thin, uneven stubble on Christian’s face when he forgot to shave. Galen had expected it to be thinner, more ethereal, like cotton, and was surprised by its solidity. It looked nothing like the fake snow that the malls in Florida spread around their Christmas trees. At first, Christian said nothing, leaving Galen to marvel at the white mass on the ground outside, and then Christian leaned over and whispered to him, “This is from last night. You know how on the news they said they had those flurries out here last night? This is all that’s left. It was probably a lot worse in the morning.”

“I didn’t know it could snow this early,” Galen said.

Christian shrugged and crossed his legs. “It’s something that happens, like, twice a century.”

The road grew bumpier as they got deeper into rural Massachusetts. Isolated houses peeked out from the trees, and at one point they passed over a valley and Galen saw a little village down below. Christian sweated and grabbed Galen’s hand. Pain shot up Galen’s arm from how hard Christian was gripping it.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I . . .” Christian was coated in sweat. “I can’t hold it anymore.”

“Just a little longer,” Galen whispered. “We’re almost there.”

In truth, he had no idea how far they'd gone, or how much farther they had left to go. He didn't even know the name of the town where they were going. Christian didn't disagree with him, though, so Galen assumed that he was right.

They drove on for another five minutes, the bus rumbling and jerking over bumps in the road, and then the road became flat again and they both breathed sighs of relief that made Galen feel clichéd. Then the bus hit a huge bump, and a dark stain spread in the seat of Christian's pants. The driver shouted something into the radio in Chinese, and then everything was eerily quiet except for the hum of the engine and the louder hum of the air vents.

"Seriously?" Galen whispered, and Christian glanced up at him, his face red and swollen with embarrassment. Galen took off his jacket and used it to cover Christian's lap. He put one arm around Christian's shoulder, held his hand with the other, and glared at the back of the seat in front of him for the duration of the ride.

\*

A month after they moved in together, Galen was fired from his job at the convenience store for arguing politics with a customer. He cried, and Christian held him, and told him everything was going to be all right, and then Christian fell asleep while holding him. Galen stayed awake, listening to Christian snore, feeling the weight of Christian's body and itching where Christian wrapped around him. Galen's body had adapted to being up all night, and he lay there, staring at the ceiling, and then the next night he did the same thing, catching maybe two hours of sleep a night before the smell of Christian cooking woke him up.

Once he woke up before dawn and Christian wasn't there. A pair of stray cats howled and shrieked at one another outside. He heard them tear into one another, and then one of them let out a yowl that turned into a moan and slipped into silence.

Galen turned back to find Christian standing at the foot of the bed. He held a glass of something, and smelled so strongly of alcohol that the odor radiated all the way to where Galen was lying.

“Dude,” Galen said. “You scared me.”

It was true. When he first saw him, he almost wished that Christian hadn’t insisted he lock up his guns. Then he saw the fragile outline, the oddly narrow, almost parabolic shoulders, the enlarged head of curly brown hair.

“Sorry,” Christian said. “I needed a drink of water.”

“That’s not water,” Galen said.

“No, it isn’t.”

Galen almost took Christian to task for lying to him, then decided against it. “How much did you drink?”

“Not much.”

“You’re stinking up the whole room.”

Christian shrugged. “I spilled some.”

Galen got up and turned on the light. Christian’s T-shirt and pajama pants were both soaked in something red. “Vodka and cranberry juice?” Galen asked.

“Yeah.” Christian lowered his head. “Sorry.”

“That shit costs money, you know,” Galen said. They only had one bottle of vodka, and it was very expensive.

“Sorry.”

“Will you fucking stop saying that? It makes you sound stupid.”

“Sorry.”

Galen leaped at Christian, grabbed him by the arm, and threw him on the bed. For a moment, he imagined the possibility of lighting a match and seeing how flammable he was, but instead he pulled off Christian's clothes and threw them in the washing machine. He could hear Christian crying in the bedroom, and thought again about how it would have been to throw a match at him and watch him go up in flames on the bed. Then Galen put his back against the washing machine as it hummed and sloshed to life, and cried.

He woke up the next morning, still leaning against the washing machine. He felt thirsty, so he stumbled into the kitchen. The vodka bottle sat open on the counter. He wondered if this meant it was ruined. He recapped it and put it back in its corner behind the coffee machine anyway. Then he drank a glass of water and went back to the bedroom, where Christian lay naked on top of the comforter. Christian had a bruise on his shoulder, and when Galen saw it he felt terrified of himself and of Christian. He wondered if this was it, if this was the fight that would end them, and lay down in bed next to Christian as gently as possible, at once hoping and afraid that he would wake up. Galen lay there, watching the rise and fall of Christian's bony chest, the tiny movements of his face. He fell asleep listening to Christian breathe. When they woke up within seconds of one another the next day, Christian didn't say a thing about the night before.

\*

They were standing outside the window of a diner where they'd just had dinner and taken turns freshening up in the bathroom. Christian, who'd switched his jeans out for pajama pants the moment they arrived, couldn't get hold of his friend. He tried calling him twice, left a voicemail, and sent multiple text messages. The cook periodically glared out the window at them. She still hadn't cleared the table or picked up her tip.



“I don’t get it,” he said. “He said he wasn’t working.”

“Maybe he got called in.”

“He’d respond to texts, anyway.” Christian paced back and forth. “I’m sorry about this, Galen. I really am.”

“What?”

“It’s just that, well, I should have known Alex was a bit unreliable.”

Galen suddenly felt very irritated with Christian. “A bit?”

“I said I was sorry, all right?”

“It’s okay,” Galen said. “I’m sorry, too.” He wasn’t sorry at all. He just didn’t want anyone to see him angry in public.

They found a cheap motel near the bus stop, a place so run-down that Galen thought it was abandoned until he saw cars in the parking lot. They soaked Christian’s jeans in the shower, made plans to wash them more thoroughly later, had dinner at a Chinese buffet on the ground floor of what had once been a brownstone hotel, and then walked through the town. The Ferris wheel, still unlit and immobile, towered over the steeped houses of the town with a kind of melancholy splendor. They took photographs of one another in a little park with a statue of a locally famous explorer and his Native American guide, then played with the color filters on their phones until the pictures looked at once Victorian and psychedelic. Before heading back to the motel, they stopped by a convenience store for cheap beer and snacks.

The inside of the convenience store gave Galen a momentary flashback—it looked like the convenience store where he’d worked when he and Christian met. The same vacuous music, the same shelving, the same brightly colored candy wrappers and toxic-looking sodas, the same overhead racks of cigarettes. The lone cashier, a sour-faced old man, chewed a pen as he glared

at them, making loud smacking sounds in the process. For a moment, Galen felt as if he were still at work, and felt uncomfortable out of uniform. Then he looked outside and saw little drifts of snow. At first he thought someone had dropped confetti from the ceiling.

“Look, baby,” Christian said, and pulled Galen to the window. They peeked over stacks of soda at the gentle flakes as they made their way down. “It’s snowing.”

“Cool,” Galen said.

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“No,” Galen said. “It really is cool.”

Christian smiled, but it wasn’t his usual smile. Something had crept into it, and whatever it was glanced out at Galen for a second, then disappeared as Christian turned to look at the sodas. “They don’t have the kind I usually drink,” he said. Galen looked back out at the snow, and found himself lost in its movement. The flakes fell in seemingly random patterns, twitching from one direction to the next, like deranged insects. They made him think of the jellyfish at the aquarium.

\*

The Ferris wheel didn’t move the way that Galen thought it would. He’d expected a smooth ride upwards, one in which they held hands and watched the orange woods and the spear-like roofs of the town grow further away, and from the way Christian leaned his head on Galen’s shoulder, he must have expected the same. But the Ferris wheel yanked them upwards in a series of ataxic jerks punctuated by long screeches of metal. Galen whispered, “Oh my God,” and clung desperately to the handlebars. Christian laughed at every jerk of the wheel and held onto Galen.

“I hope we don’t die,” Christian shouted, but he smiled when he said it and laughed afterwards. Galen didn’t think it was very funny.

They reached the top of the wheel. Their gondola swung precipitously in a sudden gust of wind, then righted itself, and from then on the wheel rolled smoothly along, taking them over the fairgrounds.

They’d waited until evening to come. During the day, they’d toured the little town, going up and down steep hills lined with brick buildings and old churches repurposed as pharmacies or used book stores. Galen was bored out of his mind except at the Bat Museum, a cavernous mansion where stuffed and desiccated bat carcasses hung from perches or nails under glass, and Christian was fascinated by the banal creepiness of the moldering old buildings, which didn’t seem to stare at them so much as peek at them as they passed. Most of the buildings were built into the landscape, and they would enter one at ground level on top of a hill, go down two flights of stairs, and exit at ground level at the hill’s base. Stuffed witches and giant plastic spiders stared at them from shop windows coated in frost until early afternoon. Every house looked empty, the windows opaque, the rooms unlit by day, until some elderly person walked out to sweep her entranceway and stare at them. Even the waiter at the restaurant where they had lunch was quiet, though polite; he served them their food without a word under a heavy, creaking roof lit by a single dull Tiffany-style lamp. When dusk fell, the snow from the night before had already melted away in the sunlight. Dark clouds rolled overhead, shrouding the distant mountains, and there had been a little flurry in the early afternoon, but then it had ended, and they had shivered to the fair through a town with only a light coating of snow. From the top of the Ferris wheel, Galen could barely see it in the cloudstrewn night. The fairgrounds were lit only by the glow of tents and rides.

On the way down, Christian leaned over and kissed him. He smiled at Christian. “That was fun,” Christian said. “You wanna try the Gravitron?”

“Not really,” Galen said. “Not after that.”

“C’mon.” Christian rubbed his head on Galen’s shoulder. “It’ll be fun. And this wasn’t so bad.”

“It wasn’t safe,” Galen said. “You could feel it jerking too, right?”

“Yeah, but when’s the last time you heard of one falling apart?”

“I just don’t trust it,” Galen said.

“Trust me.”

“Huh?”

“I rode that same Gravitron when I was a kid,” Christian said. “I recognize the clown on top. See?”

Christian pointed to the edge of the fair. The Gravitron spun with an almost animal viciousness. Galen imagined it breaking off and flying away into the stratosphere. He imagined it collapsing in on itself to form a black hole. He imagined it bursting into flames.

“No,” he said. “I’m not doing it.”

“Well, then,” Christian said. “Can we check out the games?”

“They’re rigged.”

“I know,” Christian said. “You don’t need to tell me.”

“If you really want to waste a bunch of money on stupid shit,” Galen said.

“It’s not a waste. It’s fun, and maybe you beat the house.”

“You don’t beat the house.”

They disembarked at the bottom of the wheel and went to the midway. Galen begged Christian not to spend more than five dollars, but he used all that money up at one shooting rink. He bought Galen a chance to play, and they shot at wooden clowns. Galen hit one, and Christian pouted that he'd aimed for the juggler.

"He's the least creepy one," Christian whined.

"At least it's something. I mean, it's not enough for a prize, but it's something."

They played a few more games, Galen asking Christian time and again if he wanted to spend this much money, Christian gleefully losing until they found a game off in the corner. The goal was to maneuver a rod through the space between two twisting metal tubes without the rod touching the side of the tubes. Christian failed twice before the man behind the counter addressed him by name.

Christian turned to face him, and they hugged. "Austin!"

Galen had to look up at Austin, who was almost as tall as the booth. He had a tangled puffball of black curly hair on his head; it rubbed against the ceiling.

"Holy shit," Austin had a voice that was at once booming and oddly teenage. "I never thought I'd see you again. How're you doing?"

"Great." They broke off the hug. "This is my friend Galen."

Galen winced at being called a friend. Austin reached out, and Galen shook his hand. It had long fingers that enveloped Galen's hand completely.

"Nice to meet you," Galen said.

Austin nodded. "Likewise."

"So what're you doing here?" Christian asked.

“Just working the booth,” Austin said. “Shift’s over in a couple minutes. Joined the fair a while after you left.”

“Sorry I couldn’t join you,” Christian said. “My parents . . .”

“No harm done. I remember what they were like.”

“Am I missing something?” Galen asked.

“Me and Austin were part of this juggling club. We used to talk about running away to join the circus, then got it in our heads to really do it after high school, but when I told my parents they locked up my bank account to keep me in college.”

“Austin and I,” Galen said.

“Huh?”

“Austin and I, not ‘me and Austin.’”

“Sorry,” Christian said.

“Your friend’s a real educator,” Austin said.

Christian laughed. “You could say that.”

\*

Christian almost left him, once, outside a mall on the night before Black Friday. They’d skipped Thanksgiving dinner—neither of them had family nearby—to camp out in line for the chance to fight for deeply discounted clothes and video game consoles. The people in front of them and the people behind them both had tents, but they huddled together on the ground, soaking up each other’s body heat. Galen went to fetch a substantial take-out meal from an overpriced poverty-themed restaurant where the patrons lucky enough to find a seat drank from Mason jars on plastic-coated tables meant to look like overturned cable reels. After waiting half an hour for his order in a shifting maze of screaming children and increasingly angry parents,

Galen sped back to the department store and got pulled over. The officer questioned the authenticity of his license, questioned his sobriety, and felt the need to instruct him on the finer points of speed limits throughout Florida history before writing him his ticket. By the time he made it back to the mall, the food was cold and the line for the sale was so long that he had trouble finding Christian. Someone from the back of the line called him a faggot; he pretended that it didn't bother him.

“Where were you?” Christian asked. “I’ve been so worried. I tried calling you, like, twenty times.” As if he wasn’t sure whether Galen would believe him, Christian took out his phone and showed him the page on his call log.

“I didn’t get a call,” Galen said. “Must have been in a dead zone.”

He took out his phone, and found that it had mysteriously turned off. “Or not.”

“What happened?”

“The food was late.” Galen sat down, back against the wall. Galen glanced up at the tents that flanked them and wondered what their owners planned to do with them once the doors opened. “And I got pulled over.”

“You should’ve called me.”

“Why?”

“Never mind.” Christian sulked, pulled the hood of his jacket as far over his head as it would go, and leaned against the wall. He stared at his shoes, and waited in a very obvious way for Galen to apologize.

“Here’s your food.” Galen handed him his cardboard box of mashed potatoes, meatloaf, steamed vegetables and gelatinous cranberry sauce. Then he passed him a plastic fork. They ate in silence.

“It’s cold,” Christian said. He had a childish whine in his voice; Galen could tell he needed a nap.

“Sorry,” Galen said. “Look, do you want me to go get you some coffee?”

“No,” Christian said. By now, he had disappeared more or less completely into his jacket.

“I just want a warm meal.”

“I’m sorry I can’t get you a warm meal. That cop made me sit there for, like, half an hour, and it got cold.”

“Well, did you tell him to hurry up?”

“No.”

“No?” Christian’s face burst out of his hood, pale and burred with stubble. “No? Why no?”

“He was a cop.”

“You knew I was waiting for you. You could’ve just politely pointed out that you-“

“No. I. Couldn’t. Have.”

They said nothing for a moment. The people in the tents whispered to each other, and the people outside the tents did their best not to stare.

“I’m sorry,” Christian said. He curled up and seemed to shrink like a drying leaf, or a pool of water evaporating on a sunny day. Galen wanted to spit on him. Instead he turned around and marched back to the car.

Galen was halfway to the car when he heard Christian chasing him. Galen slowed down, hated himself for doing so, and turned around to confront him, but Christian’s face was lacquered in tears and Galen couldn’t think of anything but how beautiful he looked, his brown hair mussed by the hoodie, his eyes cupped in dark semicircles from lack of sleep. They held



each other, Galen leaning against the hood of his car, and tightened their grips, both of them whispering apologies that turned into declarations of love and promises that they would never leave. They made love in the backseat while the line surged into the mall.

\*

The snow fell harder as they watched a group of drunken jugglers on the edge of the fair. The wind kept catching their balls and clubs, and the liquor made them clumsy, but they still held a crowd, laughing and brightly clothes against a whiter and whiter world lit by a single anemic street lamp. Galen stood behind Christian and shivered.

“It’s getting bad,” he said.

“I know,” Christian said. “We’ll get back to the bus stop soon.”

“I hope so,” Galen said.

“Why are you so worried?”

“We gotta get back at the hotel in Boston by tomorrow morning if we’re gonna get our stuff, check out in time, and catch the flight.”

“You sure they’re not gonna cancel those flights?” Austin asked.

“Why?”

“It’s supposed to get worse tonight,” he said. “Like, really bad.”

“Then we gotta hurry out,” Galen said. “Besides, we’re already checked out at the motel here.”

All day, he’d been carrying the one duffel bag which held everything they’d taken to the small town. He’d wanted, all day, to drop it, but everywhere he looked he saw thieves eyeing it, or what he thought were thieves eyeing it, and he knew better than to trust Christian with it. Now the snow fell on him, melted on his face, and piled up in the creases of his clothes. He was glad

he'd worn boots, and felt practical even though snow had never been part of the plan when buying clothes for the trip.

The snow and wind picked up, and the jugglers stopped what they were doing and shouted to one another. One of them came over and hugged Austin before seeing Christian, shouting something, and grasping him in a bear hug. They laughed and shouted at each other. Galen couldn't make it out.

The jugglers moved into the side streets and set up on a corner. They offered Christian and Austin some extra clubs. They juggled with them, tossing things back and forth in the wind, dropping them, almost sending a few through empty shop windows. Galen huddled under a streetlight and watched them. When a car passed by and the jugglers grabbed their things and ran to the slush-coated sidewalk, Galen patted Christian's collar and reminded him of the time. Christian promised him that they'd leave soon, then took off his coat and wrapped it around Galen. Underneath, he wore nothing but a flimsy sweater, but he stank of sweat and grinned blissfully.

The storm got worse. Wind picked up the balls and threw them down the street, and eventually the jugglers gave up and moved, as one mass, down the road. Galen followed them, trying to pick Christian out of the crowd, but in the snow, the jugglers all looked like silhouettes. Galen could make out snatches of conversation, and then they were all in a diner, Galen stumbling in after them in Christian's coat. Christian was near the front of the pack; he didn't look cold at all. Galen maneuvered closer to him.

"Baby," he said. "We gotta go."

"I'm sure we'll have time," Christian said. "I just wanna have dinner with my friends before we leave."

“The last bus could leave at any moment,” Galen said.

The hostess led them all to a huge table.

“It comes through at eleven,” Christian said.

“Dude,” Austin said, one hand on Galen’s shoulder. “You got two hours. Don’t worry.”

“What if they decide to quit early? I mean, if the storm gets too bad?”

“That bus line?” Austin laughed into his menu. “They wouldn’t stop the bus if it was on fire. Shit, they didn’t even when it *was* on fire.”

“What?”

“I heard they settled out of court,” Christian said.

Austin peeked over the top of his menu. “You heard about that?”

“Dude, it was all over the internet.”

“I wouldn’t know anymore,” Austin said. “You kind of forget about that shit after a while.”

“Can you really?” Galen asked. “I mean, yeah, you can cut down, but you never really log out.”

“It’s not easy,” Austin said. “But you can do it. And you kind of have to, I mean, to get out of the rat race.”

Galen shrugged. “I don’t see why.”

The waitress came and took their drink orders. The conversation started up again after she left, but focused on the mechanics of juggling. Galen never got back into the conversation.

The group finished their food, paid their checks, the waitress refilled their coffees three times, and they kept talking Galen pointed at his watch whenever Christian looked over at him, but Christian ignored him, and eventually Galen had to interrupt a conversation about the burn

someone got while juggling fire poi to announce that it was thirty minutes before their bus was scheduled to leave, and they had to go.

The table was completely still. Austin sipped his coffee. Christian looked at Galen and said, "I don't want to."

"But we have to," Galen said. "It's almost eleven. We're hardly gonna be able to make it as it is."

"But I don't want to go," Christian said. "I want to stay here."

"Have you been drinking?"

Christian looked at his friends, and for the first time Galen got a good look at them. They were ragged, greasy young men, their faces sprouting stubble and thin beards, their hair tangled and mussed, with the crowns molded into the shapes of their second-hand ushankas and skullcaps. Their clothes were ragged, and Galen wondered how many of them were really that filthy and slimy, and how many of them were simply pretending. Either way, he felt a weird disgust that Christian would have the gall to delay him in order to spend time with them.

"So this is it? This is what you wanted to come here for?" Galen stared right into Christian's eyes, then gazed over the jugglers again. "For these freaks? Come on, don't be stupid. Let's get out of here."

He grabbed Christian's shoulder and pulled, but Christian stayed seated. They made eye contact again. "No," Christian said, and then Galen yanked harder and he got out of his chair. Galen pulled again, trying to drag Christian out of the room, but Christian grabbed a friend's hand and pulled his way out of Galen's grasp. For a moment, Galen turned around, and said again, "Let's get out of here," but Christian sat back down and started crying. The sight of it disgusted Galen, and he grabbed his bag and marched out of the diner and into the snow.

For a while, Galen turned around every few steps, half-expecting Christian to chase him, but Christian never appeared. Eventually, he gave up, and until he boarded the bus he didn't look back once. The bus idled in the warehouse parking lot that it used as a station, and Galen looked out the window at the snow-covered town. For the first time, it looked as eerie to him as Christian had promised him it would be. It watched him, and for a while Galen wondered if it was grinning at him. Nervous, he dug through his bag and found the stuffed penguin that he'd bought Christian. He hugged it close and waited for it to absorb enough of his body heat to keep him warm.

## IGNUS FATUUS

The funeral was crowded with mourners, protesters, and people who heard about it and felt they should come, although many only stayed for a few minutes before wandering off. The constant arrivals and departures in the chapel reminded Zachary of the bustle in an airport terminal. He and his friend Ethan left shortly after the procession, both having agreed in advance that whatever came after—another Bible reading, another prefabricated sermon, some more tears from Patrick’s stepmother—would be a waste of everyone’s time. Still in their oversized dress shirts and thrift store slacks, they drove to the old limestone quarry outside of town, where they parked behind a shack, leaned against the wall, and shared a bottle of whiskey that Ethan’s foster brother had brought him. Ethan poured every third swig into the dusty ground, saying it was for Patrick.

Neither of them had gotten close to the casket. It didn’t make a difference, since from what they’d read in the paper, the casket was probably closed. Patrick had been found two days after his disappearance, his body wrapped around a fallen tree several miles downstream from where he’d jumped. His car, which he’d let idle until it ran out of gas, waited on the shore in a parking lot a quarter mile from the bridge.

“Why you think he did it?” Ethan asked. He spoke slowly—the quiet made him feel self-conscious about his perpetually slurred speech.

“I don’t know,” Zachary said. “The bullying, I guess.”

“I guess,” Ethan said, and they stared at their feet. Zachary tried to think about all the things he’d ever said or done to Patrick, or anyone at all. Not all of them were things he wanted to think about.

“Or grades,” Zachary said. A burst of energy straightened his back and widened his eyes. “He wasn’t doing too good in algebra, remember? Maybe he didn’t want to have to drop out.”

“You don’t go to algebra.”

“I did, like, two weeks ago.” Zachary took the bottle back and finished it off. “He failed that test, remember? And you’ve had enough of this stuff.”

“Are you good to drive?” Ethan asked. “I’m hungry.”

“Not yet.” Zachary lit a cigarette.

“So what now?” asked Ethan. “I mean, what do we do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, what if people start fucking with us, too?”

“Why? I mean, we weren’t that close to him.”

Ethan folded his body up against the wall. “Yeah, but we hung out. I mean, we took him *here*. I don’t think he could get much closer than that.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it.”

\*

Zachary and Ethan hadn’t known Patrick very well. No one had known Patrick very well. He was a skinny Latino boy adopted into a white family who’d changed his first and last name, supposedly at his request. The school had stuck him in group therapy with Zachary, Ethan, and a few other kids because he’d hit on one of the players on the basketball team, until the player gave Patrick a black eye, which had prompted Patrick to kick him in the groin, which would have prompted Patrick’s expulsion if the principal hadn’t come to see him as a “special case,” in need of special attention. Next to Zachary, who’d gotten into group therapy for smoking in the bathrooms, he seemed untouchable, feral, alien. Patrick wore headbands and smoked incredibly

thin cigarettes with them under the bleachers. He liked to eat fruit—they all found that funny—but he was a messy eater, and his fingers and clothes were often stained with juice. Mostly, he wore cheap stuff: girls' jeans from Wal-Mart, plain white T-shirts, chintzy earrings from the flea market. His headbands were mostly rags.

He liked to say things like “When I get out of here . . .” or “When I make it big . . .” or “When I graduate . . .” He had no plan for getting out, and wasn't good enough to make it big at anything but spelling and Minesweeper, but he was only a couple months from graduating and old enough to buy his own cigarettes on the day when Zachary and Ethan went to group therapy and Patrick wasn't there. They assumed he was sick.

\*

The night after the funeral, Zachary woke up to find his bedroom ice cold. His sweat-soaked mattress clung to him like a straitjacket, and he had a headache that shot back and forth under his scalp in time to his racing pulse. He writhed out of it and sat up in bed, then opened and leaned into the screen before he lit a cigarette. The metal felt cool against his skin, but the air outside was hot and he was thirsty. Dizzy from his interrupted sleep, he rested his cigarette on the marble windowsill and left to get a glass of water and some aspirin.

When he came back, the cigarette was gone. Zachary got on his hands and knees and searched the whole room for it, half-expecting the place to go up in flames at any moment, but after ten minutes he began to wonder if he'd even smoked one. Maybe it had been a dream. He leaned against the screen and lit up.

