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DISTANCE

by

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B.A. University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 1998

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

Distance is a collection of short fiction that explores the spaces between us. Sometimes it's emotional, sometimes it's physical; it lies before us like a cross-country journey, dragging us through emotional terrain fraught with countless dangers and rare rewards. A convict returns to his childhood home. A lonely man documents the unexpected damage of an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. A teenager learns that some boots are not made for walking.

These stories are the long and short of it. They examine the way we struggle to understand love, lust, disappointment and the kind of detachment that can develop where we least expect it. We all know the distance between two people differs by degree, but in the end, where that space exists, an inescapable question awaits: Should we sever the tie or bridge the gap?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Because the boy wasn't dead or in jail, but instead had happened to stumble into grace, he figured there were plenty of folks to thank.

Because Darlin' Neal did a damn fine job of keeping me on task and pushed me to explore a variety of avenues in my reading and writing, I thank you.

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Because my mother, Catherine is a woman with unshakable faith, and once cried for me because in a dream she could not save me from a horrible, horrible creature that was drowning me—something no mother should ever have to dream about, and because that, to me, has been a wonderful testament of her love for her son, I thank you.

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THE BOY COMES BACK TO NOGALES

You spell my name Cesar, but it's pronounced Caesar, like the Roman. I'm a mixed-breed, a cross between a skinny Mexican who had a thin line of mustache like an old Hollywood leading man, slicked-back hair the black-blue color of a crow, and a white woman who paints her nails the color of blood and smokes her way through a carton of cigarettes every week. I am also as good as dead. And that's a dilemma.

Today I am free. Five years of time served in Kingman for grand theft auto. Just being a stupid-ass kid, taking a hot caddy out for a Friday night spin. Picked the wrong car. Sunny Bob. Some guy I've never met. Some guy who had me carved up a few months ago. That's whose car I stole. That's whose car had a drop out floor pan, a secret compartment. In it, fifty thousand dollars of Sunny Bob's money that the police found and seized when they busted my stupid ass. So I'm kind of involved, but not really. But Sunny Bob doesn't give a fuck one way or the other. I'm just some mongrel to him.

Tomorrow I'll be either halfway to Canada or a body, stuffed in the trunk of a car, or maybe buried only deep enough so that I'll stay gone for only as long as it takes the coyotes to pull me out of the ground and send a message to anybody that might be thinking about pulling dollars out of Sunny Bob's pockets. I would prefer to be in Canada. Word's gonna to be out on the streets regardless. The folks in their nice homes with their internet, their swimming pools, their wives and husbands that don't touch each other anymore. Those folks don't know or care about some convict getting released from prison. It's only the people that run in the shadows, the kind of people that never meet your eyes on the streets, or if they do, they look so hard through

you that you feel hollow as they brush past you on the sidewalk. Those people know. And they take care of their business.

I'm already marked. Got two lines, thin as a box-knife blade. They move like tears from the middle of each eyelid, and head straight south, cutting a fine line through the meat of my cheeks. There's a lot of blood in your face, so it's messy as hell and scares you to death when you come to as your cellmate carves down your cheeks. You wake in your own blood, blood in your eyes, blood in your mouth, eyes floating out of their sockets, the room, that little-ass cell floating around, and your hands move to your face and fight to keep your self in one piece. Which isn't going to happen: nothing but screams to God, who hasn't heard a prayer of yours since you were ten, come from your lips. No cursing or calling out for help. No, it's God, God, God. You pray when the shit goes down. You pray hard. Any man will turn bitch and call for a guard when that kind of thing happens, but you pray first. You pray that the blade stays on your face and doesn't find your neck. You pray that your dick is still attached to your body. You pray that you get to see your mother again, your father too, even though that's a tall order. And your cellie finishes the job. He sits back and laughs. He's a lifer. Murder one. But a nonviolent prisoner who was transferred to medium security because the maximum security prisons are full. At least that's what the paperwork says. Added time doesn't mean anything to an inmate whose calendar days will never have the word RELEASE circled in red Sharpie. He'll get transferred back to the real prison. He'll be paid in cigarettes, phone cards, blowjobs, some marijuana, maybe even a clean syringe loaded with a shot of heroin, and not the dirty stuff either. The blood gets cleaned away and you recover in the infirmary, the stitches are cut from your face, the scars aren't nearly as bad as you might think they would be. Thin lines like a surgeon had been

working on me, instead of a convict. But that's part of the message. You spend your last three months in solitary because the guards can't look after you in general population, and the state doesn't want to deal with the paperwork of an inmate being murdered. Because they know what the marks mean.

But that's all then. Today is now. Today I spent hours on a Greyhound bus to come back to Nogales, because you don't forget your mother. Not even in times of bad news. Now I rock back and forth in the back seat of a pale-yellow station wagon with a taxi logo painted in faded black letters on the front doors. Some woman on the radio is singing heartbreak and misery. I catch the cab driver taking another look at me in the rear view. "Boat accident," I say. "You should see what the other guy looks like." I smile big. That's when the scars look their worst, when I smile and my cheeks pile up pink and the thin strips of light purple scar wrinkle and pucker against the skin feeding into it. The cab driver keeps his eyes fixed on the road for the rest of the trip.

I swing open the heavy door of the taxi. It pops and sighs and creaks until it rests, slanting to the ground. I fish in my pocket for a ten-dollar bill and pull out a wad of singles, some quarters and a fiver. I broke a twenty for a tallboy and enough change to call my mother and let her know that I was released and I'd be coming by the house to see her. I lean in through the back door and check the meter. I pull enough from my hand to cover the fare and leave him with a buck. The door to the old station wagon protests a little. "Just give it a good tug," the cab driver says. So I do. And the door closes loud as a shotgun. "Sorry," I mumble toward the ground. The cab lurches forward and crawls around the loop of the cul-de-sac. There's a whine from under the hood as the power steering belt slips. Then the cab hits the straightaway and is off. Gone.

A breeze is turning into a wind. I can see the ridgeline where my father took me to shoot pistols when I was a boy. The weather moves in over that ridge. It might blow south of us and soak the Mexicans across the border, or we might catch it. My hair blows around the front of my face. It fights with the wind, tangles itself up and slaps at my eyes. I catch sight of my mother hugged up against the large picture window that looks out into the yard. Her hair is still blonde. Once, in an experiment, she dyed it black, possibly because my father was always sneaking off with raven-haired women. She let the black grow out and went back to bottle blonde. Guess she figured that hair color wasn't going to keep my father at home.

A white dog with black spots jumps up and starts to bark when he sees me come through the gate. I've never heard word one of my mother having a dog. But there he is, stretched at the end of a chain that's anchored into the packed dirt that forms an oval around his doghouse. Maybe she mentioned something. I don't know. A lot happens in five years. I didn't leave out from here under the best light. I wasn't real good with keeping her up to date on much of anything either. It's prison. What are you supposed to tell your mother about prison that's not going to send her off crying; which is what happened the only time she visited, which is what also happened the few times we talked on the phone. It was just easier to send out a letter or a card for her birthday, Christmas and Easter too. The dog growls at me. I squat down just out of his reach and offer my hand. His tail wags into his hips and carries the momentum into his shoulders. I get closer. He rolls to his back. I scratch his belly, call him good buddy, rub the soft patch of fur running from his neck to his jaw. My mother has pulled back from the window. I give the dog a firm pat on the belly and walk to the front door. He yelps and tugs at the chain holding him in place.

Several newspapers are scattered on the ground in front of the door. I find today's paper and lean over to pick it up. I knock and then try the door, which is unlocked.

The front room smells like an attic, like the sun has been baking dust into everything. Heavy curtains hang closed on the only window in the room. The afternoon sun is reduced to a sliver of white light fighting to get in. My grandmother's couch, high-back chair and coffee table are still in the last place I remembered them. My mother never uses this room. Even in death, my grandmother talks to my mother through the furniture she left. My white grandmother, old Nogales blood, dry as dust, and still reminding my mother that she should have never gotten involved with the Mexican.

"Hey-yo," I call out. It's something I used to say when I'd come home from friends' houses, or from school before I dropped out.

A mess of my hair hangs in front of my face. My mother's footsteps are light and quick and I can hear the crackling of the linoleum floor in the kitchen as she crosses that room and moves down the short hallway. By now, I've managed to roll the rubber band the length of the folded newspaper and used it to fix my hair into a loose ponytail.

"My beautiful boy! Mi Vida! Mi Vida!" she says from down the hall. She has always thrown in a clip of Spanish with her English. She never learned Spanish, just picked up words from my father. He was born in Mexico, raised in Arizona. He spoke to me in English as much as possible, teaching me enough Spanish to help me out in a city that was half-Hispanic when I was a boy. I don't use Spanish much. I look white. I sound white. And the marks, they are there to keep me from blending in. That's how Sunny Bob calls the shots. And once Sunny Bob calls it, that's it. He sends a message to you, just so you know that your number could be up any day.

Tears from a knife, that's one hell of a message. But I got to keep that business out of my mother's mind. Just going to hang around long enough to figure out my next step. And then I'll run.

“Estas aqui!” Her arms are pushed out in front of her. She's a hugger, my mother.

“Yes, I'm here,” I smile big, happy to see her. My mother stops where she is, stands still. Her hands move up to her own cheeks. She soaks it in. Her eyes shift back and forth, jumping from one scar to the other, back and forth, back and forth. The water builds on her eyelids and spills like rain. I should have told her. She sucks in breath as if she's hyperventilating and fans the air in front of her mouth with her hands.

“Momma, I should have told you.”

She gasps and cries out, then says, “My baby. Dios mío. What...” She turns and rushes back to the kitchen. The pads on the bottom of her chair legs bark as they scrape the floor while she settles in at the table. The metallic pling of her Zippo opening comes first, then three hard turns of the wheel against the flint and I know her cigarette is lit.

My mother is weeping at the red Formica table where I ate breakfast most every morning for eighteen years. Until I was ten, my father ate his meals at this table with us too. I stand there and watch her cry into her hands. I touch her hair and lean in to kiss the top of her head. An amber ashtray in the middle of the table is crammed with lipstick tinted cigarette butts. I take it across the room to empty it and open the cabinet door under the sink. There are a dozen cleaning agents in bottles with triggers and canisters with powder caked around ill-fitting lids.

“It's in the hallway closet, baby,” she says.

“You’re moving things around on me,” I say. “I can’t stay gone for five years without having my whole life rearranged.” She laughs through a sob.

In the window above the kitchen sink I can see the back of my mother’s body. Her shoulders roll forward. She is still young, but from behind looks worn, brittle. Beyond her, is the picture window that faces the yard, the gate and the street. In the reflection of the picture window I can see my mother’s face, her arms crossed on the top of the table, the cigarette at the tip of her fingers sending up a trail of smoke. She is almost transparent. I am further behind her, nothing more than a ghost.

I put a liner in the trashcan and empty the ashtray, then place it back in front of her. “I need that hug of yours, Momma.” She rolls the tip of her cigarette in the ashtray. The gray ashes crumble from the red tip.

“Yes, baby. I’m sorry.” She moves like she’s going to stand up.

“Stay where you are,” I say.

On my knees, hugging her as she sits, we are almost the same height. Her hands rove in circles across my shoulders and back, stopping for a second to pull me tight against her, then moving on. My arms wrap her frame, my hands and fingers find her ribs through the thin sweater she is wearing. She feels delicate like an egg. And she shakes some, and sobs into my shoulder, hooks my neck with her hands, kisses my cheeks, pats my shoulders, and tells me a dozen times how much she’s missed me. I bite back on the feeling that I could be twelve again, and free to cry with her like I was when I skinned my knees, falling from my bicycle. But I don’t.

“I wanted to cook for you. Your first night home. It’s a celebration, no?” She smiles. Her eyes still wet, a quiver ripples through her bottom lip. And then she’s standing, smoothing the

front of her sweater and then she's at the refrigerator, pulling out ears of corn that have been soaking in salted water, and long stalks of okra, even a bowl of bowl, setting them on the countertop.

It's three years since I smoked a cigarette. Thought I would try to do something impossible while I was locked up. "Gonna pinch a smoke from you, that okay?" My mother waves her hand through the air and speaks to the okra spread out on the cutting board, "There's a carton in the cabinet above the stove, some matches, too."

The first time you smoke it's like drowning, your body rejects it, you cough, your head goes light and dizzy, everything in you tells you to stop what you are doing. It's the same today. It's the same flavor, the same burn in my lungs. My head floats. Sitting at this table and smoking has the room moving a little. I stand up and juggle my weight from one foot to the other. I watch my mother, and feel my heart as it punches behind my chest. There is no good way of letting my mother know that I won't be around long. How do you tell your mother that you have to break her heart again? So I take another drag and let the room keep floating. And I think about what needs to be done before I leave.

"Gonna head outside for a minute, catch some sun," I say.

"Check that fire pit while you're out. I haven't used it in a long time. Got to thinking that I could get some cornbread mixed up and we could cook it over the fire."

"Fire-cooked cornbread, huh? You gonna make me a cake while you're at it?" I say, joking.

The sound of the knife against the cutting board stops. “I hadn’t thought about that.” She waits for a second or two then continues, “It makes sense, huh?” She goes back to cutting. “Like it’s your birthday,” she adds.

“Momma, it was just a joke.”

“Nope. No jokes on your first day home. My boy is back in Nogales and today is his first day of freedom birthday.” She turns from the sink and takes me in from my prison issued double-strapped Velcro shoes that are a half-size too small, right up to the hair that’s two feet longer than it ever was when I lived in this house. “You’re a man now. Look at you.” She smiles, and I can see her fighting to keep her mouth from turning sad.

“Yes, Momma,” I say. I shake loose a cigarette from the open pack on the table and pocket the lighter.

We stay silent. There is a battle of what to say next. I shift my weight from one foot to the other. Even the floor is silent.

“Go on. Get out there, catch you some sun before it rides off,” she says.

The white dog with the black spots is busy, running circles in the dirt, looking to snag his tail. He stops and eyes me. His tail drops and sweeps the dirt behind him, sending puffs of dust into the air. I call him good buddy. The street is quiet. The wind that stirred up earlier is calm. The leaves rustle, caught for a moment in a subtle breeze. A neighbor a few houses down staples a line of Christmas lights to the shingles on his roof.

A tiny handprint is pressed in the cement at the base of the brick fire pit my father built instead of buying a grill. Beside the handprint are the initials C. R. I used a pencil with a broken tip to write them while the cement cured. I couldn’t have been more than three or four years old.

It was summer. My father took off his shirt that day. The tattoo on his chest caught the light of the sun in his sweat. My father cracked open a beer and sat Indian style on the ground, admiring the work he'd just finished. I crept into his lap and used my finger to trace the letters, L-U-L-A, a woman I didn't know. I asked him what the name meant. He looked down at the fresh, raised lines in his skin. "Hey, you want to put your hand print on the fire pit and leave your mark?" he asked.

There are enough scraps of wood still stacked in the garage to keep a fire healthy. The grate from the fire pit is rusted and needs a wire brush taken to it. The bulky gray Buick my mother has had for twenty years sits unlocked in the garage. My mother keeps a spare key in the glove box. I pop it in the ignition and turn it until the fuel gauge needle jumps to three-quarters of a tank, which could get me most of the way to Flagstaff. From there I could disappear. Of course disappearing isn't really an option with a face like mine. Sunny Bob is a smart sonofabitch.

Long shadows from the trees in the front yard crawl over the roof of the house as the sun settles low in the sky. Everything is getting that golden look. I take a walk over to the gate. The white dog with the black spots follows me best he can, being tethered to the earth. With a quick glance up the street, I study the cars parked out on the curbs, the makes and models. The word I got from another inmate, a trustee who served lunches to the men in solitary, was that Sunny Bob is a straight shooter, no drive-bys, none of that bullshit. He'll get you on his own time. But that's just what I heard. There's a whole world of difference between what people say and what happens. The night is growing quiet. The staple gun kachunks another staple into the roof; the sound of it echoes. There's a good chance the .38 is still in the closet in my mother's bedroom.

There's nothing wrong with having a gun on your hip. Might persuade a man to think for a minute about just who he's coming after, and what kind of trouble he might find.

My father is still present in pictures throughout my mother's room. You'd think he and my mother were still married. Pictures of the two of them, the three of us, pictures of my father and me hugging each other around the neck like we're brothers. The phone number I have for him goes to a recorded phone company message about the line being disconnected. He's a handsome man in the photographs. After he left, my mother would lock her door and go sleep out on the couch. Sometimes she would wake me in the middle of the night and beg me to pick the lock with length of straightened coat hanger so that she could go into the room, where she would sit on the corner of the bed and cry over the framed photographs. When the morning came, her bedroom door would be locked again. She would be in the kitchen, coffee in her white mug, a cigarette in her hand, slow-cooking scrambled eggs in one skillet while bacon bubbled and popped in another. That went on for at least a year. I started sleeping over with friends whenever I could.

The shoebox with the .38 in it hides out with six other shoeboxes on a shelf above two dozen or so dresses and blouses waiting on wooden hangers. The red sticker marked "30% off" is the giveaway. My father would pull the box out of the closet when he took me over the ridgeline to shoot. The wind would blow and kick up red dust. It was a heavy piece for a ten-year-old boy to handle. Loud as a cannon too. The box stayed in the closet after my father left. I happened upon it just like any teenager rooting around their parents' room looking for money or cigarettes, or a stash of old porn mags that might have been left under the mattress or buried away in the closet. There was that sticker. There was the gun, with twenty or so loose shells

rolling around in the box. I showed that gun to Carlos, Markus and Philip. Then word got around that I was gangster. And then the girls wanted to see it. And then, I was invincible.

The gun is still heavy.

My mother is rolling okra in a mixed batter of cornmeal. She dusts the battered pieces with cayenne pepper and drops them into a wire basket, where they will sit until she is ready to fry them golden. She takes a long drag from her cigarette and holds it in. The smoke filters out with her words. "After dinner I'll get a load of sheets washed and put them on your old bed." My mother takes another drag and rests the cigarette in an ashtray on the windowsill above the kitchen sink. The smoke rises and turns orange in the fading light coming in from outside.

"Momma, no. It's fine. I'll sleep on the couch if I stay."

"Maybe a note, or a phone call and I would have had some time to get ready for you."

"I didn't know for sure. That shit gets messed up all the time."

"Your father always got out when he told me he was going to get out."

"Momma, jail is different. You spend the night in the drunk tank and you get bailed out. You don't get bailed out of prison. You're there. You're just there. And you're not going anywhere until they tell you."

She knows how it works. She used to ride with my father during border crossings, a classy looking white woman to a border guard can make that Mexican man look like a hired driver, just taking a woman he works for into Mexico for a day of shopping. They trafficked marijuana across the border on a weekly basis. That was the beauty of Nogales. It was right there. Half of the town belonged to Arizona, half of the town to Mexico. One ten-foot cinderblock wall separated the halves. They must have been pretty good at it too. Seems like

plenty of folks knew where to buy their weed. You don't need a whole lot of smarts to figure out what's going on when you hear your aunt laughing about the days when your mother used to roll up one ounce cuts of marijuana into plastic sandwich bags and seal them with a quick lick of her tongue. Then my mother got pregnant. She stopped going on as many runs with my father. My father found other women who looked the part to accompany him. My father always found other women.

My mother is silent. She fixes her gaze on the last patch of light as the sun rolls out in violet and pink. She strips the husk from an ear of corn and runs a knife down the spine. The fat kernels fall to the cutting board in rows of tooth-shaped gold. She wipes her fingers on a cloth rag. The cigarette in the ashtray has burned to ash, all the way back to the filter. I shake a cigarette loose from the pack on the table and light it. I take two quick drags and hold it out for my mother. My head floats.

My mother takes a long drag before she says, "You gonna kill the man that did that to you?" She looks into me, past my face, past the scars, right into my middle, where the ache rolls around and digs its claws into me, and squeezes the air out of me in short, hurried breaths. She sees where the sweat is made that cools the crease behind my ears, where the weight of the gun tucked into the front of my pants hangs heavy as a cinder block.

Her eyes find the floor between our shoes.

I'm silent.

"I don't know," I say. "Could happen."

"Feels like you should know. You wouldn't go crawling around my closet if you didn't have an idea of what you wanted to do with that gun."

“I just needed to know that it was there.”

“Oh, Cesar,” she says, letting my name run long with her breath. “I was ready to cry for you.” She holds her cigarette pinched between her thumb and first finger. She looks behind me, to the right of me, at the yard and the dog, the gate, the street. “My sweet boy was home, back in Nogales, back at this table,” she stops. “I had you again.”

My mother turns and moves with haste to her station at the cutting board. She uses the knife and scrapes the corn into the drain.

“Momma, please don’t.”

“There’s no flavor in it,” she says.

The floor crackles under her feet. The hallway closet door creaks on its hinges. The okra tumbles into the trashcan. A piece stays caught in the wire basket and my mother raps it against the rim of the trashcan. “Goddamn you,” she says and drops the whole thing into the trashcan.

“Momma!”

“No, no,” she whispers. Her hands press at the air in front of her. The thin gold wedding ring my father gave her a year after they married shines on her ring finger.

“You don’t know what’s going on.” I tell her.

She laughs, and follows, “Because your mother couldn’t possibly know about you, about her son? Because there is no way she would have heard about what happened to you?”

She smacks her hands together. Her jaw is set, rigid with teeth pressing hard against each other. Her eyes narrowed in the way I saw her talk to my father in the last months he lived in the house.

“Three months!” her voice is loud. I sit at the table as if commanded. Then the soft side of her voice comes back and the words almost feel warm, “For three months I’ve known. For five years I’ve kept up with you. Do you think a mother can just ignore her own? I’ve thought about this, seeing you for the first time, seeing what they did to you. I’ve cried. I started locking the door to my bedroom again and sleeping on the couch. Baby, I’ve kept that gun in its shoebox, and slept with it under the couch since I heard what they had done to you. You don’t know the half of things.”

“Momma, I didn’t want you to know about this. I couldn’t stand breaking your heart again.”

“My sweet boy. My sweet, sweet boy, there’s nothing left of my heart.”

The heaviness in my chest pulls my mouth open. I struggle for air. It’s only now that I see how my hands shake. So I look at them. I look at them hard, the way you learn to look at other men in the exercise yard at Kingman. But they have no fear of me in their shaking. Because my face is hard and trained, my hands give away everything about me.

“How much do you know?”

“My lovely boy. My sweet lovely boy,” she says. Her shoulders bounce and a horrible sound comes out of her mouth. A sound much louder than the thin opening between her lips should make. I think for a moment that this could be the sound of her soul dying.

“There’s gas in the car. Enough to get you a good piece up the road,” she says. “I put an envelope with a three hundred dollars in the trunk, under the spare tire. I’m sorry, my sweet boy. I’m sorry.”

Outside, the windows show night in its full veil. The light above the kitchen table is just a light. It doesn't reveal anything to me, or send me thinking about the past in this room. It settles on me. I wish a storm were coming through. Blowing over the ridgeline where I first learned about the heaviness of living. A storm full of chest-shaking thunder and flashes of violent lightning. And where are the distractions that put off moments of self reflection?

"Let me get a picture of you. Stay there, right there. Right there, at the table. Just like it used to be," my mother says and scurries out of the kitchen.

She returns with the camera. A Polaroid. "I just want one picture before you leave. Just one moment, so I'll know you were here, so I'll remember what a man you've become."

My mother holds the camera up to her face. "Feliz Cumpleaños," she says. A quick flash and the milky photo ejects into the space between us. My mother waves the photo around. "Look how it develops," she says, and brings the picture over to me. She rests her hand on top of my head and strokes my scalp. "Look how it does it. How the picture starts off blurry, how it makes you look like a ghost."

HEAT

I cover the drain in the bathtub with your postcards and let the shower run hot. The water rises in the tub. Your hurried words flow in ribbons of black ink, thin and pulled down the drain. The braided necklace made from your hair causes my shoulders to itch. I drink merlot straight from the bottle. I pull a fist full of bread from the braided loaf resting on the radiator, beside the shower. The tiled wall is cool against my shoulder. My piss colors the water at my feet amber.

*

We each had a bottle of wine the night you got sick, stood on the fire escape, lips stained burgundy, and I watched you swear to New York's winter sky that you would leave and reinvent yourself. This kind of thing happened before. But that night I knew. You'd been talking nonstop about Los Angeles.

You were reckless. Filling your lungs with air for shouting. Your feet slipped on the slick tub as you were getting into the shower and sent your shoulder slapping against the tile wall. You cursed, called yourself stupid. I caught you by the wrist before you could slap your face a second time. The drain was slow. Your piss turned the water swelling around your ankles amber, the smell of it held in the steam and turned the air sour.

Once you found the bed, I fed you pieces of bread the size of nickels and gave you water until you passed out. In your sleep, you fought the sheets, rejecting them, kicking and pulling, calming when your feet dislodged the covers and felt the chill of the room. I leaned in close to the radiator and ran my fingers over the grooves where the tongued-wood cupped and the dust gathered under stray toenail clippings. This was the last night you spent at my apartment.

You took the few things you had originally brought over in May: a toothbrush and a handful of tampons. You settled back in your old room, with your roommates in Jersey City, in the apartment above the Greek restaurant, where the water in the shower was never more than lukewarm—perhaps the only reason you stayed with me for as long as you did, the heat.

*

With a coat hanger, I hooked two feet of your hair, a wad thick as an infant’s wrist, and pulled it from the drain.

*

I don’t watch movies anymore. There is something in the way the actors eyes always catch just the right amount of light. Twinkle, twinkle. I take the A-train south. Sit through twenty-two local stops on the way to Canal Street. The woman with tea-stained teeth and the milky eyes takes the Ziploc bag with your hair in it.

“I washed it,” I say, and gesture with my hands on my head, building a thick, imaginary full-bodied lather.

“Ok, ok.” She smiles, nods her head when I hand her one hundred, seventy-five dollars. “Two weeks,” she says, holding up two fingers that twist at the knuckles. She retreats into a shop stocked with knock-off Louis Vuitton’s and disappears behind a wall of purses.

*

The bodega on Broadway near 171st still sells bread that folds over itself in a browned, puffed braid. Last night I bought a loaf, and two bottles of red wine.