\*

Zachary's car was parked in the lot behind the San Bibiana Mall, and he and Ethan were smoking cigarettes while the octogenarian mall cop made his rounds. The mall's shadow fell on



them, and when they looked out the windshield the still-glowing logo of a long-shuttered department store loomed over their heads. The mall had been built twenty years ago, and every year since then another store had shut its doors, so that now only one department store and a movie theater remained, and both were closing in a month. The mall, in recent years, had tried to right itself by piling on rules, one of which said that no one under eighteen could be unaccompanied in the mall after six, so Zachary and Ethan, who still didn't know what movies were playing, waited for the mall cop to finish his rounds and go back to his booth on an otherwise-empty wing of the mall. They'd already finished drinking.

“What happened?” Zachary said.

“Well, I was here with this girl. She needed to get something from the candy store for a birthday present or something, and I was waiting outside, keeping an eye out for security, and I swear to God I saw Patrick by the fountain.”

“Patrick's dead,” Zachary said.

“I know,” Ethan said. “And when I looked again, it was just some Mexican kid. The rent-a-cop got him right then, but I slipped into the candy store.”

“Okay, so . . .”

“It was weird, is all.”

“You didn't fall for him, did you?” Zachary laughed at his own joke.

“No, I . . . what?” Ethan dropped his cigarette, and they both dug around for it in the heap of discarded fast food wrappers under Ethan's feet. It left a little hole in the carpet. “Sorry, man.”

“It's cool,” Zachary said. “You seen the outside of this thing?”

“Oh, yeah,” Ethan said. “I've seen the hole rusted into the floor behind us, too.”

A few minutes later, when the guard had finished his patrol, they slipped inside and decided on a mediocre comedy that they felt barely drunk enough to tolerate. The theatre, desperate for business, offered them free popcorn for buying three tickets, but they turned the offer down.

The theatre was cold. Zachary didn't mind—he still felt a little warm from the cheap vodka that Ethan had somehow acquired. The two of them sat down in the back row, where they could whisper snide comments to each other without the small group of college kids in the front noticing. No one else came in before the movie started.

During the previews, Zachary got the sense that there was someone in the back row with them. He looked to his left, but didn't see anyone there but Ethan, and no one at all to his right. Then he glanced at Ethan again, and saw a patch of darkness in the seat next to him. It seemed to be leaning forward, and Zachary could feel it watching him. Then it was gone, and he wondered if he'd imagined it.

\*

He came home to find Minesweeper up on his computer. His parents were already asleep. Whoever had played it had set it to the highest difficulty, and lost in four moves without marking a single mine. Zachary ignored it, closed the window and went to bed.

Zachary woke up. The corner of his laptop screen blinked—someone had sent him a message.

*Hi*

Zachary responded, *hi*

*You're up late*

*just woke up*, Zachary responded.

*Bad dreams? Or loud noises? Sirens, maybe?*

*whose this?*

For a moment, nothing happened, then the other person responded, *Spell check doesn't catch everything, you know*

*shut up patrick*

He'd typed it before he had a chance to think. Then he realized that someone was messing with him and typed again, *whose this*

No reply.

\*

When Patrick first came to San Bibiana High, Zachary had been afraid of him. A lot of people had been. There were rumors that he'd smashed one of the Williams boys' noses the first day, although Stan Williams told him that Eric simply face-planted during a football game. Zachary didn't know if he believed him. What he knew was that this was a quiet town, full of quiet people, and Patrick was loud. He spoke loudly, excitedly, as if everything were either incredible or of incredible importance. He liked to run his keys along the rows of vents on the lockers as he walked down the hall, making a rattling sound that reverberated into classrooms and down stairwells. He attracted stares in coffee shops, strip malls, convenience stores—places where most people didn't want to be looked at.

So by the time the guidance counselor called them into her office to tell them that, due to the “rapid influx” of troubled students into her school, she'd arranged for the school psychiatrist to run a “therapy workshop,” he and Ethan knew who Patrick was. Everyone knew who he was, and they all crossed the street to avoid him, or spat on the sidewalk when he passed, or dared each other to use a sink or turn a doorknob after he'd touched it. Once, Zachary had slipped a

note into his locker that read FAG. Zachary didn't really have anything against him; he was just bored. Zachary never told Patrick about the note, even after they started going to group therapy and Zachary couldn't torment him anymore, and although Patrick saw Zachary's handwriting during numerous exercises, each of which made Zachary sweat as he passed his paper to the right, Patrick never asked.

They never became friends, at least not any more than Zachary became friends with the kids he met at people's parties. You could get drunk with them, and sometimes get a fleeting glimpse into what made them tick, or how they were feeling that night, but usually you just enjoyed their company and waited for the day when they graduated, left town, and you never saw them again.

But Zachary did see Patrick, in group therapy or in the halls or at the dying mall, and the three of them had begun to gravitate toward one another, until one day Patrick wasn't there anymore.

\*

Ethan drove them to the quarry this time. They didn't have any pot or alcohol, and Ethan didn't feel like drinking anyway, but they smoked cigarettes and chucked rocks down a hill of limestone to watch the dust clouds they made.

"I think I'm going crazy," Ethan said.

Zachary threw a big chunk of limestone at another big chunk, and they both exploded.

"Why?"

"Well, I mean, I've been kinda off lately, but then Patrick died, and I . . ."

"What?"

Ethan threw a handful of pebbles and dust downhill. It didn't really do anything. "I don't know. It's not one specific thing, really. I mean, it's kind of that time I mistook that one kid for Patrick, but not really. Really it goes back to how at the funeral, I—and you seemed to feel it too—I didn't care. I mean, not about Patrick dying, but the whole time I—it's like it didn't make a difference."

"Kinda," Zachary said. He lit a cigarette.

"I don't really get why. I mean, funerals are sad, right?"

"Yeah." Zachary ran limestone dust through his fingers. A little cloud billowed up where it fell.

"But I didn't feel anything. Like, it didn't seem to change anything. It was, and I mean I wasn't around yet, so I don't know for sure, but it was kinda like a birthday party for a baby, y'know? Like the kid who's supposed to be guest of honor has no idea what's going on or who anyone is or why they're shoving cake at it."

"I hear you, man." Zachary looked over at Ethan and realized that he looked paler than he'd looked when Zachary first saw him two years ago. Back then, he'd still had an anemic pallor, with blue veins visible through his skin in places, as if illuminated with comic book lightning. Since then, his skin had gone from gray to white, gaining a hard paleness, like a statue's. He'd lost weight, too, and dark bags grew under his eyes.

Ethan stood up and looked around until he found a fist-sized rock. He threw it so that it bounced three times on its way downhill. By the time it finished moving, he had another rock already, one so big he could barely stand up straight. He threw it as far as he could; it landed ten feet downhill and shattered, leaving a crater and a cloud of dust. "But anyway," he said. "I keep having these dreams, and Patrick keeps showing up. He's always smoking those little queenie

cigarettes and, well, remember that time we hung out at the mall? Back when it still let us in unaccompanied after six? It keeps going back to that, like when we were eating at the pizza place, the one that closed down. And nothing weird happens. Like, you'd think something would burst out of the pizza or blood would drip from the ceiling or there'd be some chick with her boobs exploding, but it just replays that part of that night. I don't get it."

\*

Zachary couldn't move. He had woken up from dreams that he didn't remember, except that they were muddy and full of muffled noises, like river bottoms. There was a ringing in his ears, which deepened to a buzzing sound before it crescendoed back up. Under it, he could hear his heartbeat. His body felt heavy and numb.

For a while, he tried to struggle, but his body ignored him. His brain sent the signals to flail, and the signals passed through him, but nothing happened. He lay on his back, staring at the ceiling fan as it spun lazily overhead.

Then he tried to scream, but his mouth wouldn't open. He lay frozen inside himself. Only his eyes moved, and they darted around the room, which seemed larger than he remembered. Sweat beaded out on his face, and the buzzing in his ears intensified.

Zachary gave up, resigned to the fact that his parents would find him like this, and imagined a life spent locked in his own body, taking food through a tube, peeing into a tube, tubes going into his veins while squat, goblin-faced nurses changed his bedclothes every day. Thoughts and memories moving in him, but no way to express them, like a computer without a monitor. Slowly, he became aware of a presence in the room.

At first, it was just a dark space, a chunk of shadow by the desk. Then it faded, and he saw Patrick, sitting at Zachary's computer, playing Minesweeper. He wore a sleeveless T-shirt

and a tie-dyed rag for a headband; his jeans hugged his legs, and he'd tucked them into his worn boots. He held a thin cigarette between his lips. Zachary heard mines going off, and Patrick sighed. Then Patrick got up and walked over to the foot of the bed.

Zachary tried to scream again, then tried to struggle. Patrick's face was expressionless, and the cigarette smoke formed a halo around his head. Zachary couldn't look him in the eye.

Without a word, Patrick climbed onto the bed. He crawled over to where Zachary lay, his mind struggling impotently, and sat on Zachary's chest. He cradled Zachary's head in one hand, blew a trio of smoke rings that orbited his head like moons, and looked into Zachary's eyes.

Warmth flooded Zachary's body. He gave up again, surrendering himself completely this time to the kaleidoscopic glow of Patrick's gaze. The two of them floated off the bed and Patrick moved under him, holding him aloft as the smoke rings flew by, expanding and contracting like jellyfish as they left Patrick's orbit to spin around the room. Tides of warmth ebbed and flowed through his body. After a few minutes, he drifted back down. Patrick stood again at the foot of the bed.

"Just say it," Patrick said.

Zachary tried to say, "What?"

"Whatever," Patrick said, and then he was gone. Zachary's joints tingled, and his arm twitched. His whole body shook as he forced himself upright. Sweat soaked his bedclothes. For a moment, he thought of calling his parents, and then he stumbled over to the window, lit a cigarette, and waited to stop shaking.

\*

“Don’t you think you should see a doctor about that?” Ethan asked. They were talking about Zachary’s paralysis, which had happened now three nights in a row. “I mean, it might be a tumor or something.”

“It’s not a tumor,” Zachary said. “If it was, I’d have . . . I dunno, but something else, y’know? Like, headaches an’ stuff.”

“I thought you had headaches.”

They were in line for lunch at the cafeteria, both of them jittery with nicotine cravings and caffeine.

“Not now,” Zachary said. “Just in the morning.”

“Look,” Ethan said. “I’m worried about you, okay? You’re my friend, and you need a doctor. I mean, what if you end up with locked-in syndrome?”

“What?”

“You never heard of it?” They reached the serving line, picked up trays, and pointed at anonymous slabs of meat that the lunch ladies then slopped onto paper plates. “It’s this disease where people end up, like, totally paralyzed. Forever. And like their minds are still working, right? But there’s no way to tell anyone anything.”

“Never heard of that before.” Zachary pointed at a basket of French fries.

\*

They could never really get close to Patrick. He wore his flamboyance like armor—coats of eyeliner, pomegranates in his sack lunch, hips that swayed when he was angry, one hand on his hip when he felt that he’d crushed someone. All his emotions had the dramatic falseness of a fainting silent-film actress.



Underneath them, though, Zachary got the sense that Patrick knew things, that his practiced smirk and dancing bear grin revealed something about him. It frightened him: those white teeth, those thin cigarettes, the pomegranate-stained fingers, they all seemed to know what they shouldn't. Zachary wondered if Ethan felt the same way, and one day at the quarry, while Patrick had slipped off to take a piss, Ethan admitted that he did.

"You ever feel like he knows something about you?" Ethan said.

"Huh?"

"You ever feel like Patrick knows more than he's letting on? Like he's seen you in places you don't want to be seen, and he won't say anything, but he knows?"

"Kinda. You worried?"

"Not really." Ethan smoked a cigarette. "It's more like when I was seven or so, and I stole some while Mom was out and went to the convenience store. I wanted to get some candy, but when I got there I couldn't bring myself to buy it. It's like she was watching me, y'know? Like she *knew*. So I ran home and put the money back, and when she got home, she didn't say a word, but-"

Patrick rounded the corner, and Ethan stopped talking. They looked at each other for a second, then Patrick rested one hand on one hip and leaned into it. "You know," he said. "You got something to say, you should just say it."

"Well, I was-"

"Talking about me?" Patrick ran his free hand through his hair.

"No, I-"

Zachary stepped in for him. "He was talking 'bout his mother."

Patrick nodded slowly. "Like we don't spend enough time in group."

The three of them stared at each other for a while. Finally, Patrick spoke up again. “Look, if you wanna say something, say something. It’s not like I’m gonna piss in your locker or anything.” And he grinned, put his hand on his hip, and sashayed back to his perch on an outcropping, where he started throwing rocks as if nothing had happened.

\*

After a few more days of Patrick’s visitations, Zachary had trouble going to sleep. The bags under his eyes thickened and darkened, and his parents worried out loud about him at the dinner table, speaking to each other as if he weren’t there. He might as well not have been—the world seemed abstract, motionless, like a picture in a textbook or a DVD menu. Finally, his mother asked him if he’d been doing drugs.

“No,” he said. “I’m just not sleeping well.” In truth, he hadn’t slept at all the night before. Every time he saw his bed, his body wanted to fall into it, but then he lay there for an hour, floating through levels of exhaustion that took him nowhere.

“Are you sure, hon? You can tell us.” She put her hand on his. He could feel her pulse. Every time he blinked, there was a fraction of a second where the world showed its true face, and in that fraction her hand looked huge and watery, like a plucked chicken.

“No, really,” he said. “I haven’t been sleeping much, is all.”

“Is something wrong?” Her pulse was off: three beats, instead of two.

“No,” he said. “I think I’m just stressed out. It’s cool.”

“Well.” She took her hand away and went back to her casserole. “If you need us, we’re here for you.”

“Thanks, Mom,” he said.

“I hope this isn’t about your friend,” his father said. He had a mouthful of food, and when he talked he shoved it into one cheek with his tongue. For a moment, Zachary thought the food was struggling.

“No.” Zachary took a mouthful of casserole. It tasted metallic, like blood. “Just school stuff. Or I need some sleeping pills.”

“You’ll be fine,” his mother said. “You should go to bed earlier, though.”

“Yeah,” Zachary said. His casserole kept squirming to get out of his mouth. “Maybe I should.”

\*

An hour after dinner, Zachary finally fell asleep. A sea of hands carried him through his dreams to a stage where he met himself under a spotlight. The other Zachary was featureless—no eyes, no nose, no mouth or ears, with straw sticking out of his shirtsleeves. He stared at his other self, and as he did, a pair of eyes floated to the surface of its face like a pair of meatballs. It stared back, and then nodded. He woke up at three in the morning, his room stinking of cigarette smoke. It wasn’t the smell of his brand.

The laptop was on. Its glow angelically. There was a message for him; the sender was another random string of letters.

*Meet me at the mall*

Whoever it was logged off right away, before Zachary could even type *Huh*.

Getting the window screen off was easy—he’d done it before, and knew the right way to twist the corners, and how to push the screen back in without making too much noise. It didn’t matter—his parents were deep sleepers, and the sound of Zachary’s car starting up wouldn’t wake them, much less a little grinding of metal on metal, but Zachary had the sense that what he

was doing was secret and profound, so he walked on tiptoe across the front yard to his car. The lights were off all through the house, and the first quarter moon lit nothing. He almost tripped on a garden gnome, but he made it to the car and started the engine. He drove to the mall slowly, chain-smoking the whole way, taking no risks with yellow lights, afraid that every car was an undercover cop. He parked in the back of the mall, which had by now become so broke that it didn't have after-hours security, and looked around. Another car, Ethan's, pulled into the lot and parked on the opposite end.

\*

At first, they both thought the other had told them to go here. They argued about it for a little while, and then stared at the ground between their feet. Zachary was barefoot, and Ethan had snuck out in a pair of heavily padded skate shoes that looked enormous on the ends of his skinny ankles.

"Did you tell me to come here?" Ethan asked. He looked sick, and his eyes were full of engorged blood vessels that clawed their way toward his pupils like red vines racing toward the sunlight.

"I assumed you told me." Zachary didn't look up. They started walking towards the mall.

"I didn't."

Zachary thought about that for a second, and decided that Ethan wasn't that clever.

"Why're we here?"

"I don't know. I don't see anyone else. Should we go?"

"Maybe." Zachary turned around for a moment, then turned back. "But I wanna know what's going on here."

"Doesn't look like there's a way in."

They tried the door to a department store and found it unlocked. Using their cell phones as flashlights, they wandered between racks of empty clothes. Something scurried away from them—the mall was notorious for mice. They passed the fitting rooms, then the shoe section, then reached the exit that led to the lobby. Someone had left the gate partway up, or pushed it up, so they could crawl under it.

“Aren’t there cameras?” Ethan said.

“Nah.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I dunno,” he said, but he knew that someone had taken the time to arrange all this, that everything would be fine. But he didn’t know what “everything” was.

They walked down past rows of closed gates, and Zachary felt as if his legs were walking of their own accord, leading him to something he wasn’t ready for. Most of the storefronts were empty, cages for shadows. He stopped a little before they reached the fountain. Moonlight filtered through the glass ceiling onto them. Ethan took a couple more steps, paused, and turned around.

“Are you into me?” Ethan asked. Zachary couldn’t read his face.

“Nah, bro,” Zachary said. “Not really.”

“Why not?”

Zachary thought about it. He wanted alcohol. He lit a cigarette instead. “You’re too skinny.”

“And kinda weird, too.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s cool,” Ethan said. “I was just afraid that you were. Cause you’re a good friend and all, but I’m still not really over . . .”

“I get it.”

“You shouldn’t smoke in here,” Ethan said. “There’s alarms.”

Zachary wasn’t listening. He knew there weren’t any, that they’d both forgotten how to sleep and left reality behind for the night, that they might both still be asleep. The world seemed at once wide open and artificially closed off, like a video game world, and like all video game worlds it had its own logic, so Zachary knew there was a reason Ethan had asked him what he’d asked him.

“Are *you* into *me*?” Zachary asked.

Ethan didn’t answer. He stared at Zachary.

“Cause I’m okay with it if you are, but just don’t think that we’re gonna-“

“I get it,” Ethan said. “And we’re friends, okay? I get that, too.”

“Okay,” Zachary said. “So what now?”

“I dunno,” Ethan said. Zachary’s smoke vanished into the machine-scrubbed air. The filters whirred around them. They walked towards the fountain.

\*

The food court, really an alcove with a few chairs and a single fast food restaurant, was closed, and the fast food restaurant was locked up behind an iron gate even heavier than the ones blocking the abandoned boutiques that dominated the mall, but the three of them still sat there, two of them talking, unraveling the last few years, the third listening, or perhaps not, or perhaps not there at all.

“I was a part of it,” Zachary said, towards the end. “I mean, that’s really the hard part for me.”

“A part of what?”

“Like, that whole world Patrick had to live in. I mean, remember the note I slipped into his locker?”

“Yeah.” Ethan looked away, and gazed into the darkness of the food court. They sat under skylights that had been partially replaced with wooden boards, creating a checkerboard of moonlight and shadow around them.

“I just don’t know what that means,” Zachary said. “Does it mean I’m a bad person? Does it mean I’m a hypocrite? I’m at a loss here.”

“So am I.”

“So what do we do?”

“I don’t know.” Ethan shrugged. “I’ve been assuming I’ll find out sometime. Really, I think I’ll . . .”

“Yeah?” Zachary felt massive, as if his skin and muscles and bones and organs were somehow thicker, denser than before, as if there were more of him. “What’ll you do?”

“I wanna get out of this place,” Ethan said.

Zachary got up, then leaned on the table with both hands. “I’m sorry. Really. Let’s get out of here.”

“Okay.” Ethan didn’t so much get up as rise towards the square of light over his head.

Zachary couldn’t stop watching Ethan as they left the way they’d come in. The red had gone out of Ethan’s eyes. He seemed awake, with a new energy that squirmed under his skin as he smoked, walking through the department store aisles so quickly that he periodically slipped

out of the beam of light from Zachary's cell phone. When they parted, he ran to his car, each leg moving at its own speed, so that he almost tripped himself twice. Each time, he caught his balance in midair, as if he were weightless.

Zachary got in his car and drove home with his new solidity. He got the sense that he wasn't alone in the car, but when he checked the backseat, it was empty. The presence persisted, like a cricket under the seat, but he didn't mind—it seemed so natural all of a sudden, this haunting. He slipped into his bedroom, closed the window behind him and fell asleep.

\*

He woke up to find Patrick at the foot of the bed, an open pomegranate in his hand. His hands and lips were stained with its juices, and he chewed meditatively on a mouthful of seeds. Zachary assumed that he couldn't move, and lay there for a minute, staring at Patrick and waiting for the ghost to lift him up to the ceiling.

When it didn't happen, he said "Well?" and was surprised to find himself actually saying it. The ghost jammed the pomegranate seeds into the corner of his mouth, producing a visible bulge, and said "What?"

"Aren't you gonna lift me up to the ceiling?"

"Now why would I do a thing like that?"

"I dunno. You did it before, right?"

The ghost let the seeds fall back into his mouth, chewed them some more, and swallowed. "Doesn't mean I have to do it now."

"So what's changed?"

The ghost walked over to the trash can and threw the pomegranate in. Then he took out a pack of cigarettes and pulled one out. It was already lit. "You tell me, faggot."



For a moment, Zachary thought about asking the ghost for a cigarette, but then he got up, dug around in his underwear drawer, and found a pack of his own. The one he took out was already lit, too, so he knew he was dreaming. He inhaled, blew out a blob of smoke, then said, “It’s me, isn’t it?”

The ghost smiled. “You should just say it,” he said.

Zachary took another drag on his cigarette. He held it in as long as he could. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know that doesn’t mean anything, but I’m sorry.”

“It means more than you think,” the ghost said.

“Thanks.”

“I want you to have something. It was yours, but then you handed it over, and I wanted to give it back to you before the big move.”

The ghost walked over to him, holding his cigarette in his pomegranate-stained mouth. He took Zachary’s wrist, turned it so the palm faced upwards, and placed a slip of paper on it before taking Zachary’s fingers in his other hand and wrapping them into a fist. When Zachary looked up, the ghost was gone.

He opened his fist. The paper was wrinkled and faded, but he could still make out the word FAG.

## HOTEL

After he was laid off, Carson went home and did one hundred pushups. Then he did one hundred abdominal crunches, then he attached the pull-up bar to his bedroom door frame and did pull-up after pull-up until his whole body was a mass of panicked nerves, then he gazed at the mirror over his sink for an hour, not so much admiring as observing the grimy sweat that ran down his crude, shapeless muscles. His eyes traced the arc of an eyebrow, the stray hair that peeked out from a nostril, the curve of his lips, the scar on his chin from where he'd crashed a bike as a child, and then pulled his gaze back to study his torso, contemplate its bulges and dents, and compare his muscles with those of the glossy models and actors in *GQ*.

Years ago, his father had warned him against the muscles in *GQ*, misbegotten things produced by extravagant gym equipment and too much time on a man's hands. Carson's father had taught him to treasure the strength gotten by lifting buckets of paint, hauling ladders, mowing lawns, and chopping wood in the backyard. Carson still had a scar from when he'd swung wide and jammed the axe into his calf as a teenager. But since he'd moved out, since he'd subscribed to *GQ* to appease a desperate door-to-door saleswoman whose whole body smelled like deodorant, he'd found himself slowly being sucked into finding those bodies beautiful. The men in *GQ* were ageless, solid, with no emotions deeper than those which could be implied by a sardonic grin or a white-toothed smile in a drug commercial. Their physiques seemed effortless, like extraordinary cave formations built by nothing but the slow drip of water.

He called his father, who didn't answer. He turned on the TV and popped open a can of beer. He fell asleep drinking it and woke up in the middle of the night with a headache. Not sure what else to do, he took two aspirin and drove back to the site of what was meant to be but would never become the Hotel D'Mar.

There were no cars in the front parking lot, and no traffic at this hour other than Carson's pick-up truck. He parked in the back and saw a utility van idling by the Porta-Potties. Some of the laborers were shoving two-by-fours into it. They froze when they saw Carson, and for a moment he thought they were going to flee, but then they went back to work. Carson parked the truck and stepped outside. One of the laborers held the back door open for him.

He went into the last room he'd painted before the project had run out of money. His boss had insisted on piling as much of the furniture as would fit in the bathroom, and the resulting heap had tilted precariously over his head. Most of it was gone now. Carson picked out two leftover chairs and carried them out to his car. Then he went back and got more from other rooms. He piled them in the back of his truck, then drove ten below the speed limit back to the little house he rented a mile away from the beach. He and his roommates, all gone now, had made a bonfire one night with furniture from an abandoned Shoney's. They drank cheap beer while sticking chair after cheaply upholstered chair into the fire. The flames burned purple, blue, yellow, even green as they tore through the seat cushions to the plastic foam within. Carson lit a fire for himself, black smoke rising into the solitary night as he gingerly lowered the chairs into the fire one at a time, but after the first two chairs the novelty wore off and he couldn't shake the feeling that the neighbors were peeking out their windows and over the fence into his yard, so he went to bed, leaving the fire to die out on its own.

He woke up the next day to a call from his father.

"Dad?"

"Carson," his father said. "I heard you got fired."

His father used to have a twang in his voice, but it had vanished years ago, and now his jagged sentences sounded affected, like a parent using slang to seem cool to a sullen teenager

who'd taken to speaking like an automaton. It always surprised Carson to hear his father talk like that, since he'd dealt with Carson's teenage sullenness by making Carson dig holes in the yard and fill them back in until the simple act of being angry at his father was too much work.

"Laid off, actually. The project ran out of money," Carson said.

"I told you it would," his father said. "You should listen to me before you take a job in this industry."

"I know." Carson said. "I'm sorry."

Carson heard his father sigh. "You don't have to say that," his father said.

Carson knew that he did.

"Thanks, Dad." Carson still had a headache.

The conversation opened into a yawning chasm, and Carson stood at the edge, wearing a blindfold, not sure which way he was facing. His father excused himself to go to work, and they said their good-byes and hung up.