DON'T FORGET TO EAT

The note on the kitchen table said: Found somebody else. There was no signature. Peter looked at the words. They were hurried, written like an afterthought, like a note that she would have left had she been running out to pick up some groceries. Elizabeth had left in a rush. The stagnant air in the apartment and the temperature he was just now feeling caught his attention. He walked past the note, past the kitchen and down the hall. She had turned off the air conditioning before she left. Outside, it had been another ninety-eight degree July day, thick and humid, ideal for the palm trees and mangroves, the kind of day that found most people scurrying from their cars to the cool comfort of their apartments or houses.

The temperature in the apartment hovered at ninety degrees. He could feel the knit shirt he was wearing cling to his back, wet from the drive home. It's something he complained of, the goddamned humidity in Florida, the sweat, the feeling like he was slippery one minute and sticky the next. He didn't find this amusing at all. He moved the control lever from "off" to "cool." The fan kicked in. The air whined as it traveled through the filter in the bottom of the hall closet door. The doors throughout the apartment pressed against their frames as the cooler air began to push from the ceiling vents. Peter walked back to the table, determined to decipher the note. He was having problems wrapping his mind around it. The day had already been drawn out with restocking returned merchandise and re-hanging all the clothes that had been left in careless piles on the floors of the dressing rooms at the department store where he worked.

He looked at the note until his eyes dried and stung from the steady air flow pouring from the air conditioner. Peter traced the loops and curves of her writing with the pen she had left by

the note. Her penmanship had always been so beautiful, elegant, “a lost art,” he would say to her. So nice, in fact, he had her write the checks for the rent and utilities. The gentle slope of “l” in the word *else* jumped out at him as the rhythm broke and the ink skipped over a wrinkle in the paper. He studied the edge of the paper where it had been torn from the pad. There was nothing nice about this note.

He wasn’t good with keeping her friends straight, who lived where, who had married whom out of high school or college. There wasn’t an address book filled with information that could help him get a hold of her. She didn’t have any sisters or brothers he could call. Her parents would know. He had her parents’ number written down on a note pad in the drawer by the phone in the kitchen. Her parents would know everything by now, everything he and Elizabeth had kept from them, the job he’d lost, the job he was working now to make sure the bills were covered. The other stuff too.

On his initial sweep of the apartment, he took an inventory of the most obvious things she would have taken if she were really leaving for good: clothing in the closets, shoes, framed pictures, bathroom products. All of it was still there. She’d had the day to move anything out that she wanted to. She didn’t have a job. “Painters paint,” she’d said.

She’d made a point of letting him know that was what she doing with her life. Even after graduation, Elizabeth had kept her small studio on campus. She worked for the figure drawing class as a model and had made an arrangement with her professors to let her keep a key to the building and a studio in exchange for her willingness to stand naked on a box cloaked in velvet and hold poses while students worked on their drawings. She had the charm to pull something like that off. Maybe manipulation was a better way of putting it, Peter thought.

He was starting to feel manipulated. The muscles in his neck and shoulders throbbed. He held his mouth behind his hand and regarded the quickened pace of his heartbeats with a sigh. The note, still where she'd written it, fluttered as the air conditioning kicked on. The doors in the apartment sucked against their frames.

The sun inched through the sky, toward the end of the day. At seven o'clock Peter put some water on to boil. He emptied a can of tuna and half a cup of rice into the warming water. There were ice trays in the freezer that had been empty for months and needed to be washed. So he washed them. The water in the pot began to boil. He covered it with a dinner plate.

Elizabeth had wanted to make sure that they didn't take anything from her parents. She'd made it clear before they got married that her parents were not to help out with anything. "I don't want them to own us," she'd said. "We have to be able to rely on ourselves. They'll hang it over our heads if we ever take anything from them."

So they took nothing. They got married on a Wednesday in a courthouse clerk's office in front of strangers. Peter emptied his savings to cover the deposit and first month's rent on their apartment and pay all the fees for hooking up their utilities and getting a cable box for the television in the living room. His mother had been upset with him initially, saying only that she would have flown down had he given her notice. Peter had explained to her that there had been no notice to give. Elizabeth's parents hadn't acknowledged the event at all. And she'd said, "I could give two shits what they think." And he had believed her.

In the two hours since he'd arrived home from work the phone had not rung. And he had not called anyone, fearing that Elizabeth might call and he would miss it. When things started to get tight with their finances, he'd started cutting things out that he hoped she wouldn't notice.

Call waiting was one of the things he dropped. The plate covering the rice clattered. Peter stood and watched the parking lot from their second-story kitchen window, hopeful that her car would dart around the corner and pull into the space reserved for their apartment.

His tongue felt heavy in his mouth as he recited her words, “Found somebody else,” waiting for the sound of the phrase to make sense to him, as if the right delivery of those words would justify what he had come home to. In the year they’d been married she’d left him twice to stay with her parents for a weekend. It was always just her, “needing a little space,” as she put it. He didn’t argue with her about it. He’d never done anything about it. But she’d never left a note before. It had always been a show: the doors would slam, she’d pack her overnight bag and huff and mutter things under her breath— things she always apologized for later, and then she’d be gone for two or three days, eventually calling, letting him know where she was. He checked the bathroom again, hoping she’d taken her toothbrush with her instead of abandoning everything. It was where she always left it, right behind the faucet, its bristles twisted and spent.

The rice stuck to the bottom of the pot as it cooked and burned thoroughly. The sweet edge of charred sugar from the rice mixed with the harsh smell of scorched tuna rose from the ruined meal into the vent hood where the fan above the stove had been set to high.

Peter lingered in the bathroom, waiting to hear the door to the apartment open, and to hear her voice call to him. He imagined her laughing about how she’d pulled one over on him, and his own reaction, hugging her until he thought he would break her, laughing at himself because she had, indeed, pulled one over on him. It had almost happened, he was sure of it. She had almost come back. The door was most certainly going to swing open and she would be there,

but the smoke detector sounded instead. Peter walked into a smoke-filled kitchen. And she had still not come home.

He left the half empty bowl of salvaged but untouched rice on the table in the den. Images on the muted television set sent a flickering blue wash that filled the room.

He stood in the bathroom and relieved himself. Before he zipped his pants closed he listened to the quiet. He stood there and listened. There was nothing. And he had no idea how he had come to nothing. Nothing about this worked for him. The air vent above him ushered a faint whistle. He could taste his sadness. He turned the bathroom lights off and watched himself in the mirror. Small pinpoints of light flickered in his eyes as the traveling images from the television set in the living room crept into the space around him.

He decided he would call his brother. As he let the sound of the flushing toilet break the silence, he heard the phone ring. He ran to the kitchen and pulled at the phone, dislodging it from the cradle and sending the phone to the floor with a crash. He answered. Elizabeth's mother spoke soft and low on the other end of the line.

“Peter, Peter, are you there? Honey, are you alright?”

“Is Elizabeth there? Is she with you? Can I talk to her, please?”

“Peter, Peter, honey, calm down,” she said, her voice low and controlled. “Now hold on, Peter. Let's talk for a minute, ok?”

“She left a note. Is she having an affair?”

“Peter, we're dealing with a very, very confused girl, right now. Libby needs some time.”

Peter switched the phone to his other ear. He pulled open the drawer below the phone and took the notepad and a pencil out. The fan was still whirling away and vibrating the hood above the stove. Peter slapped hard at the switch. The fan went quiet.

“Peter, Peter what is going on? What’s that racket all about?”

“It’s nothing. The vent fan over the stove was running. I had to turn it off to hear better.”

“Well it sounded very, very loud on this side of the phone.”

Peter rolled his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Everything’s fine, Gwen. Everything’s fine.”

“Ok. That’s better.... Now look, Peter, John is out of town right now. When he gets back I’m sure that he’s going to have a good long talk with Libby about this. But for now...”

“Is she coming home? What’s going on?”

“Peter, now I know that you’re upset, but please don’t interrupt, I need,”

“It’s just my wife has lef...”

“Peter!” She waited. Peter was silent. “This isn’t easy for any of us. And I know it must be very hard for you, but I need to do something, and I’d rather you know about it.”

Peter waited until the phone went quiet, “What do you need to do Gwen?”

“I need to come over tomorrow and get her stuff.”

“What?”

“Peter, honey, listen. I’m going to come over with a few boxes tomorrow and get her stuff. She’s very, very confused right now, and I don’t want her to have to deal with all of that business.”

“What? Why can’t she?”

“Peter, I need you to be a man right now. I need you to accept this and help me help Elizabeth. I know you care for her, and I need you to use that, and help me do this. Nobody can say what the future’s gonna bring, honey. Ok?”

“Ok,” he said.

He heard her pull a drag from a cigarette and exhale. And then she hung up.

The toilet tank hadn’t finished filling up. He listened as the water echoed in the tank. He hadn’t had time to even ask about Elizabeth, or why she had chosen to do what she had done. His wife had left him alone in their apartment and her mother had just called to say she was sorry. What had her exact words been, he asked himself. “It’s just the way of life, sometimes,” she had said. She had not elaborated.

He watched as the light from the television set abruptly shifted on the far wall of the room. He wanted to hold the phone to his heart, but he just held it next to his mouth. He couldn’t find any poetry in this moment.

In the bedroom, the sheets laid on the bed in a loose pile, tangled together with the comforter. He looked at the bed. His face muscles involuntarily fought between smiling and frowning. His cheeks hurt. The meat beneath his eyes twitched. He pulled the sheets off the bed and removed the pillowcases. He left the whole mess in a pile at the foot of the bed; he could smell the two of them, the citrus shampoo and conditioner, the lavender oils she rubbed on her skin, woven into the thread count.

In the hall closet, above the return vent for the air conditioning unit, he pulled out a set of white sheets that they kept on hand for the foldout couch in case friends came to visit. There was no use in sleeping in their bed. He figured that there would be very little sleeping going on at all,

but their bed had been theirs, and the couch had been there for anyone who needed it. He dressed the foldout bed and propped himself up on one of the pillows. The pillow pushed out the fragrance of her shampoo and he tossed the pillow across the room and retrieved his own pillow, a pillow that smelled neutral.

Sometime during the night, between a string of late night infomercials, he fell asleep. His dreams were empty. He woke up tired, the crust on his eyes, thick and rough like salt.

The parking lot light outside the kitchen window was still burning. Elizabeth's parking space stood empty. Peter took a bowl from the cabinet and poured some cereal. His appetite was still gone, but he wanted to put something in his stomach. The time on the coffee maker read 4:54. There was never a more appropriate time to put coffee on to brew.

Libby had kept cigarettes hidden around the apartment. She smoked sometimes after a couple of drinks, or on occasion when she thought she needed a cigarette. Peter searched through the drawers in the kitchen, but found no packs or hidden singles tucked under the generous number of menus and coupons for take-out places in the neighborhood.

He hadn't been up this early since he'd worked summers, shoveling out livestock stables when he was still in high school back in Wisconsin. It had seemed a long time ago, high school. Telling people he was married had made him feel older. He and Elizabeth were hardly a year out of undergraduate studies. Somehow he'd managed to get laid off from one job and end up working in a discount retail store, sorting out what everybody else left behind.

Gwen hadn't given him any time frame for when she might come by. He figured that she would be earlier rather than later. She was a go-getter, an active lady who played golf at eight o'clock on the mornings, and took one gin and tonic with her lunch. She'd never really taken to

him, but then, she hadn't taken to the notion that her daughter had gone off and married a boy she'd met only a few months before.

Peter pored over this. He fixed a cup of coffee and ate some cereal. Everything had happened so quick. He topped off his coffee and went to their bedroom. He was pretty sure she'd have stashed some cigarettes in her dresser.

He pushed her socks around and pulled a handful of panties out of the top drawer, but found nothing. The second and third drawers were full of folded T-shirts and shorts, but no cigarettes. Peter kept looking, walking to the small vanity in the corner. He checked the narrow drawer under the mirror, but only a couple of empty perfume bottles and a few dried rose petals. The petals had come from the rose he wore on his lapel the day he and Elizabeth were married. He sat on the low wicker stool in front of the vanity. Peter scooped up the petals and placed them in his hand.

The doorbell rang. Peter looked over his shoulder. The sun was up and coming through the windows in the bedroom. He wasn't sure if he'd fallen asleep or just lost himself. The air smelled different, empty. The door opened. Gwen's voice echoed down the hall, "Peter, it's Gwen. Peter?"

"I'm in the bedroom," he said.

Peter looked at the petals in his hand. She's here to take her away, he thought. He studied the dried, brown petals. There was nothing much to them. He could make out where the creases of the petals had dried into hard folds, the edges curled back, withered and brittle.

“I see you put some coffee on,” Gwen said. “I’m just going to help myself to a cup.” She paused and added, “I brought some boxes with me, you wouldn’t mind getting them out of the car would you?”

Peter said nothing. The thick swelling had returned to his throat. Peter listened to the sound of coffee pouring into a mug. She must have added sugar or milk because he could hear the spoon clank against the mug as she stirred. This is it, he thought.

“You can’t have her.”

“Peter?” she called as she moved down the hall toward the bedroom. He made a fist and crushed the rose petals.

“You can’t just show up and take everything away.”

“Peter, I need you to understand what’s going on here,” she said. Hurried steps accompanied her voice.

He heard her stop at the threshold of the bedroom.

“This isn’t fair.”

“She rushed into something she didn’t understand. You both did.”

“But what. What do I get? Nothing,” he paused. “Nothing.” Peter put his hands to his face.

“Peter, please, show some dignity. Turn around, and compose yourself.”

Peter spun on the wicker stool, and stopped when he found her with his eyes.

“Better?” he asked.

He smiled as best as he could. The rose petals were dry in his mouth. He struggled to swallow them, but he did, all the while smiling.

LISTING

Tonight you will go home and think of ten things you could have said to Miranda. You list, often going only to ten as to keep all the lists from repeating too much. Tonight's list will be all Miranda, the girl with the uninterested eyes and the sour-green nail polish. The one with trained lips: "What can I get you?" What can't she give you? You'll wash your face and shave. You'll stand in front of the full-length mirror in your room and get rolling drunk. The stereo will weep the songs you have picked for your soundtrack with her. Sonic Youth. The Smiths. Still, the night will start out strong. You sing along and move to the rhythms that find your mouth and tongue following the curves of her: from hip to rib, from elbow to armpit, from shoulder to cheek. In time with the music, your fist will pump, gathering you in, and you will watch yourself in the mirror as your mind pours through thoughts of you and Miranda and a tangle of sheets. The music will hang in the room. A vapor, a mist. You will smell her hair, her skin, her breath. And you will catch wind of your own foul breath, as you choke on the air, caught for a moment in your own pull. Then you will cry. You will begin to sink. And you won't pay attention to this, because you never do. Nothing has happened, nothing more to see here. You will punch the soft spot on the wall where the indentions are accented with the smears of dead blood, brown as shoe polish. Bright taps of your mother's brass-tipped cane being fired into the floor of the room above you like a Gatling gun will leave you breathing heavy and rubbing your swollen knuckles. You will stand for ten good seconds staring at the ceiling, your fist raised, a rusty scream rolling at the back of your throat, muted behind tight lips. You will lumber across the room and pull another two beers from the refrigerator that doubles as a nightstand. And on the corner of your

bed you will rest. Your feet will feel heavy as sandbags as you list, rolling on the worn springs of a mattress you've slept on since junior high. Your tongue will feel thick behind your teeth and your jaw will clench tight as you pass from king of the goddamn world to sinking ship all within the bridge and chorus of "Landslide," currently flooding from your speakers. Your mind will whisper you're a goddamn wreck, but you will select song after song that pushes you to feel, because it's only in these times that you understand how to feel. You will light a cigarette and pose your most tragic, your forehead resting on your palm, your fingers trenched in your unwashed hair, the flush of everything tonight blushing your cheeks. A forgotten cigarette will die in the ashtray, a corpse of ash still holding its form. A fresh beer will sit full on the floor by your bed, and be dumped down the drain in the morning. But for now, you will drift off. There will be no dreams. No images of Miranda, of her nametag, of her plump, chapped lips. No recollection of the smile she gave you when you dropped a dollar in the tip jar after she brought out your coffee and the thick slice of carrot cake. Nothing. And the morning will come. The alarm will send you reeling. Your thoughts will be scattered, fragments of Miranda.

CONSENTING ADULTS

The phone rang seven times before the machine picked up. If I'd had a gun, I would've shot that ringing fucker right off the kitchen wall. Sometimes the days are rotten and long and you just have to let the phone go straight to the machine. "Charlie. Pick up, pick up, pick up." It was my cousin, Frankie Janette. Who else would it be? She thinks that ever since Jean moved out I've been on some suicide kick. She calls the house just about every day. She's got a habit of pulling her deathtrap of a Ford Bronco right up in my front yard and layin' on the horn until I make it to the door and let her know I'm still alive. It's her way of showing she cares. She's just trying to help put me on the upswing of things.

"Pick up, pick-up, pick-up," she continued to repeat, until she pulled the phone away from her mouth and coughed all holy hell into the receiver. I could hear a bit of music going on in the background. A bottle hissed as it opened. She cleared her throat and took a drink of something and cut right back in like she'd just remembered she was on the phone: "Goddamn, I just about choked myself half to death. But ... hmmm ... ah hell, oh, yeah. New girl I want to set you up with. She's one hot lady; I'll say that. Gimme a call." And that's about how all the messages go. I would gamble that Frankie was about half a joint in, and sitting on her front porch like she does in the evenings. I figured she'd give me about a good half-hour before she had my phone ringing to the machine again.

Frankie'd been on the lookout for me even before Jean boxed up all of what was hers and plenty of what was mine and moved out of our place and started sharing a bed with Steve Fisher. Steve Fisher is the asshole who'd been throwing it on Jean for a good two months before I found

out. But I did find out. And then that whole mess between me and Steve happened in the parking lot of the Arby's he manages, and Jean, thinking she was going to stop two grown men from beating the shit out of each other, stepped in a little too close to us and caught my elbow on her cheek as I pulled back, fixing to take off the better part of Steve Fisher's face with all the punch I could muster. I still landed the punch, but Jean took the brunt of it. Still, nice to watch that little prick bleed some from his nose. Course that leads to me getting arrested for assault on the both of them. Charges were dropped, but I've been banned from all the Arby's restaurants in Franklin County, Tennessee. There are six of them total.

A few months after that mess at the Arby's, Frankie Janette decided it was time. "It's your time! You're still young enough, you ought to be finding out what you missed over the last twenty years," she'd said.

I told her it wasn't just about sex. She told me it was all about the sex. I told her there was more to it. She told me to quit looking so deep. I told her that hurt lasts a good while. She told me that hurt hurts less when you're knee-deep in pussy. Frankie Janette shoots it pretty straight. She'll tell you long as the day what all you should be doing to get your life straightened out.

"You just need to find some other consenting adult," she'd said. "That's all you need to get over that Jean hump you're wallowing behind."

Sure as the clock hit thirty minutes on the tick, the phone in the kitchen started to ring. And Frankie Janette knows how to get me out of the recliner in the front room. She'd let the phone ring six times, hang-up, and start at it again, and again, and again. She could do that all day. So I picked myself up out of that old blue recliner and answered the phone.

The girl's name was Paula. She had left a messed up situation in Arkansas and was just looking to hang out and meet some "good folks" as Frankie put it in a drawn out way. That's all that Frankie Janette said. Well, that and a little sass about Viagra. And I told her the equipment still worked just fine.

She was a good looking woman, fair skinned and freckled over. A tall woman, built on miles of legs. Sweet Jesus. She wore a thin jacket over a blue dress that cut her at the knees and had three tiny red buttons up the front where the neck of the dress formed a V. And she was pushed up in the way that newer bras do, and showing some soft, freckled real estate. I got the door for her as she moved past me and into my truck.

She thanked me. I stumbled over something like "you're welcome."

"You hungry?" I asked.

"Not really, maybe in a little bit," she said.

"Frankie says you're new in town," I said, hoping to get past that awkward stuff that happens when you first meet someone. "Got any ideas of what you'd like to get into tonight?"

She said, "Why don't you take me sightseeing. And I don't mean showing me where the Walmart is."

There was something nice in the way her hair smelled. Something other than flowers. Like rain in the spring, when the soil is rich from a wet winter. I asked if maybe she'd like to cut up through the hills and take in a nice drive before the sun disappeared. She said she would. So I shut her door and stole another peek at her chest.

When Jean and I were young we used to go park on back roads and get to some serious fooling around. The stuff that makes your balls ache for an hour after you've dropped her off at

her parents' house. Sometimes we got into it so good that I would come home and just about cry. Young man's blues.

I figured we could pull off on one of the cut through roads somewhere down Smith Road. It's a little ways up the ridge. You get a good view of the land and stars on a clear night. The hills roll out in front of you and dip through rich green pastures that follow the slope of the valley. Deer creep out from the shadows of the tree lines that mark property and feed in the fields. Radio comes in loud and static free up there too. I had the station set to WSM, The Grand Ole Opry. They play a good bit of Bluegrass at night. Ricky Skaggs and Cadillac Sky were doing a live set. I kept it low so we could talk, but not too low. They've got some good players in that band. Just in case the conversation started to drag, I'd have a little back-up plan ready to go. I could always fall into the story of when I met Ricky Skaggs' road manager at a Waffle House in Murfreesboro. It's really nothing more than me and him eating waffles and drinking coffee. I didn't even know he was Skaggs' manager until he shook my hand as he was leaving. Guess I had been talking a lot that night. I was fresh off of what were the last days I would know of being married to Jean. I'm pretty sure I just talked and talked, the way some men do when they're lost, when they wake up and find out it's done. I don't know how it gets to that point, but it does. And Ricky Skaggs' road manager heard me spill it all out over coffee and waffles at one in the morning. He was a nice enough guy. Listened to all of it and never seemed put-off.

"Nice country up here. Pretty night. Should get a good look at some stars," I said.

"Been here a lot?" She winked, laughed a little.

"It's been a good while, but I guess I still remember a few of the old pull-off spots, had myself a little bit of fun back when I was young and reckless."

“I could use a little of that. This week’s been rotten. I could a done without it: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, could have done without ‘em.” She ran her hand through her hair.

“What about Friday?”

“I’m still on the fence about Friday. Let’s see how it ends.” She pulled a cigarette from a pack in her purse and waved it in my direction. “You mind?”

“Naw, you’re fine.”

She peeled her jacket off, stuffed it behind her on the seat and smoothed her dress out.

“I don’t know what I was thinking, wearing a jacket out. It’s still mostly summer.”

“It might cool later,” I said.

The hem of her dress sat on her knee and draped where her legs crossed. She patted the dress down in her lap some and that move pulled the dress another three or four inches up her leg. That’s a sweet place to see, that curve of muscle right as the thigh pours into the knee and then widens out to the calf. Goddamn, that’s a good look when you’re riding down a country road, and the air has that summer smell of cut grass, and the sun is painting everything golden for that hour before it hides away for the night. My hair blew out from behind my ear and lifted into my line of sight. I felt the smooth end of her finger as she combed it back. Her hand stayed on my shoulder.

“Sorry, it’s this vent window blowing your hair around,” she said.

“It’s all right. It doesn’t bother me.”

“My little boy has hair the same color as yours.”

“Oh yeah?”

“He’s a piece of work, but I’m out of control in love with him. Out-of-control.”

“How late’s the babysitter gonna let you stay out tonight?” I asked.

“Didn’t need to get one. My little boy’s in Arkansas with his sonofabitch father.” She paused for a moment and added, “Don’t get me wrong, not every man is a sonofabitch, but I’ve known a few in my day.”

“Well, here’s to hoping I don’t end up on that list,” I said.

“From what I know of you, from what Frankie’s told me, you don’t have to worry much about that happening.”

She looked off at the country we were passing through. Her fingers tapped in rhythm on my shoulder as the music on the radio played.

A fine bit of mandolin and banjo work drifted from the speakers. The tempo built. The audience at the Opry responded, a thunder of clapping on the beat. Paula uncrossed her legs and the dress showed a little more leg. My palms went cold against the steering wheel. It had been a fair bit of time since I’d seen legs showing out under the line of a dress in my own truck. It’s not something you really think about when it’s not there, but when it’s two feet to the right of you it’s about all you can do to try and remember where it was you were heading, and why you hadn’t come across a little company much sooner.

The last few years that Jean and I were together had slipped off into a world of frumpy sweatpants and NFL jerseys, shorthand conversation, cussing at each other, getting pissed about where she’d set the thermostat instead of getting a good feel of her curves. We’d fallen dull as milk and cereal every damn morning. I guess I didn’t want to see it go away. Maybe she had. Maybe I hadn’t heard it in her voice when we’d work our way through a normal day of

conversations. I don't know. Something else caught her eye. I thought about that a lot at night. Sometimes I'd just lie there on top of the sheets and wonder when it all decided to go away. Where did it go? When she was still there I'd roll over and take a look at her. She was still beautiful, still that lovely girl I'd gone crazy over, but we'd gone flat somehow. And then she wasn't there, and I couldn't tell if I missed her, or just the misery of where we'd come to.

The place I was looking to pull over had a few rowdy high school kids drinking beer in the back of their truck, one of those Chevy trucks that's got a lift kit on it and tires tall as your waist. A couple of empties decorated the high grass at the fence line. I seethed a little. Best I could remember, there was a nice patch of land down this road, up on a hilltop.

The little gravel cut trough was a single lane road. And they were smack in the middle of it. I came to a stop a few yards away from them and left my truck idling.

"Let's see if I can get these fellas out of the way."

"Go on hero, let's see what you've got in the ways of persuasion," she said.

"I might have to pay a toll," I said, and opened my door. She let loose a laugh.

The sun still had a bit more time in the sky. The air stirred a little and cooled off some of the daytime heat. I caught sight of a Harrison Tigers sticker on the back window. I had gone to McKinnley; Harrison used to slaughter us way back, but I wasn't going to mention that to them. They were bigger than I had thought, now that I was on the ground and they were still perched up on the wheel wells and the tailgate of the big old Chevy.

"What you know good, young men?" I asked. I gave them a little salute, like you do when you see other folks in the supermarket or out on the river fishing for catfish.