Carson spent the whole day working out, until he could feel his body fall apart. It was something he liked about construction: the exhaustion, the occasional pulled muscle or torn ligament, the wounds that made him feel close to himself, part of the world, like he'd actually done something worth doing to get them. In a way, he was grateful to his father for pressuring him to work with his hands, and as he did pull-up after pull-up, he found his hatred for the old man and his clipped, smug speech grow less and less with each repetition. That evening, when his whole body hurt and his right arm was so sore he could barely open a beer bottle, he took a flask of whiskey and went to the hotel.

The Hotel D'Mar rose up from the dirt like a half-buried Moorish palace designed by a child, and its flimsy stucco battlements and gaping windows seemed even more regal now that

everything that had once surrounded it—the heaps of wood, the dumpsters, the Porta-Potties, the nude sculpture by the pool—was gone. The contractors had reclaimed their equipment, the laborers and other scavengers had gotten the rest. The front doorway was already boarded up.

Carson parked in the back again. Someone had placed a rock in the gateway to the beach, and the breeze repeatedly pulled the gate open and slammed it against the rock with a dull clunk. He moved the rock with his foot until it held the gate all the way open, then stepped through.

The path became a wooden walkway with a gazebo halfway between the hotel and the beach. A weathervane in the shape of a swooping osprey spun over the gazebo. For a moment, Carson thought he saw the nude statue from the pool propped against the railing. It was wearing a shirt that clung to its skinny frame and leaning over the edge of the railing to look at something. Its long hair clung to its head, wrapped around the curve of its slender neck. As his eyes adjusted to the starlight, Carson realized he was looking at a boy, about eighteen years old and sopping wet. He must have just gone for a swim.

“You know,” Carson said, surprised at his own forwardness, “that the sharks come out at night, right?” He took a swig of whiskey.

The boy didn’t look away from whatever was down there. “They hang out mostly to the south, though,” he said, adjusting his wet hair. “This part of the beach is pretty safe. I think it’s all the boat traffic or something.”

As if to illustrate what he’d said, a speedboat cruised in the distance, its engine buzzing like a wasp.

“You know this place well?”

The boy shrugged. “Family used to live here, before they moved inland after the hurricane.”

Salt water dripped down the boy's neck and soaked the collar of his tie-dyed T-shirt. It was a few sizes too big for him, as if he'd washed up naked on shore and put on someone else's clothes. "What're you looking at?" Carson asked him.

"Turtles."

"Turtles?"

"Fucking."

Carson looked over the edge. The boy had to point at the two dark shapes for a few seconds before Carson could see them.

"Those aren't turtles," Carson said.

"What?"

"Those are gopher tortoises. They live in the dunes. Dad and me used to take potshots at them."

"Cool," the boy said. "Do they make that noise?"

"What noise?"

The boy made a sound like a dolphin, but drawn out and creaking. "The sound turtles make when they fuck."

"You like that word, don't you?"

"What word?"

"Fuck."

"It's a pretty handy word."

Carson took a swig of whiskey, and his hand offered the boy the flask of its own accord. The boy took it before Carson could rescind the offer.

"So how old are you?" Carson asked.

“Nineteen.”

“You look young.”

The boy took another swig. “For now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” the boy said. “People tend to look older when they get older, maybe?”

“It was supposed to be a compliment.”

The boy shrugged. “I know.”

“So what’re you doing out here?”

“I went for a swim,” the boy said. “Now I’m watching turtles have sex and talking to some weird guy who just showed up to warn me about sharks. Oh, and I’m underage drinking.”

Carson took his flask back and took a swig, but almost spat it out when one of the tortoises wailed. It sounded nothing like a dolphin. It was an infantile sound, a cracked keening, broken off at its peak as if a wire had been cut, severing some vital connection.

“Told you,” the boy said. “Anyway, I gotta get going. It’s late.”

“Okay. Nice meeting you.”

“Same. Or something.” The boy walked off, leaving a trail of salt water behind him.

Carson watched him head back to the beach, and wanted to ask why he didn’t go the other way, but instead he took a swig from his flask and tried to make sense of what had just happened. The tortoises went their separate ways, stumbling over the dunes like creatures new to gravity.

Carson walked back to the hotel and chain-smoked in the back of his truck. For a moment, he slipped away, but he gazed at his reflection in the truck’s rear window until he felt himself come back. Then he went home.

The next day, he called his friends in the construction business, and found that almost all of them were out of work, or out of some of their work, or about to be, or afraid that they were about to be.

“It’s like all of a sudden,” one of them said. “Everyone’s decided they have enough buildings, and they can fix everything themselves.”

“So Burkowski’s not hiring at all?” asked Carson.

“Not painters, no.”

Carson lit a cigarette and took a swig of his beer.

“But he is hiring?”

“Yeah, I think he is. It doesn’t pay well, though.”

“I don’t really care,” Carson said. “I need the money, and I need the work or I’m gonna go crazy.”

His friend called him back a couple hours later, telling him that Burkowski would take him on as a cleaner.

“It’s not bad work,” his friend said. “Mostly, you sweep and haul the piss-bottles downstairs.”

“The what?”

“Burkowski doesn’t like the Mexicans to go to the Porta-Potties too much,” the friend said. “So they bring all these empty soda bottles and piss in them. Leave them fucking everywhere. The cleaners gotta pick ‘em up, I mean it’s not part of the job description, but they do, carry them downstairs and dump ‘em in the Porta-Potties.”

Carson didn’t know what to say to that, so he told his friend he’d drop by tomorrow and talk to Burkowski. That night he got drunk, and when he woke up he had the feeling that he’d



lost something. He made it into the shower and out the front door before he realized what it was: the faint smell of paint fumes that followed him everywhere until he wondered, sometimes, if it was in his head. Underneath it, he smelled kind of nice.

Burkowski hired him on the spot—the junkies who normally did the job had hopped in a van and skipped town for god knew where, and he needed all the help he could get. Carson's only coworker was a man in his forties who'd spent twenty years working for Lambent Construction. They swept the floors, creating thick fogs of dust, and carried lidless two-liter bottles of urine downstairs. The urine was dark, almost amber. Shapeless things floated in it. Everything smelled like paint, and Carson was afraid that he might pass out, but he didn't. When it was all over, he went home and took a shower. The water at his feet was yellowish for the first few seconds, and the smell of urine lingered in his nostrils like a worm.

That night he sat and watched TV in a haze of boredom, lazily drinking beer and not sure what he was watching except that it had sharks in it. At midnight, he went to bed and lay there, staring at the ceiling, imagining the speckled paint melting and dripping onto his face, covering him in paint, burying him in it. He imagined his body rotting away over centuries, replaced by an absence, a cavern in the shape of his body under a hundred feet of paint. The air conditioning, which was on a timer, shut off, and Carson sweated into the sheets for an hour before he sat up, flipped through the channels twice and, because he had nothing better to do, went back to the Hotel D'Mar.

There was no one on the gazebo, and under the light of a full moon he couldn't see anyone in the water. He waited for a moment, not sure why, then turned and went back to his pick-up truck, but the back door to the hotel was open, so he went inside. Motes of moon-bright dust spun around him like fireflies.

He lit the way ahead of him with his cell phone, which barely replaced the moonlight. Someone had swept the dust into the corner, forming a clear path down a corridor of open rooms to a stairwell in the lobby. A little side path led to the reception desk, but Carson went upstairs and followed a sound of off-key singing to one of the luxury suites.

The boy sat on one of the windowsills, smoking a cigarette between lines of his song, which was in a foreign language that Carson didn't recognize. His hair seemed to glow. At first, he ignored Carson and kept on singing. Then he turned his head toward Carson and almost fell out the window. Carson ran to catch him.

"You surprised me," the boy said.

"Sorry." Carson helped him right himself.

"What're you doing here?"

Carson shrugged. "I don't know. Used to work here, thought I'd see what it was like."

"Well, this is it. Do you like it?"

"What are you doing here?"

The boy sat up straight, leaned forward, scratched his ankle. Carson saw something metal in his boot. "I live here."

"You live here?"

The boy rolled his eyes and sighed. "Who told you?"

"Sorry," Carson said. "Now can you sit up? I'm kind of nervous with you fondling your knife like that."

"What knife?"

"In your boot."

“Sorry.” The boy sat up straight, then pushed himself off the ledge and onto the floor, where he sat in a crude half-lotus. He wore a black tank-top that was two sizes too big for him, and had to pull one of the sleeves back onto his bony shoulders. Light seemed to pool in his clavicles. “You got your flask?”

“Not tonight.”

The boy stood, shakily, then found his footing. “I stole some beer.” He walked on tip-toe to a Styrofoam cooler in the corner. “Got it outta the back of someone’s pick-up on the beach today. Hope it wasn’t yours.”

“No,” Carson said. “I was hauling bottles of piss around.”

“Me too,” the boy said. “This stuff is total piss.”

Carson gazed at the boy as he dug in his pockets for a bottle opener. Everything about him: the width of his movements, the frailty of his arms, his off-kilter walk and his nasal, lilting speech, all suggested someone completely unfit for squatting. But here he was, belting out an excited cry upon finding a bottle opener before reaching into a pool of lukewarm meltwater to retrieve a pair of bottles that couldn’t be more than a couple degrees above room temperature, opening them and handing one to a near-total stranger.

Carson raised his bottle for a toast. The boy did the same, but instead of proposing a toast, he told him his name. “I’m Halifax.”

“Is that your real name?”

“It’s where my parents met, or something.” Halifax rammed his bottle into Carson’s, then took a swig. “They didn’t really talk about it that much.”

“Cool,” Carson said. The name made him think of icy seawater and fog-shrouded lighthouses. “I’m Carson.”

“Like the MTV guy?” It was the first indication that Halifax had had a life before he appeared on the boardwalk of the hotel.

“Like the MTV guy.” Carson drank long and deep.

Halifax had been squatting for a month. His friends, most of whom had gone to college, were strewn around the state, and he could couch surf and borrow money that he never paid back. His father, who was either a gloomy old man or a violent, tattooed young drunk, had kicked him out, either when they found out he was gay or when they found his make-up. His story was so confused, so full of contradictory layers and sudden twists from subject to subject that Carson couldn't tell. Halifax showered at a friend's place nearby, but his friend wouldn't let him crash there, so he spent his nights as the only guest at the Hotel D'Mar. He'd run out of exfoliant, and he was afraid the salt and sand in the air would dry out his skin.

Carson listened to everything he said. He wanted to ask Halifax what it was like, being gay, wanted to ask him if the long-legged awkwardness and the illuminated skin came with it or were just something he did for show, and if so, why? At the same time, he felt paralyzed, as if Halifax had a hold over him. Who was he to question someone like Halifax, someone who had walked out of the ocean and knew about the sounds that tortoises made in their most intimate moments, even if he didn't know a tortoise from a turtle? Finally, after a few more beers that seemed to have hardly any effect on Halifax, Carson broke and asked him, “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” Halifax leaned forward and grinned. By this point, Carson could tell he was *trying* to act like a cartoon cat-person.

“Act like that. I mean, your Dad didn't seem too patient with it.”

“I don't know. Just happens that way. Really, the more I think about it, the more I needed him to kick me out of there. He was sucking me in. All those unspoken rules and everything, all

that walking on eggshells around his fucking manliness, it all starts to make this weird kind of almost sense after a while. I'd probably break if I didn't get out of there."

"Break?"

"You know, start feeling ashamed of myself like he wanted me to, grow a bunch of muscles and join the army or something. You know, man up, be like Dad, that kinda stuff."

Carson was done with his beer, and there weren't any more bottles left. He lit a cigarette.

"Don't you want to?"

"Want to what?"

"Grow some muscle."

Halifax finished his beer. "Never did." Then he paused and added, "Is that weird?"

"A little," Carson said. "I guess."

"I need sleep," Halifax said. "I'm gonna pass out. What time is it?"

It was almost three in the morning. "Same here," Carson said. He had a hard time getting up, his legs heavy and awkward, as if they'd gotten longer. "You gonna be all right here?"

"Yeah," Halifax said. "If I can get some more product. I'll probably pinch some from that grocery store on A1A."

"Okay, then. I'll see you around." And with that, he stumbled into the hallway, oddly aware that he wasn't drunk, but that his legs felt numb. By the time he got to the stairs, they felt better, and he drove home and went to bed.

The next day was blistering hot, and the bottles of urine slid around in his sweaty grasp. He spilled one, pouring amber urine clotted with used chewing tobacco down the stairs, and the foreman made him and the forty-year-old pissboy that he worked with spend an hour cleaning it

before the older pissboy passed out from heat exhaustion. Carson's father called him that evening to ask him how work was going, and he told his father it was going fine.

"You don't sound so sure," his father said.

"It's good."

"Have you been lazy again?"

Carson sighed. "I'm not lazy anymore."

"I've always been worried you'd get lazy again," his father said. "You wouldn't be where you are now if you'd worked harder in high school."

"I know," Carson said.

"Then keep working," his father said. "I have to go."

It went on like this for a week. Stinking of other men's urine; unable to say anything to a father who couldn't say anything to him, but wouldn't stop calling; exhausted at the end of the day and on the verge of collapse in the morning heat; his face fading into mist between crunches and pull-ups and glute lifts, Carson forgot about the hotel, and while he still worried about Halifax, the boy was now like a ghostly hitchhiker he'd picked up on a lonely road, only to have him vanish a couple miles later, leaving the smell of old roses in the car. It wasn't until Saturday that he could worry about anything but urine for long enough to buy a jar of exfoliant and head to the hotel.

Someone had tagged the back wall, writing FAGGOTS in big black letters and signing their names in multicolored squiggles that looked more like toddlers' drawings than anything. The back door was shut, but one of the windows was open. Carson looked inside and saw holes in the wall, some with chairs sticking out of them. Carson went inside and saw more tagging, long streaks of green and black and yellow where someone had run up and down the hall with a

can of spray paint. Broken glass littered the way to the lobby and crunched under the soles of Carson's boots. He'd brought a flashlight this time, and its pale beam leached the color from everything, making the walls look sickly.

"Halifax?"

His flashlight passed over a dark spot at the foot of the lobby stairs. It wasn't blood; it was too thick, too complicated. He smelled rotten eggs and saw the yolks floating in the mix. A trail led upstairs, and Carson followed it.

Halifax lay on the floor, curled up in a corner. Whatever covered him was also smeared down the wall behind him—he'd sat back, then slumped over and curled into a fetal position. Carson caught other smells under the stench of the eggs: vegetable oil, chocolate syrup, spray paint, cheap beer. A purple bruise rose from the skin on Halifax's cheek. He came to slowly, his breathing seeming deeper under the flashlight beam, and when he turned his head to face Carson he did so with the pained movements of an old dog. Halifax smiled; dried blood stuck to his teeth.

Carson took him home. At first, he wanted to take Halifax to the hospital, because the bump on the side of his head and the gulfs of silence between his words made a strong case for a concussion, but Halifax was too afraid of being arrested, or having his parents called, or of something else that he couldn't name, so Carson took him home, not even bothering to put newspapers on the car seat. Then he sat outside the bathroom, listening for a crash while Halifax showered, but nothing happened except that Halifax used up half a bottle of shampoo and still couldn't get all the paint out of his hair. Green lines crossed his bangs like vines.

They hadn't come for Halifax, or Halifax didn't think so. "They . . . I think they just wanted to make trouble. They wanted to vandalize the place, smoke . . . some pot, drink, and I . .

. fucking stupid, I went down and decided to see what was going on. They egged me, tagged me . . . beat me, like they did the hotel. I don't know what the syrup was for. Guess they just had it in the house, wanted . . . to take everything they could . . . to fuck things up with." The skin on one side of his face bulged and purpled, swelled over one eye. The other one gazed out at Carson, then darted around the room, clear and nervous as a bird's eye. "Do you have . . . roommates?"

"No," Carson said. "They moved out a couple weeks before I lost my job."

"Why?"

"Lost their jobs, moved in with their folks."

Halifax was leaning against the wall outside the bathroom, and when he sat upright Carson saw a water stain behind him in the exact shape of his body. "Can I . . ." the boy stopped for a moment. "Can I stay in one of their rooms for a while? Until I'm better."

"No problem," Carson said. "Just try to stay awake until the concussion's gone. You sure you don't want a doctor?"

"No doctors," Halifax said. "You promised."

"No doctors," Carson said.

They stayed up, smoking cigarettes and watching TV. Carson kept looking over at Halifax, his eyes on the boy's fingers as he ate popcorn or on his lips as he drank water or on his eyes as they followed the action on screen. At first, Halifax didn't seem to understand what he was watching, and stared blankly at situation comedies as if they were broadcast in Finnish, but by the time the ridiculous infomercials for fifty dollars blenders came on, he was coherent enough that they could make fun of them together, and Carson fell asleep before him.

The next morning, Carson woke up and found a note from Halifax: *Went for a walk. Leave the door unlocked.* Groggy after only three hours of sleep, he drove himself through his



day, spilling two bottles of rancid piss and vomiting a little into the pool. His foreman let him go home early after he cleaned up the mess he'd made. Dizzy from heat, hunger, and fatigue, he got home to find Halifax on the couch. The parts of him that weren't purple were beet red.

"You okay?" asked Carson. He kicked his boots off and noticed that Halifax's bare feet were swollen.

"I've been running," Halifax said. The TV muttered something about hemorrhoid cushions. "And I borrowed your weights."

"Why?"

"Last night . . ."

Carson went to the fridge and got himself a beer. "You should rest."

"That's what I was doing yesterday, though. Didn't even leave the hotel, except to go for a swim at dusk."

"There are sharks out at dusk."

"There are sharks pretty much all the time," Halifax said. "And I told you, they're mostly south of the hotel. My arms hurts."

Carson left him and went to his room. His free weights lay on the bed; Halifax had been lifting twenty pounds in each spindly arm. "They'll probably hurt for a couple days," he called out. "Rest them a while, or you'll get rhabdo."

"I don't know what that is," Halifax called down the hall. "But is it worse than getting the shit kicked out of you for no reason?"

Carson had to admit that Halifax had a point. His mind tried to work around it, but he knew the answer wouldn't come until work the next day. He sat down with his beer and watched TV with Halifax and talked about spilling piss everywhere. When evening came, he opened the

Venetian blinds and waited for the moonlight to reflect off Halifax's skin and light up the room, but it didn't happen. After dark, Carson turned on the lights. They ordered a cheese pizza for dinner. Grease dribbled down Halifax's wrist.

At work the next day, Carson got a call. He'd just finished dumping urine into the Porta-Potty, so he ducked under a stairwell.

"Hi, Carson." His father's voice seemed mushy, as if he had a mouthful of pea soup.

"Are you okay, Dad?"

"My throat's not right. I'll see a doctor soon. How is Burkowski treating you?" He coughed; it sounded wet.

"It's okay," Carson said.

"Maybe he needs a painter."

"I don't think so." Burkowski had just laid off two painters; one of them needed the job for his visa.

"Did you ask?"

"Sure, Dad," Carson said. "I asked. There's nothing else for me."

"Well," his father said. "Your mother wants to talk to you."

"Okay, Dad," Carson said, but he could already hear his father tell his mother to get the phone.

"Hello, Carson," she said.

"Hi, Mom. How're you?" There was a stretch of silence; Carson couldn't tell how long it lasted.

Then she said, "I'm well. How are you?"

"I'm good," Carson said. "I..."

“Yes?”

Carson couldn't remember what he'd been about to say, and as he searched his memory, his mother said, “I hope you're doing well. Your father said you—oh, yes, dear, that's good advice. Your father says not to waste time on the clock, and I should call you later.”

“Okay, Mom,” Carter said. “You have a good day, all right?”

“You too, dear. We love you.”

Carson went back to work with the odd feeling that the call had been dropped and would resume at any moment, but it never did. , He finished his day by sweeping the stairwells, ducking into corners whenever a barrage of laborers marched up or down the stairs. Sometimes, they shoved bottles of urine into his hand, and he had to run to the Porta-Potties to dump the contents. By the end of the day, his back hurt and his legs felt so heavy that he could barely walk.

When Carson came home, Halifax was gone; he'd left another note about going for a run. A few minutes later, he came back in, barefoot and soaked in sweat. “I need to do laundry,” he said, and pulled off his shirt. His stomach was soft and an inch wider than his waist.

Halifax's clothes rolled and fell in the washing machine, and he drank one of Carson's protein shakes. Carson lay on the sofa.

“You all right?” asked Halifax. He leaned on the arm of the sofa and chugged his shake. It left a chocolate moustache on his lip.

“Tired.”

“I was hoping you'd give me some pointers.”

“How're your arms?”

“Better.” Halifax stood up, turned on the TV, hunted through the channels.

“Good,” Carson said. “Keep it that way.”

“Are you gonna tell me how my body’s fine as it is or something?”

”Well, it is.”

“No it isn’t.” Halifax didn’t even stop changing channels. “If it was, why’d those assholes hand me my ass so easy?”

“That happens sometimes,” Carson said. He didn’t know where these words were coming from. “You can’t do anything about it. You just gotta be who you are.”

“But I’m tired of who I am. Who I am is just this stupid rebellion against . . . I don’t even know against what. Look where it’s got me.”

“It’s not a bad place,” Carson said.

Halifax didn’t respond. He stopped channel surfing to watch Nancy Grace, who was saying that a recent celebrity death might be a homicide.

“What I want to know,” she said, “is who he was with that night? Why was this person giving him so many drugs? What did this person have to do with him getting in the water?”

She went on, growing louder and angrier, until Carson fell asleep. He dreamed of pushing a shadowy drunk over the railings of a cruise ship. The drunk fell into darkness, and Carson listened for a splash, but it never came.

Carson’s mother called him the next morning to tell him that his father was in the hospital. One of his teeth had abscessed, and the infection had travelled to his bloodstream in the night. Carson had learned once, while half-asleep in a middle school history class, that more than one pharaoh had died this way. He thought about that all the way to the hospital, and almost forgot to call in sick.

He had to park half a mile from the hospital, on the far side of a parking lot almost liquid with heat, and halfway to the front entrance he realized that his teeth hurt. When he got inside, he

went to the bathroom to look inside his mouth, only to see that his face wasn't there. He spent twenty minutes pulling it back, getting each eye and nostril in its right place, each stray hair between his eyebrows in line, then watched himself for a minute longer, to make sure nothing moved.

His father was on a respirator. His mother sat beside him, gazing out the window, holding her own hand. "How is he?" Carson asked.

"He's ..." His mother hesitated. She looked out the window, and ran a hand along the excess skin on her throat. "They say it was a pretty bad abscess, but he's stable now."

"He knew about this," Carson said.

"No," his mother said. "He didn't. He went to bed with a cough. We thought it was a cold. Then he woke me and I could barely hear him. He sounded so faint and warped. I didn't know something like this could do that to your voice."

Carson's father was watching them.

"He's drugged," his mother said. "He probably doesn't know you're here."

"He told me not to waste any time yesterday," Carson said. "I think he knew."

"Why?"

"He told me not to waste my time."

"But if he knew," asked his mother. "Then why didn't he do anything about it?"

Carson didn't know how to answer that question, and his mother's face slipped back into its usual fogginess so quickly that Carson wondered if she'd really said it. The machines hooked up to his father let out the same rhythmic beats that they had let out when Carson got there, and his mother stared in the general direction of her husband without looking at him. She cleared her throat once, twice, three times.

“Is he gonna be all right?” Carson asked.

“They’ll have to put him on antibiotics,” she said. “Until his airway opens. And they’ll have to drain the abscess, or abscesses. I think the doctors said there was more than one now. He’s getting his teeth out the moment this clears up.”

Carson left a few minutes later, after making small talk with his mother about carbohydrates and Nancy Grace. He had trouble finding his truck in the parking lot, and almost walked past it; it looked smaller than before. On the way home, he played with the radio, not so much choosing an 80s station as giving up when he happened to be tuned in to one. Billy Idol sneered his way through “White Wedding,” and Carson bobbed his head dispassionately until he convinced himself that it meant something. He slowed down so he could hear the whole song, but still got home right when the bridge began.

At first, he didn’t recognize Halifax. It wasn’t until he saw the heap of hair on the linoleum in the kitchenette that he made the connection to the shaved head watching TV. A red bruise boiled up from Halifax’s naked scalp, surrounded by pimply fields of razor burn.

“Dude,” Carson said. “What did you do?”

Halifax didn’t look away from the screen. He was watching a documentary about Alaskan truck drivers. “I shaved my head.”

“Why?”

Halifax didn’t say anything for a while. Then he said “I want a job.”

“Why?”

“I need money, to pay rent. And get new clothes.”

“New clothes?”

A commercial break started, and Halifax turned around. With his bangs gone, Carson could see every bruise and bump on his face. It made him think of pictures he'd seen of the lunar surface up close: a broken, jagged landscape strewn with rubble, like a war zone. "I'm sick of being me," Halifax said. "I'm not . . . I'm not a real person. I'm sick of being this . . . this faggot, this skinny little hipster *faggot*."

Carson could feel his face coming loose.

"I wanna be more like you," Halifax said.

"What?"

"Can you get me a job with that construction guy? I mean, I know it's shit work, but I don't have a permanent address, and I don't have to take that kinda job home with me."

"Yes, you do," Carson said. "You have no idea."

"Plus it's good exercise. That's been the problem for me, y'know? Like, it's hard and stuff. I've gotten too damn soft."

"No, you're not."

"I'm not?"

"You have to be pretty hard to get by when you're that girly. I couldn't have done it."

"But I had friends to help me," Halifax said. "I mean, not really, but I could shower and shit. I mean, you didn't see it, but one day I had to go without bathing, and I totally flipped out. Itched myself crazy."

Carson went down the hall to the bathroom, and Halifax followed him for a few steps. "I just don't want to be that kid in the hotel anymore."