“Nothin’ much,” a boy with a pitiful mustache said. He was smaller than the other two fellas. An ugly little cuss. Wiry too.

The other two boys straightened up a little, pulled their shoulders back and pushed their chins up in the air so they could look down their noses at me. They both looked like they could throw up two-twenty-five on a bench press without a whole lot of trouble. They were doughboys: heavy lifters with no muscle definition, wearing sleeveless white t-shirts that pulled tight through the shoulders and neck and stretched to barely cover stomachs that pushed out from their belts and sagged like flour sacks. They looked like they could be brothers too, probably played on the line, guards or tackles. I guessed this was the ugly boy’s truck. He was the only one really looking at me. The doughboys tipped their cans to their mouths and drank. They emptied the beers and crushed their cans in unison, like they had done this a hundred times at parties where everyone loved them because they were always the ones that carried in the kegs.

“Good night for tossing down some cold ones,” I said.

“I guess it is,” the kid with the mustache said. He didn’t look like he was fond of much of anything. His face carried that look, like he couldn’t stop smelling shit. He sniffled and ran his hand under his nose, stroked the pitiful hairs that young manhood had given him.

“Yeah, buddy. There ain’t a bit wrong with throwing back a few cold ones.” I stirred up some gravel with the tip of my boot, and tried to figure out where all of this small talk was going.

The two doughboys leaned over and fished beers out of a cooler in the bed of the big truck. One of them whispered something to the other one and they both got to snickering. I could probably guess it was something smart-assed and involved me as the punch line. That’s the deal with thick-headed muscled-up turds like these two, you got to take that kind of shit. Three on

one, you're going to take a bit of shit and let them get their laughs in. It's a whole lot kinder than getting your teeth kicked down your throat. The kid with the mustache's mouth went ugly and twisted as he sneered a little. His eyes shot over to his buddies. Their smiles dropped.

The kid with the mustache hopped down off the tailgate. He crossed his arms in front of his chest. He was shorter up close. A bit scrawny. Place kicker. Needs them big boys to watch out for him cause he doesn't know how to control his mouth.

"I was just looking to get on down this stretch of road and wondered if you fellas wouldn't mind pulling your truck out of the way for me." I was thinking of telling them of what a fine truck they had, when the boy with the mustache cut in.

"This ain't no through road," he said.

"This-un leads up to his house," one of the doughboys said. He'd let his eyes fall into a squint and his thin lips puckered tight.

"Well, I guess I got turned around. Been a long spell of time since I was up running around in these hills."

"Well it ain't like you're lost is it?" the kid with the mustache chimed in. There was something in his voice. It lifted with curiosity.

"Naw, nothing like that. Just driving around," I said. "Just a good night for driving around the countryside."

"Cause if you're lost we can help you out. It's kind of like a maze up here, roads going here and there." His mustache twitched a little. A smile started turning up the corners of his mouth.

The boy with the mustache looked back at his buddies and half laughed, some thought creeping into his ugly head, “You fixin to get some action going with that lady you got there in your truck? That’s why most people come up here.” His little eyes landed beyond me and settled on Paula. “Hey boys,” he said, and shifted his eyes on me, “I think we got some folks looking for a nice spot to get things going. Is that what’s going on? Cause for twenty dollars I’ll draw you a map, what you think about that?” He laughed, tossed the beer in his hand to the ground.

The two doughboys in the back of the truck had come off the tailgate and stood stacked up behind their friend. They wore crooked smiles. I couldn’t see a good way out of this. I took a look over my shoulder. Paula smoked a cigarette; she’d turned up the radio some. I wasn’t really sure how to play this. If the two thick-necked retards hadn’t been here, I might have dropped the ugly kid with the mustache. But those two boys were emptying beers about as fast as if they were drinking Gatorade after a game. You don’t mess with that kind of country. That kind of country will twist you into the ground for no reason other than it being Friday night and they’re bored.

“That’s a good one,” I said. “Y’all have a good night, mmmkay?” I turned on the heel of my boot and started back to my truck.

“You got it, buddy,” said the kid with the mustache. If he’d had the balls to call me buddy like that, and he’d been by himself, Good lord, I might have called over to Paula and told her to cover her eyes while I mopped the road with his face. Goddamn kids got no respect.

“Get on out of here, pussy,” fired out of one of their mouths as I opened the door and hopped in the cab. They cackled. I watched them pat each other on the shoulders as I pulled the shift column down and felt the transmission shift into reverse.

“Did that boy just call you a pussy?” Paula asked. She let a laugh slip, and I couldn’t tell if she thought the situation was funny or horrible.

“Forget about it. Let’s head up a ways and see if we can’t find a someplace that isn’t crawling with assholes.”

“Aw, you’ll laugh about it tomorrow.” She squeezed my shoulder. I felt my teeth go hard against each other.

“Sure thing,” I said, and breathed out through my nose.

“Don’t get all bent about it.” Her voice came soft. She put a cigarette between her lips and blew a stream of smoke out of the window and into the oncoming night.

I kept my eyes in the side mirror and backed up the way I’d come in. “Little shits are drunk enough to get their dander up. They’ll figure it out someday, or somebody’ll figure them out,” I said. The whine of the truck moving in reverse reminded me of sobbing horns you hear in cartoons when the coyote’s just run off the edge of a cliff.

We’d had a lot of rain all summer. Most of the roads that cut lines between the fields are dirt. You can find gravel roads too, but most folks don’t want to spend the extra money. The black top disappears and you’re left with what’s there. The rains had done a good job of softening the dirt and the farm gear had heaped on the punishment, leaving deep gouges and pockets of soft mud that held pools of standing water where mosquitos hatched and brought their menace into the season. My truck was too old to handle getting bogged in the mud or bottoming out on the frame in a deep rut. I guessed that neither one of us felt like walking out of this place if we were to get stuck. We drove for another five or ten minutes. It’s hard to figure time when you’ve got to move slow. I wasn’t so sure this was such a good idea after all. The cut through

roads heading downhill hurt with pockets of stagnant water that looked big enough to swallow us up, truck and all. I was getting deeper into the shit.

Paula didn't say much of anything. The road we were on had turned rough. Potholes sunk into the ground, the shoulder had been torn up by the run-off from all of the rain. We did a fair amount of bouncing around. She jiggled in all the right places. We laughed it off for a minutes or two, but the fun of our back road adventure was slipping away. I had no business taking this old beater off the paved roads. I'd just wanted to be somewhere I could feel like I did once before, find a quiet place, see where a little talking might get us. It had been a mistake, coming up here. The worse the road got, the less either one of us laughed. There was a moment when we smacked down hard and it sent us both up off the seat. She made a sound like she'd taken a punch to the stomach. All the fun had been bounced out of her.

Then she spoke, "We should head back. We're getting tossed around a lot."

"I'm awful sorry about this. We should've gone to a movie or something."

"It's not your fault, Charlie. Sometimes it's a rough ride."

"I feel awful. I do."

"It's okay. Just kind of feeling a little road sick. Maybe we could get somewhere solid and I could have a cigarette, try to settle my stomach some. I'm going to shut up now, talking's making it worse," she said, her voice turned flat. She rolled down the window, closed her eyes.

I listened to the sounds of the springs in the seat suffering under our weight. I nosed the truck into the next cut through road and got us turned around. I used a lot of clutch to keep us from getting lodged in a mean looking tractor tire rut. We headed back. I drove so slow. The radio played low. Cadillac Sky had just finished their set by the time I got us out of the rough.

The road got smooth, and soon as I could, I pulled over and asked her if she wanted to stretch her legs and have that cigarette. She did. We stood there, propped up against the side of the truck and watched the day start to fade. I put my hand on her back and rubbed the skin between her shoulders.

“That feels nice,” she said. She leaned her shoulder against mine, and put her arm around my hip, hooking her thumb in one of my belt loops. We stood there. Settling. The sun hid behind a thin veil of pink clouds. In fifteen or so minutes it’d be pitch, and the stars would prick the sky.

I waited for a couple of minutes before I asked, “You doing a little better now?” “I’m coming around,” she said. She laughed some to herself. “God, that could have been a mess.” She patted my hip where her hand rested.

“Got to feeling pretty bad, huh?”

“I wasn’t sure if I was going to lose that glass of wine I had before you picked me up.”

“Oh, lord, here we go,” I said, “Gone and got yourself wrecked on wine before the date even started.”

“Hey now, a girl’s allowed to be nervous from time to time.” She smiled and pitched her cigarette to the ground.

“I guess you’re right about that. Hell, I showered twice. Never can smell too good for the ladies, right? But they always remember if you stink.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” she said, and without any warning, anchored her nose into my armpit.

“You did clean up, didn’t you, even your shirt smells like you just pulled it off the line. Well, isn’t that refreshing.” She turned on her heel and squared up in front of me and let her hands roam in small circles above my hips.

“You got a damn smart mouth don’t you?” I said.

“I’m having a good time. Even if you did try to get the both of us killed by them boys in the big ol’ truck.”

“Yeah, wasn’t that something. Little pricks.”

“Thanks for bringing me up here, even if you just wanted to get in my pants.” She punched me in the arm, high up by my shoulder. “Your cousin said you were a sweetheart.”

“Ah hell, what’s she know anyway,” I said.

The headlights on my truck were starting to cut color through the fading day. I followed the freckles scattered across her face with my eyes and settled on her mouth. Her lips had little freckles too, barely visible under the lipstick that had worn thin as she smoked. So I kissed her. She stepped closer and placed my hand on the back of her neck. There we were, crashing into each other like a couple of kids drinking in one another for the first time. God knows I had been thirsty for this.

I’d found myself alone in the Holiday Inn lounge, thinking too much, drinking too much, having run off all the girls that I’d bought drinks for during the night. Running them off because the hurt made me talk, and because I was drunk on misery, the talk circled around and around and always came back to Jean, and how she’d gone off and fucked some guy who managed an Arby’s. And how we’d lost the spark long before that had happened. And then that pretty girl at the bar who’d sat through the two vodka cranberries I’d bought her vanished, her cigarette still

smoking in the ashtray, the smell of her perfume, whatever it was that smelled so damn good was gone too. Not even a memory, just gone. Those nights ended with a slow drive home. Alone. The radio always too loud and the ache inside magnified proportionally with the size of the bar tab I'd paid. Then the dead sound of the front door opening to an empty house, the close of the door and twist of the deadbolt echoing ahead of me through rooms that sounded cavernous now that Jean had left.

There's nothing pretty about that kind of mess. You figure it'd be all okay if you could trade some of that empty you feel for a night or two where you could hold on to someone and drink in a little of their warmth. And it would be easy too if you believed that a body next to yours is all it took to get you healed. Maybe it is. Being holed up in the living room with just the light of the television, or saddled up on a bar stool at five in the afternoon, five days a week, sure as hell ain't what I'd call living. It's a hard call at first, because you think the next girl is gonna replace that last one. But that's not how it always goes. That's what I think I'm figuring out. It might be okay to soak in someone new, just to do it, just to fill yourself up again.

Her hair lay fanned out on the bench seat and fell into the shadows that held the space between the door of the truck and the harness for the seatbelt. The moon colored everything around us in cool silver and blue. The bit of heat leaving the day had us both sweating at the hairline and where our clothes pulled tight. Every kiss worked as it should, the long deep kisses drew sighs from her; the quick kisses fell like flurries between open smiles and laughter. We'd been playing around each other's mouths for some time. I had my hands wedged up under her shoulders, and she worked her hands in and around my back pockets. There we were, some

country road, under the stars, dry humping like teenagers, on the crying seat springs in a beat-up old truck.

“You got to lift up, here, lift up for minute,” she said.

“What you got going on?” I asked. I pushed up with my right arm, and reached for the steering wheel with my left.

“My dress is getting bunched up, it’s about to kill me,” She arched up on her shoulders and grabbed up underneath her back. “Sonofabitch,” Paula said, and I watched. She squirmed a little and we both heard a tearing sound.

“Aw fuck,” she said.

I leaned my back right up against the driver’s side door. A pitiful bit of breeze moved in through the little vent window, pushed its way around the rolled up cuff of my shirt, and felt almost cold as it got lost in the hair on my arms.

“Hells bells,” I said.

“You got that right, honey.”

Even in that soft spell of moonlight, she looked mad enough to spit. I let my head lay back against the window. My sharkskin Tony Lama’s felt tight in the toe box and rubbed my calves where my socks had lost their grip and fallen deep into the boots, crowding my ankles and gathering in folds under my heels. It was a miserable piece of time. It’s amazing how much you can think about your own life, flash through all the romances and heartaches, the times you felt breathless and needed some of your girl’s sweet air to get you through a restless night.

In fifteen seconds on a night of sweat and wrong turns you can get to thinking that maybe a long drive on the highway, way beyond Memphis, crossing that muddy Mississippi River and

going until the road runs out and then just finding a crack in the face of the world to disappear into, maybe a job as a night manager at some motor lodge on a forgotten highway, where wind pushes tumbleweeds around and the travelers drive right past. Maybe that's not such a bad place to be. And it seemed that's what sat on my mind most of the time, running somewhere else, hiding.

Paula sat herself upright and turned her back to me. There was a moment when only the springs in the seat were doing any talking.

“Get this damn thing unzipped before we both forget why we came up here in the first place.”

I leaned in close to her.

“While we're at, go ahead and lose your shirt and pants. I'm done with soft and cuddly for now,” she said. “You okay with that?”

“Just two consenting adults up here, huh?”

“In a matter of speaking,” she said.

I helped the zipper down the length of her back. She raised up off the seat just a bit and the dress fell around her hips. She slid it down the length of her legs and let it sit in the grit on the floorboard. It was going to be some kind of chore to get my Tony Lama's off, what with seeing her in her bra and panties and how that affects the situation below the belt. I was afraid if I moved too quick I was sure to lose my balance and break something.

“I don't want you to think I didn't appreciate what you were doing.”

“No, no, not at all.”

“Because I did. It was nice. It really was. I haven’t been kissed like that in I can’t remember how long.” She took a breath and placed her hand on her chest. “But I’m wound up. And we got to take care of this.”

I was leaned over struggling to pull my boots free and pretty much crushing my pecker into healthy pile of loose change that had been rolling around in my jeans the last day or so.

“How long’s it been for you?” she asked.

“Well,” and I was glad that it was dark. I could answer as straight as I wanted to and she’d never know what I was hiding.

Then she added, “It’s none of my business. Forget what I just said. That was a really stupid question.”

I pulled one boot free and ran my knuckles right smack into the steering column.

“Aw, shit, damn, piss,” I said.

Paula sucked in a mouth full of air and talked into her hands, “Oh, God. You okay?”

“Lots of metal in these old trucks.”

“It sounded like it hurt.”

“Whew, American steel,” I said, and pried the other boot of with caution.

I took off my socks until I felt the grit from the floorboard stick to the bottom of my feet. Then I put ‘em back on. The moon cut a soft sagging shadow where the clasp of her bra pinched into the skin of her back.

“Christ a-mighty, you’re a good looking woman,” I said.

She didn’t say a word, just ran her fingers deep into her hair and pushed it away from her face, combing it back behind her ears with those long fingers.

I was fighting with everything around me, the steering wheel, my sock feet sliding out from under me on the dusty rubber floor mat, my knees found the steering column a time or two, and then there was what was going on behind that pair of button fly jeans that just didn't want to turn loose from me. And finally the pants were off: one leg, then both legs, heaped up in a pile at my feet. The whole thing had been a bit of an ordeal.

“Get that shirt off, honey, you're sweating up a storm,” she said. “Jesus, I feel like I'm back in high school.”

“Ain't that the truth.”

She was quick and said, “Don't forget to get me home by ten, or my daddy's going light into the both of us.”

We had a laugh. Things were good. It'd been a while since I'd felt good.

And then it was Paula and me, and a scant bit of underwear between us and fevered kissing going on. She pulled her dress from the floor of the truck and lay on her back against the bench seat. She wedged the dress behind her head, then cracked a smile that said, “yeah, buddy.” I was poking out of the front of my boxers. I lowered myself onto the heat of her skin, and caught a faint edge of cinnamon in the air around her. I couldn't place where exactly it was coming from, but it was there, and I was there, and she held her lower lip between her teeth as I breathed her in. And there was about five good minutes of my hand cupping her right tit under the bra, and her left hand giving me a tug, until a little flicker of light flashed through the cab of the truck, and then another flicker, and then a set of headlights and the deep growl of a big block Chevy coming up quick in the rearview mirror.

“Get yourself covered up,” I said.

And that's part of the risk of parking on the side of some farm road. You never know who might drop by. The sound of the engine grew closer. Then it slowed. I peeked out the back window, doing my best to get my feet wedged into the legs of my jeans and estimated how many seconds we had before the truck was on us. Whoever it was had the high beams flooding the night around us with light. It was a big truck. That much I could pick out. From the first hints of those headlights approaching, I was damned sure it was the three boys we'd run up on earlier in the night. And I was pretty sure those little shits were well good and drunk by now, and looking to stir up some shit. It's what you do out in the country when there's nothing but fields folding over hills and an endless pitch sky filled with stars. It's a whole lot cheaper than going to the movies. Just find someone and fuck with them all night.

I tried to sound calm. "I think it's them kids."

"Who?"

"Them two doughboys and that ugly one with the mustache that were drinking in the bed of that truck where we stopped."

Whoever it was, there was no secret as to what we'd been getting up to. The hard white from their headlights were lighting us up like Christmas. Whoever it was could see right into the cab of my truck. They could see my weak shoulders jump and flex as I managed the jeans past my ankles and fought to get them up to my knees. Bunched in the floorboard as they were, I found I was standing on them more than I was getting my legs through them. They could also see Paula's hands, pulled tight against her back securing the hook on her bra from where I'd managed to get it free a few moments ago. In the truck behind us they watched Paula's dress

billow as it fell from her head to her shoulders and covered the grid of red lines the seat had left pressed into her back.

The truck stayed parked and idled.

“Motherfuckers,” Paula said.

“You got that right.”

“Sons of bitches,” she said, the heat in her voice growing.

I fished for the keys in my pocket. In the process of all this swearing I’d jockeyed my pants up around my waist, but hadn’t attempted to button myself up yet. Paula had turned around on the seat and sat watching the truck on the road behind us.

“What are you looking at!” she called through the back window. Her voice cut at my ear. I fumbled the keys and they made a racket when they hit the floor mat. The mood we’d worked up had disappeared and been replaced with a wet heat in my armpits and crawling up my spine. I only noticed my shaking when I pulled the keys from the grit on the floormat and tried to stab the ignition. And then Paula’s hand grabbed mine, and the key found the slot. The mosquitos were buzzing in through the vent window and floating in the wash of light in the cab. I swatted through the air with one hand and turned the key with the other. The lights on the dashboard dimmed as the battery pulled current to get the engine turning over. The truck sputtered and died.

“Are you kidding me?” she said, and turned back to face the truck on the road behind us.

I checked the side mirror and watched the big truck spring forward, the engine roared. After few feet the truck skidded to a stop. Dust kicked loose from the road bloomed out from beneath the truck and rolled through the sharp beams of the big truck’s headlights. I rolled the

window down. They were a cackling bunch of sonsabitches. They lurched forward again, creeping a few yards closer. By now, I could see silhouettes in the cab.

“Let’s go, Charlie, let’s go.”

“I know, I know.” I turned the key. She hugged herself up to me and held tight to my arm. We were both panting like we’d just run a mile. I could tell she was crying.

“Jesus, they’re right on us.”

“I’m on it, I’m on it,” I said.

The headlights from their truck came off the rearview mirror and caught me blind. I bent my head down, looked into my lap and turned the key again. They revved their engine. Again and again. And I thought for a moment about all of the running I’d been doing, and how it hadn’t got me anywhere, but stuck in hotel bars and avoiding the tough things. That’s when I pulled the keys from the ignition and laid them on top of the dash. I looked at Paula.

“Give me a second, will you?”

She didn’t say anything.

I pulled a long tire iron out from under the seat.

“Don’t worry, I’ll have you home by ten. That way maybe your daddy’ll let me take you out again. Maybe to a movie next time.” I winked.

“Hold on,” she said. She leaned over and dug around in her purse. She shouted over the monstrous engine revving behind us, “As two consenting adults, I think I should just put something on the table right now.” She sprang back up with can of pepper spray. “I keep it in my purse, just in case I run into a sonofabitch. And these sonsofbitches are wrecking my night.”

“Out of control,” I said. “Out-of-control.”

SHARED VISITATION

“What is that? What’s with you and that look you’re giving me?” she asks.

“I’m not sure. What look am I giving you, exactly?” he says back.

“Well, it’s gone now. I shouldn’t have let you in on it. I should have snapped a picture and then we could have discussed it. You don’t have to help out. I can do this on my own.”

“What?”

“If that’s what you were feeling. We don’t have to do this, you know.”

“Wait, back-up, back-up. You’re light years ahead of me here.”

“Please don’t do that.”

“Do what? What did I do?” he asks.

“You find a way to make fun of me every time.”

“Why are you whispering?”

“See, that’s what I mean. Right there. You just can’t leave it alone can you?”

“I’m confused.”

“Don’t play that with me. You always go there with the ‘I’m confused’ thing. And then your face, God, if you could see what your face does. Even your body too.”

“My body too? What, what are you talking about?” he asks.

“Like what you’re doing right now. Can you feel that? Your shoulders are pitched forward, humping your back, like a child sulking.”

“So I’m sulking now. Well, you’re pleasant. I thought I was wrapping a present for my son because he’s going to be with you this Christmas. Just like last Christmas.”

“Jesus! That’s right in line with you. I could have predicted that you would bring that up. That’s where you go. You go full on smart-ass, then Mr. hurt feelings, then shift to woe-is-me. Every time. It’s your pattern. It’s what happens every time.”

“There’s no need to yell. Your gonna wake up the kid. You want to do that? Wake the kid up? Maybe he’ll get out of bed, decide he wants to investigate, see if the noise is Santa. How are you going to explain to him that we just happen to be wrapping all the presents?”

“Don’t get nasty.”

“Don’t start to cry.”

“I can’t help it. I get emotional.”

“I know,” he says, then adds, “that wasn’t a slight. You’ve always been a very emotional person. It’s not a bad thing.”

“Don’t.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

“Can you put your finger here and hold this tight so I can get some tape on this damn thing?”

“Sure.”

“Right there. No, wait. There. Right there. Perfect.”

“Why don’t you just put a ribbon on it?”

“What?”

“Why don’t you just put a ribbon right on the handle bars?”

“Because that’s expected.”

“So you’re going to gift-wrap a bicycle”

“If it takes three rolls of paper. That’s what I’m going to do.”

“Good Lord.”

“Go ahead and laugh. Yuck it up. This is going to be something.”

“It’s something alright.”

“You’ll see,” he pauses. “You got any beer?”

“I planned ahead.”

“I appreciate that. You want one?”

“When do I ever?”

“Not often. Just thought I’d ask.”

“Not right now.... And you’re not going to drink all six of those and drive home, so you can just get that thought out of your head.”

“Yes, Dear.”

“Don’t be a smart ass.”

“What’s this? A bottle of, wait let’s see, hmmm, Schmitt Sohne Relax Riesling. Boy, that’s a mouthful to say.”

“It’s Riesling, like Reese’s peanut butter cups.”

“Quite the wine scholar are we?”

“Don’t make fun.”

“Not making fun. Well, a little,” he says. “So, are you some sort of a wine drinker now?”

“I have a glass sometimes.”

“You want that I should pour you one?”

“Not so much. Maybe in a while. We’ll see.”

“It’s Christmas Eeeeeeyeeve.”

“Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“That little thing, drawing out the words. It’s not funny, it’s like bad sitcom writing.”

“Bitch.”

“Great response, you really, really, have a great defense mechanism. Really”

“It’s a joke,” he says. “Who all is coming for dinner tomorrow?”

“What? No one.”

“So you have three steaks swimming in marinade because you and our six year old son are going to be super hungry?”

“Quit snooping around in my refrigerator. The steaks were discounted because they expire today. I’m not going to freeze one steak. Maybe I’ll just eat steak all day tomorrow, nothing but steak. Maybe I’ll cook all three of them and throw one of them out window for some stray dog, Jesus!”

“Easy. Shhh. Damn, lady. I was just fooling around.”

“You were prying.”

“Okay.”

“No, not okay.”

“I was agreeing with you.”

“And I’m just telling you.”

“Change of subject.”

“Of course.”

“Yep.”

“Hmmm,” she says.

“So your gonna turn on the t.v. now?”

“Does it matter? Just wrap your bicycle, okay?”

“You’ll see. It’s going to be amazing.”

“I still don’t get what you’re going for.”

“Kids want to unwrap stuff. That’s the thrill.

“Right.”

“Did you ever get a bike for Christmas or your birthday?”

“Sure.”

“Will you turn the volume down a little? I’m trying to explain something here and I’m getting lost.”

“Hmmm.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You sure you don’t want a glass of wine?”

“I never got used to that.”

“What?”

“How fast you can drink?”

“The first one just goes down quick. It’s mother nature’s way of eliminating stress.”

“It’s not funny.”

“I’m not being funny. It’s just the way it is.”

“No, I don’t want a glass of wine, thanks.”

“So anyway, back to the bike.”

“Yes, back to the bike.”

“Yes, so anyway, boys like to tear stuff up. It’s in our nature. There’s a thrill there.”

“Oh, I know about boys, and tearing stuff up.”

“What’s that all about?”

“Motorcycle, lawn mower, the bathroom shower that’s still only half tiled.”

“It’s in the guest room. You having guests anytime soon?”

“What’s your point?”

“If the shower isn’t being used . . .”

“The bicycle!”

“Well shit, you’ve got me thinking about ten different things. You just throw stuff out and expect me to sort through it all.”

“I was just pointing out that you’ve done your share of tearing things up.”

“I get it, I’m a failure. Thanks. Thanks for pointing that out.”

“Don’t get dramatic.”

“How do you want me to get?”

“Nobody is calling you a failure.”

“Well, that’s what it sounds like . . . Why isn’t this bottle open?”

“What?”

“This Reecesling, It’s never been opened.”

“What is it with you and the things in my refrigerator?”

“You’re the one telling me that you drink a glass from time to time.”

“And your point?”