Carson stood in the mirror. His face was a blank field of skin framed by black hair that stood out like the spines on a sea urchin. Halifax stood behind him, skinny arms crossed, legs

shaking with exhaustion, his face expressionless except for the swelling that squeezed one eye into a look of empty rage. Behind him, the pull-up bar jutted out from a doorway, and after a few seconds Halifax turned around, grabbed it, and struggled to pull himself up. Before Carson knew what he was doing, he walked behind Halifax and hoisted him up until his chin was over the bar. Halifax's muscles shook under his hands, as if he were about to break apart, and when Carson let go of him Halifax stayed airborne, clinging to the bars. His grunt became a scream before he finally dropped.



## **DARK GLOBE**

The first things Westley had to load onto the SaniTaxi Medical Delivery LLC van were a pair of metal barrels that looked like futuristic garbage cans and reeked of alcohol-based disinfectant. Westley and a pair of bony orderlies walled the barrels in behind containers full of urine samples, plasma bags, biopsied tissue, and cerebro-spinal fluid. Westley had to do most of the work himself—the orderlies constantly ran out of breath, and they took turns taking breaks to fill out paperwork while Westley, whose muscles had been hardened by several years of carrying steel boxes and coolers full of human by-product, worked non-stop, almost throwing containers on top of each other. He liked the metallic clang and the sound of fluid jostling for space inside plastic bags, and the work kept him from having to listen to the orderlies joke with one another.

When he was done, Westley slammed the cooler shut and tied the first seal, a zip tie with a plastic nob coated in paper that he initialed and dated, around the latch before driving off. The orderlies waved good-bye. He rolled his eyes and gave them the finger once he was sure they wouldn't see it.

A mile out, the SaniTaxi depot rose like a monolith from the North Texas horizon. It was the only inhabited place for miles, part of a planned community that never blossomed. Westley passed an abandoned gas station and a couple of houses. He took one last glance at the depot, then lit a cigarette and drove another twenty miles to the nearest town and the beginning of his route.

The AC was broken, so he drove with the window down, one arm hanging out, fingers playing in the breeze. Once or twice he looked out over the cotton fields and was in awe of how far away everything was, and remembered the Florida suburb where he'd grown up, a sprawl of houses encased in woods so that the only open space was on the beach or the mall parking lot.

He never got over how vast this part of the country was by comparison. He was still young, only twenty-five, and when he talked to his parents over the phone on the weekends they never stopped suggesting possibilities for him: college, the army, some charity program in Africa. But when he looked around him all he could see was cotton.

\*

Westley, sixteen, met Cleo at a party. A year into high school, he and his friend Isaac met almost everyone they knew at parties. Sometimes Westley wondered how else people met.

She was sitting on the sofa, playing with a glass sphere with lightning in it. He'd seen her around school, where she'd been vibrant and stoned, and at other parties and shows where she looked positively electric. Cleo had never paid attention to him before, even when he was dating one of the girls she hung out with all the time. Only now those girls were gone, and she smoked alone with one hand while rubbing the globe with the other. The lightning bolts scuttled after her hand.

Westley and Isaac were looking in separate rooms for Isaac's jacket. It gave Westley an excuse to talk to her.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi." She kept on playing with the lightning bolts.

"You seen a jacket around here?"

"A what?" She looked up, then back down, then back up.

"My friend lost his jacket."

She got up, looked around, sat back down. Westley noticed that she was wearing a fleece jacket like Isaac's, with what looked like tribal tattoos running down its sleeves. It looked much cooler on her than it did on Isaac, who was the kind of person that smoked cigarettes in the

bathroom by the gym but was too afraid of getting in trouble to let anyone copy his homework. “No,” she said.

“It looks like yours,” Westley said.

Cleo shrugged and took it off. “I was wondering if you’d notice.” She handed the jacket over to him. He smiled when he took it, and she smiled back, and for a moment he had a vision of them stealing things together, crossing gargoyle-strewn wastelands to climb castle walls and slip in through the windows where they found some pulsating, glowing orb and Westley stuffed it in his messenger bag before they walked, hand in hand, out the unguarded back door.

“You see something?” she asked. She was staring back at him.

“Sorry,” he said. “I spaced out for a second.”

Cleo smirked at him, turned around, and sat down on the couch. She wrapped her arms around her chest, and Westley thought she looked cold, so he handed her his jacket.

\*

The deliveries were all the same. Westley drove to a strip mall, parked in the back, rang a bell, and waited for up to five minutes in the blazing heat before one or more nurses or orderlies opened the back door, signed for the shipment, and took it inside. Then they came back out, got their invoices, and handed him some paperwork of their own. The last thing they did was attach another seal to the latch on his van. They often stared at him the whole time, as if he were a heavy object that had almost fallen on their heads. Sometimes he imagined making friends with them and joining them on road trips to Austin or New Orleans or Florida, but he’d made precious few friends in the eight years he’d spent in Texas, and most of them had wandered off to more prosperous parts of the country, leaving him with his memories and the stories about high school that he’d once told girls at bars until they got tired of listening to them. With so little happening

in his life, it became harder to find things to talk about with strangers, and eventually he stopped trying altogether.

Westley drove on, delivering two containers of biopsied skin and a shipment of blood samples, and as he left the huff and hot wind of southern Lubbock, it occurred to him that while he knew exactly what was in all the shipments of blood and skin and human waste, he had no idea what was in those two barrels in the back of his cooler.

He knew they weren't donor organs. Those usually came in smaller, square containers, and he'd only had to transport one of those in his time with SaniTaxi, a kidney that ended up at a hospital in Dallas. Organs mostly travelled by plane and helicopter, and they didn't smell nearly as strongly of alcohol as the barrel did.

South of Lubbock, the roads got straighter and straighter, until they were like drawings of roads in a children's art class, simple lessons in one-point perspective. Nothing to the left, nothing to the right, nothing anywhere but the vast circular cotton fields dotted with farmhouses and strung with power lines. He had an hour before the next stop in Seagraves, and the back roads he took were lonely, and the air was so dry he could feel his saliva evaporate. The clipboard with the invoices lay next to him. At first he resisted the urge to flip ahead, but as he continued driving and making deliveries and the load in the back of his truck got lighter and lighter, exposing more and more of the barrels at each stop, he gave in and read ahead while waiting for a flustered lab technician to bring him his paperwork.

There were only a couple deliveries left, two in Seagraves and one further out in Seminole. The first two were shipments of blood samples to biomedical labs. He'd been to them before; one of them was run by a nervous little woman who seemed to think it was customary to offer him a fifty-cent tip, the other never had the same orderly twice. The third address was new

to him, and he had to read the invoice three times before he was able to process what it said. It was an invoice for a shipment of twenty-four human legs.

\*

Westley had stopped stealing shortly after being sent to live with his grandparents in Texas. Then, a year ago, he'd stopped going to bars, shortly after he'd moved out. After a while, he'd even stopped drinking. At the end of the day he drove back to SaniTaxi headquarters, dropped off the van, got in his car, and drove two hours back to his slumping trailer where he watched reruns of reality TV shows until he passed out. The night before, he'd fallen asleep during a show about a funeral home. The mortician who was the show's effective protagonist had a back covered in tattoos—she hid it at work, but the cameras followed her home often enough—and he imagined Cleo, inky spider webs running down her spine, spreading into spiky wings between her shoulders.

When they'd started dating, the energy picked up inside her and her skin brightened in his nervous arms. She hummed constantly. Little notes came from her closed lips when she slept. She wore vintage go-go boots, got a beet-red pixie cut which she liked to cover under bright, spiky wigs, and started smoking again. Then one day in mid-July, when they couldn't find an older friend to buy them alcohol, she suggested that they steal beer from a convenience store.

"I've done it a bunch of times," Cleo kept saying. "You walk on in, have a friend look at the candy bars. Seriously, a lot of those cashiers are fucking batshit crazy about candy bars."

"I'm not sure about that," Isaac said. He'd dyed his hair green and then tried to dye it back, and he was constantly sniffing the too-black locks that fell in his face. He'd also gotten into the habit of saving his cigarette butts in the pack, to avoid littering. All his cigarettes were stale with their odor.

“No,” Cleo said. “It's true. I used to work in this one place, and the manager was, like, obsessed with her candy bars. Seriously, all those weird fish-eye mirrors were pointed at the candy aisle, and this one guy told me she liked to pop in at midnight to recount it and compare losses with sales.”

“That's just anecdotal evidence,” Isaac said. “I mean, really, you're gonna risk a goddamn criminal record for fucking beer?”

“We're not risking anything,” Westley said. “The cashiers aren't gonna chase us into the parking lot.”

“Yeah, but there's cameras.”

Cleo rolled her eyes. “Yeah, so they know to be on the lookout for blurry white people. Or blobs, maybe. Or walking piles of pixels. Or-”

Isaac slammed his palm down on the car horn. “Can you fucking take this seriously?”

“We are,” she said. “That's why we're waiting until right before closing.”

\*

Westley put the clipboard down and kept on driving, but the legs stayed in his mind. Were they men's legs? Women's legs? Black, white, red, green, purple? Were they broken or deformed? Had they been amputated from living patients, from corpses, did someone find them lying around in a dumpster somewhere? Were they whole, segmented, cut thin like deli meat?

Westley imagined crawling into the refrigerator that made up the back of the van, cool air blasting into the hot Texas afternoon. On his knees in front of the two tubs, he would suddenly know how to open them, reach in and pull out a laminated slice of leg. His mind went over a series of urban legends: murder victims preserved in brandy, mummified rats in bottles of beer.

But it wouldn't be like that, would it?

It was the toes that finally broke him. Twenty miles away from Seagraves, he thought about the feet sticking out from under white sheets in TV morgues. The little handwritten tags tied around the big toes, like the tags on fur coats at Goodwill. The yellow toenails on the men's corpses, the gleaming Technicolor manicures of the women's. He thought of the legs being sawn off and frozen, thought of med students smiling and shaking their heads at the cracked, sulphur-yellow nails. He wondered if whoever was responsible for sawing people's legs off for medical research—Westley imagined a balding German in coke-bottle glasses—cared enough to at least clip their toenails.

He made it another ten miles before he stopped and pulled over to look.

\*

The plan was for Cleo to go in with Westley and be loud, crude, and socially awkward, which would distract the cashier. Westley would grab the beer and walk out while the cashier stared at her, and then Isaac, who was already shaking, would speed off with them in the getaway car.

“Got it?” Cleo asked. Westley nodded.

“Good,” Cleo said. “Cause we’re going in.” She opened the door and got out, and Westley did the same.

“You sure about—” Isaac started, but Westley slammed the car door shut and followed Cleo inside.

The convenience store had glaring halogen lights that reminded Westley of the ones over dentists’ chairs. The automatic door hissed shut behind him, and for a moment he was overwhelmed by the brightness of it all: the lights, the glaring bags of potato chips, the wall of cigarettes, Cleo's neon-blond wig. His gaze passed over everything twice, and the clerk glanced

up from the wide V of Cleo's jacket to stare at him. Cleo's gaze followed the clerk's, and she glared at Westley for a moment before turning back and raising her voice to get the clerk's attention.

“So anyway,” she said, as if she were already drunk and in the middle of a loud and deeply personal anecdote. “What I was gonna say was that the whole thing was just a blow-off. I mean, she leaves me in the waiting room for a whole hour and then marches in and says, like ‘Those are normal side effects.’”

Westley put one foot in front of the other and made his way to the coolers of beer in the back of the store. He paused halfway down an aisle and read the warnings on a single-serving packet of BC Powder and wondered whether the clerk was glancing at the window or him.

He could see his silhouette reflected in the glass of the cooler window as he got to the end of the aisle. Someone had polished it far too well. He reached up and felt along the edge of his skullcap, stuffed a stray lock of dishwater-blond hair back under the rim. Cleo was still talking, and as she went on her monologue got louder and more bizarre.

“But yeah, she wouldn't even do another *breast exam* on me. I was, like, fourteen years old at the time. I didn't know what to do. I mean, nowadays, I can rub them all kinds of ways, so I can check for that myself, but back then, I mean, they weren't even . . .”

Westley took a deep breath, flung the door open, and grabbed two cases of beer without even looking at the brand name. A gust of cool air blew over him, and he could feel it in his spine. His brain froze inside his skullcap.

He didn't run. He turned around and walked, calmly, out the door. Cleo had positioned herself in front of the gate separating the counter from the sales floor, and seductively sucked on her lollipop while rambling on about her breasts. Isaac popped the trunk; Westley kicked it the



rest of the way open, threw the beer in, and threw himself in after it. Isaac was backing out of the parking lot before Westley even reached up and pulled the trunk down over himself. In the darkness, he heard a car door slam, and then he felt a rush of speed and a hard bump as the car turned out of the parking lot. For a moment, Cleo kept talking about her breasts, then she stopped and the car was silent except for the sound of the engine and the wheels and the grumbling road underneath.

The chill left Westley's head. He took off his skullcap and let his hair puff out into a tangled lump. The cases of beer felt cool against his back, and his sweat felt cool on his skin. His head spun in the darkness of the trunk, flurries of excitement for the drunken night to come, for the chance to drink alone with Isaac once Cleo guzzled her way into a happy stupor in front of the television set. And then he felt the cool of what he'd done, an early spring cool, and he lay in it and breathed and didn't worry about anything except how easy shoplifting had been once he got up the courage to do it.

\*

For a moment, Westley stood at the back door and stared at its glistening SaniTaxi logo. For a moment after that, he imagined satellite photography, security alarms, hidden GPS trackers, spies in the cotton fields. He put out his cigarette on his boot sole and stuffed it in the pack. Then, with a deep breath, he ripped off the seal and opened the door.

The Texas heat recoiled as cold fog, thick with the smell of preservative, washed over him. Westley spat out his cigarette, took one last look around and crawled inside.

He knew to keep his boot soles off the floor. All his deliveries were inside sterile containers, but he still knew well enough not to risk leaving dirt on the truck bed. He reached out as far as he could and pulled the barrel of legs closer to him. His breath fogged and floated up in

front of his face, mixing with the barrel's pungent stench. His whole body shivered. It made him think of winter on the Florida coast, Cleo in his arms on the beach, their discarded cigarettes spinning in the wind. Isaac next to them, putting a cigarette out on the sole of his shoe and stuffing the butt back in the pack, saying something that Westley couldn't remember. He thought he heard some hints of Isaac's whiny voice in the barrel's hum.

\*

The next week Westley went in without Cleo. They drove around until they found a busy gas station, and she patted him on the back on his way out the door. He wore one of her hoodies. This time he left with only one case, but it was a case of something good.

She liked to make out in public, and if that meant making out in front of Isaac, she would crawl into the back seat and lock lips with Westley. She supported her upper body with one arm, leaned forward, pulled his face in with the other. He could feel her body shake from the strain on that one arm, but she never stopped, and when he tried to move under her he found that her arm blocked his path.

"You know this is my car, right?" Isaac said.

"Yeah," Cleo said, then she leaned back over and started kissing Westley again.

Isaac slammed on the brakes. Cleo toppled over sideways; her head hit the back of the passenger seat. "Goddamnit," she said.

"You all right?" Westley asked.

She didn't say anything. She just sat up, fastened her seatbelt, folded her arms and glared at Isaac's reflection in the rear view. He glared back at her. They drove deeper into the suburbs, to Cleo's uncle's unused summer home, which Cleo got a hundred dollars a month for "watching," where they drank and watched a raunchy comedy about college students on the dust-

coated television. Later that night, after Cleo had passed out in his lap, Westley pushed her off him and went outside to smoke a cigarette. The door, in desperate need of oiling, shrieked when he opened it. Isaac was sitting in the driveway, making huge clouds of smoke that melted in the wind.

“You're doing it wrong,” Westley said.

“Huh?”

“You're not inhaling.”

Isaac took a drag, exhaled another heap of smoke. “Yeah I am.”

“You're not,” Westley said. “I can tell by the smoke.”

He sucked on his own cigarette and talked Isaac through the process. Isaac had to sit down when he finished his cigarette and jammed the butt into his pack.

“God,” he said. “I'm getting such a buzz.”

He glanced over at Westley, and the blue glow of a mosquito lamp reflected off his eyes and off his sweat, which smelled like nicotine and cheap beer.

“You okay?” Westley asked.

“Yeah,” Isaac said. “Just thinking about—”

Something roared in the maze of suburbs around them, and then an eighteen-wheeler groaned around the corner and passed them by. The driver had the light on in the cab and drove with his knees while glancing bewilderedly out the window and fumbling with a map. As he crawled past, he looked at them. Westley realized how close the truck passed; a few steps forward, and he could touch it. When the truck rounded another corner, Isaac said “What the hell is he doing here?” Then he turned around, and Westley could smell his breath.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then both of them moved, little fluttering movements that brought them closer together until they were almost touching. They kept their eyes open and tried to find something to look at across the street. After a few seconds, Isaac stepped away, and ran inside. He locked the door behind him.

Westley stood motionless, staring at the door. The truck rumbled through the neighborhood. He could hear it going in and out of reverse, trying to turn a tight corner, and wondered how it had gotten so lost. Then he finished his cigarette and began pounding on the door until Cleo woke up and let him in.

\*

The barrel was warm to the touch, warmer than Westley expected. It gave off a high-pitched hum. He shook it a little, and the hum stuttered for a few seconds before starting up again. He couldn't hear anything move inside.

Westley tilted the barrel towards himself and looked at the lid. He'd seen organ containers before—boxes within boxes within boxes, each one clamped shut, vacuum-sealed, gaps filled in with O-rings. Once, he'd gone online and looked at the patent for one. It had reminded him of one of those wooden dolls with another wooden doll inside it, and another inside that one. The little kidney in the middle had looked like a poisonous jellyfish.

This container was different, though. The lid was held in place by seven clamps, held in place by seven bars, screwed into place with seven screws. A glossy black knob, like the kind used to adjust office chairs, rose up from the middle of the lid like a plastic idol. It had seven knobs.

He put one hand on the knob and felt it vibrate in his palm like a broken refrigerator. The whole barrel quivered. Westley took a deep breath and turned the knob, but it wouldn't budge. It stayed frozen in place, vibrating in tune to the hum of whatever machine operated inside it.

A bird shrieked in the distance. Westley held onto the knob with one shaking hand and debated whether to try turning it again. He didn't even know what that would do: it could collapse the air pressure, raise the temperature, open ventilation shafts on the machine. It could do a million things that could destroy the legs and cost him his job.

He pulled the rest of his body into the machine and looked the barrel over. He couldn't see any vents, any observation windows, any instructions. Just the unflinching lid. Its faint warmth made him think of some sick animal, but it had something comforting about it, and he put his arms around the barrel and felt more than heard its soft hum against his ear.

\*

The third time they stole beer, Isaac drove them to the same gas station they'd stolen from the first time, and Cleo went in first again. They waited in the car for a minute to make sure there was only one clerk, a middle-aged man who might have been a gym teacher at some point in his life. He had a neck like a mini keg.

Westley was about to go in. He adjusted his hair inside his baseball cap and turned to Isaac. "I'll see you in a min—"

They could hear an alarm going off, and the clerk hurled himself in front of the exit before Cleo could get to it. She screamed and feebly punched him, but he grabbed her wrist. She glanced out the window at them, her pupils dilated, her mouth wide open. Then she turned and slammed her teeth down on the clerk's biceps, holding on until he shook her off and dragged her, kicking and gnawing at the clerk's arm, away from the door.

It took a few seconds for Westley to stop staring. He'd slid back in his seat so that his waist was under the glove compartment, and Isaac had done the same.

“Jesus,” Isaac whispered. And then he put the car in reverse and sped off into the suburbs.

“What the fuck, man?” Westley said.

“I don't know. I don't fucking--” Isaac paused. “What are we gonna do? We are so fucked.”

Westley sat up. They parked in front of Isaac's mother's house. “Calm down,” he said. “Jesus, we shouldn't have left her.”

Isaac lit a cigarette. “It's not gonna make much difference.”

“Dude, what if your mom sees you smoke?”

“Won't make a difference,” he said. “Jesus, how hard is it to get that through your head?”

“What?”

“That we're screwed,” Isaac said. Neither of them said anything for a second. “We are absolutely, positively screwed. The cops are gonna come for her, and she's gonna squeal, and we're both going to fucking juvie.”

“You're not going to juvie,” Westley said.

Isaac took a drag off his cigarette. “Why the hell not?”

“With your parents' connections? You're getting fucking probation, and mine aren't exactly Cletus McAsscrack, either.”

“Yeah, sure,” Isaac said. “Whatever. It doesn't matter. When my parents find out, they're gonna ground me until I'm thirty. They're gonna send me to some boarding school in Utah, or make me join the army or something. Jesus, Westley, I'm never gonna see you again.”

And they were on each other, lips and tongue, fingertips running down each other's faces like drops of rain on a windshield. Westley couldn't keep his eyes shut, and every time he opened them he couldn't look at anything but Isaac's freckles. Then he looked up and met Isaac's open eyes, and Isaac shoved him away and told him to get out of the car and go home. It was only half a mile, but by the time Westley got to his front door he felt exhausted and torn down and picked clean by moonlight.

Isaac was right. Cleo told the police everything. They showed up at the house the next morning, and his father broke down and locked himself in his bedroom until that afternoon. Westley could hear him making tearful phone calls all day. Once he heard his mother's voice on speakerphone, worry in her voice, from her Jacksonville office. Then her voice gained resolve, and his father's gained relief, and then the call was over. He couldn't make out a single word.

He only had three days to pack before he had to leave for his grandparents' home in Texas, and he was grounded for all three of them. On the last night he snuck out, walked to a little park, sat on a bench under a single streetlight, and tried to call Isaac, who didn't pick up. His voicemail message was his mother, informing anyone who was interested that she'd grounded him and taken his phone. Westley called again, but didn't leave a message.

\*

Westley closed the cooler door. He took the seal out of his pocket, looked at it, put it back in his pocket. He could slide it around the lock when he arrived at the first stop in Seagraves, absentmindedly tear it himself, play the ditz and talk about how the heat was getting to everyone today, and tell some story about a stupid driver who'd almost run him over. This late in the day, the orderlies probably wouldn't really care.

He leaned against the back door of the van and lit a cigarette. Its stale taste reminded him of Isaac, whose mother had sent him to military school, after which he'd joined the army as an officer. Shortly after arriving in Texas, Westley had started saving his butts as a way to remember him. In pictures on Facebook he looked tanned and muscular, his uniform crisp, his shoulders square, his back straight. He was overseas a lot, but Westley didn't know where. He still had Cleo's number, and thought about calling her sometimes, but always told himself that the number was probably out of date, and that someone else would answer, and the thought of that sharp little conversation always made him change his mind.

Another bird cried out in the distance, and he could see clear across the cotton fields to a road where a single car drove across the horizon. The heat fell on him like a heap of blankets, and for a moment he thought about taking his smartphone out and trying to find instructions for opening a barrel of legs.

But his image of them had shifted. He tried to picture himself opening a barrel, a cloud of fog rolling into his face and out the back door of the van, the legs exposed and naked, blue veins and rime between the toes. But he couldn't imagine the legs anymore. Fat, thin, decomposed, manicured, sliced up and laminated, he couldn't get them to form in his head. Every time he ran through the thought, the fog cleared and the barrel was empty except for a six-pack of cheap beer or just the staleness of recycled air and Isaac's old cigarettes. He wondered if there were even legs in there, or if the term was some obscure acronym for some runny, foul-smelling liquid that sloshed around in small glands deep in the human body. He had a vague memory of opening an empty cooler at a convenience store once, of seeing clear past the empty shelves to the frozen boxes in the back, but he couldn't remember when it had happened, and he couldn't remember what the boxes looked like or what they said, or even why they'd seemed so interesting and



worth his time and attention. He slammed the door shut, and stood for a moment in a cloud of cool air that smelled like alcohol and meat before it dissipated, then he slid the broken seal back on the lock and got back behind the wheel.

## CORONA RADIATA

The year he turned seventeen, Jared figured out how to bypass the parental locks on the family computer. His parents homeschooled him, but they both worked on Saturdays, so he had the house to himself and nothing to do except poke holes in his parents' well-guarded world, which he did through what he saw as simultaneously petty and revolutionary acts. He switched the one-day old lettuce in the Kelly green container with the two-day old lettuce in the cyan container. He watered down the window cleaner that his mother obsessively used every morning. Once, he removed the shells from the shotgun his father kept in a rack on the side of the bed, and when he checked again a month later, they were still gone. Then one day he guessed the password to his mother's account on the computer. For a few hours a week, he had access to the world outside his parents' alarm systems and barred windows, and he spent them studying gun control, then anti-globalism, then deep ecology. He read Zerzan, Kaczynski, Jensen, writers who dreamed of a return to life before hand sanitizer and security systems and food storage containers. Eventually, he ended up on obscure little forums that discussed the ethical feasibility of industrial civilization, places where he commented extensively while sipping sweet tea to keep alert during early afternoon slumps. The forums were how he found out about the Corona Family Home.

\*

Jared's first encounter with the Home was in the signature of a forum poster who'd commented to defend him from an angry anarcho-capitalist. The poster's name was Adam, and his signature identified him as a resident of the Corona Family Home. The Home's name was a hyperlink, and when Jared clicked it, it took him to a dated website that described the Home in glowing terms as an "intentional community" dedicated to "raising domestic rabbits in an

organic, natural manner.” He wondered how someone could raise domestic animals organically or naturally, and sent Adam a private message to ask him.

Their argument turned into a larger conversation about nature, civilization, domesticity. Then it turned into a personal conversation, and over a period of a few months they went from private messages to e-mails to instant messages to a phone call. Jared’s parents questioned him when the number showed up on the phone bill, but he told them he’d decided to call back some telemarketers in an effort to get them to stop calling. Still, he was smart enough not to call again.

When Jared turned eighteen, his parents threw a “party,” with only the three of them and a warty Yorkshire terrier in attendance, where they made him wear a stupid hat and gave him store-bought cupcakes with candles on them. He e-mailed Adam about it that Saturday, and got a reply within thirty minutes suggesting that he get the hell out of there as soon as he could. At first, Jared thought about going to college, but as days turned into weeks he wondered if it would be any different. He imagined his parents calling him every morning to make sure he got out of bed on time. When he told Adam this, Adam replied by suggesting that he come stay with him at the Home for a while. Two weeks later, while Jared’s parents were at work, he left the house and got on his bike, leaving a note on the refrigerator that heavily quoted Derrick Jensen and said little else except that he couldn’t take life with them anymore and didn’t want them to look for him.

He didn’t know how to explain it to them, but the truth was that he ran away because he wanted to get dirty. All his life he’d been drawn to dirt. He’d craved the darkness of the forest, the joy of splashing in mud, the company of rats and beetles. As a small child, he would grab unwashed vegetables from his mother’s grocery bags and eat them before she could wrestle them away from him. She would scream at him and wash his mouth out, then coat his arms and hers in

hand sanitizer. By the time he hit his teens, he was sick of their constant cleaning, nagging, the harsh odor of bleach in every room and the sound of his mother cleaning windows for two hours at a time while telling him to study. Everything in the house glowed and glistened from her efforts in unnatural, unhealthy ways. Meanwhile his father barred the window and polished his shotgun.

\*

He didn't talk to anyone at the bus station except for a couple of panhandlers who asked him for change. He'd stopped to pawn his video game consoles while biking to the station, so he could afford to give them some, and to eat a hamburger and a prepackaged salad from the cafeteria. The salad had a little sticker on the bottom that signified the date when it had been made. It made him think that his parents would be reading the note on the refrigerator at that very moment.

For most of the four-hour wait before the bus arrived, Jared stared in blank incomprehension at dusty explosions in Afghanistan on the news, vaguely disappointed with the world and with himself. He'd expected to feel free the moment he escaped from his parents' house, but the reality was that he felt numb and vaguely scared, like something was chasing him. When it got close to boarding time, he lined up with several dozen other riders, and then the line disintegrated and he was surrounded by people who pressed in close, vying for his spot in line. He felt the urge to crawl under their legs and hide in the bathroom, and when he handed the driver his ticket it was with a feeling of relief at finally being able to lean against a bus window and breathe.

\*

From the moment the bus left San Bibiana to the moment it arrived in the bucolic farming town near the Corona Family Home, Jared forgot who he was. He forgot what he was doing, or where he was going, how he'd gotten to where he was. He had to check his bus ticket whenever he heard a call to board at a rest stop, to make sure he was getting on the right bus. Once he almost headed to Memphis. He didn't feel like he was taking a trip that went beyond the next stop, or that he was leaving anything but the station. Once or twice, he had a fantasy that he'd died, that he and the other passengers were shades heading to some barren afterlife, where the driver would weigh their hearts against one another on a balance scale. The way the other passengers buckled and stooped under the weight of their bags and coats and blankets and babies, the way they grumbled and yelled at one another, he knew his would be lighter than theirs, so he didn't worry.

\*

Once, he woke up on a bus in the early morning, his thoughts still sticky and half-formed, and saw his first glimpse of the North Georgia landscape. By the grayed-out light, the land looked jagged, sharp, full of steep drops and sheer cliffs where the hillside had been sliced in half to make room for roads or mines, or where titanic forces had simply crushed and pulled the land, twisted it, or bitten down on it with misshapen teeth. All his life, when he'd looked out a window, he'd had a view of the Florida horizon blocked only by cars, buildings, swampland, and the occasional person or cow. Now he stared at a shifting landscape that seemed to rise and fall like the ocean during a hurricane. It drove himself crazy trying to find a level surface, trying to figure out what constituted level ground, since even the road rose, fell, and twisted at seemingly arbitrary angles.

He had a ringing headache and couldn't think straight, so he closed his eyes until they hurt, pulled his shirt over his head and gazed down at the bunched-up skin of his stomach. Then, he thought about his parents. Their refrigerator full of food storage containers, each clearly labeled with their contents and expiration dates, piled vertically in reverse order of freshness. Their separate cutting boards for red meat, white meat, fish, shellfish, tofu, vegetables, fruit, mushrooms. He thought about the evenings that they'd spent inside, reading yellowed paperbacks in which runaways and hitchhikers met horrible ends at the hands of mustachioed men in utility vans. He thought of the words they used to describe their immaculate, fresh-scented life, words like "sensible," "conscientious," "stable," "sanitary." He thought of how much he hated those words, how the man he was going to live with never typed them without quotation marks, and fell asleep trying to imagine what that man would look like in person.

\*

The bus stopped in the farming town at noon. Jared had slept for maybe two hours out of the day, and didn't wake up until the bus arrived at the station, which was really just a booth on the side of a convenience store. He stepped off the bus and into a cloud of dust. As it cleared, silos appeared all around him. Sad little fields of grain rose up around the silos; a number of police officers watched prisoners dig through them, looking for pests or weeds. At the gas station, Jared bought a cinnamon roll and a bottle of soda. The attendant told him that, for twenty bucks—all the money he had left—his friend would drive him to the Corona Family Home.

\*

The entrance was marked by a hand-painted sign decorated with faded shooting stars. The attendant's friend's rusty truck drove away, raising up a cloud of red dust, and Jared walked under the sign and into a patchy, broken forest much like the one he'd just been driven to. It was

a quarter mile before he passed an abandoned shack, its roof caved in and its door hanging from a single hinge. Half a mile later, he found a little one-room house with a jalopy outside, and knew from Adam's description that this was where he'd be living now. Adam was in his front yard, chopping wood.

Jared had expected Adam to be taller and wirier. Adam had a full beard, although he couldn't have been older than twenty-two, and wore a knit cap and a pair of vintage sunglasses with deep red lenses. Under his flannel shirt, he had a noticeable paunch, and his shorts were a little too tight.

"You're Adam?" Jared said.

Adam split one more block of wood and then turned around.

"Jared?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you sounded young."

"I'm not," Jared said.

"You got a cell phone?"

"No."

Adam smiled. He was missing one of his canines. It made him look kind of innocent, as did his large and oddly wet-looking eyes. "Good," he said. "Do your parents know where you are?"

"I don't think so," Jared said. "And I'm eighteen, anyway, so it doesn't matter."

"Please tell me you're not lying."

By now, Adam had dropped the axe and was heading toward his door. Jared followed him.

When he'd told Adam his clothing sizes, Jared thought Adam had been planning on getting him a winter jacket, but a whole wardrobe for him was laid out on the couch. It was like the wardrobe of a cartoon character who looked the same every day. Seven white T-shirts, three pairs of cut-off shorts, and a pair of rope sandals. There was a pair of steel toe boots, for when they went into town to dig through the trash behind restaurants and grocery stores. A pair of work gloves, too. That night they burned all of Jared's old things, and Adam drew thick, wavy lines on Jared's cheeks with the ashes, like the lines on football players' faces.

"I wish I had some kind of headdress for you," Adam said.

"Like an Indian thing?" Jared asked. He was drunk off what Adam had told him was stolen vodka. Adam said he never paid for food. Then he said that Jared needed a new name.

"Like Sunshine?"

"Hopefully not," Adam said. "I got lucky."

"I thought there'd be more people here," Jared said. He glanced around, then back at Adam. "I mean, isn't this a commune?"

"More like a community," Adam said. "We share funding, really, and we breed the rabbits together. You'll meet the rabbits tomorrow, by the way."

"Are they nice?"

Adam shrugged. He had a way of shrugging that Jared thought looked reflexive, like an extended shudder. "Sometimes," he said. "They can get pissy, though."

\*

They dug through an old encyclopedia that Adam had found in someone's trash until they settled on the name Calyx, which was the part of a flower that held the petals until they were



ready to blossom. They stayed up late, talking about their lives before coming to the Home. Adam said talking was a way to say good-bye.

Adam had taken a Biblical name, not because it was Biblical, but because it meant “dirt-man.” Like Calyx, he’d been drawn to the woods, drawn to the life of simple work and simple rewards. Unlike Calyx, he’d found the Home by accident, while hitch-hiking through the Southeast. A girl in a jalopy had picked him up on the way back home from the farming town. Her name was Mirage. She let him stay with her in her bead-encrusted shack for a while, and he decided not to leave. He’d built his one-room house himself after a falling-out with Mirage, who was very popular and had led several of the people in the Home to shun him for reasons Adam would only hint at, but that involved a boy named Gemini and an disagreement about the appropriateness of polyamory to a post-civilized society. Mostly, he chopped wood, grew some medicinal herbs in the field behind his house, and helped tend to the rabbits by cleaning and repairing hutches. In his spare time, he read or played guitar. Jared wanted Adam to play guitar for him, which he did, not even bothering to tune the guitar before he began playing old Bob Dylan songs that melted into one another until they lost all shape or dimension. After a while he convinced Jared to sing, making up words as he went along. Jared fell asleep by the fire, dimly aware of Adam carrying him inside. His arms were warm, and he drunkenly remembered his childhood for a moment before passing out.

\*

Calyx woke up with a withering headache. It was a bright day, and sunlight tore like a fire through the window onto the couch and onto the dingy mattress where Adam slept, his hairy body curled up like a sleeping bear’s. Calyx looked at him and felt disgusted, then he felt the full weight of his headache, which pounded straight into his right eyeball as if it were some trapped

animal trying to get out. He lay on the couch for a few minutes, nursing his pain, then got bored and debated whether to wake Adam up. Adam snored, and Calyx thought it made him sound even more bearlike, so he decided to let him sleep, and thought about his hometown, which he remembered like a dream in which endless strip malls rose up around him, each one sealed in a differently-colored BPA-free plastic container.

He went outside to use the cathole that Adam had dug the night before. He dug them deep enough to be used twice before you had to bury them. When Calyx came back, Adam was in the yard, starting up the campfire. Little blobs of pinkish meat lay on the grill.

“What’re you making?” Calyx asked. His head throbbed.

“Rabbit,” Adam said. He was still in his dingy underwear. “I do the shit work at the pens, so I get first pick of the runts. This guy got part of his ear bit off.”

“I thought we bred them as pets.” Calyx had to admit it looked edible.

“We do.” Adam got the fire going, and warmed his hands by it, even though it wasn’t cold outside. “It’s just that not all of them make good pets.”

To Calyx, the heat of the fire was dizzying. He sat down a little distance away. “Is it good?”

“Great,” Adam said. “Can’t live off it, though. You eat too much rabbit, you get diarrhea and die. Read about it in this survival guide by a real Cherokee.”

\*

Calyx’s first taste of rabbit was underwhelming; mostly, it tasted like smoke and last night’s whiskey. The house didn’t have running water, so they walked a quarter mile to a communal shower. It was crowded by the time they arrived, but they had plenty of room. Calyx, who had never been naked around other people before, showered in his underwear. Everyone

stared at him, pausing only to glare at Adam. Calyx had forgotten to bring a towel, so he tried to shake himself dry and then put clothes on. He left his soaking wet briefs in a cathole. He'd forgotten to pack any more underwear. Adam promised him that he'd steal some soon.

\*

The rabbits were caged up in pairs, some with young, some without. Adam told Calyx that the males were called bucks, the females does, and the young rabbits had all kinds of names, but he liked kitten best. They came in several varieties: angora, lop-eared, all produced from three or four breeding pairs. Adam said that a lot of them came out wrong.

"Isn't that cruel?" Calyx asked. Adam rushed past their cages with a bored look on his face, and Calyx struggled to keep up. His headache had split in half, with part of it pounding behind his right eye and part of it trying to jam its way through his head.

"We gotta produce," Adam said. "Or we don't eat. At least not until things get better out there. Anyway, we need to hose down some of these cages. Help me get the rabbits out."

He showed him how to hold the rabbits, and they started with a cage that only held a pair of lop-eared bunnies. The female was heavily pregnant, and her swollen nipples sagged like parasites. Calyx let her sniff his hand, then reached underneath her to scoop her up. He put his hand right on her teats, though, and the doe shrieked out in pain. He was shocked by the sound and dropped her, after which she writhed and bit him on the finger.

"Fuck," he yelled. "She bit me."

"It happens sometimes," Adam said. "Walk it out. We'll dump some iodine on it in a few."

"It's bleeding pretty badly," Calyx said. He walked in circles, staring at his finger, one hand wrapped around it to stem the blood flow.

“Lemme see.” Adam took a look at it and laughed. “You’re gonna be a handful, aren’t you?”

“I’ll be fine,” Calyx said, and picked the rabbit back up again, carefully avoiding both her teats and her fangs.

\*

They settled into a routine, one that persisted for two weeks before Calyx ever met another member of the Home. By day, they would care for the rabbits, or Adam would chop wood while Calyx read the wilderness survival guides on Adam’s bookshelf. All of them were written by Native Americans. His headache faded into a dull background ache, and he developed a taste for the smoky rabbit meat that Adam cooked at least once every couple days. Then one day he lifted up an angora with an oddly pebbly texture to its stomach, like a massive scab, and a bulbous lump near its head. Moving the matted fur aside, he found a black nodule, like a little globe of diseased bone, growing out of the side of the animal’s neck.

“Adam?” he said. The nodule on its head wasn’t quite round. He could feel a flaky spot, dented like a navel, in one corner. He scratched at it for a moment before the rabbit screamed and tried to bite him. He almost dropped it, but set it back down instead. It curled up in a ball and gnawed at its growth.

“What?”

“I found a bump,” he said. “On the buck.”

“A bump?”

“A black thing. Like a horn or something. There’s something on its stomach, too.”

Adam grabbed the buck and twisted its head away from the horn, then examined it for a second. “Shit,” he said.

“What?”

“Rabbit papilloma,” Adam said. The rabbit writhed and twisted in his arms. The growths on its underside clicked together.

“What do we do?”

Adam twisted the rabbit’s head. There was a weird, wet snapping sound, and the buck went limp in Adam’s hand. He dumped it back in the cage and did the same thing to the doe.

“Nothing else you can do,” he said. Calyx stared at the two rabbit’s corpses. “We can eat ‘em, though,” he said. “It’s not dangerous to humans. I just gotta let someone know.”

He left Calyx alone with the rabbits. Calyx went to the next cage and inspected another pair of angoras, but they were fine. He moved them to a temporary cage and dumped a bucket of water onto the wood floor to wash away their pellets. The water poured down a shallow incline and out a little hole in the middle of the cage, from which it splattered onto the mud floor.

A girl who had just finished feeding the lop-eared rabbits walked over to him. She wore a flowing gown made of some wrinkled, gauzy substance, and smoked a hand-rolled cigarette without a filter. When she took it out of her mouth a string of tobacco stuck to her lip. She blew on it in a futile effort to get it off.

“What’s happening here?” she asked. She picked the tobacco off her lip with her finger.

“Adam leave you?”

“One of the rabbits was sick,” Calyx said. “He went to tell someone.”

“He kill it?” She took another drag of her cigarette. It looked wilted.

“Yeah,” Calyx said. “I’m Calyx, by the way.”

“I heard,” she said. “Word gets around.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

Her smile looked unhealthy, as if it were the result of a muscle tic. “I gotta clean some cages,” she said. “Be seeing you.”

\*

That night, while he sat with Adam and cooked the dead rabbits, Calyx could hear the sound of singing and howling in the woods. He believed that something incredible was happening out there, something so glamorous that the moon leaned in close, drunk and smiling like a cartoon hobo. Adam flipped over a rabbit leg with a dent in it at the spot where he’d cut off a nodule.

“This isn’t what I thought it would be,” Calyx said. He looked around for a clue to why he’d said it.

“It never is,” Adam said.

“I mean,” Calyx said. “I imagined there’d be more people out here. I imagined what’s happening in the woods.”

“You can go,” Adam said. “But they won’t have you. I can promise you that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re with me. Oh, and they want me to change your name.”

“Are you gonna?”

“Fuck that.” Adam poked a rabbit breast; steam and juices hissed out. He flipped it over.

Calyx adjusted himself, leaning towards the fire and crossing his legs. “I’ve been wondering,” he said. “What did you do to make them hate you so much?”

“I can’t really explain,” Adam said. “It wasn’t really something I did, but I was kind of picky about who I gave my attention to, y’know? Like part of being in a place like this is not

getting sucked into the kind of bullshit drama you get in civilization. But a lot of people bring that drama with them.”

Calyx mentally checked over the past few weeks to make sure he hadn't brought any drama with him. As far as he knew, he hadn't mentioned his parents once, and he couldn't think of anything else he might be carrying.

\*

They made out that night. Calyx wanted it to happen later, but not so much later that he was willing to resist when Adam slid his arm around his waist, leaving an ashy handprint on Calyx's white T-shirt. Instead, Calyx leaned over and kissed Adam on the cheek. He'd learned about this kind of kissing before he left by watching it on TV and practicing on stuffed animals that he found in the attic, but he felt as if all his movements were clumsy, halting, dumb, so eventually he gave up and lay face-up in the dirt and let Adam explore his body, tasting his nipples, his armpits, the lint in his navel. The whole time, he stayed soft, and Adam never touched his penis, preferring to run his tongue along the grooves of Calyx's ears and the valleys between his fingers. Calyx breathed slowly and thought of the hills around him. His head pounded. He thought he saw a spot in the right side of his field of vision, a place darker than the rest of the night sky. When Adam was done, Calyx turned to face the fire, and the dark spot was still there. He blinked and shook his head, but it wouldn't go away.

“Adam?” he said.

“What is it?”

“Can you see anything in my eye?”

“I can see all kinds of things,” Adam said. “Harmony, freedom, passion, love.”

“No,” Calyx said. “My right eye. Is there something in it? I have this blind spot.”

Adam looked into Calyx's right eye. His face disappeared behind the blind spot. "I don't see anything," he said. "Might be a floater. Or pinkeye. Give it a couple days. Your eye will get it out. You can sleep in tomorrow."

\*

The next day, they drove a truckload of kittens into the farming town. It was a smoldering hot afternoon, and the road quivered with heat mirages. Crates of rabbits blocked Calyx's view, but he mostly kept his eyes closed. It seemed to block out the throbbing in his head, except when they rode over a bump in the road and his whole body shook. He kept looking around for the dark spot he'd seen last night, but it seemed to have vanished for the moment.

"Can we get some Tylenol?" Calyx asked.

"I thought you hated corporate medicine?"

"It's just Tylenol," Calyx said. They rode over a bump. The rabbit crates jolted, and Calyx felt like his head was about to burst.

"I have some herbs in the garden," Adam said, "that work just as well, and they don't get made in factories.

Calyx didn't say anything for a while. They drove on.

"Look, Calyx," Adam said. "I thought you were serious about this."

"I am," Calyx said. "And I'm so happy to be away from, y'know, everything, but I have this headache that won't go away. It's been there for, like, days now. I'm sorry."

"It's hard," Adam said. "I know it is. When I got out, there was this time when I really missed the Empire. I mean, air conditioning, antibiotics, whatever. You learn to do without. You find herbs, you find ways to build houses with airflow, and you realize after a while how weak



you were, before you got out. How much the things you miss most were the things that really sucked the life out of you, out of the world, out of humanity. Like Tylenol.”

“So why do we farm rabbits?” Calyx asked.

“Huh?” Adam sounded genuinely confused.

“I mean, isn’t agriculture, like, the basis of civilization, and the root of man’s oppression of nature and thus of himself?”

“So you *did* read Zerzan.” Adam adjusted his grip on the wheel. “The truth is, civilization’s everywhere. There’s no *outside* to it anymore. That’s why all that research on how much life sucks for hunter-gatherers is bullshit. And until it collapses in on itself, we have to make compromises.”

“Okay,” Calyx said. He rubbed his head, and thought he felt a lump under his hair, but he couldn’t find it when he ran his hand over the spot again.

They sold the rabbits to a withered old woman by the gas station where the bus had dropped Calyx off, and for a moment he considered buying a ticket back to San Bibiana. The woman put the rabbits in the back of another truck, then drove off.

“Where’s she going?” Calyx asked.

“Some pet store,” Adam said. “Anyway, get back in the truck. I need some stuff. You ever shoplifted before?”

\*

Shoplifting, Adam told him as they drove to the best grocery store in the farming town, was all about location. If they tried to steal from the gas station or a big box store or another place where people usually shoplifted, they risked getting caught, whether by alarms or by security workers. If they went somewhere nice, though, they were pretty likely to get away.

“Basically,” Adam said as they pulled into the parking lot, “the easiest way to tell the difference is to look for black people. If more than a quarter of the customers are black, run. If more than one of the cashiers is black, run faster.”

“So it’s about race?” Calyx asked.

“Well, yeah.” The truck wheezed as Adam turned off the ignition. “See, places with mostly white customers don’t just trust their customers, they want them to *know* how much they trust them. So they don’t follow you around, they don’t have those stupid security gates, they don’t even have anyone watching the cameras most of the time, and if they do, they won’t do anything unless you hold up a goddamn neon sign saying *Shoplifter*.”

“So what do I do?” Calyx hoped he didn’t have to do anything.

“You’re like my wingman,” Adam said. “We go inside, and you distract anyone who’s working in an aisle where I’m working. It should be slow this time of the week, so there won’t be a lot of customers, but a lot of stock boys.”

Adam wore a pair of baggy jeans and an army jacket with extra pockets sown into the lining. He also wore a skullcap, which he pulled down almost over his eyes, although it didn’t really hide them in any noticeable shadows.

“You ready?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Calyx said. His head hurt, and when they stepped out of the truck and into the sunlight, it hurt even more. Everything looked at once washed-out and overbright. He followed Adam inside, and found that Adam hadn’t lied: only a few customers, mostly weather-beaten old women, wandered the aisles, but every aisle had a pallet of boxes and a worker in it.

“So how should I distract them?” Calyx asked.

Adam scanned the row of cash registers. The checkout girls looked identical: blandly attractive teenagers with dark hair tied back in tight ponytails. He nodded approvingly at them, then told Adam to ask where to find something obscure or imaginary.

“Make sure they go and show it to you,” Adam added. “Sometimes they try to just tell you an aisle. Leave, then come back in thirty seconds or so and bitch about your eyesight or something.”

“That’ll be easy,” Calyx said. “I can’t see anything in this light.”

Every time he looked up, the halogen lamps blinded him for a few seconds.

“Cool,” Adam said, and led him down one aisle to the coffees, which he stopped and eyed. Calyx walked over to the stocker, an overly energetic blond boy who wore his long hair in a kind of clumsy, half-collapsed bun, and asked him where to find fish sticks. The blond boy told him a number, but he couldn’t hear it over the throbbing in his head and his rapidly growing irritation with the way the boy moved from box to aisle even while he made eye contact with him.

“Can you show me?” he asked. He was amazed at how easy it was to ask, how little he worried that the boy might see through his ruse. Then he was amazed that he’d been dumb enough to ask for fish sticks, which he wouldn’t be able to store in Adam’s house.

“Sure,” the boy said, and led him down a few aisles to the frozen food. He opened a shelf and pointed inside. Cool air floated out of the freezer, and somehow it made Calyx aware of how much he smelled, and how hot it had been outside.

Calyx stared at the identical yellow boxes of fish sticks for a while, his thoughts graying out into a disgust with himself that throbbed like a heart in time to the beat of his headache. The boy stared at him for a while, then reached into the freezer, took out a box of fish sticks and

offered it to him. He was only dimly aware that it was happening. The pain in his head made everything seem visionary.

The stock boy said “Sir?”

Calyx became aware of a stinging on his right temple, like a large insect trying to pierce his skin with its teeth. He reached up with one hand to feel it, and when he touched his skin, a wordless, quivering feeling ran through him. Something had pierced through his temple from the inside, and a trickle of blood ran down the side of his head. He could feel it, sharp and bony, like an antler. He wondered whether it was a part of his body or not. Then the stock boy noticed the wound and blanched.

“Are you okay, sir? Oh my god, you’re bleeding. Please, sit down. I’ll get a first aid kit.” And he was gone. A few seconds later he ran back with a first aid kit and two more employees, one of whom announced that an ambulance was on its way. They cleaned the wound with a gauze towel soaked in something that sent cold pain against the heat in Calyx’s head. Adam appeared behind them.

“Is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” the boy said. “But there’s something in the wound. See, right here?”

The boy touched it, and then tried to pick it out as if it were a pebble. Calyx screamed and bolted upright, knocking the boy against a freezer. Then he ran out of the store, barely aware that his legs were moving until he was in the truck bed and Adam, who’d run after him, was in the driver’s seat, speeding off as an ambulance pulled into the parking lot. At the bus stop, Adam pulled over and Calyx got in the passenger seat.

“Good job,” Adam said. “That cleared, like, three aisles. How’d you do it?”

“I . . .” Calyx stopped. “There’s something in my head.”

“Sounds interesting,” Adam said. “You just rage at your own head or something?”

“No, I mean, physically. Like, something burst open, and . . . can you look at it when we get home?”

“It doesn’t look that bad,” Adam said.

“I know, but there’s something in there. I felt it earlier.”

“We’ll get it out,” Adam said. “Don’t worry.”

\*

Adam couldn’t get it out. He tried picking at it with a fingernail, then a fork, then a spoon, but he couldn’t get under it. After a while, he came to the conclusion that it would just come out by itself.

“Your body knows what it needs to do,” he said. “It’ll push it out on its own.”

“You sure?” Calyx asked. He had a trail of blood running down the side of his face from Adam’s probing.

“Don’t worry,” Adam said. “Just keep it clean and cover it up in public, okay?”

He left the room and came back with some gauze and a half-empty bottle of peroxide. “Rub this in,” he said, and went outside. Calyx could hear him chopping wood.

\*

Another pair of rabbits had come down with papilloma. The horns grew from the sides of their heads. One had a horn in its mouth. It wasn’t able to eat. Adam broke their necks.