“My point is that you buy a bottle of wine because you want to drink it. You know, on your way home, ‘hey a glass of wine would be nice.’ You don’t just store it.”

“No, *You* don’t just store it. Not everyone works the way you do.”

“So you just go out and buy a bottle of wine and don’t open it, but you’ll buy three steaks and cook all of them.”

“Maybe I bought five bottles of wine. Maybe I bought ten bottles of wine and drank them all. All but that last one. What’s your logic here?”

“So you’re not having anybody over for dinner tomorrow night?”

“Are you serious?”

“Well?”

“Ass-hole. You’re an asshole.”

“I’m just asking a question.”

“No, no. You’re just being an asshole.”

“Oh, it’s my fault? I see.”

“Nope, we’re not going to talk about this. Nope. Finish wrapping up that bicycle and hit the road. Goddamnit.”

“I didn’t do anything. C’mon, don’t cry again. Look, I’m getting down to business, see? I’ve got the little tape dispenser, I’ve got a couple of rolls of wrapping paper. I’m serious. — Look at me, King serious,” he sings.

“Goddamnit.”

“Good, now say it like you’re angry. Give me a good ‘goddamnit, Patrick’— use the full name so I know I’m in trouble, but do it without laughing. Because right now I can’t take you seriously.”

“Nope.”

“Do it.”

“No.”

“C’mon.”

“Quit, I’m serious.”

“Your smile makes that point for you very, very clear. Or maybe it’s that sweet laugh. Now do it. One good ‘goddamnit, Patrick.’ Just like you used to.”

“Goddamnit, Patrick.”

“With vigor.”

“Goddamnit , Patrick.”

“C’mon sissy, throw your balls into it!”

“Goddamnit, Patrick!”

“That last one; that was the winner. I believed you on that one. Good one. Hope we didn’t wake the boy.”

“Shhh.”

“What,” he whispers.

“I’m listening. I thought I heard him moving around.”

“Hmmm.”

“Stop that.”

“HMMMMMMMMM,” he says.

“Shhh, I think he’s up.”

“Shit.”

“Hide the bike. Put it out on the patio.”

“It’s raining,” he whispers.

“Put it out on the patio.”

“It’s mostly wrapped, can’t I wheel it into the bathroom or something?”

“GODDAMNIT, Patrick.”

“Okay, okay, okay.”

“Joshua, honey is that you? ... honey did we wake you up?”

“MMMMmm.”

“Oh big boy. Was mommy making too much noise?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“I’m sorry. Stay there, Mommy’s coming over to give you a big hug.”

“Were you talking with Santa Claus?”

“No, baby. He’s still got other houses to visit before he gets to ours.”

“Mmm.”

“Baby, you need go get back in bed, okay? You want to make sure that you’re asleep when Santa comes. Okay?”

“Mmmhmm.”

“Okay, baby.”

“Mommy, were you talking with Eric?”

“Hey buddy,” Patrick says.

“Daddy?”

“Hey kiddo. I was just talking to your mom about you coming with me to Granny’s house the day after Christmas. You want to do that?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, buddy. Want me to tuck you in?”

“Mmm, yeah.”

“Okay.”

“Is he sleeping?”

“On his way,” he says

“I’m sorry.”

“Hey, That’s cool. I uh... the rain... Josh’s bike is still out there. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Do me favor?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you wrap it up for him. The whole thing”

“Sure.”

“Really take it to town.”

“Pat, listen ...”

“The bow on the handlebars just kills all of the excitement.” “Pat ...”

“He’s a boy. Boys need to tear stuff up, find out what’s inside.”

SUNDAYS ON THE TENNESSEE

Nothing good comes out of this river. Heavy steel killed this bend in the Tennessee. My father pours two bags of ice into the fish hold in the middle of the boat. He sinks a case of Coors Light into the ice, two cans at a time. We don't keep the fish; my father throws his catch back. It's just time in a boat, floating, pulling fish from the river next to the sagging frames of steel mills where the clouds of metal dust and slag flushed, for years, down worn, red banks and into the water. My father worked these mills, when their furnaces burned strong and bright orange throughout the night, when the glow of man-made lava poured from giant ladles and filled molds for railroad tracks. My father and I brought home fish from the river then. When we fished close to the locks, and my father told me "they pulled the stopper" when the water lowered for barges moving up river, when my father's arms were rigid with muscle, when he first took me out in the boat and taught me to hook bait and cast close to the shore, I lost five crickets off the curve of my hook in as many minutes. My father tossed me into the current. "If you can't learn to hook a cricket, this is the closest you'll come to catching fish."

My father digs into the ice and pulls two cans out. The cans drip sweat in this heat. The *ssshhh-thwack* slices the air behind me as he flips both tabs. He presses a cold can against the back of my arm; I jump, sending the boat rocking. "You're going to scare the goddamn fish," he says. He takes a drink. I keep my hat pulled low. The bandana filled with ice chips and tied around my neck steadily drips down my back. It will be dry soon. I won't fill it with ice again. My father will be watching. He is unyielding in this kind of heat. "Must have caught the worst of

his mother,” I once heard him say to Roy Hapburn as they drank beers on the back porch and cleaned fish they’d caught in Alabama.

It’s just a game. I watch my bobber. The white top rests on the surface of the water. The bobber dips and jumps to the surface. The tip of my rod bends to the water. I pray that my hook has caught a stopper on the bottom of this rusted river. My bobber is dragged under the surface, and as I fight with the reel my father springs to his feet. The weight of his steps pitches the boat side to side. Water slops against the aluminum hull. I feel his shadow cool the back of my neck. I imagine his arms around me, his hands on mine, his breath heavy with excitement. One strong tug, we could pull the stopper free from this riverbed.

DISTANCE

Susan Fletcher yells, “Jimmy Daghall just showed me his cock.” It’s the kind of moment where the smile on her face betrays the serious tone she is trying to keep. “He was beating off behind the bleachers.” She is elated. Then she calls him a faggot and throws the carton of milk she’s holding against one of the vending machines. The milk erupts from the carton and runs down the front of the machine.

Mr. Horton calls out Susan, “Miss Fletcher. That is quite enough.” He points her in the direction of the main hall, where the offices are, where you go when you’ve called someone a faggot and used the word cock within ten seconds of each other.

Susie Fletcher exits. People stand. They clap for her. Some hoot and cat call.

Mr. Horton pounds a white-knuckled fist against the table he is closest to. “Enough. Enough!” he shouts.

Jimmy Daghall feels the slickness of the polished concrete floor slip under the movements of his socked feet. In two breaths he is on the outside of the double doors that open from the back of the cafeteria and pour out into a courtyard with empty picnic tables and the parking lot beyond.

Saturday morning Jimmy Daghall sits on the shell of an off-white washing machine. It’s early, too early for shooting. Fifty yards away the earth rises to a mound of trash that’s been covered in tons of soil, shaped by a bulldozer and seeded with grass to look like a hill. With the sun slow and bending over the horizon, the shapes of bottles and soup cans waiting on the top of

the heap where he's placed them stand out, silhouetted. The smell of the landfill is subdued by the chill of the morning. In the heat of the summer, the rankness of the place can pull the hunger from his stomach from a half-mile up the road. Jimmy takes a bite of his peanut butter sandwich. He pours coffee from a thermos into its lid. On the first drink he coughs and spits the coffee out. He picks grounds off of his tongue and spits again onto the dirt between his dangling legs and feet. His shoes and socks are wet from the walk over through the grass. It's too cold for shorts. He wishes he'd worn pants. A box of .22 shells rests by his right hip. The bullets wiggle in the plastic case when he leans to his side and pours the rest of the coffee out. Steam rides with the coffee as it moves into the cracks of dried earth. A rooster scratches at the ground, pecks at something and cocks his feathered-head to eye the horizon. Jimmy waits for the light. It's the calm after the shot that Jimmy likes the most. After the air has been cracked by the speed of the bullet. It's the knowing that even the air can be torn.

Susan Fletcher eats quartered orange slices and waits for her mother to finish making her an omelet. The television on the kitchen counter jabbars through the stories on a morning news show while her mother fries up bacon and chopped onions that crackle in a greased pan. Susan drinks her coffee black because the pussy bitches at school only talk vanilla frap this and caramel mach that. The juice from the orange wedge stings where she has chewed her nails back to the pink. The yellow suspension slip stays tucked away in her backpack. She'll forge her mother's name again and hide out at the mall for three days. It's nothing new for her. If she had enough money saved up, she'd visit her dad in Ohio.

He calls every couple of weeks to ask how she is, how are classes, any boyfriends he should know about, that kind of thing. He always says he misses her. He tells her to come visit when summer break rolls around; says she's got two new stepsisters that want to meet her. Says he'll work it out with her mother later, maybe even get Susan up for a visit this Christmas. Then, "I love you, kiddo." Then the phone is just an object in her hand, and she's back to this place and her mother.

Her mother was up early again this morning. Neither of them, Susan nor her mother, sleep well in this apartment. The walls are thin. The neighbors above them fuck half the night away on average four times a week. Friday night is a big night for the upstairs couple. Susan lies awake then. She listens to the distant sound of the stereo and the bed frame creaking in metallic rhythm. She tries to figure out what songs are playing on the radio. It's something they can fuck to, whatever it is, she figures. She's never had sex while music was playing, never had sex long enough to make it through more than a song or two, at best.

On mornings like today, her mother wakes up early and walks light-footed down the hallway and is quiet in closing the door to the bathroom. Susie hears the shower start. Then she rolls over to face the window and holds the pillow against her ear. She can still hear traces of her mother's heavy breathing, the unintended moans, and sometimes the crying. She hates the sounds in this apartment. The fucking, the coffeemaker, the television, the phone in the kitchen that rings so loud, the muffled radio upstairs, the thunder of semi's exiting the Interstate to stop at Stacey's Quick Pit, and then roaring back up the long entrance ramp, off to anywhere.

Ed Horton is on the school track by eight-thirty every Saturday morning of the year. Today he doesn't feel like running. Most Saturdays he doesn't feel like running. He takes a warm up lap at a slow pace to get his legs get warmed-up. He drops and blows out fifty push-ups, then is up and jogs another lap while his heart rate calms down. It's cold for mid-November. The live oaks drop their acorns like rain in the delicate morning breeze. He bends from the hips and grabs the front of his running shoes. His hamstrings are tight. His calf muscles feel strained. If he doesn't run, this last week will swallow him. So he runs every Saturday. And every Saturday at ten-thirty he meets his ex-wife and daughter at the Vista Park Diner, and he sits across the table from Diane and his daughter, Lucinda, and for an hour is allowed to see the both of them. So on Saturday mornings he runs until his throat is dry and the air he sucks in stings his lungs. He runs until his knees tremble and his thighs spasm, until new blisters fill with blood and clear fluid under the calluses on the balls of his feet, until his face is powdered with the salt that sticks to the skin after the sweat has evaporated.

Jimmy Daghall shoulders the rifle and pulls the trigger. The last bottle on the mound twirls on end and falls clumsily to the ground. He lowers the rifle and looks at the gun like it's broken. Every bottle or can has lifted from that mound of earth with every bullet that's spun though the barrel after the firing pin punched it. He checks his watch. Ten-thirty. He's tired.

Thinking about Susan Fletcher, and what she did, and what's going to happen if he goes to school on Monday, had him in and out of a restless sleep. Mostly, he watched the ceiling, thought of visiting his mother.

He should go to the hospital today. He should tell his mother what happened: tell her that he'd love to go back into that cafeteria and lay waste to everyone, but that he wouldn't do that, not in a million years, but that doesn't keep him from thinking about it. It's been some time since he saw her, maybe a month, maybe two. It's hard to see her there, resting, recovering, maybe dreaming, but never waking up. And the quiet of the room, it's not like being alone at home, or outside in the morning, before the rooster crows. The quiet there makes Jimmy feel like every word he says to her can be heard throughout the hospital. It's a different silence there. Cold and lonely.

He brought a radio the last time he visited, back in September. Had it plugged in, resting on the table beside the bed, and tuned to a light rock station for an hour before a nurse appeared and told him that hospital policy prohibited radios or televisions in these rooms

“The radio is for when I'm not here,” Jimmy said.

“I'm sorry. It's hospital policy.”

“She's been here for three years. What's a radio going to hurt? You don't even know if she'll ever wake up, what's some music going to do to her?”

“It's the rules, honey. I'm just letting you know. You can leave it here, for all I care, but don't expect it to be here the next time you come by.”

On his way out, Jimmy paused at the nurses station and the radio falls into a garbage can full of emptied coffee cups and wads of paper towels. He never told his father or his brother about that trip.

Jimmy, his brother, Carl and his father don't talk about the wife and mother who lives on the fifth floor of this hospital, a machine pulling her breaths out and pushing new ones in, bruises

on her body where the blood settles, her toes cold, her eyes closed behind lashes, so long and black that she looks like a doll waiting to be picked up and held by a child. At home they are just three men. Three men, three beds, two and a half baths, original shag carpet in both living and dining rooms, two and a half acres of “fun for the kids” yard, and a kitchen with a breakfast nook and table set for four.

The sounds of the morning swell in the landfill. The rooster struts and scratches the ground, back now, since the loud pops from the gun have stopped. Jimmy listens to the gulls that cry in the air as they hover, then swoop down and return to the air with rotting vegetation hanging from their beaks. Two hawks circle high in the thermals and watch for tiny movements of tiny brown mice, or the more obvious shifting of the larger gray rats that keep the uncovered trash looking like it is in perpetual motion.

Susan Fletcher told him she’d lost her watch when it fell through the slats in the bleachers, and asked if he’d go under and find it for her before Mr. Horton cleared out the locker rooms and the gym for lunch. While Jimmy was bent over turning over potato chip bags, empty soda cans, wrinkled homework assignments on loose-leaf notebook paper, digging through cobwebs to find her lost watch, she snuck in behind him grabbed his balls with one hand and rubbed her other hand up and down the front seam of his sweats.

Jimmy smacked his head on one of the lower bleacher boards. Susan Fletcher had her hand down the front of his pants and found him, and worked him hard. “Susan, stop that shit,” he’d said. The door to gymnasium opened. Mr. Horton called out. “Last call for lunch. Let’s go, people. Clear out, clear out.” Locker doors shut in the distance and Jimmy could hear the shuffle of sneakers squeaking across the basketball court. Susan worked him in her hand behind the

elastic band of his boxers. He held his mouth shut and breathed in through his nose. A couple of students lingered. Mr. Horton was calling for them to hurry up. Susan worked him faster. Her hand was soft and warm, slick with her spit. She stroked him and hugged her body into his from behind, her tits pressing against his back, her hand tugging harder, and running her other hand into the thick curls on the back of his head, grabbing a fist full of his mouse brown hair and pulling his head back. And then he felt it building, and thought: *I'm going to come. I'm going to come behind the bleachers. Jesus Christ, I'm coming. I'm coming. I'm coming.*

Jimmy stares down that last bottle as he slides his rifle into the smooth, brown leather bag. It lies on its side on the berm and teeters there. His fingers burn at the tips and his legs shiver from the cold. The temperature has dropped since he set out.

Diane and Lucinda are already seated in a booth back by the swinging doors that lead to the restrooms. The diner is crowded. Ed Horton recognizes several faces as he walks the length of the room. All of the Saturday morning regulars are here, some with their newspapers and coffee refills, others in for “the usual” and then off to start their days. Diane pours sugar into her coffee cup then dips a spoon in and stirs. She taps the spoon twice on the lip of the cup, slides it between her lips and places it back on her napkin. They’ve been meeting here, like this, for the better part of a year.

Lucinda is fourteen months old. She grabs the sippy cup with the tiger and the red balloons on it and raps it against the table. She stops and stretches her fingers wide. She moves her left hand to her face and finds her cheek and nose with delicate fingers that pat the skin and then disappear into her mouth.

“Good morning, lovely girl,” Ed says, and leans in, kissing Lucinda’s cheek. “You just keep getting bigger, huh?” Lucinda pulls her hand from her mouth and rushes to touch her father’s face. The spit on her fingers is warm against his cold chin.

He takes a seat opposite them. “Good morning, Dee,” he says, and pulls out a menu.

“Ed,” Diane says.

He busies his hands with his napkin roll and then runs his fingers through his daughter’s hair. Lucinda takes her hand out of her mouth and slaps it against the table. Flecks of spittle sprinkle the paper mat under her hand.

“I think I did a number on my feet. It’s blister city down there.” He closes the menu.

“How many guilt miles are you up to now?”

“I just go until I have to stop, Dee.”

“Well, maybe you should stop sooner.”

“Maybe so,” Ed says. He catches the eye of the waitress with the short brown hair and points to the cup of coffee in front of Diane.

“I’m just saying,” Diane says. She looks out into the diner and scans the room as if she is waiting for someone.

“It’s my way of dealing with everything. We’ve had this talk before.”

The waitress brings Ed a cup of coffee, and pencils their orders in a little book that she tucks into her apron. She smiles at Lucinda and says, “Oh what a doll, just gorgeous.” She turns and walks back to the kitchen.

Ed takes a sip of coffee. He adds a little creamer. A tan cloud mushrooms up from the bottom of the cup.

“A little sugar’s not going to make you a bad person, Ed,” Diane says.

“Thanks, that’s so very insightful.”

Diane leans in over her coffee. “Don’t be a dick, Ed.”

Ed feels his jaw tense. He’d like to send her reeling. He’d like to bash her once, right in the jaw. “Of course, I’m being the dick. Of course.”

Diane let’s out an exhaustive sigh. Lucinda punctuates a gurgled string of sounds with a high shriek.

“Yes, ma’am,” Ed says. He reaches across the table and holds her hand with two of his fingers. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Susan Fletcher rolls a sticky ball of hash the size of a pea between her thumb and forefinger. There was a time when she freebased the hash from the blade of a red-hot knife in the kitchen of their old house. She kept hiding the knives that she would use because the metal would scorch and couldn’t be cleaned. And being high, she kept forgetting where she hid the knives. Her mother found one in the garage. Burned blue and black from heating it on the eye of the stove. Susie looked at the knife. Her tongue crept from behind her teeth and licked the burn on her top lip. She watched the pulse in her mother’s neck flutter and kick. Susan laughed. She laughed and held her hands up to her mouth. “That’s the knife Dad was using when he just about fried himself trying to dig a piece a burnt toast out of the toaster,” she focused her eyes on the wrinkles of her mother’s eyelids. “Don’t you remember that? Oh my God. That’s so funny. Where did you find it?” Before her mother could answer, Susie had turned away and moved into the kitchen, still talking and laughing about the knife and the toaster. She threw away the three

knives she found tucked in shoeboxes and stuffed under her bed when they moved to this apartment.

Susan takes a pair of tweezers out of her purse and pulls fine-cut flakes of tobacco from the tip of the cigarette, leaving the paper intact. She rolls the little hash pea to the edge of her fingertips and lets it drop into the empty space at the end of the cigarette. She twists the loose cigarette paper tight against the hash. The tip burns for a couple of minutes before it even catches the tobacco. The hash ball glows like a comet at the end of the cigarette. After two big drags she can feel her mouth drying out.

She walks across the room to the kitchen and pulls three different colors of Flav-R-Ice out of a multi-colored box in the freezer. The blue flavor is her favorite. There are scissors on the coffee table where her little block of hash sits on a piece of aluminum foil. She sets the green flavor and the red flavor on the coffee table. She cuts open the top of the blue one. Her eyes close while she takes a long pull from the cigarette. The oil in the hash sizzles. Smoke floods her mouth. She takes it deep and holds it there. The fuzzies start behind her ears and rush to her cheeks. She lets the smoke leave slow. She takes a bite of blue.

Blue is a miracle. It's tart and sends her mouth tingling so that she clenches her teeth. Then it is sweet and makes her think of what violets might taste like. Susie rests the cigarette in the ashtray. The smoke from the tip runs a thin line towards the ceiling. She thinks of the four times she has slept with Ed Horton: the dirty clothes scattered about the bedroom in his cold apartment, the thought that he would be a wonderful lover, teaching her so much with his tender touch, but how his hands move clumsy and fast, pinching, grabbing tugging, pulling her against

him, his movements callous and quick and just like everyone else she's ever had. Fucking like a boy.

She sprays pine-scented air freshener towards the ceiling. There is enough hash left in her little block to fix up three more cigarettes.

She takes another bite of blue and feels the flavor wash over her tongue. She thinks about Jimmy: working him behind the drawstrings of his sweatpants, feeling him fill out under the tight squeeze of her hand, Ed Horton standing there, not twenty feet away, clueless and ushering people to lunch, then Jimmy's hushed breathing, wiping tears from his eyes, his thighs trembling, fumbling to fend her hands away, the dark spot up by the waistband of his gray boxers, stumbling out of his shoes and leaving her behind, the door to the gymnasium booming closed, the dust under the bleachers stinging her eyes, her hand wet with him. Waiting.

Ed Horton showers for the second time today. The first time was to wash off the run. This time it's because he only masturbates in the shower. His chest and stomach are red where the water beats against him. The thermostat in his apartment is set to 67. His ass is cold. He grabs his rear and squeezes a cheek with his free hand when he comes, thinking of Susan's chipped red nail polish, the smell of the dust under the bleachers where he found her after she'd just given some greasy-haired freshman a hand job, thinking of how she unbuckled his pants and had him out and into her, holding him deep, her breath coming and going with his, waiting until he kissed her, then pushing off of him and running off to lunch, catching him up in some kind of game, leaving him aching and fighting to get his pants zipped up. Chasing after her.

Jimmy Daghall finds his brother Carl awake and eating cereal at the kitchen table. He slurps a spoonful of chocolate krispies into his mouth. The milk in the bowl is a gray shade of brown. There's more milk on the table top than in the bowl. Carl's hair twists away from his head in a nest of curls above his right ear. His face is slack, his mouth agape. He's high. Probably glue, there's no paint caked around his mouth and nose. Jimmy hangs his gun up in the closet by the front door and walks over to the table.

"What are you doing up?" Jimmy asks.

His brother has been getting high every night for a week, maybe longer, glue, paint, gasoline, whatever he can huff. Jimmy doesn't like being around his brother when he's high like this. He's an unpredictable mess: might want to hug and cry and tell Jimmy how much he loves him, or he might come after Jimmy with a chair, the garbage can, a spoon, whatever is closest.

Carl laughs behind a spoonful of cereal. Some of the krispies fall from the spoon and stick where they land. At the sight of this, Carl blows hard on the spoon and sprays milk and krispies across the table.

"Goddamn it, Carl," Jimmy says. He jumps back and wipes at the cereal on the front of his sweatshirt.

"HA."

"Don't be an asshole, man," Jimmy says, and tries to read his brother's wet eyes.

"HA," Carl scoops another spoonful of krispies and milk from his bowl.

Jimmy opens his hand to shield his face, "Carl, don't."

"Carldon't," his brother says, and blows the cereal from the spoon.

Jimmy lands a solid left to Carl's jaw. It's a fast punch, and it sends Carl crumbling to the floor. Everything that moves around Jimmy is fast, the punch, his heartbeat, the high pitch shrieks from Carl that tear the air in the room. Jimmy takes it all in: the sound of his fist, like punching a side of beef, but felt like hitting a wad of play dough, not like hitting your brother. The chair Carl was sitting in, how it barked across the linoleum floor, less than a second, before Carl spilled out of it. Much quicker than what Jimmy had thought. He can't feel the pain in his fist yet, but knows it will be there soon, because his hand feels different, heavy. Carl holds his face. His lip is split.

"Goddamn it," Jimmy says. Deep in his stomach he feels a knot. A chill moves into his chest and his throat tightens. A muscle cramps under his left shoulder blade.

He pulls a tray of ice from the freezer and dumps three pieces into a hand towel that was already laid out on the countertop. His stomach contracts and pushes acid up on the back of his tongue. The towel the ice is wrapped in is soured and perfumed with mildew. "Goddamn it," he says, and looks at his whimpering brother. Jimmy tosses the ice and the towel into the sink, runs the water from the faucet until it gets hot and washes his hands. "This is so fucked," he says.

Susan Fletcher is concentrating on a dead cigarette with a long ash that burned down to the filter. The ash is flat gray. Down the length of it she can still see the pinstripes and the seam of the original paper. It's almost like a fossil. Her feet are cold. Looking at the chipped nail polish on her toenails, she wonders where she put her socks. She thinks it's too cold for the windows in the living room to be open. She thinks the radio is too loud. The phone in the kitchen rings. It's too cold to walk across the room. She wedges her feet between cushions on the couch.

She lights a cigarette and takes a drag. The tobacco crackles. The phone rings. She pulls a blanket over her head. The radio is too loud. The phone in the kitchen rings. The phone in the kitchen rings. It's too cold to walk across the room. The sweet blue on her tongue has been rinsed off with red and green, purple, orange, and red and green. The phone rings. The radio is too loud. Her stomach hurts. She's too sick to smoke it away. The phone rings. She kicks a cushion off the couch. It's all too loud, too loud, too loud. She jerks a pillow from behind her head and fires it at the stereo receiver. The stereo is silent. The phone has stopped ringing. A beep signals the answering machine has picked up. The infrequent murmur of traffic on the interstate, three blocks away, drifts in through the window.

Ed Horton is on the streets. His breathing is rushed. He sucks water from a small bottle that he caps closed with his teeth and sticks into an elastic pouch that hugs his hip. The skin under this morning's blisters burns with every step. The bottoms of his socks feel cold. His toes are too wet to be sweating. The blisters from the run earlier today have ruptured. His knees ache with every strike of his heel into the brick roads of his neighborhood. He thinks about calling Susan Fletcher's house earlier today, how he could get fired if anyone found out, how he can't lose control. A click track rolls through his thoughts: he's a man in control, a man in control, a man in control. The music in his headphones plays at one hundred and forty beats per minute. His heart races ahead of the music. He thunders towards the horizon.

Jimmy Daghall walks through the hospital cafeteria to the counter with the coffee pots. A nurse with a small diamond embedded in her left front tooth waves to Jimmy. He hopes that she has somewhere to be, that her squeaking shoes will carry her away from him, but they don't.

"Jimmy," she says, "boy, you better give me a hug." She leans in and holds him tight against her and then releases him, letting her hand rest on his right shoulder. "Look at you. When was the last time you got some sleep?" She laughs loud.