“You don’t think I have that, do you?” Calyx said, staring at the limp bodies as Adam dumped them in a bucket for dinner.

“I told you, it doesn’t happen to people.”

“But I have this bump.”

“It’s probably just a boil or something,” Adam said. “Sometimes they get these hard centers.”

“Well, I’ve been getting this pressure behind my eye, and over here.” Calyx pointed at the crown of his head.

“It’s probably pressure from the boil,” Adam said. “I have some herbs that’ll numb it, if you’re really worried. But be careful; you won’t feel anything up there after I rub them in. Don’t hit your head on anything.”

\*

The ointment worked. Calyx’s forehead, his temple, the space around his eye went numb. He rubbed the ointment into his hair, making a spikey mess. He only felt pain in one spot, deep in his right eye, and with the numbness of the rest of his face it felt as if his eye was floating in a void, connected to the rest of his head only by a kind of telekinesis.

“How’s it feel?” Adam asked. They sat on opposite ends of Adam’s bed. “Weird,” Calyx said. “Kinda cool.”

“Don’t pick at it,” Adam said. He got up and wrapped Calyx’s head in gauze. “Here. This’ll keep you from getting tempted.”

“Can you cover my eye up?” Calyx asked. “The right one, I mean.”

Adam covered both of them. Calyx didn’t resist. Adam wrapped the gauze around three or four times. Little cracks of light came in from the space between it and Calyx’s skin. Adam wrapped his arms around him and started sucking on the skin at the base of his neck, working it with his teeth for good measure. Calyx hissed, then let out the low moan he assumed was appropriate at times like this.

“Are you feeling this?” Adam whispered in his ear.

“Oh, yeah.”

“You sure?” Adam started sucking and nibbling on a different part of Calyx’s neck.

“Totally. I mean, this isn’t really my *thing*, really, but it’s kind of cool and—ow!—kinda . . . mysterious, I guess.”

“You know what’s crazy?” Adam whispered.

“What?”

“I could scalp you right now, and you wouldn’t know until I took the blindfold off.”

“What?”

Adam ran a finger along Calyx’s scalp, and Calyx shuddered. “But you trust me, right?” Adam whispered. “You know I won’t, right?”

Calyx started to answer, but Adam put his hand over his mouth and bit down, hard, on the base of Calyx’s neck. His other hand reached into Calyx’s underpants and lingered there, exploring the crease of his buttocks like some burrowing animal hunting for edible roots. Adam started licking, then sucking on the spot where he’d sunk his teeth into Calyx, who moaned into Adam’s hand while Adam ground into his crotch until he came.

\*

They slept on opposite ends of the bed, Adam in the nude and Calyx in his briefs and a fresh layer of gauze wrapped around his scalp. Adam snored grotesquely, keeping Calyx awake. It was a warm night, and the stink rising up from the mattress made him think of mold spores and Hantavirus. He felt like his mother, especially with the way his worries about disease circled around his worries about what Adam had said between love bites on Calyx’s neck. He knew that it was supposed to be a joke, but for the first time since his arrival at the Home, he felt vulnerable, felt how far away he was from any kind of support structure. His face was still numb,

but he could feel pain return to his scalp, and the ointment had crusted into his hair, pulling it in several directions at once and wrenching the skin.

He got up and went outside. Adam didn't stir. The night was full of crickets and the call of strange birds. He wandered out into the trees, found one of Adam's catholes, and used it while gazing up at the waning moon. He kicked a heap of dirt into the cathole, then went back inside. The house was hot and the air tasted old. Calyx put on a pair of the black pants Adam had bought him and stepped outside again. The cool night air felt good on his head.

He started walking, not entirely sure why. He walked down the road to the center of the Corona Family Home. Dairy goats wandered freely; one of them followed him for a little while as he wandered into the courtyard between the two main buildings. There was a long table there, warped with years of rain and covered in layers of drawings, initials, names, phrases that people had carved into it over the years. Calyx ran his hand over the surface, feeling the texture of the cuts. He stopped at a jagged carving of a jackalope.

Calyx could hear two rabbits fighting in their hutch. They hissed, and then one of them let out an unearthly shriek and then fell silent. Calyx walked in the direction of the sound, his head throbbing. He felt as if there were nothing else to do.

By day, the hutches were almost deathly quiet. The rabbits slept, waking up to drink water, drop hard little pellets of feces, chew languidly on a block of wood, or struggle with would-be groomers. Adam had told him that they came alive at night, but he hadn't pictured anything this extreme. The rabbits were insane with energy. Some of them hopped forward, ran back, then hopped forward again. Others gnawed manically on the chicken wire of their hutches, producing a cacophonous sound like a children's orchestra rehearsal that rattled in Calyx's head and added sharp spikes to the pain of his thickening headache.



One of the lop-eared does huddled in the corner of a hutch for heavily pregnant females. Calyx leaned over and looked in on her. She stared out at him, her little eyeball ringed in the shadows of bony growths that had sprung up overnight. Fluid oozed down her face. Calyx couldn't stop staring at her, and she stared back at him with the uncomprehending gaze of a porcelain doll.

He suddenly felt tired, and lay down with his back against one of the maternity hutch's legs. A dull half-moon floated overhead, and he stared at it, thinking of the doe's encircled eye. His head rustled with thoughts that flashed into his mind and fled into the undergrowth of his headache, and after a while he felt exhausted and rested his gauze-wrapped head in his hand. He was so startled to find the gauze wet that he shot up and hit his head on the hutch.

"Fuck," he whispered, and clutched his head with both hands. They both came away red, and he screamed and ran into the grooming hut, which had a broken mirror in the corner, set up by someone who thought the rabbits might like to admire themselves after their baths. No one ever brought the rabbits near it.

He tore the gauze off his head and threw it in the tub. Two great spots of blood soaked it, one near the wound in his temple and a new one, still wet, in his scalp. Bumping into the hutch hadn't done any damage he could see. Calyx reached up and felt the wound, already knowing what he'd find.

The bump hadn't been there when he'd gone to bed with Adam, who'd made out only with the undamaged side of his face before falling asleep on the only pillow. He was amazed at how much faster than the other one it had grown, at how much uglier it was. It looked like a hairball, or the flesh of a mummy. He tried to move it, but it was firmly embedded in his head, like an extension of his skull.

The other growth, the one that had burst out in the grocery store, now extended a full inch from the side of his head. It was flat, a quarter inch thick, and greenish-gray. Its tip twisted counterclockwise. He stared at it for a little while longer, than ran back home, passing a pair of hippies who, he guessed, had heard the screams and come to see what was happening.

\*

He made it back to Adam's house after a seemingly endless run through a cluttered landscape of cartoonish trees and jutting rocks, all of which seemed to leer at him, offering both a threat and a comfortable place to hide. More than once, he imagined Adam's reaction to the growths on his head, and thought of hiding under a looming boulder that squatted in the middle of nowhere. Adam was still asleep; he didn't stir awake when Calyx slammed the door, his breath gone and his whole body aching from the run. Hearing Adam snore, Calyx leaned against the door and slumped onto the ground, staring at the dried blood encrusted on his hands.

"Adam?" he whispered, then said it louder. "Adam?"

Calyx repeated his name at higher and higher volume until he was shouting it, at which point Adam slowly rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself upright. "What?"

Adam lit an old oil lamp by the bed, then turned to look at Calyx, who leaned against the door in flickering darkness.

"Adam," Calyx said. "I need a doctor."

"Is it your head?"

"Yes."

"I have more ointment, and we can disinfect it with some aloe, if it's oozing. Infection's good; it means your body's fighting."

"Well," Calyx got up. "I'm not sure this is all that good anymore."

He stepped into the light.

\*

Calyx was staring at himself in the mirror when Adam came back in from throwing up. He'd finished washing the dried blood off his face, and changed out of his blood-stained white T-shirt and into another one. He'd lost weight since coming to the Home.

"What do you think it is?" Calyx asked.

"I don't know," Adam said. "You can't get rabbit papilloma. We've been over this. Do you think it's cancer? Or, like, some kind of parasite?"

"I don't know. I . . . I need a doctor."

"A doctor will just pump you full of drugs and call your parents," Adam said.

"I don't care," Calyx said. "I need a doctor."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"If I . . ." Adam paused. "If I take you to a doctor, you can't come back here."

"What?"

"I let you come here because I thought you believed in something. I mean, talking to you online—I never talked to anyone who really believed it this much. I tested you, a couple times, made you bite some pretty hard bullets. Remember the question I asked you, about the people who needed drugs for their hearts? You bit that bullet, and I . . ."

"What?"

"It's just that, before I started talking to you, I mean, the reason I was driving down to the library and going into those chat rooms was because I wasn't too sure anymore myself. I mean, I was sure about the system and all, and the whole freedom thing. Freedom's really important to me. But the drama here, the . . . ostracism, right? It really made me think. I needed someone from

outside to remind me how good I had it, not having to soak myself in hand sanitizer all the time. It . . . it meant a lot.”

Calyx didn't know what to say. When he finally spoke, it was to excuse himself to use the cathole.

When he came back in, Adam was dressed in a flannel shirt and a pair of jeans completely covered in reddish dirt. He fingered his car keys like prayer beads. “You ready?” he asked.

“For what?”

“To go to the hospital.”

“I'm not going,” Calyx said. “Look, I'm sorry. I didn't know how much it meant to you for me to stay.”

“That's not it,” Adam said. “It's not whether you stay or not, it's whether or not you want to stay. I'm willing to . . . to let you go, if you want to.”

“I don't want to,” Calyx said. He said the words so quickly that they rolled together, and he barely had time to put them in the right order before they fell out.

“Really?” Adam's face lit up.

“Really.”

“You mean it?”

“I mean it.”

“You have no idea,” Adam said. “How glad I am to hear that.”

Adam threw the car keys on a crude nightstand made from milk cartons covered in an old T-shirt, got up, and embraced him. The pressure made his wounds hurt.

\*

Two weeks passed. The horns didn't fall out. They grew, the one in his temple spiraling down and the one in his scalp rising up in a crude obelisk. Adam shaved Calyx's head every day to keep hair out of the wounds. His eye hurt more every day, and while he knew what was going to happen, he didn't want to bring it up. Adam gave him herbs, rubbed ointments into his scalp, went into town and came back with stolen vitamin C supplements. He changed Calyx's bandages twice a day, and didn't ask him to help out with the rabbits, who were still getting culled every day because of papilloma. After a while, Adam stopped bringing their bodies home with him, and they lived entirely on stolen food.

At night, when they made love, Adam would gently slide his hand up Calyx's chest to his neck, then to his chin. He would cup Calyx's chin in his hand, then grip it a little tighter and turn Calyx's head so that the horned side faced away from him, and he could kiss the smooth, clean-shaven, human side.

Sometimes, Calyx would wake up in the middle of the night, his eyeball on fire. New bulbs of pain had formed in the back of his skull, on his left cheek, on the side of his neck, but his eye was still the worst. Then he would lie there, taking deep breaths, trying to will away the pain, thinking of home, of aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, antibiotics. After a while, he would feel a presence behind him, and without turning he would know that it was Adam, lying awake, watching him, and Calyx would feel that he'd cheated Adam horribly by coming into his life.

\*

At the end of the two weeks, Calyx's eye began bleeding. It came on suddenly, more suddenly than he'd thought it would. While Adam was out working with the rabbits, Calyx was in the tiny house, distracting himself from his pain by fiddling with the chess set Adam had whittled during the time before Calyx arrived. Two pawns and a queen were still missing, and

Calyx couldn't quite remember how the pieces went or which did what, but he set them up at random spots on the board and moved them around until only one of the horses remained. Then he remembered that he was supposed to kill the one with the cross on its head. He got up to use the cathole, then realized that there was a spot in the middle of his vision, a little grey thing like a mote of dust in the air. He moved his head, blinked, shook, blew on his eye, but it stayed there, and he realized that the horn was finally on its way through his eyeball. His first response was to go out back and dig a new cathole.

By the time he was done, the gray spot had turned black and grown to fill the left quarter of his field of vision, except for a ring of color around the edge. He kept trying to stare right into the void, but it moved, always to the left of the direction he was looking. He stood there, by the cathole, and chased the spot with his eyes for a full minute before a louder, sharper pain than he'd ever felt before shot through his head and the area around the black spot turned red before going black, and he felt something warm flood his eye socket. He put his hand over the eye, and when he withdrew it and saw blood, he screamed and ran to the hutches.

\*

It was a sweltering hot day, but Calyx shivered. Droplets of blood and sweat slithered down his forehead like crawling insects.. By the time he arrived at the rabbit hutches, he couldn't even feel the heat anymore; his body felt oddly cool and tingly. He stopped running and lurched his body along as if by thought alone. The hippies who tended the rabbits, including the girl he'd met when he first saw Adam kill a rabbit, stared at him, some of them motionless, others squirming like frightened children at a horror movie. The rabbits stared out of their hutches at everything and nothing.

“Calyx?” Adam ran up to him from the maternity clutches. His presence was like a gust of wind bearing snow and dead leaves. Calyx turned his head to the left to look at him with his good eye. “What happened?”

“I think there’s another horn,” Calyx said.

The hippies circled around them. Calyx sat down; he was tired. The ground felt oddly warm, like something alive. He felt cold, and lay down on it. The hippies closed in around them. One of them yelled at Adam. Adam yelled back. Another hippie put something under Calyx’s leg.

\*

He was going to the hospital.

He lay in the passenger seat of Adam’s pickup truck. Adam had put old newspapers down on the seat and the surrounding area, although Calyx had mostly stopped bleeding. The chill had passed a little, although he felt dizzy and oddly thirsty, even after convincing Adam to buy him a water bottle at the convenience store by the bus station.

He sipped his water and surveyed the land around him with his good eye.

“Adam?” he said.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I can treat this, y’know,” Adam said. “You look at Neanderthal bones, they have all kinds of crazy scars and deformities and broken bones and stuff. And they all healed. They all lived. The tribe takes care of its own, you know?”

“I know.”

“The point is,” Adam went on. “I’d turn around if they let me, but they made up their mind. They don’t want you around anymore until you’re better.”

“Am I gonna get better?”

“Sure. As long as the doctors don’t poison you.”

At the Home, Adam’s argument with the hippies had ended with a burly man dragging Calyx away from the hutches by the ankles, after which, Adam told him later, there had been a discussion of the risks in keeping Calyx at the Home, especially the risks to the rabbits. The hippies were afraid that the CDC would blame the Home for Calyx’s condition, even as they themselves agreed to blame Calyx for what happened to the rabbits. They’d decided, in the end, that Adam would bring Calyx to the hospital himself, and say he found him hitchhiking. Then they rolled Calyx in the red dirt to make it more believable.

“So what happens to you?” Calyx asked. “I mean, I guess I can’t live with you anymore.”

“I don’t know,” Adam said. “I mean, I pissed off the whole damn Home years ago, and you just clinched it, but it’s like I told you: you just need one person to like you, one person in your whole life, and you’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Calyx said. “I . . .”

“But that’s what’s amazing about the internet. You can find that person, if you know where to look. We did it before, right?”

“Yeah,” Calyx said. “We did.”

\*

They had a fight shortly before arriving at the hospital. Calyx hadn’t planned on it, and didn’t know what it was about, although he was sure he started it. He didn’t think Adam knew either, but they were both red in the face when Calyx got out of the truck at the entrance to the



hospital and Adam slammed the door shut behind him and drove away. Calyx gazed out at the packed and sunlit hospital parking lot and felt the same smallness he felt when looking at the stars. When Adam's truck disappeared around the corner, Calyx turned and stumbled through the automatic doors. They closed behind him with a loud and final hiss and the cold, antiseptic hospital air enveloped him.

## WAY DOWN IN THE HOLE

Aiden was walking Lurch when he heard sirens. Lurch, a Boston terrier who had been stubbornly licking himself in the middle of the road while Aiden tugged at his leash, howled along with the sirens until Aiden picked him up and tucked him under his arm.

The noise came from two directions, and the sirens rose as they got closer, then converged in his street. Aiden began walking home. Lurch squirmed in his arms. He ran out of breath a block away, but even from there he could see the police cruiser and the fire truck parked in front of his house.

“Shit,” he whispered to himself. He remembered hearing a loud crash downstairs before he took Lurch out, but the couple who lived downstairs were always fighting, so he didn't worry about it at the time. Now he felt dizzy thinking about it, and a sickly thrill passed through him. He was afraid he might drop Lurch.

Aiden walked past the nest of emergency vehicles in his driveway and tried to get into the backyard, where the stairs led up to his apartment. The lone police officer, a woman with a face like a parakeet, stopped him. “Sir,” she said, and held up her hand, and waited for him to turn away. He walked back to the edge of the road and scratched Lurch behind his ears. Lurch shivered and whined.

Most of the neighbors were too polite to gawk. Instead, they peeked out their windows, or walked their dogs past the house, or slowed down as they drove home. One of them stopped and pulled over. The window rolled down, and Nurse waved at Aiden.

Nurse wasn't a nurse; he was a euthanasia tech. Every day he killed dogs and cats for ten dollars an hour. He had a childlike face, but had to shave his head to hide his premature baldness face. Aiden and Nurse knew each other in high school, but never really hung out until all of

Aiden's friends moved away and all of Nurse's friends withdrew from the smell of death that hung around his scrubs and his car.

“What's going on?” asked Nurse. Lurch, the only dog that would come near him, stopped whining when he heard Nurse's voice.

“I dunno,” Aiden said. “I'm kinda worried.”

“Do you have anything up there?”

“Anything?” Aiden shrugged. “You mean . . .”

Nurse nodded.

“No, I think we used up all of it last night.”

“So that's not it,” Nurse said. He rubbed his head—there was a five o'clock shadow shaped like a swooping bird of prey on the back of his crown.

“I don't know,” Aiden said. “I'm fucking losing it. Can I-”

“I need to shower first,” Nurse said. “I'll call you when I'm done.”

“Okay.” Aiden stood up; he was shaking a little, but nodded at Nurse as he drove away.

Then he heard the parakeet-faced officer's voice behind him. “Excuse me, sir? Are you a resident?”

“Yes,” Aiden said. He turned to face her. Lurch whimpered in his arms.

\*

Aiden and Nurse played with Lurch in Nurse's living room. Down the street, they could hear the police driving away from Aiden's house and the sinkhole in its ground-floor living room. They turned on their sirens, though Aiden didn't understand why.

“So do you have anywhere to go?” asked Nurse. He and Lurch were in a tug of war over a scrap of fabric. “I mean, if they do condemn the place, and it doesn't look like it's about to collapse from outside.”

Aiden watched Lurch maul the scrap of fabric. “I could get a hotel,” he said. “Or I could call Mom, but I'm never gonna find a job here if I'm in fucking Louisiana.”

“Louisiana's not so bad,” Nurse said. “Can't be worse than this place.”

“It can,” Aiden said. “You have no idea. I mean, just fucking churches and mud, and then I'd have Mom up my ass every day about how much money I'd be making if I'd done this or that or what the fuck ever. And besides, I put all my goddamn savings into staying in that place.”

Nurse yanked the denim out of Lurch's snout, and Lurch climbed onto Nurse's torso to get to it. Then he rolled over and licked Nurse's face. “I'm always weirded out that this dog likes me so much.”

“Maybe he has a death wish,” Aiden said. He was playing with his hair, picking out tangles and unknotting them.

“Maybe.” Nurse picked Lurch up and put him down on the floor. Lurch sat down and licked himself. “Anyway,” Nurse said. “I was thinking you could crash here tonight.”

“You sure? I don't wanna be a burden.”

“Don't worry about it.” Nurse stared at the floor between them. “I mean, if you're lucky, the guy from the city's just gonna okay you to move back in tomorrow. And anyway, this place has been kind of weird since Nathan left for Nicaragua.”

\*

The next morning, Aiden woke up on the couch under the front window. He looked outside and saw Nurse walking Lurch. Lurch circled him, tying him up with his leash.

He'd bought the dog a month ago, exhausting enough of his savings and the money his family had given him when he graduated college that he barely had enough left for another month's rent. His work study job had gone to an incoming freshman, and while he'd tried to get a new one in the two months since, a part of him still felt as if he only had to make it until August to receive another check from financial aid. Most of the time he played video games, or read books, or smoked pot with Nurse, who let Lurch sit on his chest while he lay on the floor, staring at his own smoke.

\*

No one called Aiden, so he called his landlady. The house, she said, was a loss, and he had three days to move. The building inspector had refused to even set foot upstairs, or to spend another minute in the house, after he saw the condition of the living room. His landlady was livid; she yelled at him as if he'd caused the sinkhole. He said good-bye to her in mid-sentence and hung up.

“So what's happening?” asked Nurse. He'd just gotten back from work, and his left arm was wrapped in gauze.

“The short version or the long version?”

Nurse picked up Lurch and gave him a kiss. “Short.”

“The house is condemned and we need to get my shit out of there.”

“We?” Nurse looked at him from behind Lurch's head.

Aiden sucked on his cigarette. “Sorry.”

“I'm kidding,” Nurse said. “How much of it is there?”

That night they went down the street to the condemned house. The front door had a yellow sign nailed to it, but the stairs only had a strip of caution tape tied to the railings. They

ducked under it, treading lightly, watching the road for police. Aiden thought he saw the house sway, and the steps croaked like frogs under his feet. He wasn't sure if he remembered them doing that, and wondered what it meant that no one had bothered to board up the door yet. Inside the attic, he took his boots off and tried not to make any noise.

Nurse looked around. "Do you want the couch?"

"Let's not touch it," Aiden said. Was the floor moving under him? "I don't wanna move heavy stuff around in here, y'know?"

"I hear you," Nurse said. He'd bought a stack of cardboard boxes and was putting them together in the middle of the room. Aiden piled his clothes in a suitcase and smoked.

The house groaned, and Aiden startled. "We gotta hurry," he whispered to himself. Then he looked at Nurse, who was still taping boxes together with his back turned toward Aiden, and silently mouthed it. "Hurry hurry hurry hurry shit shit shit c'mon c'mon c'mon . . ."

The house whimpered. Nurse looked around. "Did you hear that?"

"Yeah."

"We should hurry," Nurse said. He glanced out the window that overlooked the street.

\*

That night Aiden woke up on the couch with the Weather Channel still on. The living room reeked of Nurse's pot, and he could hear Lurch scuttling around behind the baby gate in the bathroom. Aiden's sweat cooled on his skin. His hands shook.

He tried to think back to the rest of the evening, but all his thoughts crumbled into a little hole in his mind. He tried to stand up and the room drifted around under him. His chest fell in on itself and he barely managed to cross the room before falling over and catching himself on the

baby gate. It tilted over, and Lurch climbed over it. He licked Aiden's sweat off his forehead until Aiden pushed him away.

Nurse opened his bedroom door and stood there in his black briefs. He switched on the light, illuminating the boxes of Aiden's things that stood between them.

Nurse clambered over the boxes. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Aiden said. He shook. His skin was pale, and his lips felt chilly. "I . . . Can you help me up?"

"I don't think I should," Nurse said. "Lie there for a moment. I'll get you some water." He ran into the kitchen and poured a glass, then came back and held it to Aiden's lips.

"The baby gate," Aiden said. Nurse put it back in place, secured it, chased Lurch around the room.

Aiden pulled himself upright and leaned against the doorway. He kept on drinking. Nurse leaned over and took his pulse. His fingers were warm against Aiden's skin, and Aiden's heart slowed down a little.

"I think you're gonna be okay," Nurse said.

"Cool," Aiden said. The room stopped flailing and now rotated slowly around the axis of Nurse.

"But we should go to the hospital," Nurse said. "All right?"

Aiden nodded. "How about the clinic?"

"Hospital's closer."

"It doesn't matter."

A few minutes later, they were on the road. The car smelled like frightened dog, so they both rolled down the window and smoked cigarettes. It didn't get the smell out.

Everything in the clinic seemed to glow, even Nurse. They had the waiting room to themselves, but it still took half an hour for a bony nurse to call Aiden's number. He got up, and Nurse followed, but she stopped him. Then she led Aiden to a dingy little room and left him there for ten minutes. He lay down on the examination table and almost fell asleep when she came back with a blood pressure monitor. Then she took him back to the hall, weighed him, took his temperature, shone a light in his ear, all without a word except for the occasional instruction.

“Judging by your paperwork, it's just a panic attack,” she said. “But I see here you're a smoker. You wanna talk about that?”

Thirty seconds later he was back in the waiting room.

“How'd it go?” asked Nurse.

“She said I had a panic attack.”

“So it's nothing?” They both stood at the billing counter. Nurse smoked an imaginary cigarette.

“Well,” Aiden said. “It's a panic attack.”

Aiden paid and they left. Nurse lit a cigarette the moment they got outside. When Nurse turned the ignition in the car, the clock said 3:08 AM.

“Shit,” Nurse said.

“What?”

“I work in the morning.” He started the engine.

“What time?”

“Seven to one. They cut my hours again.”

“You might as well stay up.”



Nurse sighed and pulled out of the parking lot. They drove through empty streets, and Aiden felt the crumbling feeling in his chest again. He took deep breaths, tried not to take them too quickly, felt like he'd lost the ability to breathe without concentrating. He could feel the car drive off the road and over empty space for miles, then he looked outside and the road was still there. They were halfway home when Nurse slammed his fist on the horn and screamed, then put his arms back in two-ten position as if nothing had happened. Aiden wanted to ask him what was wrong, but Nurse turned on the radio and cranked the volume up all the way.

\*

They lay on the floor in Aiden's living room, staring at the dust that floated above them and sparkled in the lamplight. Nurse's GED, associate's degree and Euthanasia Certification stared down at him, two eyes and a mouth on an otherwise bare wall.

Nurse stared up at the ceiling fan and said, "I don't want to go to work tomorrow."

"Why not?"

"I want to be fired. I want them to drag another dog into the room and tell me to destroy it, and I want to tell them to go fuck themselves, and I want them to fire me on the spot and chase me out of the building. I want them to try and euthanize me." He hissed out a laugh.

"That'd suck."

"If I got fired?"

"If they euthanized you."

"Why?"

"Cause then I'd have to move back to Louisiana." Aiden paused. "Can you euthanize in Louisiana?"

Nurse licked his lips. "I'm not certified there. I think I need to take another sixteen-hour course or something."

"You can't transfer?"

"You know, when I told my parents what I was doing, they didn't even know the job existed. They said 'But you need a veterinarian, right? At least supervising you?' Like how it is at the vets. A lot of people don't know jobs like mine exist."

He paused, glanced over at Aiden, who looked away. "Maybe in Louisiana," he said. "This job doesn't exist."

Lurch sniffed his way over, pausing to lick the carpet between them. Then he curled up in Nurse's armpit. Aiden reached over and petted him. He noticed Nurse watching his fingers. Nurse closed his eyes.

"Thanks for taking me in," Aiden said. "I'm gonna try to find a job again tomorrow."

"There's a bunch of openings in the strip by the shelter," Nurse said.

"Really?"

"I can drop you off. I mean, not this morning, cause you're too out of it, but the next time I work, which I think is Tues— No. Fuck, I'm out of it."

\*

It was another week before Nurse took Aiden to the strip mall. In that time, Aiden read want ads on Craigslist and watched television, filled out online applications on the university's job site and checked his inbox. He smoked in Nurse's kitchen, blew smoke rings out the window, and his mother called almost every day. Once, he went out to hunt for job applications, but she called him on his way out the door, and he spent half an hour appeasing her about his future only to hang up and find that the talk had knocked the wind out of him. He spent the rest of the day

reading and playing with Lurch until the little dog shit on the carpet and he locked him behind the baby gate in the bathroom.

That Friday, Nurse dropped him off at the strip mall, which was really a quartet of strip malls gathered around an intersection. The animal shelter cowered behind a Bed, Bath & Beyond. The shelter's front entrance was only accessible by a dirt road, but the dumpster was in the strip mall parking lot, and Nurse parked next to it.

Aiden nodded good-bye, turned around once more on his way to the corner, then went into Starbucks. The line swelled on both sides of him, and when he got up to the counter the press of people behind him made him feel like something was scuttling down his back. He forgot to ask for an application.

At Bed, Bath & Beyond, he barely got past the door before a salesperson approached him. She asked him whether he was interested in their new line of 300-thread count sheets. He had no idea what that meant, so he decided they'd never hire him.

Barnes & Noble sent what looked like a loss prevention worker after him. Someone must have seen the folder he'd taken for applications and thought he was stealing books. He tried not to make any sudden moves, and he knew better than to ask for an application.

The pet store told him to e-mail them a résumé. The cashier gave him an e-mail address, and he wrote it down on the inside of his folder.

In the end, the only application he got was from an ice cream store that forced its employees to sing whenever anyone tipped them.

“But you can't sing,” Nurse said while they sat in a restaurant booth and waited for their beer.

“Yeah, I know,” Aiden said. “Worth a try, right?”

“Did you ask here?” asked Nurse. There was a little bloodstain on his scrubs. Aiden couldn't stop staring at it.

“I'm not really sure who to ask.”

The waitress came back, and Nurse asked her if they were hiring. She stared at the ceiling for a second and told him to call the next morning, when the manager was in. “The number'll be on the receipt,” she said, obviously in a hurry.

When they got home, neither of them could find the receipt.

\*

Aiden spent the next two days online. He dug around Craigslist, read a string of suspicious e-mails that allegedly came from nuns or elderly philanthropists who needed a blank check to set up direct deposit before they could send him an application, and smoked too many cigarettes. When he filled out online applications, he always found something he couldn't fill in: his hourly wage at a store that paid him entirely in tips, the mailing address of his first job, an emergency contact. If he chose his mother, what would it say about his social skills? And what if he chose Nurse? What would they think when the work number was the number for Animal Control?

“You're being ridiculous,” Nurse kept saying, and every time he said it Aiden could feel something bottom out inside him. “They never check that kind of stuff. And besides, you're a college graduate. Shouldn't you be working somewhere better?”

“No one's hiring,” Aiden said. “All I get is a bunch of pyramid schemes.”

“That law office at the strip mall had a sign out for a receptionist.”

Aiden looked up from the screen and rested his head on his fist. They stared at each other for a moment, and then the room began to tilt, and Aiden clung to the laptop for stability. Any moment, the floor would turn sideways and pour him off it.

“Are you okay?” He could barely hear Nurse, who seemed tilted at a bizarre angle, like a sculpture just beginning to fall over. Nurse had a hand on each of his shoulders and pulled him back from the laptop. “Dude, you're hyperventilating.”

And he was. His breath came fast, and it felt like something outside him was sucking air out of his lungs and blowing it back in. After a minute he got it under control and the room slowly shifted back into place. Nurse was still holding onto his shoulders.

\*

Aiden would wash Nurse's dishes, vacuum his carpet, clean his counters. He alphabetized Nurse's DVD collection and wiped the patina of brown ooze off his absent roommate's door. He dumped the ashtrays and bought new batteries for everything in the house. He got little beads full of lemon-scented fluid that deodorized the garbage disposal.

One night they were drunk together, watching an awful movie that Nurse said he needed if he was going to get his mind off what he'd done that day—a whole litter of miniature dachshunds and both parents.

“I thought there was a lot of demand for purebreds?” Aiden said. He stroked Lurch's back. Lurch snored.

“Not if they have kennel cough.” Nurse sat straight up. He still wore his scrub pants, but he'd changed into a plain olive T-shirt. He stared at the TV with a look of wide-eyed fascination, like someone who wanted to avoid staring at something else.

“They had kennel cough? All of them?” Aiden realized he was staring at Nurse, and turned to watch the TV. On the screen, a black-clad woman broke a man's spine, leaning forward to give the camera a good view of her breasts as she did so.

“One of them,” Nurse said. “But it spreads like crazy. And we can't afford to risk having the whole shelter get sick.”

“The vets don't give you any kind of discount?”

“We don't call the vets,” Nurse said. Lurch made little snorting noises. “Can we not talk about this?”

“Okay,” Aiden said. Lurch's snorting turned into honking.

“Lemme see him for a second,” Nurse said.

Aiden handed the dog over. Nurse cradled him in his arms and gently pinched his nose. Then he scratched Lurch's throat, and after swallowing a few times Lurch strutted onto the arm of the couch, lay down and fell back to sleep.

Aiden imagined Nurse putting the dachshunds to sleep. He imagined a room with pink walls, picture windows shot through with sunlight, Nurse cradling the tiny dachshund puppies and sliding the needle in when they fell asleep in his hands. He imagined them taking one slow, calm breath and going slack on a soft pillow in a shoebox.

In the movie he and Nurse were watching, the black-clad woman and her friends dragged an unconscious teenage girl to the black-clad woman's car.

\*

Nurse came back one day with a manila folder full of job applications. His skin had a glow on it that Aiden hadn't seen in days. The cartoon dogs on Nurse's scrubs seemed to be grinning at him. Lurch ran in circles around Nurse's feet and pawed at his leg.

“Dude,” he said. “I don't know where you asked, but you missed a ton of openings. I mean, they kind of looked at me funny, but that's what happens when you go to Barnes & Noble looking like this.” Lurch ran into the kitchen, where Aiden had been mopping, and slid around on the wet floor before scuttling back to Nurse with a scrap of fabric.

“Thanks,” Aiden said. “I'll look in a minute.”

“I'm taking a shower,” Nurse said. He scratched Lurch behind the ears, tugged on the scrap until it came loose, and threw it into the bedroom. “I'll leave this by the couch, okay?”

Nurse left the room and Aiden finished mopping, then went to the living room and looked at the manila folder. Lurch followed him, the drool-soaked scrap of fabric hanging from his mouth. A Starbucks application slid out of the folder and flopped onto the floor. It was bright green and reminded him of the color of Nurse's favorite scrubs. Aiden picked it up and read it over. He thought about the loss prevention worker who'd followed him through the aisles, wondered if Barnes & Noble even had any, then crumpled up the application and stuffed it into a box of his clothes. No sense taking that kind of risk.

\*

Sometimes, their walks synchronized without the slightest thought or effort, until one of them noticed and slowed down. Sometimes, one of them would go to walk Lurch, and the other would come along, say that he had nothing better to do. Sometimes, one of them would come into the living room and find the other one staring at the TV screen, holding a cigarette that had burned itself down to a finger of ash, and would know not to ask. It was at times like this that Aiden thought his life was going somewhere.

Once, they were walking Lurch when they passed Aiden's old house. One of the walls was starting to sink into itself, and one side of the roof sagged visibly. Some of the vinyl siding had already cracked.

“Wow,” Aiden said.

“What?”

“I'm really homeless.”

Lurch peed on the mailbox and stared at them with his bulging eyes.

“Not really,” Nurse said. “I mean, you live on my couch, so that's kind of a home. And my roommate might not be coming back until spring, so you're pretty much set.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Nurse said. “He called me yesterday. Said he'd joined this missionary group or something.”

“Weird.” Aiden couldn't stop smiling.

\*

A couple days later, Aiden stood in the parking lot behind Bed, Bath & Beyond with a folder full of job applications. He had a voided check and his social security card in his wallet in case anyone wanted to hire him on the spot. He'd warned Nurse that this wasn't likely, it being the middle of summer and there not being all that many openings, but Nurse asked him if he was serious about finding a job, and Aiden got out his checkbook without a word.

“If you get a job,” Nurse had said the next morning. “I mean, I need you to find one either way if you're gonna be sleeping on the couch, and Nate's mailing over his room key and if you're gonna be subleasing then you definitely need one, but anyway . . .”

“Yeah?”



“If you can find even some shitty part-time minimum wage thing, and I can find some shitty part-time minimum wage thing, then I've been crunching the numbers and we could make the rent without me having to kill—without me having to destroy animals anymore.”

Nurse was probably destroying his first animal of the day while Aiden walked around the corner to Starbucks. The earth seemed to open up between him and the front door; it grew farther and farther away with every step he took toward it. Aiden sat down on a chair outside the store and looked at the application. He checked it carefully for mistakes, but there was nothing wrong with it. He remembered his time at the library, scanning, stamping answering an endless barrage of stupid questions, excuses for late books, having to keep everything moving. Then he looked through the Starbucks window at what the baristas were doing. It occurred to him that he didn't know the answers to any of the stupid questions he'd get asked. That he wouldn't know what to do with any beverage. That he was a terrible barista. He threw the application away.

That was stupid, he told himself while he stood in line for coffee. He could learn. They all had to learn. But then he went to FedEx and did the exact same thing.

It was a hot day, and Aiden's dress shirt was laced with sweat. The girl at Top Dollar kept glancing at his armpit. She looked over his application. “So you can only work these hours?”

“The bus doesn't run any later,” he said. He thought about telling her that he could call a taxi if the shift was long enough to justify the cost, but before he could formulate the sentence she said “We'll call you if we have an opening. Was there anything else you needed help with?”

Outside, everything was white with late morning sun, and the parking lot swirled with mirages. He looked over the applications, looked at the strip malls on every street corner, realized how many times he would have to do this, and each one would give him that same tone

of voice, those same quivers in his stomach, that same feeling of a world starting to turn over on its side. But at least now he knew not to waste time with the places that were open after eight.

\*

“I’m done,” Nurse said as he came out of the shelter’s back door. He had a dark stain on his scrubs with a clear imprint of a dog’s nose in it. “I’m gonna fucking quit.”

Aiden’s world stopped turning for a moment. “What?”

“I fucking can’t take it anymore.” Nurse unlocked the car and got in.

Aiden yanked on the passenger side handle until Nurse unlocked it. When Aiden got in, Nurse had turned the radio up all the way, but Aiden turned it down.

“Dude, you can’t fucking quit. I mean, not until I get a job.”

“Yeah, sure.” Nurse rolled his eyes. “I’ll wait until then.”

“Hey,” Aiden said. They were speeding out of the parking lot. “What the hell do you mean?”

Nurse lit a cigarette without rolling down the window. They drove through residential streets where the parallel-parked SUVs barely left them with any room to drive. A shrill talk radio host bleated through the speakers.

Nurse rolled down the window. “Nothing,” he said. A cloud of smoke had formed in the car, blotting out the smell of scared dog. “I’m sorry, man. I can be such an asshole sometimes.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Aiden said. “I’m kind of a shitheel myself.”

\*

A week passed. No one called. Nurse kept telling Aiden that he should call the places where he’d applied, and Aiden kept saying that he would, he just wanted to wait a little.

“I shouldn’t be pushy,” he said. “Besides, how often do you call the vets you applied at?”

“I called one of them this morning.”

Aiden sighed. He was reading job postings online. All of them looked like pyramid schemes or outright frauds. “I’ll start calling tomorrow,” he said. “Can I get a cigarette?”

Nurse stuck two in his mouth, lit them, handed one to Aiden. He felt something else pass to him, and then Lurch stumbled into the room, tripped on himself, and flopped over to sleep next to Aiden's laptop.

\*

Aiden overslept the next day, and the day after that he woke up to hear Nurse on the phone. He stood up, still dressed in a wrinkled T-shirt and a pair of jeans, unwrapped the dingy sheets that had coiled around him while he slept, and walked into the kitchenette. He started making coffee when Nurse came into the room and leaned against the doorway. Nurse sucked viciously on his cigarette.

“Barnes & Noble couldn't find your application.”

“Huh?”

“I called and told them I was you.”

“What?”

“And the other places, too. You gave the wrong phone number at the dollar store, by the way.” Nurse lowered his head and shoved the last three words out through clenched teeth. Then he walked into the room, sat down at the dining table and rested his forehead in his hands.

“Aiden,” Nurse said. “What do you want me to do?”

“I don't know,” Aiden said. He took a seat across from Nurse. Lurch slid across the tile floor and begged for scraps.

“Because I want to help you, and I want you to . . .” Nurse ran his hands over his shaved head. “I want you to pull yourself together, and to . . . I don't know. I mean, I don't even know what's wrong with you.”

“Nothing's wrong with me,” Aiden said. Lurch sat on the floor and stared at him.

“Then why are we here?”

“Because I-”

“I can't help you,” Nurse said. “I don't understand.”

Lurch gave up on Aiden and began scratching Nurse's leg. Nurse picked him up and held him. The dog sneezed and licked Nurse's face.

“Look.” Nurse pushed himself upright, stood there, his eyes half-closed. “I come home every day smelling like anal glands and covered in streaks of blood from where the needle doesn't go in right or the dog's been bitten or where it's bitten me. I can't help you.”

“So what do I do?”

“I don't know.”

Aiden got up, went to the living room and dredged a backpack from the heap of clothes in his open suitcase. He stuffed it with underwear, a few decent shirts, some socks, a pair of khakis.

“You can keep Lurch for now,” he said.

“Where are you going?”

“I don't know,” Aiden said, and he pulled his cell phone charger from the wall. “I'll call you later today.” Then he left.

It was a humid morning, and he felt the first drops of sweat percolate on his skin as he stood on the reeking porch. He could hear birds in the distance, and the swoosh of the morning commute on the nearby highway. The newspaper lay by the edge of the road, and he went to pick

it up. He could picture Nurse waiting for him inside: Nurse scratched his shaved head with one hand and held Lurch in the other. Lurch's bulging eyes stared at the doorknob as if he'd never seen it before.

At the edge of the driveway, Aiden looked both ways down the street. He could feel the heat build up under his bangs. He imagined Nurse, on his way to work tomorrow, and the day after, and the killing room filled up to Nurse's chest with dead dogs. Lurch would wait behind the baby gate all day, chewing a scrap of denim, peeing in the corner until Nurse came home and cried into the dog's velvety fur.

Aiden imagined that he might be able to help them.

The street shifted around him. Aiden's sweat became icy, and he had to fight to slow down his breathing. He focused his eyes on a palm tree across the street, and when the world stopped spinning he turned and saw a couple walking their dog down the street. One wore a yellow sundress, the other dressed entirely in black. They walked a few inches apart and passed the leash back and forth between them as the dog circled their legs. For a moment, Aiden watched them, enraptured at their movements, and then he took a deep breath and turned around.

## A WILDERNESS OF TIGERS

My friend Greg drove past the entrance to the Kitty Korner Kat Sanktuary twice before we found it. I'd expected something more like a zoo, or maybe a prison: either there'd be plastic signs painted to look like wood with the cat sanctuary's name on it in some kitschy "African" typeset, or a driveway lined with razor wire and leading to a windowless cube of reinforced concrete in the middle of a swamp. Instead, the Sanktuary's entranceway was marked only by a weather-beaten wooden sign that dangled on a rusty chain from a mailbox that looked like it had been dragged behind a semi.

I was doing community service at the Kitty Korner Kat Sanktuary because the court system of San Bibiana County, Florida, held me responsible for the first of many forest fires that summer. It hadn't been my fault, really—my friends had set the campfire, and they'd been the ones to "put it out" by peeing on it after I passed out drunk in the dirt—but it had been *my* sixteenth birthday party, so the jury blamed me. Luckily, my parents were friends with the judge, and instead of jail time I got community service.

After we found the entrance, Greg dropped me off and drove away, thinking that the Sanktuary must be right around the bend in the dirt road. I had to sweat down half a mile of winding gravel to get to the gate. Leafless trees wreathed the path, and I got some shade by staying to one side of the road, but by the time I got to the Sanktuary itself, I was drenched in sweat.

No one was waiting for me at the entrance, and if I hadn't heard something roar I might have thought the place was abandoned. A ten-foot chain-link fence wrapped around the Sanktuary, and the roofs of the cages towered over it. An old big rig, its bare axles resting on cinderblocks, rusted by the parking lot. Someone had spray-painted a gigantic tiger on the side.

Its proportions were all wrong, with huge ears on a tiny head and fangs that barely fit in its mouth and a tail that could wrap around its body. The front gate was open, and I walked in.

A middle-aged woman in combat boots sat outside a trailer just past the entrance, smoking a cigarette. She got up and walked over to me. Her muscular arms threatened to rip the sleeves of her shirt.

“You must be Marco,” she said. Her face wrinkled up. I felt like dirt, and my sweat felt grimy, as if I was coated in drops of wet clay.

“Yeah,” I said. She shook my hand as if it were a lever that wouldn’t budge.

“We could use you. There’s a lot of meat to cut up.”

“I’m glad to be here.”

We both sounded equally sincere. Or maybe I *was* sincere. I didn’t know how I felt, except dirty and a little dizzy from the heat. We went inside to a dimly lit office where I filled out forms and the woman signed them. She glanced up at me every few seconds, but said nothing. A fan spun overhead. I paused to get water from a cooler in the corner—the cups were shaped like party hats.

“I’m Cher,” said the woman. It was the first thing she’d said in a full minute.

“Good to meet you, Cher,” I said.

“When we’re done here, I’ll show you the cats.”

The entire time I knew her, she never once called a lion a lion or a tiger a tiger. Panthers, caracals, the oddly out-of-place coatimundi, they were all cats.

The cats spent their days in huge cages with trees and little shacks in them. Some had ceilings, so the cats couldn’t climb out. Others were open to the sky. Most had two-doored metal chambers for feeding, like the ones used to exchange objects through bullet-proof glass. You

opened one door, threw in the food, closed the door, then turned a switch that opened the other door, and the meat slopped out in a bloody wad. Mostly the animals ate raw slabs of beef or pork. One of the tigers would only eat whole pigs. Cher warned me not to touch any of them.

“People keep these as pets?” I asked.

“They try to,” Cher said.

She was a quiet woman, the kind of person who’d spent so much time around animals that she’d gone native. She moved and spoke with a kind of brute efficiency, and let her contempt for me and my awkward efforts at small talk waft from her skin like musk.

The cats slept, mostly. It was all they really did, except when they were hungry. Then they paced back and forth around the feeding vestibule. Sometimes, one of the cats would get up, circle its enclosure, and lie down in a newer, sunnier or shadier spot. The cats at the Sanktuary were all rescues, wild animals that had been captured and sold illegally, then bought and owned legally until their owners got busted for something else or ran out of money or simply got scared of them. A lot of them were declawed, and one, a white tiger named Snowflake, had been defanged.

“So what does she eat?” I asked Cher. We were coming to the end of our tour, and I could see why she had saved Snowflake for last. The tiger was fat and lazy, like the other animals, but her face was all wrong. Her jaws looked sunken in and comically small for her face, but she paced around with a hunger that the other cats didn’t have. She glanced over at me and sized me up with a gaze that felt more snakelike than feline.

“You’ll see,” Cher said. “It’s almost feeding time. Todd’ll show you.”



I didn't ask who Todd was. It seemed rude—I felt like I should know already. Cher led me back to the meat locker, but didn't stay to introduce me to the people that I could hear throwing heavy objects around inside. I opened the door, and a blast of cold fog fell over me.

It was dark inside, so at first I didn't see them. One of them was short and squat, the other tall and far too skinny, as if he were starving. They hauled a headless pig carcass to the door. "Hi," the skinny one said. He looked about my age and had hair the color of dried oatmeal. "Can you hold the door for me?"

"Sure," I said, and as they stumbled by, holding a pale hoof in each gloved hand, I introduced myself. "I'm Marco, by the way."

"I'm Todd," the skinny one said. "That's Frank."

Frank was even older than Cher, and so short I wanted to pet him. His eyes bulged out of his face like a Boston terrier's. He nodded at me, but didn't say anything. Todd towered over me, like a skinny tree. They were both out of breath.

"Need help with that?" I asked.

"We're fine." Todd panted. In spite of his long legs, his arms looked like they could reach down to his knees. "Just follow us. Cher send you?"

"Yeah," I said. "Is she always like that?"

Frank shrugged. Todd ignored the question.

They led me to a dimly lit shack with a table in the middle. Frank and Todd heaved the pig carcass onto the table and leaned against the wall to catch their breath.

"You ever butcher a pig before?" Todd asked.

"Not really," I said. "I carved a turkey once."

“Good enough for Snowflake and the caracals,” Todd said. “Get some gloves on. They’re on the counter by the bathroom door.”

I don’t think I could call what we did “butchering,” really. There was no talk of cuts of meat, of where to cut, even. We just took knives and awkwardly sawed the pig into chunks, then hacked the meat off the bones of two of those chunks, each of which consisted of most of a leg. There wasn’t really any blood—it had been drained before coming here—but the body was still wet and full of juices that coated my gloves and oozed their way in to trickle down my wrist. Todd told me to cut off the hooves, too, because Snowflake liked gnawing on them. I hacked at the pig’s ankles until Frank stopped me. He had a handheld circular saw, and ground through the ankles in a spray of fluid and pig dust. I couldn’t stop staring at it.

“You okay?” Todd asked. He had an elongated face, like he was part alien. I felt dizzy.

“I need some water,” I said, and I did. I hadn’t had anything to drink since filling out paperwork in Cher’s office. The world listed to the right, and I fell against a counter. Todd ran up to me—I’d never noticed how long his fingers were before—and cradled my head in one enormous hand. “Frank,” he said. “Get him some water.”

Frank scuttled away.

“Don’t worry,” Todd said. “You’ll be okay. Lotta people faint the first time they chop up a dead animal. Don’t expect us to call an ambulance, though. Cher’d kill us if we got OSHA’s attention and Jesus Christ, you’re bleeding.”

I looked where he was looking; there was a cut on my right arm where I’d hit the edge of the counter. Frank came back with a cup of water.

“It’s not bad,” I said.

“You’re right,” Todd said. “Just gotta clean it up.”

The first aid kit was low on supplies, so Todd stuck a row of Band-Aids down my arm; his fingertips felt cold, and I wondered if maybe his heart had trouble pumping blood all the way down his long arms. Meanwhile, Frank stuffed gobs of pig meat into a blender, then dumped the contents into a bowl. When he was done, there must have been ten pounds of liquefied pork in there. “That’s for Snowflake, right?” I asked, sipping my water.

“Yep,” Todd said. “And you can give it to her.”

“How?” I asked. I couldn’t imagine pouring the contents through the double doors.

“You walk in and put the bowl down,” Todd said. “Don’t worry. She doesn’t bite. And if she does, well . . .”

It didn’t matter, because when Todd unlocked the cage door and I walked in, Snowflake lurched to the back of her enclosure. Her paws, like her mouth, looked half-formed; she’d been declawed.

“Hi,” I said. Snowflake stared at me. A breeze moved her white hair like snowy grass. I put down the food and left, shaking.

I stayed for eight hours that day. Frank hardly said a word the entire time, and I didn’t see Cher until she barged into the meat locker to bluntly announce that she was leaving for the night, but Todd took me on what amounted to a second tour of the Sanktuary, introducing me to the cats and giving me bits of trivia. By the end of the day, when Greg arrived to pick me up, I thought about inviting him to hang out with us, but Greg was in a hurry and I didn’t get around to it. Black clouds rose above the trees in the distance, signifying another forest fire. I wondered if whoever had started it would get caught, and if he’d end up in the prison cell that I was supposed to be occupying.

\*

The next day, I butchered more animals with Frank and Todd. Cher cleaned cages all day long. She could walk in on the cats, and they ignored her, except for the caracals, who rubbed themselves against her side. She ignored them.

“Why don’t they just send them back?” I asked Todd.

“Can’t,” he said. “They’re too used to getting fed.”

“Really?” We were waiting for a frozen hunk of cow to thaw so that we could cut it up for the lions. Frank was inside, hacking up turkeys for the smaller cats.

“So why can’t we feed them up close? I mean, except Snowflake.”

“Well,” Todd thought about it. He held a cigarette between the tips of his spidery fingers. “What I mean with them getting used to feeding isn’t that they’re used to being pets. They think all food comes from us, and it’s not a long stretch from that to thinking that we’re food.”