He can't remember her name. She pats his shoulder.

"You coming in for a visit?"

"I need to catch her up on what's been going on."

"Sweet boy," she says. "She's looking good, honey," she pauses, smiles, "Well, I won't keep you. You know how I get to talking, lord, we'll be here all night."

"I've got a few minutes," Jimmy says.

"Sweet, sweet boy. I got a full clipboard of people I got to check on," she says. She pats his shoulder. "Go see your mother."

Jimmy watches her walk down the hall. His stomach feels like it did earlier, after he punched his brother. He fills a tall styrofoam cup with coffee and adds two sugars. He tips the container marked "half and half." It's empty. He takes a drink. On his way down the hall he drops the full cup into a trashcan, close to the elevators.

Susan Fletcher's mother will be home soon. There is so much to do on the list of chores she left her: the vacuuming, dusting, loading the dishwasher, getting the towels in the hamper washed. She looks around the apartment. The eight-by-ten photo of Susan and her mom is

mounted in a cheap frame on top of a stereo speaker in the corner. Two ferns hang from baskets, held by thin gold chains anchored into the ceiling. Her feet are cold. She closes the window and the sound of the interstate falls quiet behind it. She laces her shoes and grabs her wallet. She takes a pair of panties and an extra pair of socks from her dresser and puts them into the front pockets of her jacket. Susan closes the front door behind her. The crust in the far corners of her eyelids clings to her lashes. Once outside, the low temperature makes her eyes water and tickles the back of her throat. She coughs. She lights a cigarette and walks off towards Stacey's Quick Pit. The trucks roll in and out, all night long. Somebody is bound to be headed to Ohio.

Jimmy Daghall sees the yellow gerbera daisies his father sends to their mother every Thursday are on the windowsill. The rooms for coma patients are painted a calm sky blue. A thick sheer hangs in front of the window and lets the room fill with soft light during the day and keeps the complete pitch of night from coming into the room. There are no harsh fluorescents on this floor. Jimmy has figured out that it's to make people like himself not worry so much about people like his mother, who are non-responsive and live in pleasant rooms where the whirling sounds of ventilators breathing for them and the heartbeat bleeps on the small white monitors resting on end tables like answering machines, and the wash of warm light lends color to their skin to help disguise the reason they are here.

He stands a few feet inside the door. It's been a month since he last made his way to her room. She looks healthy from here. Any unknowing person walking down the hall and casually peering in would probably mistake this for a recovery room, perhaps for new mothers who had just given birth. From across the room, she looks like she is having a restful sleep.

It's not until he touches her hand that he feels how lost she really is. Somewhere in her brain she is trying to reconnect damaged circuits, she is asking her limbs to move again. She is begging her vocal chords to vibrate and push words from her mouth. She is lost in the dark and can't find her way out. This is what he feels when he takes her motionless hand in his. When his thumb rubs heat into her knuckles and the sweat on his palm turns cool against hers. He feels light-headed. His heart pumps hard and fast in his chest, and he can hear it churn deep inside his ears. The beeps on the bedside monitor stay slow and steady.

"Hey, momma. Don't get mad at me, okay?" He leans in so that his mouth is close to her ear. "I wanted to tell you something, something that happened to me," Jimmy buries his hands in the front pocket of his hooded sweatshirt. He looks down and sees that he has tracked dirt across the polished floor in this bright room. He thinks of the new shoes he left under the bleachers, and Carl sleeping at home, probably not even aware of what happened earlier in the kitchen.

"I don't know what I wanted to say, momma ... It's tough not having you around."

He takes a small silver radio out of the front pocket of his sweatshirt and turn it down low. The melody of an acoustic guitar and the voice of a broken singer become muffled as he places the little radio behind his mother's pillow.

TIGHTROPE WALKER

Talia walks a tightrope in her living room. Twenty feet. End to end, fifteen inches from the floor. Pulled tight through eyebolts anchored into the studs in the wall. The plaster on the walls is chipped and off-white where the weight of the rope pulls at the bolts as she moves, one foot in front of the other, head up, eyes forward, step by step, crossing the length of the room. The long sofa and the walnut coffee table and the taut rope are the only things left in the place. She moved the television out, a terrible distraction. She fell thirty-eight times before she removed it and stowed it away in the bottom of the hall closet, leaving it there because she found it far too heavy for her to carry down the flights of stairs and place it on the curb. Along with the television she found it necessary to part with the stereo. She could no longer focus with sound in the place. And the place echoed with the sounds of Gershwin and Glenn Miller, hissing from the needle, their big band sound bending through every doorway and reverberating from wall to wall in the empty rooms. The music brought to mind the days when she danced, a younger woman then, before her knees and hips were bruised from the rope, and dancing still, while she carried So Sweet and Ezekiel, the twins blooming in her lean body, and how she whispered to them of the times before their father and what she remembered of happiness: stories of ballrooms and society parties, of gentlemen who visited her apartment, and vanilla ice cream in sugar cones, of white gloves and parasols on Sunday walks through Prospect Park, and a handful of red tickets to ride the majestic carousel at Coney Island with the carved horses suspended in air, so beautiful with their gilded manes. She placed the stereo, with its record player and two speakers tethered by thin cords, on the curb in front of her building and stood for a long moment there, what had

happened to them all, the gentlemen who she required to waltz with her before their business was addressed. And she stood for a moment longer, waiting with the wind and watching cotton clouds drift in a gray sky boxed in by buildings and power lines.

In the early days of her training with the tightrope, Talia nailed a wool rug over the only window in the apartment, the window above the long couch. The rug dampened the noises that life pushed up from the street five stories below and kept her eyes focused on the rope and away from the worries outside her window. So she hammered a dozen nails through the rug and into the gleaming white frame of the window. Then she tossed the hammer away, letting it clatter its way down the trash chute, put off by its heaviness and its pounding motion, and the sound as it clumsily collided with the nails. The only light left, the light from a single bulb in a reading lamp that rested on the walnut coffee table, its metal neck craned back in an elegant curve to illuminate the room, was dim. And she fell from the rope. Again and again and again. Plum colored circles with yellow centers polka dotted the swollen skin around her hips, knees and ankles. Talia longed for the hammer. She yanked at the rug until the skin on her palms burned and her knuckles throbbed and the flexibility of her fingers grew stiff with cramping. The rug stayed fixed to the window frame.

The light remained outside. So she practiced walking the rope in the low light: her feet and the rolling spiral of grooves she felt on the twisting rope allowing her to find her balance and her calm. And she walked the rope in the low light and eventually closed her eyes and discovered that she could negotiate the rope in total darkness. The consideration of this: the need to walk the tightrope in darkness, just now becoming obvious to her. Her movements in the dark became familiar, her need for light diminishing.

She hired two men to take everything that belonged to the man who had come to stay with her, the father of the twins, and put it in the storage slot in the basement of the building. The superintendent of the building changed the locks so the man who had come to stay with her could no longer use his keys to enter her apartment. And he arrived home from work at five-thirty. Ten minutes later he endeared himself to the whole fifth floor of the building by spitting curses through grinding teeth, fists balled tight, then open handed slaps to the face of the door. And she leaned against the door on the inside and felt it flex and heard it give when he drove his shoulder into it. But the door, solid in its construction, held up. And the three bolt locks anchored into an oak beam held fast. Talia spoke through the door in the language they had been born of, and explained to him in words that she hoped the neighbors wouldn't understand. She spoke, and he listened. She heard the weight of him lean against the door and slide to the floor. She listened to him weep. Talia moved to her knees and repeated the words again and again. He moaned and cursed himself, and she kept her voice low, working the words into his head. Convincing him. Recounting his actions over and over, loud enough to push through his sobs, soft enough to destroy the fury he had brought with him into her apartment so many months before. And she listened as he crawled to the staircase and his heavy boots carried him away.

Her feet are familiar with the rope now. They are strong with muscle memory and calloused. The rope, pulled tight, no longer bites into her arches. She is long past the days of only training for five minutes on a slack rope. In the dim light she works the rope, spending hours a day crossing, standing, sometimes racing forward, her arms out to the sides, grounding her balance.

When the bulb in the reading lamp dies she replaces it with another bulb. Then the last bulb in the apartment dies, and she has no more light. No light to read by, or fix her meager dinners by, not light to see by in the room she's been hiding in for so long. It's the light she's been avoiding, the push from the outside that starts to heal her. She feels lethargic and knows now that she needs the sun, and that the noises from the street are the sounds of life. She looks to the window, to the rug, to the light and sound and wind that she would need to embrace in order to walk the tightrope the way she had intended.

It was never about staying here. So she steps onto the cushions of the long couch and enjoys how they squish down under her weight. The arm of the couch works as a step to lift her to the arched back, where the round brass tops of upholstery nails run a line that leads her to the middle of the window. Here she wedges her fingers around the top of the rug. Instead of fighting with the rug, yanking at it and feeling it rub against her skin, she allows her feet to slip from the top of couch and dangle, using the weight of her body to pull the rug free. One by one, she positions herself at the place where each nail is driven, crooked and bent into the wood frame of the window. One by one, the nails pull free and the light from the day comes back to the room. The shadows move out from dark corners and the room breathes again.

The sun pours in through the window and rides the dust diagonally from frame to floor. She fixes oatmeal on the stove and slices a pear into wedges that she arranges in a circle on a plate. It's been too long since she ate in this room with the light of the day warming her shoulders. Her body is ashen. Scabs dot her cuticles like flecks of black pepper. The wrinkles that she sees, the folds at her elbows, the lines on her hands, fall into a blue tint, like that of a

cadaver. How much time has she lost here, she wonders, behind this window, locked away, and for what. She calls the grocer who delivers to her door and places a rush order.

For lunch, Talia peels back the bright rind of an orange and savors the sweet slices. She eats three of them. She drags the couch into the middle of the room and spins it to face the window. There she sleeps under a light blanket and lets the sun and the sounds of the streets below carry her off into a long nap. At five o'clock Talia wakes refreshed and takes one trip across the rope on her way to the kitchen.

Talia waits for the wind to rattle the window against its frame. She needs one day of good rope walking in the wind. It's critical for her balance to be perfect. When she goes, there can be no turning back. In just two days she will let the rope guide her.

She thinks about the two children that she lost when the man lived with her. They would have turned five in two days. She would have baked two cakes. She thought the name So Sweet would be perfect for a girl. The boy: she settled on Ezekiel. The man disagreed and said the girl would be called Alice, and the boy Alexander. And had they come to term, and had the man stayed, the two children may have been known by different names, but to her, they are forever So Sweet and Ezekiel. She feels them with her when she walks the rope. Their tiny voices ride on the seams of the wallpaper and the light beneath the doors.

Today the wind is good to her. It blows hard through the open window and eases, then bursts into the room again, sending her dress flapping up around her knees. Her feet stay rigid and follow the length of the rope, from wall to wall, and back again, and back again. She keeps this up for three hours, until the wind tires and settles and then falls silent.

Through the night the refrigerator rattles. Newspapers blow along the sidewalks. Lights on cabs flicker messages that napping drivers are off duty. The subway cars rumble underground.

So Sweet and Ezekiel are with her. It's their presence she can feel. She's sure of it because it's just like when she is awake in the room and she can feel them there with her. Her hair is short again, like it was six years ago. Music swirls around her, pumped through speakers high on a pole, reminding her of being at a fairground. She carries three red tickets in her hand.

She wakes before the sun comes up. From the drawer in the kitchen, she takes a pair of hair cutting shears and cuts just above the knot of hair that hangs between her shoulders.

She cracks two eggs and whisks them in a bowl. A breakfast of two scrambled eggs, two pieces of wheat toast and a cup of black coffee should be just the thing to start her day with. Talia takes three bites of egg, eats one and a half pieces of toast and drinks just a few sips of coffee before she feels full. She unlocks the three deadbolts that have kept her safe from him for five years.

In the living room she lies on the long couch and takes deep breaths through her nose. Beneath the dust and the fabric she pictures thousands of grains of salt from the tears she'd wept, for days on end, when she lost So Sweet and Ezekiel. The stain, as dark as chocolate, is something she never cleaned up, kept to remind her of the man who had come to live with her, of the rage in his voice when he learned of the gentlemen who had come before him, and the power in his arms, the arms that sent her tumbling down eight stairs to the landing.

Talia looks through the open window and sees the rooftops of buildings and the bridges that feed the other boroughs. Feeling the wind against her face, rushing over her eyes and making them wet, she sees that it's a lovely day for a walk. The rope falls slack against the floor in the

room. She coils it like a snake in front of the couch and places it in a duffle bag. Her steps are direct. She stops at the curb where she once left a stereo. The sun is too welcoming to take the subway. With her arm held high she hails a cab. She settles in the backseat, calls out a cross street and the driver roars off.

It's still early morning when she steps out of the cab. She has forgotten how the salt in the air close to the surf smells sweet and clean. The seagulls cry as they float in wind currents and hover over the vendors frying up funnel cakes and hanging pretzels on cooking racks. The odor of roasting coffee beans from a shop across the street lingers for a moment then drifts on.

Talia drops the duffle bag between two parking meters on the sidewalk opposite the midway and the carousel. Within minutes the rope is strung up between the two parking meters. It's higher here, maybe three feet off the ground. She leans into the rope with her hip and gauges the tension. It's a taut run. She borrows a five-gallon bucket from a vendor so she can step up to the rope. People walk by and take notice with fleeting glances. Performers work this sidewalk every day. But she's not a performer, she reminds herself. A cop drinking coffee up the sidewalk leans against the fender of his cruiser. He keeps a watchful eye on her.

Talia places a foot on the rope. It holds tight. She steps fully onto the rope and holds her position and takes another step, and then another. She keeps her eyes forward, her head up. The wind picks up. It fills her dress and tickles the skin on her belly.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to come down off this rope," the cop says.

"If you'll just give me a few minutes," she says.

"Please, ma'am. Please get off the rope."

“It’s for my children. It’s their birthday.” The wind stirs. Talia keeps her head up, and her eyes forward.

“I’m not seeing any children,” the cop says.

“They’re riding the carousel,” she says. “I’ll only be a minute more.”

“Fine, do whatever. I’m back this way in five minutes. Got it?”

She smiles. So Sweet and Ezekiel shriek and laugh, the way children do when they ride horses suspended in air. The sky stretches far and blue, free of buildings and power lines, free of even the smallest cloud.

ALBUQUERQUE BALLOON FIESTA

It's not that I ever really had a lot against Ed Jensen. I haven't thought about it in a couple of days. I mean, Jesus, the man watched his wife fall from a hot air balloon while they were in Albuquerque at the balloon fiesta two weeks ago. Of course, it should be explained that she was my wife first. We had a twelve-year track record, me and her. But I stopped thinking of her as my wife when she took off with our Corgis while I was in Dallas on a day trip, looking at a couple of wells that weren't producing what they should have been. She grabbed 'em all. Six of those little bastards make one hell of a racket. It's something you really notice right away when it isn't around.

And I knew she'd gone off and done it the minute I pulled up in the driveway. Those little yippers would stir up a barking fury when my truck pulled into the driveway. They could hear that diesel engine coming a block away. Bunch of barking floor polishers, they are. So it's hard for me to hold much against Ed. It's not like he was key in all of this, besides the infidelity part. He's more of a bystander.

I mean, there's what happened before the fall, him and her, stealing away, and of course that pissed me off, those two setting up house together, goddamn right it made me mad, of course. Nobody likes another dog to come sniffing around during mealtime. And I know that sounds insensitive, but it's just the way we were made. It's the animal in us. Makes us get our backs up about everything. We're no different than a herd of Corgis. Eat, shit and sex it up every once in a while. Herd is probably not the right word to use, but you get the idea. We've all got territory and we don't like it when someone else eats out of our bowl.

Now, Linda left of her own accord. She wasn't property, or territory, or a meal, that's not what I meant at all. But she did sneak back in the house and steal the dogs while I was away on business. And that's bullshit.

The firm breasts she got for her forty-second birthday, now that's something else too. I paid for those ladies. Got to take a good look at them a couple of times before they settled in. New breasts require a break-in period, now that's what the doctor told us when Linda came out of the surgery. Said they—he was referring to the breasts—would shape up and look perfectly natural. That's the word the doctor used. Natural. I still don't really know how I feel about those things. Her natural ones had been working just fine by me. And that's a twelve-year track record. That's pretty good by today's standards. Can't say I was thrilled with the sight of her new titties when the bandages first came off; there they were, high up on her chest and looking stiff, like they'd been pulled right off some department store mannequin. But it was something she'd wanted, and so she got 'em. And I guess I should have figured that she wasn't going to run around hiding behind a sweater. Lord no, soon as those boobs fell into place, she got it in her head that she wanted to get some risqué pictures taken. She said it would be a nice reminder for me of what I was missing while I was off on business. For the record, I don't think she meant that maliciously.

Now, Ed Jensen just happened to be the photographer working on the day Linda walked her new self in to one of those glamour studios in the mall to get some pictures made. If it had been a woman working that day, I might still be married. Linda wouldn't have had that accident, and we'd both be in the living room watching *Entertainment Tonight* with the Corgi collective laid out on the couch with us, bellies waiting to be rubbed, maybe a little rubbing between me

and Linda—not with the dogs in the room, later, behind closed doors. But that was how it worked out. Ed Jensen was there. And I don't know that Ed was particularly hell bent on pursuing Linda on that first visit. Probably got a good look at the spray-tanned cleavage she was pushing up through that white v-neck T-shirt of hers that she was never too keen on wearing before she jumped up two-cup sizes. But he did get to know her.

Now, I'll have to say that the first set of pictures came out looking real nice, sexy looks over her bare shoulder, glossy lips, a load of sky blue eyeshadow. But she kept chewing over the idea that some of the photos were too dark, or angles made her neck look thick, stuff I didn't really notice at all. I told her... and see, that's where the trouble begins. That's the big thing, I told her, capital M-E told her. I said that she should go back and get them done up right, just the way she wanted them done. Even told her not to leave or pay for any more photos until she was satisfied. And I guess she got satisfied. I didn't see but one of the photos from the other two sessions. Looked just like the ones she had brought home from the first time, maybe featuring a hint more cleavage.

Ed Jensen should thank me for those breasts though. Natural or not, he was reaping the benefits of my hard work. I'm sure he got more out of them than I did. And that sounds like I'm mad, but I'm not. I feel horrible for Ed. Hell, we never once spoke to one another. He'd been a lonely man looking through a camera lens when he saw Linda. And Linda must have been a little less than satisfied with what was going on under our own roof. She cut out pretty soon after.

I called her and begged for those dogs back. She wouldn't even leave Pepper Man and Ronnie James with me, and I'd had those two boys for a year before Linda and I married. She said it would be cruel to break up their family. Ain't that some shit.

On the fairgrounds, thousands of folks meandered around, drinking coffee and waiting for the sun to come up. The long hissing blasts of fire from the burners kicked color into the flaccid balloon skins. Their colors lit up and the trapped heat filled the balloons, raising them towards the sky. It's a beautiful thing. Linda and I used to go every year and take a ride. We'd always go up with a friend of ours, Javier. Linda introduced me to him the first time she took me up to Albuquerque for a balloon trip. There was something between the two of them, I always felt. Probably something going on with them before me and her got together. Linda's got a way of looking at people that could give someone the wrong idea. But we hit it off, me and Javier. I send business up to him all the time. The wind currents in Albuquerque keep the balloon business flying three hundred days a year. That's a lot of money if you've got the right kind of clients. And I send Javier the right kind of client. The rich kind. It's like being the one who gives the dogs their treats when they've done a trick right, or pooped quick during a rainstorm. It breeds loyalty, favoritism. Yes sir, Javier's a good ol' boy, knows what's what.

Ed was staked out in a lawn chair huggin' a cold Corona in his hand. Linda was downing a beer and chatting it up with Javier. The heels of her red stilettos were sinking into the grassy lawn. She would cuss and reach down to pry the heels out of the ground. Ed and Javier were there, just laughing with her, having a real good time. Ed wouldn't go up with her. Afraid of heights is what I understand. Now, I never met the man personally. It's just something I heard in passing. Beautiful skies that day too. Blue stretched out to the curve of the earth. Good temperature. Good weather for drinking a few beers, for getting a little drunk and hopping in a balloon. Balloon goes up, Linda comes down.

Javier, his assistant, Todd, and Linda piled into the open basket. Course Ed was on the ground snapping away with his camera, taking pictures of everything, waving a Corona back and forth high above his head, a slice of bright green lime caught half way in the neck of the bottle. We watched the whole thing happen.

If there'd been a stopwatch running, I would have bet that it was all over within, or maybe just under three seconds. I mean, that's gravity for you. But against that blue sky... Goddamn, it took forever. Her shoes came off her feet, two shiny red darts that spun loose and followed her to the ground. She flopped around like a ragdoll being tossed from an eight-story window. It was a clumsy thing, really. The sort of thing you don't expect. And I don't know exactly what I was expecting. Something with a little more flair, maybe like skydiving. And that sounds harsh, considering that she's dead, and not coming back, but the whole day had been coming together in such a beautiful way: the temperature couldn't have been more pleasing, the sky, what with its ever reaching blue, the spectacle of hundreds of hot air balloons filling out into enormous bulbs of color, those little red pumps spinning around her body like satellites. But there she was, smack in the middle of all that beauty, tearing through the air with the grace of a brick. I don't think she had the wherewithal to work up a scream. I think Ed was taking care of that part of the business. And I would have been screaming too, pulling out my hair, punching the earth, had she still been my wife.

The article in the *Albuquerque Journal* that ran the next day called it a tragic accident. That seems like the right way to put it. The fella that wrote the piece wrote long descriptions about the colors of the balloons, the magnificent sky, the vendors selling hot dogs and funnel cakes, and how this tragedy befell it all. In the article, Javier was quoted, describing the whole

thing: “That lady, I told her to take her shoes off for safety, but she wasn’t having that. Once we got up a little ways she kinda went nuts, man, shaking the basket and trying to pull the chain that operates the burner and sends the fire up into the balloon, leaning out over the edge of the basket. She was a mess. A little drunk, too, I think. We don’t fly with partiers. It’s just too dangerous. Although we did have one lady throw up in the basket last month, and that was nasty, but this lady, maybe she was stoned or drunk or something. I don’t know. It was a mess. I was trying to pilot the balloon. She popped my assistant a good one, right in the face. He was just trying to get her to chill, you know. Next thing you know, she’s overboard. It ain’t like being in a boat.” Javier can play it out real dumb when he needs too. The rest of the article was pretty much summary: Linda’s name, age, where she was from, a refusal from Ed to comment on the fact that several witnesses observed him passing her beers for about an hour before the balloon took flight, the history of ballooning in Albuquerque, how many people came out for this year’s balloon fiesta, statistics on ballooning deaths—which are relatively low, but not unheard of, roughly four to eight deaths per year.

Linda bounced once when she hit the lush green grass. It must have been awful for Ed Jensen, jumping up out of his seat the way he did, the bottle of Corona dropping from his hand, hitting the ground and sticking there like a gymnast sticking a landing off the rings. Man alive. Something awful. For a minute there we all go primal, like a pack of Corgis going after a steak. And for a minute Ed lost the edge that keeps us human. He found the side of him that reminds everybody watching that we’re really only one good step away from complete savagery. He hit himself in the head with balled fists, pulled at his hair and threw himself to the ground and writhed there, cursing everything from God to the wind, to the goddamned bright red heels Linda

was wearing. It was all very sincere. I believed every bit of it. Ed Jensen had a big love for my wife, I don't doubt that one bit.

Every man has a right to grieve, even Ed Jensen. And takes a little time. After all, his new wife and her breasts are gone. The glitter is gone. There is no magic left in the world for Ed Jensen. And I guess I'm a little more caught up in this than I thought. I don't mean to be. And I don't have a lot against the man. After all, he was just watching it all go by. He never said a harsh word to me. Sure he hooked up with my wife, and there's something I should deal with, maybe talk with a therapist about what I had done wrong in my relationship with Linda to have her leave so easily. The more I think on that, the more it makes sense. There was a reason she picked up and left. She must have felt some sort of anger toward me. I don't see why else she would have taken the dogs. Not in the way she did it. That was cruel. And the letter my lawyer drafted up that explains my rights to my dogs might be cruel too. Just keeping in consideration that Ed will be left all alone in whatever house they were sharing. But what's mine is mine. He's had two weeks to get his head about him. I'm thinking it's all gonna work out fine. Pepper Man, Ronnie James, Pebbles, Tina, Max and Steinbrenner should be tromping around my backyard before the end of the week. If there's a hassle, well, I know a damn fine balloon pilot in Albuquerque who knows just whose hand is feeding him.

NEBRASKA AND THE REST OF THE WORLD

Kermit the frog smiles, and words under his rounded puppet head say “It’s not easy being green.” This is the shirt that your grandmother and grandfather give you on your twelfth birthday. This is the kind of shirt your eight-year-old cousin would wear. It’s not cool. It’s a puppet for Christ’s sake. You’re at their farm in Nebraska for the summer, while your mother moves everything you’ve known of your first twelve years into a crummy apartment in Phoenix.

You wear the shirt the next day while you and your grandmother work in the kitchen, rolling out long ovals of sugar cookie dough on flour-dusted baking sheets. After the cookies are cut and put in the oven to bake, you go upstairs to your room and change your shirt, stuffing Kermit and his kid phrase into the zipper pocket on the outside of your suitcase. The shirt you put on is a plain white t-shirt with a hole in the left armpit. It’s your helper shirt, the one wear whenever you venture out to the barn to see your grandfather.

Your grandfather works on the engine of a red tractor. He rubs grease from his hands with a rag that he keeps slung over his shoulder, and pulls a warm cookie from the plate you’ve taken out to the barn. It’s a bribe. And he knows it. He gives you a look for a moment, his eyes pinching to slits; he hacks and snorts, then spits into the shadows. The whole cookie disappears into his wide mouth full of yellow teeth. He washes it down with a short drink from a bottle of Dr. Pepper. He takes another look at you and motions with his finger to the plate, signaling that he wants another. He asks how old you’ve just turned. You answer loud, not because he can’t hear, but because you are excited. He lights a cigarette and steps back from the tractor. And because you are old enough, and because you’ve bribed him with fresh cookies, he lets you

tighten bolts with a socket wrench while he stands over your shoulder and talks you through it, between long drags from his cigarette. The smoke is sweet, and you watch how he holds the cigarette, and how he puts it to his mouth. When you've done all the bolt tightening he can find for you to do, he tells you to go and play until you hear the dinner bell ring. Don't go too damn far, he says, or you'll not hear the bell and we'll find you dead in some dried up creek bed, starved to nothing. He winks at you; tells you to get.