“So why can Cher-“

“Cher’s different,” he said. Then Frank came out, proudly holding a bucket of turkey legs. Their grey meat glistened in the sun, and so did Frank’s gloved hands.

“Thanks, Frank,” Todd said. “You wanna feed the caracals when Cher’s done in there?”

Frank ran off without answering. That was how he said yes to things.

“Now what?” I asked.

“Come with me,” Todd said. “I wanna show you something.”

He took me to Snowflake’s cage, where the white tiger gazed out at us with doll-like eyes. Todd walked up to the cage door, and Snowflake curled up in the far corner. Todd unlocked the door and led me inside.

“Snowflake’s pretty much harmless,” he said. “So Cher has me clean the cage.”

“What about Frank?” I asked.

Todd laughed. “Frank’s too damn weird to clean cages. If he wasn’t free, Cher’d fire him, just for being so goddamn weird.”

“He’s on probation, too?”

“We all are,” Todd said. “Except Cher, of course. Cher’s just crazy. And I finished my community service, actually. Stuck around, though.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Used to it, I guess.”

He led me into Snowflake’s enclosure, a long, narrow shack coated on the inside with plaster, apparently a labor of love by a previous volunteer. It was warm and smelled like cat piss. It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the darkness, and once they did, I was blinded again when a bunch of Christmas lights fired up.

“Check it out,” Todd said. “Snowflake likes to sleep outside or under the awning if it rains, so I figured I’d put this thing to good use.”

My eyes adjusted again. Todd had covered the inner walls with cutouts from pornographic magazines, and kept a little glass bong in a crude alcove he’d probably hacked into the wood himself.

“Nice place,” I said. “Smells a little, though.”

“I know.” Todd shrugged. “She pisses in here. Does her other business outside, though. Just gotta mop up in here a couple times a day.”

“But what’s it for?” I asked.

“My ride home doesn’t come until dark,” Todd said. “So I get bored after Cher and Frank leave.”

Snowflake peeked her head in and stared at us. Her eyes now reminded me of a baby's. Todd walked up and scratched her behind the ears. She didn't respond.

"She's a smart girl," Todd said. "She knows she's defenseless. It's sad."

"So she's tame?" I asked.

"No, just depressed." Todd walked away from her and turned off the lights. He had me get a mop and bucket, told me what to fill it with. When I came back, Snowflake was standing in one corner, looking frightened and childlike while Todd hosed down the enclosure. The dirt floor had become a layer of mud. I mopped up the concrete portions, and then Todd hosed them down again. The cleaning fluid lingered in pools of filthy water. Todd kicked the used bucket over into the filth.

"Don't let Cher catch you dumping that stuff in the dirt like that, by the way," he said.

"She's kind of big on groundwater or something."

"You mean she has emotions?" I asked.

Todd laughed.

"Well, Marco," he said. "Let me put it this way: you don't want to be around when she does."

We finished the job and went back to chopping up dead animals. At the end of the day, I drove home with Greg, who told me that part of the woods near the next town had caught fire.

"Looks like you started a trend," he said.

"It wasn't me," I shrugged. "There was this other fire first. And besides, you were there, too."

"Whatever."

\*

The next day, Greg didn't show. I waited for half an hour, tried calling him, discovered that I had no reception, and went back to the gate. Cher had locked up when we left, but Todd was still inside.

"Your friend ditch you?" he asked. He'd taken his shirt off, and had a dent in the middle of his chest, as if some little kid had made him out of clay and stuck his finger in there.

"Looks like it," I said. I couldn't stop staring at his chest.

He noticed I was staring. "It's called a sunken chest," he said.

"I wasn't staring," I said.

"Marfan syndrome," he said as he unlocked the gate. "My ligaments are all weird. That's why my limbs and crap like that are so out of proportion."

"Is it dangerous?" I asked.

"Kinda." He got the gate open and motioned for me to come in. His arm must have been three feet long. For the first time, I noticed a medical alert bracelet on his wrist. It was encrusted with dried meat. "And by kinda, I mean I need to see a doctor every few months to make sure my arteries aren't about to rip themselves open."

"Sounds pretty bad," I said.

Todd shrugged. His neck was so long and slender that he could barely get his shoulders up to his chin. "It's okay, I guess."

He kept some sodas in a cooler in the butchering room, and we opened two up and smoked on the porch of Cher's office trailer. It had been a steaming hot day, but now low purple thunderclouds drifted over us, crackling with heat lightning.

"Weird," Todd said. "I thought it wasn't supposed to rain for weeks."

And it didn't. The storm was dry. It only poured lightning, and the dry sound of thunder mixed with the evening roars of the cats. We ran to the shade of the kitchen, and when that failed we went to Snowflake's shack.

Even in the storm, she didn't go inside. She stood in the corner of her enclosure, head bowed, gazing at her paws. We ducked into her shack, and Todd started packing a bowl, but I couldn't stop staring at her.

"Don't worry about her," Todd said. "She's fine."

I tried calling my friend again, and then we smoked pot until the storm ended and the lions began roaring into the evening. "They'll go on like that all night," Todd said. "I don't think they even know why they're doing it."

"You know a lot about them," I said.

"Not really," he said. "I don't know why they're roaring, either. Kind of haunting, though."

By now, the lions were all going off, their roars overlapping each other like a song. The storm still rumbled in the background, and for a little while, I remembered something I'd heard once, that if you could hear thunder, you could get struck by lightning. Todd didn't seem worried, though, and he seemed to have a better sense than I did about what was worth worrying about, so I ignored it.

Greg never came, even as dusk rolled in. Todd said his friend would drop me off at home. We said good-bye to Snowflake—with his hand on my wrist, Todd made me pet her, and her fur was softer than I'd imagined—and stood out front to wait for Todd's ride. I smelled smoke.

"I think there's another fire near here," I said.



Todd played around with his smartphone. “It’s a few miles away,” he said. “Should be fine. Kind of inevitable.”

His friend, who turned out to be his mother, drove me home, asking a stream of questions about how I liked it there. She seemed desperate to embarrass her son in front of his coworkers, and desperate to get me to admit I was afraid of the cats. She’d ask questions like “So did they teach you first aid?” or “Have you been bitten yet?” and I lied through my teeth in the hopes that she would shut up.

To be honest, I *was* afraid of the cats. They had a way of staring at you while you fed them, like they didn’t know you from the bucket of organs in your hand. Teachers gave me that look sometimes, when they got used to me sleeping in class and started seeing me as temporary furniture. I may even have looked at Frank that way. But the cats did it better: their eyes glazed, their minds off in the savannah, tearing apart a sick gazelle. I imagined running from them. I wouldn’t even have the chance to get winded.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Todd said. He stared out the window. “The cats are harmless, unless you’re stupid, and I’m crazy, but I’m not stupid.”

\*

Greg picked me up at my parents’ house the next day, with profuse apologies for forgetting to tell me that he’d had a date. A mile down the road, he pointed to a little box in the back. “I caught a rabbit,” he said. “We should feed it to the lions.”

“What?” We’d joked about this after my first day, but I hadn’t really thought about doing it.

“A rabbit, man,” he said. “Should be cool.”

I finished my cigarette and flicked it out the window. “My boss’d kill me,” I said. “Those animals don’t eat rabbit.”

“I can come by tonight,” he said. “After she leaves.”

By now we were driving down the dirt road that led to the sanctuary gates. The rusted big rig squatted like a turtle, and my friend parked in its shade.

“It came with the property,” Todd said when I asked him about the truck. “Cher told me it was full of old chicken wire. Like, up to the ceiling. Too rusted to use, though.”

“Cher told you things?” I tried to picture her having a conversation.

“Hey,” he said. “She’s human, too. Was, anyway.”

“What happened to her?”

Todd shrugged. “Cats got to her.”

I didn’t tell him about the rabbit until Cher left. I don’t know why—I had this vague feeling that it’d upset him. But he rolled his eyes and smiled, revealing a jaw so crowded it practically had two rows of teeth. “This should be interesting,” he said.

“Interesting?”

“Your friend got a temper?”

“Not really,” I said. “I mean, he gets pissed, but he’s like a six-year-old about it. Like, he’s the kind of guy who yells at video games.”

And for a second, Todd’s eyes flattened, like Snowflake’s, and then he started tittering.

“Oh, man,” he said. “Please tell me you’re gonna record this.”

My friend came late, with his camera and the rabbit, more or less alive, in its crate. He had me carry the crate while he fiddled with the camera.

He kept saying variations of “This is gonna be so awesome.” He’d been saying variations of “This is gonna be so awesome” his entire life. He said at least a dozen the night before we started the forest fire that led to me being arrested. Mostly, my other friends and I kept him around because we felt sorry for him. Every day of his life was the same.

We opened the crate and dumped the rabbit into one of the lions’ feeding chambers. The lion, an overweight and exhausted male whose previous owner had named him Eros and planned to use him as a breeder, lumbered up to investigate. It sniffed the rabbit and stared at us. Like most of the cats, he’d been captive since kittenhood, and live prey was new to him.

The rabbit lay there. Todd fed it a strip of chicken, and it was hungry enough to take it. Then, with the cameras rolling, I opened both doors and pushed the rabbit into the enclosure.

Eros walked over to the rabbit. His steps were slow, hesitant, as if he were afraid the rabbit might explode. The rabbit stared at him, still too famished to run. Eros sniffed it.

“This is gonna be so awesome,” my friend said. I hoped my face didn’t show on camera.

Eros nudged the rabbit with his maw, then gently bit on it, as if trying to figure out what it was made of. The rabbit jumped up and shot away. Eros didn’t chase it. The two of them stared at each other from ten feet away.

“C’mon, c’mon,” my friend said. Off-screen, Todd laughed into his hands and motioned me over.

“He doesn’t get it,” Todd whispered. “Eros hasn’t eaten anything alive in his life. Everything gets handed to him. He doesn’t know what to do.”

“So he doesn’t know how to eat a rabbit?”

“It doesn’t smell like people,” Todd said. “So he probably doesn’t even know it’s food.”

“So should we get it out?”

“Hell, no,” Todd said. “It doesn’t smell like people, but we do. He’d tear our faces off. We should send your friend in.”

I couldn’t really disagree with that notion, except I didn’t want to ride with Todd’s mother again. So we left the rabbit in there and I drove home with my friend, who silently stewed in his disappointment for a few minutes before changing his mind and deciding that it was awesome how that rabbit told that lion to go fuck itself.

Cher didn’t say anything about the rabbit the next day. I found it behind the butcher shed, nibbling on some grass. It ran away, but Todd saw it again an hour later. We named it Lunchmeat and more or less ignored it from then on.

There was another fire in the area, and the smell of smoke filled the air. The cats paced around, nervous, glancing through the bars of their enclosures and chewing on their paws. We were cutting up chickens for the lynxes when Todd told me he’d gotten a car.

“A Pontiac Vibe,” he said, laughing. “Like something Mom would drive.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But you’re driving it, not her.”

“You didn’t notice it out front?”

“No,” I said. “It’s kind of hard to notice anything next to the tiger truck.”

“Well,” he said. “If you wanna call off your *awesome* friend, I can take you home tonight. Or do you wanna hang out?”

“Sure,” I said, punctuating the word by hacking the wing off a chicken. Frank was out sick, so there was a lot of work to go around, and all of it involved meat. It was only noon, and between the juices and the heat, I felt the smell of dead animal seeping into my pores. “Though I should shower first,” I said, as an afterthought.

Instead, when the day was over, we smoked pot in Snowflake's shack. I half-expected her to try and eat us, but other than some ineffectual, nervous gumming of Todd's leg, she ignored us except when we petted her, and even then she only stared at us and lowered her head in what may have been pleasure or may have been submission.

"I'm worried," Todd said.

"About what?"

"You're starting to like it here," he said. "Most people don't like it here."

"You seem okay with it," I said.

"That's the thing," Todd said. "I'm not. But I can't really imagine doing anything else. That's why I'm still with Mom."

"I just assumed your parents made you do it. As a way to keep you out of trouble, or something." I was on my second joint, not sure if I wanted to finish, but I kept smoking.

"Nah," Todd said. "My parents don't care if I work or not. And besides, the way I see it, this *is* my job, y'know? I mean, I don't get paid, but it's work, right?"

By now I was stoned, and decided to try something. I raised my arm to my face and sniffed it. I'd washed my hands, but the arm still stank of rotting chicken juices and pig meat. Then I put my hand out. I'd seen Snowflake try to gnaw on Todd's leg, and nothing had happened, so I got up and walked over to her and put my forearm in her face. She stared at it for a moment, then sniffed it, then closed her jaws on it and chewed gently, unsure what she was eating. It felt like a massage.

Todd walked up to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "You know she can still break bones, right?" Right then, Snowflake bit down a little harder, and I winced in pain and pulled my

arm out and yelled. Snowflake darted to the back of her enclosure, rolled over and averted her eyes.

“Can she really?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Todd said. “Her jaw muscles are a little fucked up from the surgery, but they’re still crazy strong.”

“She doesn’t seem to think so,” I said.

He smoked a little more, and I drank a can of soda that sweated in the evening heat. Normally, I hated being outside, especially in the summer, especially with nothing to do, but being with Todd made me feel like I was somewhere safe. He’d wriggled his way into a crevice in the world, and the way he slumped his shoulders, laughed at something he found funny, and sucked at the remains of a joint until it burned his fingers all gave the impression that he knew that nothing could get its jaws in deep enough to bite him, and if I crawled in with him and kept my head down, it couldn’t get me either.

We went to his place; his mother wasn’t home yet, so we took turns washing up. He left her a note and we hung out, stoned, outside the pool hall by the riverside. Everything smelled like smoke. After a while, we got bored and drove back to the Kitty Korner Kat Sanctuary.

At first, we thought the flashing lights on the road about two miles out were from a checkpoint. We saw them through the trees, but we were only a couple turns away from running straight into them. A few other cars lumbered before us, locals on their ways home in the middle of the night. Todd cursed and kept glancing into the trees, like he was looking for a way to avoid the checkpoint, but there were no side streets between us and the cops, and no traffic going the other way that we could blend into.

“Stay cool, man,” I kept saying, but I was scared, too. Before I even pled guilty, my parents had told me they intended to ignore my curfew violations, like I’d ignored the one my parents set for me. If the cops caught me out this late, though, it meant serious business. So the entire time we waited to turn the final corner to where the cops were, I made myself as small as possible, looking for ways to curl up in the legroom so that a flashlight beam wouldn’t find me, all while telling Todd to “stay cool.”

We turned the final corner, and I gave up on life and imagined how it would feel when the other prisoners broke my teeth out to keep me from biting. But the police simply blocked the road, and a skinny cop waved traffic along. In the middle of the roadblock, the county had set up a brightly lit sign announcing “ROAD CLOSED FOR FIRE.”

“Shit,” Todd said. “I hope the cats are okay.”

“Should we try to find another way in?” I asked. I really didn’t want to; I just wanted to hear him say no. I didn’t want anything fire-related to be my fault anymore.

“I think I know a way,” Todd said.

After the police lights disappeared in Todd’s rearview, he slowed down a little until we found a dirt road, which we followed a mile into the woods. It was one-lane and hadn’t been cleared in a while; tree branches whipped the car as it drove past. The moonlight didn’t make it through the trees, which wrapped over our heads like the ceiling of a tunnel. Then we were birthed into a clearing, one dotted with strange wooden structures and sparse trees connected by rope bridges.

“Paintball field,” Todd said. He got out of the car. The whole place smelled like smoke, and my eyes stung. I pulled my shirt up over my nose and breathed through the fabric. “We gotta go that way,” Todd said, and without checking to see whether or not I was following, he ran off.

I chased after him. Branches tore at me, and bushes ripped into my legs. I knew I was bleeding, but if I stopped running, I'd lose him and be bleeding alone in the dark, so I kept running. The whole time, I got the sense of something chasing me, watching me, but the one time I turned around, there was nothing there but the woods. Then I turned back and he was gone.

Fear closed in around me. It scratched the ground, tested its claws, and I waited for panic to overtake me. For a while—a minute? Five minutes?—it almost did, but then a skinny arm reached out of the trees and dragged me deeper into the woods.

“I don't believe it,” he said, and then said it again while he dragged me through the last few feet of undergrowth and into the parking lot of the Sanctuary. “I don't believe it.” The spray-painted tiger on the side of the truck stared down at us, its neon yellow eyes bright even in moonlight.

The gate hung open, and the smell of smoke wafted through my shirt. I double over, coughing, but Todd helped me up. “This isn't happening,” he said, his eyes on the enclosure. “Tell me you're not seeing this.”

My eyes stung, and things were a little blurry, but I did see it: the enclosures were all open, their locks broken or missing, and the cats were mostly gone.

“Did you do this?” I asked him. I couldn't imagine who else would.

He didn't answer, but dropped me to check Snowflake's enclosure. The gate hung open, and Snowflake was gone.

“Shit,” Todd said. He ran into the cage, dug through grassy corners and under decorative bushes that were far too small to conceal a tiger, ran repeatedly in and out of her hut, and



eventually ran to the enclosure fence and rattled it. “Will you get your ass in here and help me look for her?”

It was a moment before I could move, and even when I went into the cage after him it was hard to look in his direction. I’d never pictured him like this: his back straight, his long arms shaking when he wasn’t rattling the cage. He looked scared, as scared as I’d expected Lunchmeat to be when we dumped him in Eros’s cage.

Todd let out a string of obscenities, and I repeated his pointless search of the enclosure. By the time I was done, he’d calmed down, left the enclosure, and sat down on a bench by the meat locker. “Who the fuck did this?” he said.

I wasn’t sure if he was asking me, but I answered anyway. “I don’t know,” I said. “Cher maybe?”

He didn’t say anything.

I offered another possibility. “Or maybe it was Frank?”

Todd sighed. The smoke was getting thicker. When I looked up, I saw a black cloud roll over us, covering the moon. “We should get out of here,” I said. Todd didn’t say anything in response. He just got up and shambled through the woods. I followed him.

We agreed on an alibi and he dropped me off at home before he called the police, hoping they’d rescue the cats.

But all they did was wait for them to show up somewhere and try to shoot them. The local media had a field day, with animal rights activists giving interviews to express their outrage that no one had sent in anyone with a tranquilizer gun and the facilities to transport, house and treat a potentially injured or sick lion, while spokespeople for the police argued that, had they waited until someone could be called in from another county, one of the nine lions, two cheetahs,

and half-a-dozen tigers that they'd shot might have eaten someone. When they weren't busy dealing with the media, the police asked me some questions, but I didn't know any better than anyone else how the cats had gotten loose. Regardless, only the caracals and one of the lions were captured alive—the lion when he fell into an abandoned quarry and couldn't get out, the caracals because they got caught in a trap for stray dogs. They never found Snowflake; there were reported sightings, mostly out in the trailer parks at the edge of town, but even the sheriff just shrugged and said that he didn't think she stood much of a chance. Then the sightings stopped, and the scandal died down, replaced by a scandal and I stopped watching the news and started looking for another place to complete my community service. At first, I thought about applying for a position in animal control, but I couldn't imagine working around animals any longer. Eventually, I settled on a position in the library, where I reshelved old books and stripped the dust jackets from new ones in chilled, bone-dry air.

A week later, Todd called me. He wanted to go back to the Sanctuary, or what was left of it, and pick up “our” things. He meant his things, because I hadn't left anything there, but I got the feeling he needed me there for other reasons. He picked me up in the early afternoon on a Saturday so hot I started sweating the moment I opened my front door. He opened the passenger side door for me, but didn't say anything when I got in. He had a CD playing, and I recognized it and got him talking by asking him how he liked it. We made small talk until he turned onto the dirt road that led to the paintball field. From there, we trudged through the charred remains of the woods.

The dead cats' cages all hung open, the gates held in place with cinderblocks. We saw Cher from a distance, but when we got closer, she vanished around a corner. The caracals sat in their enclosure and swatted flies with their tails.

“Weird,” Todd said when we got to Snowflake’s enclosure. The gate lay on the ground, as if it had been ripped off, and the plants in the enclosure were coated in ashes. “Wind must’ve blown stuff in here.”

“Probably,” I said, and walked through the gate, half-expecting Snowflake to turn a corner and gnaw impotently on one of my legs. I wore long pants that day, but the scratches from my wounds itched under their bandages. I saw Lunchmeat nibbling on some bushes in the corner, but when he saw me, he scampered away.

Todd went into the shack, a cigarette still in his lips, and came out holding his pot stash and some rolling papers, which he slipped into the pocket of his oversized shorts. He’d coiled up the Christmas lights and thrown the coil around his neck; a strand dangled down to his waist. He turned back, once more, his long fingers wrapped around the coils of the fence, and looked into his shack. “You ready?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “You?”

“I guess I should tell you that I wanted to hang out because I didn’t have anyone else to hang out with anymore.”

“Cool,” I said.

“I mean, I did, but they were all a couple years older than me, and they all left town as soon as they could after graduating, and I ... I like it here.”

“But it’s gone now,” I said, knowing it wasn’t the right thing to say. He’d always seemed so stable, so confident, so immune to the world, but now he seemed vulnerable, even wounded, and for the first time I noticed that his stooped shoulders were so close together that the Christmas lights sunk down them to wrap loosely around his elbows. He let them drop to the

floor, picked them up and held them in one hand, dragging their length behind him. Cher saw us as we went to the gate, but didn't say anything, and we said nothing back except "Bye."

We drove off. He told me he wanted to smoke pot, and I suggested we visit the paintball field again. It was a Tuesday—no one would be there. We drove down the overgrown dirt road and parked in the shade of a wooden fortress webbed with camouflage.

We got out of the car and walked a while, until the camouflage changed color and I could tell we were on the other team's territory. Paint splattered the trees and coated the pieces of cover, but the red flags that waved over our heads let us know this was somewhere else. We climbed a ladder and Todd rolled a joint. I still hadn't learned how to do that.

"So what now?" Todd asked. He craned his neck and glanced into the woods, as if looking for something.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said. "Just heard a squirrel or something. Anyway, what now?"

"I'm gonna finish my community service in the library," I said. "Gonna be boring as hell, but easy. You?"

"I dunno," he said. His oatmeal-colored hair blew into his face. "Maybe I'll get a real job. I don't even . . . How do you get one?"

"I really don't know," I said. "But you'll be okay."

"Yeah," he said. "But what if I'm not okay? What if I freak out and fall apart? What if I don't make it? I mean, I could—"

He froze and pointed into the woods, and I followed his long arm to where he was pointing: a white mass came out of the woods, its pinched face staring at us. Todd climbed down, crying "Snowflake!" and I followed him, not saying anything.

She stared at us, her collapsed maw sagging as she panted in the summer heat. Forty feet away, she looked leaner, more powerful than when she'd been caged. Her clawless paws seemed bigger than they'd been, and her shoulders hunched over her back like a vulture's.

"Marco?" Todd said.

"Yeah?"

Without a word, he handed me the car keys.

"You all right?" I asked.

"Walk calmly back to the car and start it, then drive over here, slowly, and open the side door for me."

I didn't say anything. I just walked backwards, then turned and walked normally. When I heard movement behind me, I ran and started the car and drove away. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the two of them, ten feet apart, staring one another down. I put the car in reverse and backed up to meet him, right when he broke into a run and Snowflake gave chase. I blocked her with my side of the Vibe, and heard a crash as she rammed into it. Later on we would find a foot-long dent where she'd hit.

Todd opened the passenger door and climbed in, his arms and legs dangling behind him as if he had marionette limbs. He almost closed the door on one of his legs. "Go," he said, and I did. In my rearview, I saw Snowflake glaring at us, her shoulders hunched again, planning how to kill the Vibe.

"Thanks," he said. He was breathing heavily, almost panting, and when I glanced over at him I could see tears cutting a path through the grime on his face. He looked pathetic, and I felt like some kind of hero, and tried to think of something heroic to say. I couldn't think of anything—the feeling of control that came over me was so unfamiliar I couldn't put it into

words—and he stared out the windshield in stunned silence, his long arms limp at his side. We drove on in this silence, and he slumped further and further forward, until his head was below mine and his knees blocked his view. He gazed blankly at them. Neither of us spoke. When I made it to my parents' house, I got out and he got in the driver's seat. "Call me tonight," I told him, and he said he would, but then he never did, and the one time I got around to calling him, he didn't answer.

Snowflake disappeared back into the woods. A few months later, in the fall, someone saw her again, and then a year later she turned up on a nature trail, only to disappear again when a search party came through. No one ever saw her again, but I always expected her to come out of the woods at any moment. I went camping a few more times, although I always made sure to put the fire out, and each time I watched and listened harder for the sound of padded feet on dry leaves, or for flashes of black and white in the undergrowth. Eventually, I stopped going to the woods altogether. I moved to the city, quit smoking, began working in a library. I stayed out of the heat, avoided making friends with strange people, bought a lazy white housecat whose body fat spread out like pancake batter when she lay down on my bed and who stared out the window but never paced or tried to run away.

Once, years later, I saw Todd working the ticket booth in a parking garage. His long limbs barely fit into the little glass-and-metal box, and every time he collected money or handed someone a parking pass, it seemed as if his elbow or his shoulder would smash through the wall, but he moved in his little box with the deft efficiency of a tiger exploring its cage. He knew what he was doing, which was more than I could say, a couple months from college and my own tame legitimacy. I didn't even smoke cigarettes anymore, a habit I'd kept for several months after Todd and I last hung out, but that faded away with my memory of him. Eventually I got to where

I couldn't remember anything about him except the fear he'd shown when Snowflake charged at him.

I thought about driving in and saying hello, but imagined the conversation: a blunt exchange of toothless pleasantries in vast fields of uncomfortable silence. I couldn't think of anything he might have to say to me, so I turned the car around and looked for another place to park.

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