This is the summer that you wander through the growing rows of corn, green with the season, and you discover a spot in the middle of the field, a small clearing that encircles a half-unearthed stump with gnarled roots. You smoke your first cigarette here, one you took from your grandfather's pack. You hold it that way he did, deep between your fingers, right up next to the hand. You put the cigarette to your mouth and stare serious, like your grandfather does. After you have coughed a few dozen times, and the nausea sets in, you wash the taste of smoke and nicotine from your tongue with the last swig of Dr. Pepper left in the bottle. Then you jam the empty bottle into the root structure under the stump because it feels important to mark this moment. Your hand slips off the bottle and you bark your knuckles against the tangled roots. Then come the dots of blood, and the sting of the air on the torn skin.

When you turn thirteen a girl at the mall breaks your heart in five seconds. It happens in the food court, where everything happens at that age. It starts because the drink you are holding slips from your hand.

Minutes before you had been smoking Camels in the parking lot, off to the side of the dumpsters where the kid with the spiked blond hair from Tape World smokes. He'd just given

you a blue button the size of a quarter with white letters that read “The Clash” because you had bummed him a cigarette. I’m Alex, he’d said. It was all very cool, the way he took the pin from the snapping collar of his black leather jacket, and fastened it to your shirt. “Rad,” you said. And it was. It was rad. The taste of the two Camels you smoked back-to-back while standing there with Alex lay thick on your tongue. In the food court you bought a medium Dr. Pepper. A girl at a table was eating crinkle-cut fries. She and three of her friends. They dragged their fries through a trench of ketchup. She didn’t see you until you dropped your Dr. Pepper. Then everyone saw you. She laughed, and you could hear her over everyone else who laughed. And it was the food court, so everyone laughed.

A beautiful stranger with a ketchup smear on her cheek has just destroyed you. An older man wearing a “Sun Town Mall” shirt pushes a cart up next to you. He slops a mop on the floor and the gray water mixes with the brown soft drink. “Jesus, you just gonna stand there like an idiot,” he says. “Move out of the way. Move on. Move on.”

Because you are fourteen, and your mother needs some time for herself, she sends you to your grandparents’ farm for the summer. The corn stands tall in the field beside the barn. There are abandoned cigarettes in the cupboard that you grandfather is no longer allowed to smoke. You take a pack. You hide it in the drawer of the table beside the bed where you sleep.

Your grandmother pulls out the newspaper in the mornings and goes over the news stories with you. Every morning she pours you an orange juice and asks what you are going to do with your day. You say you don’t know. At night you sit with your grandfather while he watches Ted Koppel read off the news of the world, mainly talk of satellites and cold wars.

Your grandfather doesn't make it out to the barn as much anymore. It's hard for him to keep his breath these days. He sneaks a cigarette from the cupboard every now and then, most often when your grandmother is off in town picking up groceries. More of his time is spent coughing and spitting up wads of phlegm. You sit with him during these moments and wait for these fits to pass. Sometimes the coughing gets so bad you think he might choke. The sounds of it, the horse barking and the wet flutter you hear in his throat when he breathes, is the closest you've been to death.

You go for walks and find that the creek on that backside of the property is full of water this year. You feel nervous the first time you take off your clothes and get in the water. With every step, you check the tree lines and the bushes, making sure nobody is seeing you naked. You light a cigarette and wade into the water. You laugh at how the cold water has made your balls retreat into a tight pouch of skin hugging the space under your penis, which itself, has shrunken into a wrinkled nub. You wonder if your chest and stomach will ever grow hair. The day is hot. You swim for a little while longer.

At dinner you ask your grandfather if he can teach you to drive the tractor. He raises an eyebrow. Your grandmother forks a pork chop onto each plate. She spoons green beans from a casserole dish. It's pretty hard, is what your grandfather says. Harold, is what your grandmother says. I just figure it would help me learn to drive, is what you say. How old did you just turn? Your grandfather sizes you up with eyes pinched. Fourteen, sir, is how you answer. I guess we could head out on the west pasture and tear up some land, your grandfather says. He coughs some. Your grandmother pats her napkin against the table.

You've stalled the tractor a dozen or more times. The sun is high overhead and driving straight on you. Your grandfather wipes sweat from his forehead. He sits on a toolbox just behind you. This isn't as fun as you thought it would be. The pedals are hard to press. Your grandfather asks you for a cigarette. The best surprise face you can muster doesn't sell him. He asks if your mother knows you smoke. She does. The both of you sit on the tractor and smoke a cigarette under the pretense that the sun isn't going to get any cooler, and you are required to drive them out of the sun, back into the shadows of the barn. And six tries later, you do.

You take the last three packs of cigarettes out of the cupboard and hide them in barn so that only the two of you know where they are. Your grandfather throws a fit about you tossing his cigarettes into the creek. Your grandmother buys it.

Some days you go swim in the creek. Other days you ride your mother's old bicycle into town and buy cold bottles of Dr. Pepper out of the one machine at the one gas station. The old men who sit out front and drink Coca-Cola's ask after your grandfather. There's nothing much you know to say. So you don't say much. And they nod. And you ride off on your mother's old bike. It's a stream of days like these. After the house is quiet and you're sure your grandparents are asleep you crawl through the upstairs bedroom window onto the roof and smoke cigarettes while you lie on your back and hope to catch site of a shooting star, or a satellite in orbit. And that's how the summer passes.

By the time you turn fifteen your mother allows you to work at Tape World twenty hours a week. Now you know who The Clash are. You carry four or five cassettes in your jacket so you can rotate bands through your walk-man while you take the bus to work and school. You like the

punk rock stuff, and the new wave stuff is cool too. You've got The Cars, U2, The Ramones, The Buzzcocks; but music is always changing. Part of your job is putting up new promotional displays. You hang up posters on the wall of longhaired men in spandex pants and plenty of lipstick. During your lunch break Alex cleans the seeds out of some dry looking weed and rolls a thin joint using a dollar bill. The weed stinks when Alex lights the joint. You pass on it. It's not your thing. But you smoke a cigarette and shoot the shit with Alex because he knows everything about music, and a lot about girls.

And sometimes a couple of girls from your school come into Tape World and ask you if you can give them anything free. Alex says, if you give something away you better be getting something back. He is strong, muscled like a surfer. He gives stuff away all the time. You've got to flirt it up some, Alex tells you. Then, as a side note, he says you ought to start working out a little. Low weight, lots of reps. Alex knows a lot about what women like. You're pretty sure he's had sex with half the women who work in the mall. He knows all of their names. Get rid of those zits, dude, and the ladies are gonna swarm, he says.

You use the Clearasil that your mother buys for you at the drug store, and work out with ten-pound weights in your garage. In the morning, before she showers, your mother does aerobics in the living room. When she leaves for work, you push the aerobics tape into the VCR and watch the women on the video go through their workout. The woman who calls out all of the exercises and counts down the reps puts her hands all over the other women: she touches their thighs, squeezes on their shoulders, hugs their waists. And you always pop there. Right when her hands wrap around the waist of the woman in the pink leotard whose breasts bounce with the synthesized music and whose cheeks are flush. You keep your towel under you to catch

everything. When you're done you rewind the videotape to the beginning and slide it back into its case and bury the towel deep in the laundry basket.

The girls who come into the store, the girls your age don't look anything like the women in the video. They giggle and smile awkward closed-lip smiles to cover their braces. They stand in tight clusters, some of them still shapeless, and study the older girls, who wear torn shirts that hang from rounded shoulders and tie bandanas around their boots—the heavy metal girls with their fishnets and no regret smirks, with their glossy red fingernails and wearing two or three belts at a time. These are the girls you give free posters to. They tussle your hair and call you cutie. They use the word fuck in most of their sentences. They crowd around Alex. You're absolutely sure that he gets lucky with all of these girls, maybe at the same time.

No corn was planted the year you turn sixteen. Your grandfather lives in a bed in the living room. The television flickers through images twenty-four hours a day. The volume stays low. A line of oxygen feeds your grandfather from a canister tucked under the bed, somewhat hidden by the blankets that spill over his feet and touch the floor. Your grandfather can't tell you stories about drinking beer and flying planes during the war anymore. Instead, you sit on the couch next to the bed and listen to him fight for breath and fall into weak fits of coughing that rattle in his chest and somehow remind you of loose change falling into a bucket. His eyes float from one thing to another when he is not encumbered with sleep. Your grandmother makes several phone calls.

It's July fourth when your mother arrives at the farm. She hugs you. You can tell she's been crying. You know she will cry again, once she sees your grandfather in the living room, and

soaks in the way his once muscled arms have become thin, and the skin hangs loose, and the darkness that circles his eyes and sets them even further into his head. She hasn't been in this house for over a decade.

You take a walk. Once you've rounded the barn and the house is no longer visible, you light a cigarette and walk down the path towards the creek. The water will be cool. There's been enough rain to keep the level high enough for swimming in some of the deeper pools. You peel the shirt away from your sweating back and lose your pants and underwear, your shoes and socks, and snub the butt of your cigarette out on a rock down by the water. You stand naked in water up to your knees. It feels good to piss here, to watch the bubbles float on the surface and drift away, to stand with the heat of the sun on your back and the squish of cold, soft mud between your toes. This place is quiet. There are no bouts of coughing, there are no catheters, you are free from the smell that lingers in the room of what you are sure is death, because nothing you've ever smelled has smelled like the air in your grandparents living room. If your mother has come home, your grandfather is settled and ready to die. This you knew was coming. The moment your grandmother called in April and asked you to stay with them for the summer, you felt your guts twist and food lost its taste for a couple of days. You float on your back, feeling the water around you, drifting almost weightless. This is everything, you think. The house is quiet. Your mother and grandmother sit at the table in the kitchen. Filled coffee cups rest in the space between them. They neither look at each other, or at anything in particular, just off towards the unplanted field that blows with dust, and reveals the hideous stump looming in the middle. Your grandmother calls you by name and asks if you would please go to the barn and find a can of gasoline. You know where your grandfather keeps the gas cans, don't you, she says.

She asks for you to go out and set that stump on fire. She says she is absolutely tired of seeing it. Your mother is silent, her thoughts off in the distance: her elbow on the table, her mouth resting in her hand. And you become aware that the constant low chirping from the television is silent. And you listen harder. And there is nothing more to hear.

DINNER WITH THE NELSONS

It's a few degrees above zero when my husband pushes the doorbell. The chimes ring inside the house. Some rustling happens behind the door, and then they are there.

Harriet and Joe Nelson stand close together; broad smiles like the kind in photographs fill their cheerful faces. Warm light of their bright house tickles the back of Joe's snow-white hair. They are both California bronze, the kind of tan you get by using baby oil when you sunbathe. It's early December here in Albany. My first impression is that they have just returned from a vacation. Thanksgiving in Miami, perhaps, but Robert would have mentioned that, his boss vacationing somewhere far from the cold northeast.

A steady pushing breeze adds to the cold that has chapped my lips and made the inside of my West Coast nose raw and painful to blow. The sky has been a gray smear of clouds, pushed along by a constant press from a cold front for the past five days, almost as long as I've been in town, give or take a day here or there when the sun breaks through to shine golden for a few hours. My husband, Robert, is a little more forgiving of this kind of weather. Having been here for two months, securing a house for us, and settling into his new duties at work, he assures me that I'll get used to it. The gray. Robert promises that the spring isn't too far off, and that the summer here is something to see. He grew up four hours from here. So I believe him. I don't know anything about the insurance business that's brought the both of us here, but I'm sure there will be a lot of that kind of talk tonight.

The wind picks up behind us. Tiny, icy pin-pricks burn the backs of my legs in the gap where my coat stops short of meeting my boots. I should have worn tights. San Diego doesn't get this kind of cold, the cold here turns to fire on your skin.

"Robert, Melinda, please, in out of this nasty cold." Joe stands behind Harriet. His left hand keeps a firm grip on a short glass with amber colored liquor ebbing over ice.

"Come in. Come in," Harriet says, and waves her hands in little circles. Her tanned cheeks shine. Her eyes gleam bright white with soft brown centers, the color of chocolate. The corners of her eyes wrinkle into an aqua sea of eye shadow.

My husband places his hand in the center of my back and advances me forward with a mild push. We cross the threshold and Harriet scoots around us, swinging the door closed. I am cold from my toes up. Robert has told me that my blood is thin from living in California.

"You'll get used to it," he's told me. And he uses this phrase, "You'll get used to it" when he talks about about everything. I'll get used to the drivers who are so quick to honk their horns the moment the light turns green. I'll get used to the snow, the ice, the grocery stores with their poor produce sections, the accents that everyone carries here, the looks I get when I talk. I'll get used to it all, eventually. Even the deep tanned Nelsons, so very tan while in the depths of winter.

"Forgive me," Joe starts. His voice is rich and filled with a smoky timbre that easily fills the room. His words, although loud-voiced, feel kind and soft, almost familiar. "Where the hell I've left my manners confounds me. A damned mystery, it is," Joe says. He places a hand on Robert's shoulder and looks directly at me. His smile is ever present, like a summer camp counselor.

“You’ll have to excuse the language, my dear,” Harriet pipes in, “Four years of trading rifle fire in Korea will put a twist on your tongue,” she says.

Joe slaps Robert’s shoulder and chuckles deep in the back of his throat. His hand comes off Robert’s shoulder and he shakes a finger in Harriet’s direction.

“My God, woman, here we are, and I haven’t even made a proper introduction.” He pauses for a fraction of a second. Long enough to gather his words and take a quick sip of his drink. “Robert, Melinda,” his eyes jump to each of us as he speaks our names. “My wonderful, truly magnificent wife Harriet, who I have so very rudely ignored. I’ll get a sock to the jaw later tonight, I’m almost sure of that.” A laugh rumbles in his throat.

“Nonsense.” Harriet adds. “I only use my good right-cross when he’s truly being a beast.” Harriet winks at me and darts her tongue out of the corner of her mouth. “Joe is a wonderful host. Bit of a sailor’s mouth on him, but you can tell what good twenty-five years of me trying to fix him has accomplished.” We come again with laughter. “And he’s still broken,” she adds.

“Well, I never!”

“Well, you are.”

“Hmmm.” Joe rolls his eyes and twirls his finger by his ear.

“Oh, quit that, now. If anyone’s crazy it’s you.”

Harriet claps her hands twice.

“Now, can we get away from the front hall and settle in like civilized people? Perhaps some drinks to warm our guests?”

Harriet places her hands on mine. They are soft and warm. The freckles and wrinkles that run along the tops of her knuckles and fingers glisten from years of moisturizing. The feeling

reminds me of my grandmother's hands, that softening of skin over years, though Harriett is more my mother's age. She looks like she is seeing the last of her forties.

Joe raises his glass head high and swirls the ice cubes with twist of his wrist. "Well, this won't do. Who's in need of a drink? Harriet?"

"Gin with a twist of lime."

"Melinda?"

"Wine? White. Do you have any white?"

"White wine for Melinda. That'll warm you right up."

"And for you kind sir?" he says to Robert.

"I'll take one of whatever you're drinking."

"And a bourbon for Robert. Ice?"

"Ice works."

"Yes indeed it does. I'll meet you all in the living room."

Joe turns and walks down a dim hallway whose walls are covered with framed photographs. He takes quick, short steps and disappears as he turns left into the bright kitchen. I hear glasses being placed on the counter followed by iced cubes clanking in empty space.

I feel Harriet's hand on my elbow as she leads me past the dining room, where plates and silverware and long-stemmed wine glasses lie in wait for us.

"Honey, would you like me to take your coat?" she asks in a pleasant, low voice.

"If you don't mind, I'll keep it on for a minute longer," I say.

Harriet looks at me quizzically.

"I think I'll let the wine warm my bones a little. I haven't quite adapted to the cold."

“Oh, of course, of course. You’ll eventually toughen up.”

She looks at my boots and the dress I am wearing that is cut above the knees. “I’ve got one word for you, honey. Pants. Don’t think twice about it. There’s no rule of fashion in the winter here. Pants will save your life.”

Harriet smiles full and the light in the room pushes dark shadows into the lines that form on her face. Her frosted hair and light red lipstick exaggerate her hue. She takes Robert’s coat and hangs it in the closet by the front door.

Joe carries a tray with our drinks and sets it down in the center of the oak coffee table. The table is otherwise bare. Not a single magazine or book, not even flowers. It’s blank. The room is sparsely furnished, surprisingly modern, with the look of something straight out of the movies, or one of those new wave videos on Music Television. Not at all what I was expecting. Robert and I take a seat on a soft, white leather couch.

“Rub your fingers across it,” Joe encourages us. “It’s the softest leather you’ll ever feel.”

I let the tips of my fingers trace along the stitched seam on the armrest beside me.

“Lamb,” Joe says.

“What?” I ask.

“Lamb.”

Robert tugs on the surface of the cushion he is sitting on.

“It’s so soft,” I say.

“It was an ‘84 model. Spent the day in Manhattan, jumping from store to store and settled on this one. Got it for one hell of a deal.” Joe eyes the couch. “One year out of style,” Joe continues. “Still looks great. Classic lines. Simple. Elegant. One hell of a good deal. You won’t

find anything this chic in Albany for at least a couple of years. We're a little slow when it comes to keeping up with the Fifth Avenue."

Two black end tables keep the sofa in balance with a large, black-framed mirror on the wall behind it. Three black high-backed chairs with white armrests face the sofa from the other side of the coffee table. It reminds me of the stores in San Diego, where the styles changed as often as the songs on the radio. There are white flowers in a black vase in the corner of the room beside a sliding glass door. We are the only color in the room, our fading brown from the California sun, and the dark tan of the Nelsons.

Joe sits in one of the black chairs. Gold cufflinks blink at the end of his sleeves. A thick gold band hangs from his right wrist adding contrast to his gray shirt and black pants. The smell of roasting chicken has followed him in from the kitchen. Harriet joins us. She is dressed in a black top with white squiggles pouring down the front. Her small breasts quiver behind her blouse with each step that she takes. Anyone can see that she's not wearing a bra. A fat, red, glossy belt gives way to pleated gray pants that hug tight at her ankles and stop above gold-strapped heels. Joe rises from his seat and holds out Harriet's drink for her. The lime bobs between slivers of ice.

"I hate to bring business into this," Joe begins.

Harriett interrupts, "Well of course you do." She lets out a sharp burst of laughter, and winks at her husband. Harriet moves over and sits next to me on the leather couch.

"Ok, ok. She knows me best. I take it back," Joe continues. He raises his drink. "To one hell of a good spring. 1986 is going to be a great year for the insurance biz. Money might just

grow on trees this year.” Joe smiles. He is a tall man, built wide at the shoulders and thick through his mid section. He stands anchored in long black loafers.

“Here’s to that,” Robert follows. His face is full of life. His eyes boxed into gleaming rectangles behind the lenses of his glasses. He is different than he was before he left to move here, to Albany, to this place where I will learn to wear layers in the winter to stay warm because my husband is happy here. And things are better now that he’s settled and I’ve come to join him. It was never his fault, me having to leave San Diego. It was a compromise I made with him. Robert thinks that I believe it’s a mistake, this move. I’ve never thought it was a mistake. It was just sudden.

“To a prosperous year,” I say. It comes out as wooden as it sounds. Robert wraps his free hand around my shoulder. We touch glasses and drink. The men talk. I take long drinks of my wine, and feel like this night is a reason to celebrate. I’m out of the house. These people, the Nelsons are playful.

Joe brings us back another round. The wine is good. My cheeks are growing heavy, the first signal my body sends out that the wine is relaxing me. I am smiling too. A lot. Almost constantly, but not quite—another glass and I’ll be all smiles. I should watch that I don’t get too handsy. I sometimes pat people on the back, straighten their collars, touch an arm when emphasizing a point. We talk about Robert, about the move, about the weather. We discuss the neighborhoods we should lean toward when our lease ends in June. We were fortunate enough to get a six-month rental agreement. Our apartment smells like furnace oil. I guess it’s something else you get used to. The wine swims through my head and makes my tongue feel lazy. I smile, and don’t say too much.

“Oh, honey, it’s not,” Harriet says.

I try to figure out what we were talking about.

“Believe me, that furnace oil, if it spills even once in your house, it’s there for good.”

She nods her head up and down, the words tumble from her mouth. “When we went to central heat and air it changed my life.” Harriett smiles. “It’s true. It’s true,” she adds, assuring me.

“Well it’s getting affordable,” Joe begins. “It was a hell of a lot more when we changed over. I still think that the furnace did a better job in the winters. You could feel the heat. Really feel it.” He rubs his hands together and lays them out over a non-existent fire. “The central system pushes lukewarm air around. I find myself wearing sweaters well into May.” Joe takes a hearty drink. He shuffles an ice cube into his mouth, sucks the liquor from it and lets it fall back into the drink before he lowers his glass. He puts a finger to his bottom lip and smiles, reflecting on something.

“It’s not really something you need to worry about,” Joe adds. “The money. The company is strong. Robert has been doing a fine job. If he keeps on going the way I think he will, you’ll have a place like this soon enough.”

“Well, I’ve still got a lot of work to do before we get to that point.” Robert’s cheeks are flushed. He doesn’t drink bourbon very often. His eyes are glassy. A smile stays fixed on his face. It’s almost as if he were high. I think about the Nelsons. I’m sure they’ve got some pot stashed away in a drawer. I look at the room, the music video vibe going on. If they don’t have weed, they probably have coke.

“That’s the game,” Joe is saying, “Putting in the hours. Sacrifice. We don’t get anywhere sitting on a bench and hoping for a better life.” Joe empties his drink. The ice in the glass disappears into his mouth. His lips close and his teeth crunch the ice. He swallows. “She’s one hell of a mistress, this business. She’ll steal from you one day and give back tenfold another.”

Harriett dips her finger in her drink. She stirs the ice with the tip of her red fingernail. She is studying something across the room, a memory perhaps. Her eyes are locked and her mouth has fallen open the way mouths do when we sleep. Her lips move as if she is forming words, speaking in slow motion. The timer in the kitchen dings. Harriett comes back to full speed, casts a look at her finger and blushes. I notice the fine hairs on her cheeks as they catch the light. She stands and moves off to the kitchen.

I am warm and pull my jacket off, piling it up behind me. The skin on my face and hands is dry. It wonders where the Pacific Coast wind has gone, and why the oil doesn’t come to the surface and keep me from itching. My shoulders itch the worst. At night I lie in bed and have Robert scratch my back and soothe the skin that I can’t reach with lotion. It’s something I’ll get used to.

I have the sudden urge to sing. Two glasses in and I can feel my cheeks flush. Tonight, when we are back in our apartment, where the rooms hold the lingering scent of furnace oil, I will unzip my husband’s pants and pull him free of his pinstriped boxers, and into my mouth before he can get his feet out of his pant legs. We will be messy and grab and lick and pull at each other’s hair. I forget sometimes how worked up I get after I have a few glasses of wine. It’s good to be back with my husband. It’s good to make love to him again, even under the overcast skies of this wintry place.

I need to pee. Robert and Joe are talking.

“I hate to interrupt,” I pause.

“What can we do for you, Mel?” Robert offers.

“I’m leaving my manners with yours, Joe.” I say.

I pause and clasp my hands together. Joe and Robert give me a quizzical look.

“I need to use the little girl’s room.” I over exaggerate a horrified smile. It feels like that, but for all I know I look like an idiot. Joe and Robert both laugh.

“I’ll be a sonofabitch, I completely forgot. Completely. Right down that hallway there,” he says and points in the direction he is sending me. “At the end of the hallway. Straight back. You can’t miss it.”

My steps are bouncy and alive with wine. I enter the hallway and slow as I come to the kitchen. I look in to ask Harriet if she needs any help getting food to the table. Harriett stands with her back to me. A wall of black cabinets with chrome hinges and chrome knobs fills the wall to my left. A stainless steel oven and refrigerator hug the wall to my right, separated by more black cabinets with a butcher-block top. Everything here is new: the sink, the cabinets, fresh white paint on the ceiling, a hint of which still hangs in the air. Harriet looks out beyond the window in front of her. She is focused beyond the dark yard and the far-off streetlights. Her finger dances in a refilled drink. She catches a glance of me lingering, and smiles at my reflection.

“Almost ready, dear.” She lifts the drink to her mouth.

“I was just headed to the bathroom. Do you need any help getting things to the table?”

“Oh, I’ve got it taken care of, honey.”

The photographs in the hallway are all of Harriet or Joe, or of the both of them. There must be one hundred framed photographs hanging on the wall. The frames butt into each other and fill all of the space, floor to ceiling. It's an amazing collection of memories. I see them young, and getting married, on trips—vacations around the world: A bull fight in Spain, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, a dark-lit café with candles on the tables and a bottle of wine between them, Harriet and Joe on camels in front of the great pyramid. And then there are the photographs of Harriet on the beach. Beaches from all over, from what I can see. The photographs are collaged, separated only by the lines of black wooden frames. It would take hours and hours of measuring and cutting and nailing. It's a wall of their history: black and white, sepia, color—both vivid and sun-faded. I could spend the next hour just going from one photograph to another.

“Eighty-nine photographs,” Harriet says as if she's just read my mind.

She's materialized in the hall with a slight gin stagger. We're both loose in the knees, me catching the pointed toes of my boots in the carpeted hallway.

“My God,” I say and feel dumb for being drunk and not having anything more profound to say.

“Twenty-five years, and even more photographs in that bedroom to your left.”

“That would be my room,” I say.

“How's that?” Harriet asks.

“What I mean is, if this were my house... you see it's just like the floor plan of the house where I grew up.” Harriet holds her eyes on me. She is somewhere between smiling and straight

lipped. “This is where my bedroom was when I was growing up,” I try to explain, but the words stumble off my half-drunken tongue. I sound drunk. I sound worse than drunk; I sound stupid.

“I hate sounding stupid,” I say.

“Nonsense, you don’t sound stupid in the least,” Harriet assures me. She stands in the kitchen doorway and studies me.

“Back in San Diego,” I continue, still feeling a need to make my point clear. “This would have been my room... when I was growing up... at my parents’ house. I don’t think I’m making a bit of sense.” I have nothing left in me but to push my lips together and force a closed-lip smile.

A high-pitched laugh breaks from her lips. Harriet leans her head back, sucking in air. Her drink jiggles in her hand. Her breasts shake behind her blouse. She snorts. I snort and cackle. She becomes a blur as the tears fog my eyes. We both stand there for a moment; women, lollered by alcohol and lost in laughter.

“Good lord, honey.” She dabs a finger at the corners of her eyes. Giggles interrupt her breathing. “Honey I believe you. What ever it is you’re trying to say. I believe it.”

Joe and Robert appear in the far end of the hall. The laughter drawing them in

“What’s so damn funny?” Joe booms, his smile wide, his teeth catching the light. If I were to take a picture right now it could easily be mistaken for a family gathering. Both men are smiling, drinks in hand, posed almost identical, Harriet in the doorway: A holiday portrait. All of them gathered there, watching me, alone in the hall with a wall of pressure in my bladder.

“Oh we’re just being fools,” Harriet quips.

“I was ...” I begin.

“She was just explaining to me that she grew up in a house like this,” Harriet interrupts.

“But I have to admit, I think the wine has taken over my brain. I don’t think I made a bit of sense.” I giggle and walk to the end of the hall, into the bathroom.

The bathroom door clicks when I twist the lock. I take a peek behind the mirror. There’s a bottle of Aspirin next to a spool of dental floss.

It’s white wine for everyone at dinner. The cocktail glasses retire to square white napkins in the middle of the coffee table. Even my empty glass of wine is taken away. A long stem glass takes its place. I am ravenous. My body wants food. It also wants more wine. There is a balance somewhere. Somewhere far from where I am, there is a balance. The chicken smells juicy. That’s how it hits me. Juicy. This is one succulent bird. The golden-brown skin shines under the lights above the table. Harriett uses a fork and fluffs a casserole dish full of wild rice. There is a gravy boat off to the side of a steaming platter of mashed potatoes. Fallen dominoes of butter lie in a circle on a small plate next to a basket of rolls that smell sweet in the way fresh baked bread does.

“If I died before this meal it would be a tragedy,” the words spill from my mouth and drift across the table.

Harriett smiles.

“My prize.” Joe begins. “She’s come a long way. Worth every bit of it. Right, Hon?”

“A prize indeed,” Robert follows.

“Nonsense,” Harriet says. She grins and takes a quick sip of wine. “It’s nothing, really. It’s nothing.” And the words are so quiet they get lost in the sounds of Joe serving our plates.

“You know it’s a big game, Melinda. Insurance, that’s what I meant.”

I nod and dip a fork of mashed potatoes in a pool of gravy.

“And your husband is quite a player.”

“Is he?” I say more than ask.

“He is indeed. He’s a damn fine salesman is what he is. And that’s not an easy task selling people the idea of security.” Joe keeps a finger pointed up to the ceiling and waving. He takes a drink of wine and then grabs a small shred of chicken with his fingers and lifts it from his plate. The chicken dangles there, its wetness shining his fingertips.

“See, he’s selling something that people don’t have any interest in. But he convinces them it’s a necessity. People listen to your husband. He’s going to go very far.”

“Well I had no idea he was so valuable,” I say and shoot Robert a “wow” look across the table.

“He’s a hell of a seller, going to be a great buy-in.”

“What’s that, what’s a buy-in?”

“Are we going to talk business all night?” Harriett cocks her head after she says this. She smiles, but it’s an annoyed smile.

“Twenty seconds more.” Joe begins, “Buy-in is a little term we use where you get a customer to buy a small policy, say on a car or boat. They’re with you now. Only a little though.” Joe smiles and both hands move in the air in front of him measuring broad expanses. “Then you sweet talk them into other policies: home, life, the bigger stuff, the ones that bring in the premiums. There’s talk of cancer insurance. Can you imagine that? Boy, if that one passes, imagine what you’re selling there. That’s a guilt policy if ever there was one.”

Joe plunks the chicken into his mouth. His glistening fingertips hover above his napkin. “It’s an art. All you have to do is get the customer along for the ride and they will eventually agree to just about anything. It takes some work. You’ve got to put in the hours. You’ve got to lose out on a weekend here and there, other things too. But it’s worth it. It’s what gets you this,” he points around the room, “and plenty more. We’ll have to take you out on the boat when it warms up this spring.”

“Oh yes, the boat,” Harriet adds. “That’s an all day event.”

“Sometimes all night.”

“Oh quit with that talk,” Harriet says. “We’re not barbarians,” she says to me. She lets her soft hand lie on top of my wrist as she continues. “We have a lot of fun, Melinda, and sometimes, if there’s an ample supply of whiskey, Joe’s been known to do a bit of night fishing. He’s quite the fisherman, you know.”

“Ever done any night fishing, Robert?” Joe asks.

“Can’t say I’ve tried it.”

“It’s really quite simple. You see, fish like light. They are attracted to it, much like ladies to diamonds.” Joe pauses. We laugh.

He’s an old man, I think. I laugh because the wine is good and it warms me. I laugh because I won’t embarrass him by keeping silent, much like I wouldn’t embarrass my own father if he were to say something like this.

Robert’s eyes are bright. He leans in against the table, eager, but keeps his elbows polite and off the tablecloth.

Joe clears his throat. "You point a light into the water and wait for a few minutes. Hook a cricket; they've got good movement. Have you ever fished with crickets?"

"I have," I say, and in doing so, feel like I have breached some kind of dinner protocol. But I think about times on vacation with my parents in Tennessee and hooking crickets to the line.

"I knew it," Harriet says. "I could see you following the conversation. Your eyes gave you away. I knew that you were a sporting girl. Just like me." She pats my hand and then lifts her glass to her mouth. She drinks. I watch her lips part and her throat move with her swallow and I am consumed by thirst. I drink.

"That's wonderful," Joe says. "It's good to have a fishing wife," he says to my husband.

"My father used to take me," I say.

"Then you know exactly what I'm talking about with the crickets," he gives a hearty nod, convincing me that I do indeed know all about the movements of crickets and continues, turning his look to my husband. "When you hook them behind their head, right under their collar and run the hook the length of them, but run it nice and straight, an ugly hook will kill it too fast. But a nice straight run will keep that cricket kicking. That's what you want. You shine that light into the water, tempt the fish with a little movement, and they will bite all night."

"They spit too," I say.

Robert humors me, "What? The crickets spit?"

"It looks like it. They foam at the mouth. I'm sure it's their guts. I'm sure it's them dying."

"Honey," Robert says. He's still wide-eyed.

“I’d say she’s onto something,” Joe says.

“I’m sorry.”

“Never feel sorry for speaking your mind,” Harriet says. Her smile is small and pushes her lips up at the corners, and wrinkles the skin around her eyes in a way that turns her face soft.

Joe dips a roll into some gravy and potatoes and chews it ravenously. He smiles and swallows. He holds up a finger for us all to wait. In a quick tip of his head, a drink of wine leaves his glass empty. Joe keep the base of the glass pinched between his forefinger and thumb.

“After dinner, remind me to show you two our crowning achievement.”

“Oh, it’s amazing,” Harriet adds. “I call it a vacation in a box.”

“Now don’t give it away,” Joe says.

“A vacation in a box,” Robert repeats. “Intriguing.”

“You see anybody else up here in the frigid north that’s got a tan like this?” He traces a finger the length of his jaw line. His eyes fall behind puffed cheeks as he lets a loud laugh break from deep inside. The silverware bounces as he smacks the table with an open hand. Robert smiles too. Harriett is smiling, giggling to herself. I feel myself start to giggle too. My head floats like I’m up to my ears in water. My smiles feel warmer and warmer.

“Just spell it out next time,” she says, and washes the words out of her mouth with a swallow of wine. She is vibrant and focused on the conversation.

I look at my glass. It’s almost empty. I look at the both of them and laugh. This is all so very funny. It feels like a matter of minutes passes. Harriett refreshes our drinks. I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I’ve been drunk like this. My mother still sticks to

her guns that “quality women” do not allow themselves the hedonistic pleasures. I’ve wondered how much fun, if any, my mother has ever had.

There is another break of laughter.

“Nonsense. You men are so full of nonsense.” Harriett looks at me. “Welcome to your future.”

We all share a laugh, but I feel I’ve missed something.

“Oh my,” I say. The wine has stolen my wit. The table quiets. I fork a small bite of mashed potatoes into my mouth, bargaining for some words to find me, not sure of what has just happened. “I think I must have missed something,” I say.

“You were zoned out, honey,” Robert says. “Joe said that all the business talk must have made your head swim.”

“Have you ever lost a few minutes, just blanked and then didn’t know what had happened?”

“Maybe slow down on the wine,” Robert says.

“Life moves so much faster than it used too. Just four years ago we were lucky to get six channels to tune in on the television, and now we have thirty-five. What do I need with thirty-five channels?” Harriett rests her elbows on the table. Her palms face the ceiling. She takes an exaggerated pause and rolls her eyes. Joe and Robert laugh at the gesture. I feel like I’ve run out of laughs. I can’t tell if I’m smiling anymore.

“You’ve got to get settled. Make sure you’re ready, because it’s just going to get faster. You end up seeing the world and realizing that you’re getting close to fifty before you know it,” Harriet says.

“Don’t I know it?” I say. But I don’t know it. I’m twenty-two. I bet she is going to ask when we are going to start a family. That’s what my mother asks. That’s what my aunts want to know. I’ve been married for six months. Maybe I could enjoy that first. Maybe that is enough for now. I wait for Harriett to ask about children and our plans to have them, but she doesn’t. She takes a long drink of wine and pushes the tips of her fork through a puddle of gravy. We eat. It’s just the sounds of utensils dismantling the meal.

“Well, you look pretty damn good for being not as close to fifty as you pretend you are,” Joe says. He leans back in his seat and admires her. “You’re a golden beauty.”

I think of the chicken we are eating. It’s a golden beauty too.

“Joe, let’s show them the sunbed.” Harriett’s eyes are bright. She looks like a child who wants to share with you something they have just drawn, urgency and excitement blend as her cheeks blush.

“Right now?” Joe asks. “We haven’t finished dinner.”

“Right now. Why the hell not?” Harriett taps her empty glass. “I need a refill. Yes, a refill for everyone.” Her voice comes out strong and commanding. “Any takers?”

“Yes,” I say, then add, “What’s a sunbed?” I’m excited. I’m drunk and excited.

Joe stands up and raps his knuckles against the table. “Well, Robert. At this point we have but one option.”

“Which is?” Robert grins and raps on the table himself.

“We go where the ladies tell us.” Joe raps the table again. “First a refill, then the sunbed.”

“They’re luring us with crickets,” Robert says.

“Indeed, but it’s a much better bait than crickets.”

The men roar with laughter. Harriet spills wine on the counter and cackles and pulls the cork from the bottle. I steal a bite of bread and then another, and drink from my water glass. I am ravenous.

The sunbed looks like the kind of thing you would expect to see human beings transported through space in science fiction movies, or perhaps a kind of human waffle iron. They have it set up in a room in the basement, a room with a weight machine, a treadmill, a stationary bike, a rowing machine low to the floor, and a rack of shiny barbells tucked into a corner that is run floor to ceiling with mirrors.

“It uses fluorescent bulbs with phosphorus,” Joe says. “It’s the same kind of rays that the sun puts out. UV. State-of-the-art. You can’t buy these for your home.”

“You did,” Robert says, taking it in with wide eyes and a little boy grin.

“This is a Wolf system. I know the brothers who created it. They have full-term, house, auto, boat and any other policy I can get in front of them.”

“They gave it to you?” I am amazed.

“We worked out a deal. It happens a lot in this industry. And there’s not another one of these in a residential home in America, unless you’re a Wolf. Or me. Maybe in Hollywood. You get the idea.”

Joe reaches into the cylinder-shaped device and flips a few switches. The phosphorous bulbs glow bright white which hurts my eyes.

“I love it,” Harriett squeals. “I can’t stay out of it.”

“Is it safe?” I can feel my mouth drop open. My head swims on my shoulders and I hold on Robert’s arm.

“It’s regulated,” Joe says.

“You just can’t stay in it too long.” Harriett’s speech is slow and loud.

I wonder if this was the way it is going to be, shit-faced on a Friday nights at the Nelsons’ and thinking about the chicken dinner that is getting cold upstairs, hoping that the smell of furnace oil won’t keep me awake, or that the wine won’t work itself into a blinding headache by the time I wake up.

“You can get in without a bathing suit,” Harriett says. “It’s very European.” She blinks slowly.

I can see that she is fighting for balance. Or maybe I am.

“Well isn’t that fun.” I say. I think about being naked. How my girlfriends and I would sneak off to secluded beaches and tan topless.

“She loves to let everyone know,” Joe says. The laugh that follows is hollow, nervous.

Harriett takes me by the elbow and leads me around the corner, to the staircase we’ve just come down.

“No tan lines. Not one,” she says. Her eyes drift toward mine. She is still very pretty, somewhere behind it all, behind the eye shadow and her soft skin, browned in the alien looking machine. “The Europeans sunbathe topless. We’ve been to Italy and Spain. We went to Paris once too. It’s something, being naked.”

“It really is,” I say.

“Look,” she says. Her breasts jiggle as she unbuttons her blouse. “No tan-lines.” And she’s right. Her skin is golden-brown all over, darkening at the nipples.

Her hand tightens around my elbow and she sways from her knees. Then her hand is free from me and drops to the floor. Her wine spills on her blouse and runs across the golden skin of her breasts. The glass she is holding is reduced to a sharp stem still attached to the foot. The bowl lies in a dozen pieces at my feet.

“Well, that was unexpected.” Harriet cackles, and looks up the rest of us.

In a quick second Joe is hovering above her, buttoning her blouse closed, lifting her back up to her feet. He pries the headless stem from her hand. I step away.

“What’s gotten into you?” he says.

“Oh, I’m fine,” Harriet responds. “I’m fine, Joe.” Her words are cold. She wipes her hands down the front of her blouse.

“Come on now. You’re not being very nice.” Joe leans close to her ear and speaks low. “I mean it. Upstairs,” he says.

Robert looks to me, then walks over to the sunbed. He studies it and sips at his glass as he turns and offers us his back.

Harriet holds her hand against the wet fabric clinging to her breasts and marches past Joe. Her footsteps are heavy as she takes to the stairs. We all stand motionless and watch as she moves up the stairs and disappears into the room above. Our eyes follow the sound of her steps overhead. A door slams.

“I need to apologize for this.” Joe rubs his chin. The whiskers from a long day grit against the soft flesh of his fingers and palm. “She’ll be fine. She’s just had a glass or two too much. She’s going to hate herself in the morning for such a display. She really will.” Joe smiles and points to the sunbed. “I got it for her. She got scared on a long flight home a couple of

years ago. We got hung up in some turbulence, some really nasty stuff. She decided she'd never fly on a plane again. Loved going to beaches around the world. I had to bring the beach to her." Joe smiles, but his eyes are sad, and the way he lets his breath out and gulps air back in is like a fish floundering on the muddy banks of a river.

I clear the table. Robert and Joe sit on the couch. They talk in low voices. They sip cautiously at bright red mugs filled with bitter black coffee. I can feel my head starting to ache. I rinse out my wine glass and fill it with water. I walk to the bathroom and close the door behind me. I lock it. My eyes are bloodshot and watery. Behind the mirror is a bottle of Aspirin. I pry the top off and tap three of the little pills into my palm. The cold will help me sleep tonight. The wine will twist my dreams in ways that I will not remember when I wake. Robert and I will lie in bed tomorrow. I will fix breakfast and we will eat in bed. We will let naps overtake us. We will find each other's skin with our mouths and make love on the crumbs lost in our sheets. Robert will roll the television into the bedroom and we will sleep through the whistles of college basketball. And Sunday will come soon after. And with Sunday we will start over again. With clear heads we will talk about our dinner with the Nelsons.

PENSACOLA

Before the oil turned the Gulf of Mexico sour and brown, we practiced reserved smiles and polite conversation as we crossed state lines, sometimes doing seventy in a fifty-five. We packed light for the annual summer vacation at your father's place. Pensacola, that house on the beach: the long, waxed surfboards, the blue hurricane shutters. The ocean fifty yards away, waving us in with rolling curls of crashing blue surf. We brought bathing suits and flip-flops, T-shirts and cut-off khakis. Nothing more than a duffle bag could carry. What we could agree on: a duffle bag, two liters of blue agave tequila, three liters of margarita mix. We brought a slew of Grisham and King, Dan Brown and any other quick grab from the summer reading display perfectly placed by the check out lines at Barnes and Noble, novels that would keep us in our own space. We spent the morning and afternoons scuttling from umbrella covered chairs on the hot, white sand to the kitchen at your father's house, smiling like co-workers as we passed each other at the blender, freshening a drink and then back to the beach, a handful of peanuts and some celery for lunch, and liberal amounts of sunscreen.

We shared a bed, too. The pink room: where the sun left its color at the end of the day. Where our feet occasionally touched because the bed was only a double. Where we slept on our sides, our backs all but pressed together, our knees pulled in close to our bodies. The little roars of the water came in through the screened windows with the sweet ocean air. The pink room had been ours for ten summers. On the last drive down you had called our sharing the room "the business of vacationing."

That was before the oil. Before the schools of mackerel and sea bass fought through the thick, sticky water in search of a new home or washed up on the shore, flopping about, sucking in air for a minute or two before their eyes dulled. Before the shore turned brown and gray and the signs appeared every fifty feet: *Shoes must be worn on the beach. No Swimming Allowed.* The lifeguard stations stood empty. The black flags that bickered in the wind were kept high atop the flagpoles at every public entrance on the beach. Discarded napkins from closed ice-cream stands stuck in the cattails on the dunes and waved to the ocean. The beach had been left silent, freckled here and there with blue and red and orange and yellow buckets half-filled with sand, sagging volley ball nets, screen doors swinging on hinges, left waiting for the beach-goers to return. The helicopters no longer spotted for sharks. The sharks had moved on, long before the tourists figured it out.

When the oil took Pensacola away, your father sold the beach house for far less than he had paid for it, but found it necessary to do so because he couldn't look at the filthy, brown ocean any longer. Dreams, he'd written to you, all of them gone to shit. He'd even called to tell you that he was *getting the hell out of there before he blew his head off.* He moved back to New Jersey and its gray winters and the never-ending cooing of pigeons. We were invited to come for Christmas.

When the oil began to smother the brown seagulls and the fishing boats trolled beyond the boons with long lassos of floats engineered to herd the brown sludge on the surface, we thought of other places to vacation. You'd think that we could have found someplace with sugar-white beaches, houses with hurricane shutters and dirty restaurants that served crisp conch fritters and crab cakes wetting newspaper that turned translucent. But we didn't.

That first summer away from Pensacola we stayed high above sea level. We both took a week's worth of vacation, and decided we'd tarry at home, in our living room. At the time it still felt like something viable and perhaps expected of us, to be there, together, reading thick novels and memoirs of people we'd never heard of, peanuts in a bowl. The television remained on day and night, despite the nature or mood of what was being broadcasted. I had kept it on since the news first broke, a prayer vigil of sorts. Maybe a reminder of what lurked beneath the surface for anyone. I drank margaritas out on the patio in the humid breath of a Nashville summer. You had switched to a floral scented white wine. The air between us stood still, hot and dead.

By the time the pitch clouds under the rolling gulf waves had rounded the eastern tip of Miami's South Beach and the Mercedes Benz convertibles and bright colored thongs had been replaced by hazmat suits and bulldozers that pushed black sand up and down the beachfront, the winter had settled in. You left for New Jersey.

You put your hand on my chest when you spoke. "It's just going to be me going up this year." The driver fit three large suitcases into the trunk of the taxi you took to the airport. I went to a tree lot and bought a two-hundred dollar Christmas tree that stood twelve feet tall and reached out almost as wide at its base. For hours, I untangled hundreds of feet of Christmas tree lights, I pulled the box from the attic with the plastic reindeer, and the five boxes of colored glass ornaments. The television carried on, pictures of disaster, expert interviews, scientists, ministers, fishermen, musicians, grocery store clerks, everyone had something to say about it. The oil couldn't be stopped. Not with siphons or barges, robots, chemicals or a thirty-ton mud dump to cap off the well—which none of us believed would work in the first place—not with boons or fires, or fishing boats skimming surface. The oil wouldn't be stopped, and neither would I. Not

by bourbon, not by whiskey, not by spiced rum and store-bought eggnog, not by you being in New Jersey. It was a disaster, but I was patching up any way I could.

The heavy, yellow cap installed on top of the blown well lasted a month before the ground around it ruptured and left a thirty-yard tear in the ocean floor. I called you to tell you about it, what I had seen, the panic on the television. You didn't answer the call. Nobody panicked in Nashville. For thirty-three days the oil flowed, uncontested by man. Nothing could be done about it. For thirty-three days I left messages on your cell phone, on the phone at your father's house. And then the well ran dry, and the gulf was thick like syrup. The television in the living room confirmed the news of the dead well at nine fifty-five a.m. I called to inform you. March was just around the corner. Musicians in Nashville organized benefits to aid in the clean-up efforts. Thousands upon thousands of people around the globe left their jobs and their homes, their families and put their lives on hold, to converge on the Gulf of Mexico and see what they could do. The spring was coming. People were full of optimism.

The papers from Thomas, Wyatt and Jones arrived in the first week of March. Your attorney cited irreconcilable differences. A note, typed out on impressive stationery was attached. Your attorney advised me that you did not wish to be contacted by me any longer, and that further attempts to contact you would result in harassment charges being filed. The note also mentioned that there were two hundred and twenty-three phone calls that had been logged from my phone to your cell phone, or to the phone number listed for your father's house.

The day after the signed papers were faxed back to Thomas, Wyatt and Jones, the men showed up with the moving truck. They worked without words. Their shirts stuck to their shoulders and chests, heavy with sweat, as they carried the things from the house and packed

them into a long, white moving truck, a big rig, eighteen wheels. I put the blender to work and whipped up a half dozen margaritas. The men thanked me, but refused to join me in a drink. I held up a chilled glass and toasted to their quick and quiet removal of our life together. They left the Christmas tree, which had dropped most of its needles, and the television. Other than that, the house sat enormous and vacuous. I stood out on the brick patio and drank until the sunlight died and the last hovering breaths of winter cold settled in for the night.

There was too much oil. Weeping volunteers were turned away from the site and ordered to go back to their lives. The T-shirt vendors wore ventilated masks to clean the air coming into their lungs. The thick, black tide would ebb and flow itself clean. The scientists assured the rest of us. They estimated anywhere between ten and fifty years before the Gulf would be ready for tourists. They encouraged people to move from the areas affected, and most did. I watched the television and left my drink to rest on the counter. Older televisions used to leave a pinprick of light glowing as the tubes cooled down. This television, which had been on for six hundred days straight, put up no such protest when I pulled the plug from the wall.

The love bugs don't fill the air in early summer anymore. I stand outside the house with the blue hurricane shutters and watch the slick tide roll onto the choked beach. The surfboards are long gone. I've switched to gin. The house was a steal. All property here is marked for the desperate. When the sun sits on the curve of the world and the beach falls dark, there's still a glimpse of what it used to be. I listen to the tide in the dark. It almost sounds like water.

STATIC

It all starts with a fist that hits much harder than fingers curled and knuckles raised. It's more like a hammer. That would be a better term for it. A goddamn hammer. And Jack and Claire were there. They saw everything. Saw the car, saw the girl with the smeared lipstick, saw the boots. They saw everything. And I was there too. But I stopped seeing things once that first punch landed. Once upon a time, right? Isn't that how you start a story? Once upon a time there was a goddamn fist that hit like a hammer. Jack and Claire know. They were there.

And way before that, in June of 1976 my mom left town. Packed all her shit in the back of a wood-paneled station wagon. It wasn't real wood, not like the old wagons the surfers used to take out. You know, Beach Boys, longboards. My dad's got some of their records. Hmmm, mmmm, ...gonna, gonna, hmmm, mm, mmm. "Woodies." That's it, something about woodies. Puttin' surfboards in woodies. You get it. You're there with me. Now that's some funny shit. Big cars, named after hard-ons. But she took off in a station wagon with fake wood sides. She went out to the desert. Somewhere in Arizona, New Mexico. I don't know. Pick one. You've got a fifty-fifty chance. I guess about as far away from Lansing as she thought she needed to get. I'd know more, but my dad never talks about it. Just keeps it all inside. Can you imagine that? It's dumb shit. Right. I mean that's like fourteen years ago. I was barely a year old. You would think he'd have gotten over it, instead of hanging around in his room all the time. I don't know. There's still a picture of her in his drawer. I found it a long time ago when I was looking for cigarettes. I figured he might hide them in his underwear drawer. I mean what kind of kid is going to look through his dad's grippers, right? Just this kid, I guess. But there it was. And he's

not in it either. It's just her. Faded too, and the date on the back is 1968, written in pencil. Black and white. Her face. No smile.

I've got a picture of her too. One picture. It's just her in front of a bookcase. That's it. Like a yearbook photo, all posed and nervous, like a room full of people were watching, or something. Nothing doing over the last fourteen years though. Never got a letter or a card, none of that shit. We still live in the same house. That doesn't have a lot to do with getting your face punched in and watching the stars come alive behind your eyelids while you float on the air on your way down. Down. Down. Something must happen in the back of your throat, cause there was a taste on my tongue. Right on the back. I don't know what I would call it. And you can smell it too. Taste it and smell it, right? I know. Smell it, ah that's bullshit, but I swear, you can. But I don't know what you would call it... Static. It's like if you could taste static. Static on the back of your tongue, there's something final in a taste like that. Like when the channels go off the air and that's all you've got: there's a glow from all those dots trying to figure out where the picture went, but that's all it is, a lot of action, but nothing really going on.

I haven't spent a bunch of time all down and being a hermit in front of the TV like my dad does. He's off the edge. He works early mornings at the dairy farm milking cows. That's a lot of titties, fucking perv. Naw, I'm just kidding about the titties thing. It's pretty funny though if you really think about it. But he comes home in the afternoon, right before I get out of class. I have a last period study hall in the library. Nobody does that shit. Study hall? Are you kidding me? But by the time I get home, he's usually in his room. I can hear the TV through the door. He comes out and looks in the fridge. Just stands there, in house slippers and an old wife-beater and his ball-huggers. Sometimes he just stands there for minutes. Not a word. His mouth moves, like

he's chewing on words, but doesn't want to spit them out. Sometimes he'll ask what's been going on. Usually he just taps his finger on the table next to my books and is all, get that homework done so you don't ever worry about having to hook up liners to teats of angry cows all day. I try to look at him and smile and give him a yes sir. I don't see him enough to know if we get along or not. Kids are always talking about getting along with their parents and shit like that. And it's not like we didn't hang out when I was little. I mean, we played ball and shit like that, used to go to the park, or he'd take me swimming. It's just different now. High school is a different place. People don't get that shit. Little League and everybody hanging out together doesn't happen anymore. That's long gone. And my dad will just stand there. Maybe you just don't talk a lot when you get older. Cause he'll just stand there and rub his chin and just look around the room like he just now realizes where he is. I can hear the stubble of his beard against his fingers.

I can't grow a mustache for shit. I tried for a month. It was all just kinda blond and didn't show up. Jack was all, nice fag stache. I shaved it that afternoon. Jack can grow a pretty good mustache. He's also a year older. He failed out of Biology the first time though. I'm doing pretty good at it. My teacher, Mrs. Watkins, wants me to try an honors class next year. She says there's nothing wrong with being a good student. I laugh at her and tell thanks for caring in real smart assed kind of way, like I'm some big shit rock star or something. She tells me to drop that act, tells me anybody can be a jackass. That's how she puts it. She's not afraid to bust some balls. She doesn't rag on me when I come into class smelling like cigarettes. But she does cut me 'eat shit' looks from time to time when I crack a joke or do some dumb shit like egg bombing the lab with a little sulfur. And I go red cause I think about how I'm kind of letting her down every time

I'm about to do something that I know will get a laugh. But she's not me, she's not a tagalong. And that one little moment is worth it. It's worth the red, the heat behind my ears, and the shit feeling in my stomach. At least the class is laughing. And they're thinking I'm a funny guy. Biology doesn't get many laughs on its own.

I'm pretty sure my dad doesn't know I smoke. But he smokes, so it shouldn't be a big surprise. I lift a pack from the cartons in his closet every other week. Salems. Menthol. Yeah, they aren't the best, but free is free, and the poseur kids and the chicks with mile-high bangs all hair sprayed up like the face of a cliff, don't bum off me. I like Marlboro's better. I wish my dad smoked better cigarettes.

Me and Jack and Claire go off and smoke at lunch. That's right before Biology. Sometimes Jack catches me looking too long at Claire. So Jack will punch me in the arm and say, take a picture why don't you. And Claire gets red. I get red too. I hate it when Jack does that. Really pisses me off. I don't want to fool around with her. I mean I would, in a heartbeat. If Jack weren't my best friend I would be all over that. Just say that Jack left town or something, like my mom. I'd ask her out in a second. I mean who wouldn't. She's not exactly my type, but she's fucking rad. She wears preppy pink polo shirts, rich kid stuff. You know, nice jeans, nice skirts. She irons her clothes, and her hair always smells like she just washed it with pine trees or fruit. If you looked at her you'd think she was innocent as hell. But man, she can cuss a cat up a tree. She's all like, you need to wash your fucking hair, you greasy fuckball. Like what girl do you know that would call you a fuckball. Then she'll tussle my hair and give out a good horror movie scream as she looks at her hands. Like they're melting. Goddamn she's rad. And I'm like, maybe if you saw my bathroom you'd have greasy hair too. And she laughs, and Jack is all,

fucking right, the soap got up and walked out of that joint. And I laugh a little and pat down my hair. And wipe my hands on my jeans.

And I know my hair is greasy. And I've got dandruff. And I think about how my pillowcase stinks, and how I never wash the sheets because I forget, or because it's a hassle, or because I'm too fucking lazy. It's probably no wonder that I don't have a girlfriend. Shit, sometimes I forget to put soap on the grocery list and I'll shower with only water for like a whole week. My dad only goes to the store on Saturdays, so if I miss it, I just have to deal. Dude, it sucks. I should get better at doing that stuff. If I had a girl I could stop being Jack and Claire's third tit. I've made out with a couple of girls, like once or twice. I just don't have it, I guess. They don't stick around. They don't look at me in the hallways at school. I feel gross sometimes. I tried doing push-ups for a while, but that got boring. I could only get maybe twenty out before I was face down on the linoleum floor in the kitchen, out of breath and tired of it all, looking at the hair and dust balls that collect under the refrigerator. My dad told me that my body would catch up to me one of these days. I'm a gangly looking dude. It's no wonder I can't get laid.

Jack says they do it two or three times a week at Claire's house. Says her parents are always gone. Says they go on vacations or business trips and have her aunt come over to watch her. Jack told me that her aunt sits out by the pool when it's warm and drinks margaritas. When it's fall or winter, she sits inside and drinks Corona beer. She doesn't care at all if Jack wants to spend the night either. He says she even buys them wine coolers and beer. Even cigarettes. Shit, some people get to do it all.

A bunch of us hang out at this all-ages club called Al's Bar. It's all ages, but people still get drunk. It's not that hard. You just go out to your car and pound back some beers and then go

back inside and catch a band, and when that band is done you head right on back to your car and have another couple of beers. Last weekend a girl with these really big white sunglasses with mirrored lenses totally threw up on Jack's leather jacket. I mean big yak. Fucking watery and bits of French fries or some shit. So it's not like a bunch of kids standing around and drinking Cokes. I mean the straight edge kids do that shit. Shave their heads and drink Cokes all night. X's drawn in black magic marker across the tops of their hands like homemade tattoos. That's about the only way you can tell the difference between the straight-edges and the fucking Nazi kids. All the shaved heads in Lansing, you never know who you're talking to. I just look for an X on the hand or a swastika armband. Oh, and white laces. Nazi kids wear white laces in their boots. White laces, white power. Real fucking clever bunch. I mean there are like a hundred other things too, but there isn't time to go into all of that. Fucking crazy shit, right? I mean really. What the fuck. Fucking trash, man. Lansing is hard that way. People get laid off, and these Nazi kids show up at the mall, trying to recruit. They've got pamphlets about Blacks and Mexicans taking jobs, and how the working class can't make a living anymore. And I never knew the working class was just white. Right? Some of these kids eat that shit up. And I'm glad my dad keeps on me about studying and going to college. Fuck me if I ever stall out here.

This guy Mellow Tree runs a record store in town. He's always at the shows. He's like forty. Dude, he berserked on this Nazi kid at the last show. This kid was all doing his sieg heil bullshit. Right? All goose-stepping in front of the stage while this band Blind Faith was ramming through some punk-metal-speed-thrash. And Mellow Tree went all eight kinds of crazy, I mean screaming at the kid, right in his face, about being a fucking racist. And spit is flying out of his mouth. It's all foaming at the corners of his lips. Holy shit, there's nothing mellow about him.

And get this, the fucking Nazi kid starts crying and his buddies jump in and try to start something, right. One Nazi douchebag pushed Mellow Tree down and then the whole place went all ape shit. I fucking jumped in and hit the crying kid right in the nose. Popped his ass good too, pulled the blood right out of his face. Man, fuck that kid. And the whole time the kid is looking at me, and I'm about to give him another and then I'm being pulled out of this nest of flailing arms and kicking feet by somebody, and the kid is still looking at me. Dead on. Taking a picture. And I'm all flipping him off and BOOM, Jack's got me by my belt and pulling me through the back door and out into the parking lot. Man that shit was crazy. And Jack is laughing and telling me to ease up, and he pats me on the back, and he's still laughing and he's all, you're too fucking much, as he's stuffing me into the backseat of his car. And I'm all screaming, I'll kill your shit-ass next time. And it's funny, cause I'm outside and the kid whose blood is on my hand and shirt can't hear a goddamn word I'm saying, but it's a show now. I just keep it going to keep Jack laughing. And then I see Claire get into the car and she's crying. And I stop acting all pumped. And Jack is still laughing, but just a little, up under his breath, and he's got his hand on her leg. And he's patting her leg and saying, baby, it's all right. And I see the tip of his finger trace the seam on the inside of her jeans. And then we're out of the parking lot and driving across town. The night blows cold for it to be May. Underneath the big black sky we sit silent and let the road hum underneath us. I don't laugh anymore that night. Claire doesn't say anything when they drop me off at my house. I just stand there and watch them pull out onto the blacktop. The red of the taillights fade as the road grows away from my house. It's not too late, probably ten-thirty. I light a cigarette and see the glow of the TV in my dad's window.

But, so, like two weeks later Curmudgeon is playing a show at Al's. Dude they play really hardcore shit. I mean fast as hell, like you're gonna need six Tylenols to get rid of your headache in the morning. Holy shit, they kick ass. And me and Jack and Claire are there, and we're hanging out in front of the club while one of the opening bands is playing. Just there, smoking cigarettes and thinking about grabbing some beers out of the trunk of Jack's car when this baby-shit yellow Plymouth Duster full of Nazi kids pulls up outside of the club. But there are really only like three of them in the car, which is weird, cause they usually travel in packs. Fucking scavengers. But they pull in, and they're scoping the place out. And I'm smoking a cigarette and I'm about done with it, so I flip the butt out in the parking lot and it bounces right by their car. Like big shit, right? But they stomp on their brakes and the tires bark. Right? I mean, really? But they do. And this cue-ball motherfucker lips off at me for trying to flip my cigarette butt into his car. And I say something back, like, are you fucking kidding me? And I'm pretty sure the kid I popped in the nose is all creeped up in the back seat. Sitting in the shadows. I can feel eyes on me. It looks kind of like him, you know? But so they are all talking about how I should think twice about where I flip my next butt. And I'm about three beers in and feeling pretty damn nice. And I say something like, get your fucking Nazi asses out of here. And there's a crowd of a few people watching. And some cute brunette chick with really bright red lipstick is standing in the crowd, and she's kind of smiling at me every time I look her way. And the crowd is all clapping and stuff, and it's, you know, it's cool and all. And I see Claire, and she's smiling and Jack is walking up beside me, and Mellow Tree comes walking out of the club. No shit, right? Standing right there next to me. Me and Mellow Tree and Jack. We're ready to fuck some

shit up. Three Musketeers style. I make my face go hard. I've practiced the look before. You don't just walk around Lansing late at night and not have a hard face ready to show.

And so I yell real loud. You fucking heard me! Get your goddamn Nazi asses out of here. And now it's like everybody around me starts flipping them off and yelling shit. And the brunette girl is a little closer and still watching me. She smiles a little. And I pull a cigarette out of my pack and light it. I take a drag and let the smoke fall from my nose, just like those cartoons of when a bull gets really pissed off and is about to charge. The guys in the car get nervous or something, like they damn well should be. They'd get their asses handed to them, fucking with this crowd. So they fucking yell something like fuck you and some sieg heil bullshit and give it some gas. They lay some rubber down and smoke up the parking lot as they pull onto Main and head east. The brunette girl with the bright red lipstick slides up next to me. I hear the sleeves of her leather jacket as she crosses her arms and leans into my shoulder. Her hair smells like cigarettes smoke. She's got a dog chain necklace connected with a padlock around her neck. This could be love. And she's talking the skin off my ear, words coming fast as a machine gun fire. I don't hear a bit of it. Her lips, holy shit her red, red lips. I can see where the red lipstick has touched her teeth, and I want to pull her top lip into my mouth and suck on it. Suck on it for days. Holy, holy shit, those red lips. And she's all like, hey, I'm Stacey, you want to go in and catch the show? And her hand brushes against mine. And the blood has already left my brain and moved beneath my belt. I cover it with my hand and the pack of cigarettes wedged tightly between my fingers and my palm.

So later me and Stacy, well, we're all making out as Curmudgeon is ramming through a set, and it's like a soundtrack going two hundred miles per hour around us but we're all slow

motion, making out, and she's got her hand in my front pocket, you know. And Claire walks by and shrieks, it's like an excited shriek, like a get some shriek, not like holy shit you scared the hell out of me shriek. Like a get-a-room shriek. Maybe it's not a shriek. Maybe it's more like some kind of victory squeal.

This girl Stacy, she pulls away from me. Her lipstick is all smeared. Some on her, some on me. She squeezes me where she's holding me in my pocket and a little smile creeps out of one side of her mouth. One of those devil-knows-best smiles. She's all, we'd be more comfortable in my car. And I'm all about it, and scared shitless. But there's no way I'm not going out there. Holy shit, look at her. I mean she never said we'd have sex, but I bet I get to go up under her shirt at least. Maybe more. More. And Jack is always like, just be cool. He knows I've never been laid. He's cool with it. He just says, one day it'll come, just be cool about it. He's a fucking cool best friend. And that's a really lame way to describe him. He's got some shit going for him though. Just because he failed a Biology class doesn't mean a whole lot. He's the one who convinced me to sign up for the honors class next year, told me Mrs. Watkins isn't the only one who knows I'm smart. Said I should I run like Jesus to that cross. I'm not sure what he meant by that, but it sounded urgent. Jack was all, don't want to end up milking cow tits and sitting in your room with the TV for the rest of your life, do you? And he means it nice. It's not a slam against my dad. Jack's not an asshole like some of the kids on this scene who are all, fuck my dad, my mom's a bitch. Shit, man those kids are dirtbags. Jack isn't though. Claire isn't either. He's told me before that people need some pushing sometimes to get moving.

So me and Stacy head out into the parking lot, and she's pulling at my arm, and I'm following her and being stupid, like half-skipping, some dumb shit thing like that, like, hey, I'm

gonna be all happy and in love with this girl I just met, cause she's the one for me. I mean, look at her. Fuck, she's hot. And she's with me. And we're walking out to the far part of the parking lot and I'm all joking with her like, holy shit, did you park at the end of the world? And she laughs and just keeps pulling me and we pass some kids smoking out in one of the cars. Fucking burnouts. They will sit six in a car and totally fill it with pot smoke, right? It's fucking lame. Like, hey, I know you're in there, the whole car is cloudy, you're not fooling anyone. Fucking burnouts. Anyway, we get to the back of the parking lot where a grey Corolla is parked and she pulls me in for a kiss. And I mean she's kissing me real hard and it's cold for May, so she hugs real close to me. And she's like breathing all hard, and her kisses are wild and sloppy, and I'm fucking in heaven, right? Like practically busting through my zipper. And I can hear the burnouts open the doors and get out of their car. And she grabs my ass and pulls me tight against her. Our belt buckles clink. And in my head I'm thinking, I bet those burnouts are getting an eyeful and I reach up to grab one of her tits. And she pushes me away. And then it's like all going down. It's like a million things in one second.

Somebody grabs me from behind and whoever it is, they're a big son of a bitch and they smell like beer, and at the same time she kicks me square in the balls and is screaming something about fucking with her brother, and the guy holding me is yelling some bullshit in my ear that I can't make out because it's too loud, and too close. My head hurts immediately. And I can't move. I feel like I'm going to puke. Somebody punches me in the ribs, and it goes, a few beers foam up and spill out of my mouth. Fucking nasty business. I choke a little cause I get hit again before I can catch my breath. Holy shit, There's no air. And I can hear Jack from far way and his voice desperate, get off him you motherfuckers! And then the kid whose nose I caved in, I catch

him running towards me and something metal on his hand, like rings or something, catches the light and it hits, somewhere between a fist and a hammer. A flashbulb, and the picture is taken. And the stars come out behind my eyelids, and the sounds around me suck away. It's just like that. Like a movie without sound. And my eyes don't open. And I can feel them kicking me: in the ribs, in my back, stomping my knee. And I can smell their boots, just before one of them catches my face, and my nose collapses. And then I can't feel them kicking any more. And somewhere behind my eyes the stars turn black. There's a taste on the back of my tongue. Static. And then there's nothing. Nothing. Once upon a time a fist hit like a hammer. Jack and Claire know. They were there.

APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

In 1995 I watched Huey Lewis (of Huey Lewis and The News) take a long piss off a high rock overlooking a stream. Mid-pee, he called out to his friends that he had discovered a dead girl, lodged just beneath the surface of the water where he'd been pissing. That was one of many scenes from Robert Altman's film *Short Cuts* that stuck with me. The movie surprised me with its honesty. There was loss in every story told, and with the loss came the sensation that I wasn't watching just another movie, I was reacting to the lives of real people. Of course I knew these were actors, but with great stories, the lines can blur and the audience can relate to the deeper themes these characters bring out of the story. They were all broken in some fashion and looking toward others for help in getting put back together. I often refer to that movie as the first "real" movie I'd ever seen. It was a coincidence, too. Initially I had rented the movie because Tom Waits was starring in the picture. As a punk rock kid growing older and expanding my tastes in music, Tom Waits was an essential. Nobody worth their salt would ever come down on you for putting on a Tom Waits album or picking up one of his films.

At that time, I was an English major working on my undergraduate degree and toying with the idea of taking a creative writing class. I wasn't sure I wanted to be a writer. I loved movies, but had never thought about seriously writing anything until that first viewing of *Short Cuts*. I watched that movie a couple more times. There was something about it that excited me. I couldn't put a finger on it at first, but then it started to unfold. These people talked and thought and felt like people I knew. They were sad the way real people get sad, they wanted sex from their partners, they wanted understanding from their

parents and they wanted to be looked up to by their kids. They were all searching. It wasn't typical Hollywood fare. It felt authentic.

I vividly recall the title screen that read: based on the stories of Raymond Carver. "Who's Raymond Carver," I wondered. "You should check him out, he's phenomenal," my buddy, Weird Bill said. So I did. I found *Where I'm Calling From* at a Walden Bookstore. I picked the shortest stories in the collection to read first. I wanted to read something immediately and find out if the stories felt like the scenes in the movie. Of course they did, but they were even better. I had been taking survey literature classes of 18th and 19th century writers. And not to discredit the value of such literature, but the minimalism in Carver's work, the tight prose, the tension he built line after line was a different type of reading experience. It took me a good week and plenty of coffee and cigarettes, but when I got done with that book I knew I wanted to read more writing like it.

When I discovered my friends had been reading out of class for quite some time, I'll admit I was embarrassed by my slow move into reading for enjoyment. I asked my friends for authors they liked. Harry Crews, Larry Brown, Frederick Barthelme and William Faulkner were some of the first names on the list. When I could, I wedged in one of these authors between my coursework, but by no means was I studying what they were doing on the page. The movement of Carver's characters and the way they talked to each other felt like it could be going on in the next room. The stories were moving me. I wasn't paying attention to sentence structure. I didn't yet understand point of view, verb tenses, white space, or that you must let scene description give the reader time to breathe. That would

come later. But at last, I was reading something that wasn't on my syllabus and I was ready to take a writing course.

I took fiction workshops in the last two years of my undergraduate program. I even won a student fiction prize. I was a writer, ready to storm the graduate school scene. The Iowa Writer's Workshop rejected me.

Problems arise when an overly confident, unprepared dolt (me), applies to only one graduate program in the country, and does so two weeks before the posted application deadline. Problem one: Dolt fails at this test in life. Problem two: Dolt pours copious amounts of alcohol down his throat because life is terrible and hard and rejection means that the dolt is no good. Ah, to be young forever.

It's worth mentioning that through out all of this, even from my high school years, I've been a musician. Music, for me, has always filled in wherever life felt empty. Between my musical career and the divorce of my parents, I've visited and lived in a fair number of states. It's no wonder that themes like travel, searching, running and music appear in most of the stories in my thesis collection. It seems very natural that a writer would enjoy the musical arts and the feeling that wandering is sometimes the best liberation. So I liberated myself for a couple of years. I played in several bands, and avoided the feeling that I was hiding from another creative outlet that had given me joy, but required time and even more practice.

Eventually I moved to Florida on a whim and earned a technical degree in filmmaking. After graduation, I lived in New York for a few months before moving to Los Angeles. I still wasn't writing. More writers were piling up on my bookshelf: Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Hemingway, more Larry Brown, more Harry Crews, Chekhov, Tolstoy, screenplays by Paul Auster, Billy Bob Thornton and the Coen brothers, books on writing and photography. I was watching movies almost nightly. Storylines were becoming familiar, lighting and camera movement began to shape how I saw characters in novels walk from one room to another, and how I pictured these characters as they interacted with each other. Without filmmaking, I'm not sure that I would have come back to writing. All I know is "seeing" the action in a scene as I read it affected me deeply. It excited me. It was educating me.

I remember watching *The Last Picture Show* as a film student. The ever-blowing wind pushed the story along. No one in the film could escape it. I remember wondering why the wind was so prevalent, the characters in the story struggled with it throughout the picture. It finally clicked when I drove through Texas, on my way to Los Angeles. I stopped at a gas station to fill up. The wind almost knocked me down. The dust stung my face and arms and the backs of my legs. In a yellowed field, across the interstate a lonely boxcar sat close to a fence line. There were no visible train tracks. The boxcar had been moved to this field for some reason, a feed bunk perhaps. I pulled out my still camera to take a photograph. The isolation of the old rusted boxcar was creating a moment for me. There were stories to be told about that corner, that boxcar. I pulled the camera tight against my

eye and felt the wind drive into my back. The wind was pushing about fifty miles per hour with a tremendous amount of consistency. Immediately I thought of *The Last Picture Show*. The wind was a central character, much like Faulkner's landscapes and Carver's apartments with their tremendous dialogue. The wind was as critical to the story of escaping small-town Texas as any of the other characters in the film. And there I was, on the Texas plains, eating blowing dust in a windstorm of enlightenment.

It's possible that this is the moment I felt like I should write again. I didn't though, not for another five years, but that moment planted something in me that would make me think again about the stories that happen on street corners, in rivers and at truck stops where the wind pushes people together.

As I become more of a writer, I remember more about the details of trips I have made. I looked at the photographs I took: the giant statue of a bull in front of my motel, the fluorescent bathroom inside the motel room, the rust around the screws holding the air vent fixed to the wall. I realized these were details that other writers were noticing too. They were elements in the books I had been reading that added movement to the piece. All of this knowledge was being tucked away in my mind for later use.

In Los Angeles I started keeping a journal. I was working on movie sets. When you aren't busting your hump to get a shot set up you're sitting and waiting. When you're waiting, you can smoke twice as many cigarettes as you should, or you can write down little notes about your day. I'm sure I thought I might pen a brilliant screenplay while sitting on

the tailgate of a grip truck. But I didn't. What I did do was document moments. And stories are moments. In a way, I was moving toward becoming a writer again—very slowly.

I was dry for the year I was in Los Angeles, dry and getting damn close to thirty. And perhaps realizing that I had been pulling a lot of heavy stuff off the back of trucks and working sixteen hour days, and not getting any younger. On my days off I would call back to Tennessee and talk with friends and family. I missed the South. More than that, I felt like I wanted to go back to school and start writing again. I wanted to be educated about writing. I didn't care where. I was old enough to understand that Iowa was a wonderful school, but by no means the only school. What mattered was getting brave enough to sit down and write.

There are things people who do not write will never understand about people who do. Much like I will never understand the structural engineering of a suspension bridge, and the pressure that must go along with that line of work, others won't understand the pressure that comes with being a writer. Everything is put out there. It's the business of rejection. It's also the business of coming to terms with whatever is inside of you and getting those emotions on a page. We are not dealing with absolutes, with the exception that it's absolutely imperative that we get the characters what they need and find an exit, and try to not hide too much from the reader. That's been my biggest problem, hiding from the reader. I look at the stories in my thesis and realize that there is still some hiding going on, that another revision may bring more honesty out of the piece.

There is a level of honesty we owe to ourselves, to the characters and events in the story and to the reader. What strikes me about the writers I admire is their honesty. To me, honesty has been the hardest quality for me to try and get right. It's often much easier to let something fall flat: a character, a scene, an ending. It's hard to be brutally truthful with your characters and the direction of a story.

Through workshops in class and among friends, and through reading both current and canonical writers, I've been able to start working on these issues of honest writing. I wanted to try my hand at several styles: flash fiction, experimental pieces that worked with time or dialogue, and more traditional short stories. While I was working on the stories in my thesis, I started to send out submissions to literary journals. This was a new experience for me, and drove home the need for revisions.

I don't think I fully realized what revisions were until I had waited for three months, only to receive ten rejections on the same story. I believe that's when I started looking at my work with a more serious eye. Some of the pieces in this collection went through complete POV shifts, verb tense shifts and massive cuts that abandoned sections that didn't add to the story. I began to see some of the joy in all of the hard work. I began to see pieces that resembled "real" stories and not just stories I wrote to complete an assignment.

I have published two short stories and a book review this year. It's not an amazing feat, but it is a start. It means that things I am writing are working. And just like *Short Cuts* worked for me, I am starting to see when and how my stories are working for me, and when I am being lazy and not working for my stories. The more I'm aware of what I am

doing in my stories, the more aware I have become of what other writers are doing in theirs. This telling of stories is loaded with “wow” moments, when things I’ve read and sometimes things I’ve written just seem to fall into place and connect naturally. Writing fiction is something I took a long time to embrace. I kept hiding. I had doubts. I still have doubts. But there are only so many times you can say to yourself, I’d wish I’d written that story. “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” are out there for every one of us. I’d like to get as many of my stories written before those snows call.

APPENDIX B: BOOK LIST

Fiction:

- Alexie, Sherman. *Ten Little Indians*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 2004.
- Barthelme, Frederick. *The Law of Averages*, Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2000.
---. *Waveland*, New York, NY: Double Day, 2009.
- Boswell, Robert. *The Heyday of the Insensitive Bastards*, St. Paul, MN: Grey Wolf Press, 2009.
- Brown, Larry. *Facing The Music*, Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1988.
---. *Dirty Work*, New York, NY: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989.
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