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YOUNG THINKERS

by

JACLYN ANN ELGENESS
B.A. Flagler College, 2008

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
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Thesis Adviser: Darlin' Neal

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ABSTRACT

Young Thinkers is a collection of short fiction dealing with what it means to earn wisdom in the twenty-first century. When our phones can remember everything for us, and we're plagued by a sense that everything has already been said and digitally cataloged, insight becomes even more important, particularly to the thoughtful characters explored throughout the collection. The prolonged American adolescence facilitated by the economic crisis, as well as the societal acceptance of marrying and having children much later in life, creates an atmosphere of intense self-doubt. A young man working at a gas station after college witnesses a high school boy die in a hit and run, and he longs to comfort others at the vigil. Another young man decides he would rather rob houses than return to community college while wondering at ways to extend his lifespan. Young women struggle to feel important and independent, but find themselves assuaging their fears with cigarettes and alcohol. These characters yearn for the insight and experience that would make them decidedly and authoritatively adult.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It will come as no surprise to anyone that the first person I would like to thank is Maria Milazzo. She has helped me through this collection, and through graduate school, more than anyone else. My first question to her was “Is it cool to wear backpacks in grad school?” and since then, she’s never stopped guiding me. She has edited and commented on my work with the same dedication she’d use if it were her own. I hope I’ve provided one tenth the help to her that she has given me. I mean it when I say that the best thing that came from attending UCF was meeting her.

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VIGIL

Bradley graduated two years ago with a bachelor's in business and has, in three months' time, ascended to the position of night manager at the Racetrac gas station around the corner from his parents' house. He took the first job he could get, though he quickly realized it was the only job he could get. The giant, sun-faded recruiting poster outside, which boasts that Racetrac doesn't offer "jobs," it offers "careers," still depresses him.

On a woefully boring Thursday night, a thin, Hispanic teenage boy with a buzzed head and an oversized green t-shirt comes in to buy a Yoo-hoo and a giant, Spicy Slim Jim. He places them on the counter, right on the glass over the lottery tickets. Bradley scans the items and tells the boy the total. The boy hands him a five, and Bradley gives him his change. Bradley says "Have a good night," though the boy doesn't respond. He grabs his belt buckle and dashes out the door, loping with pointless teenage urgency.

Bradley doesn't see the impact, which occurs at approximately nine p.m. He doesn't really hear it, either. There's a brief screech out on the road, like thousands of other screeches he's heard when people cut each other off entering or exiting the gas station. But Bradley decides to walk outside and look anyway. There's nothing else to do. Three cars have stopped at strange angles in the road and Bradley sees a green lump in the gutter. He runs toward it. And then he stares and stares at the boy wriggling with the t-shirt wrapped up around his neck, he stares at the brain matter mounded in the road like leftovers tossed out a car window, and at the remaining half of the boy's face somehow smiling. Two women and an older man get out of their cars and ask Bradley what to do. He doesn't tell them anything, but one woman yells, "We'll call 911!"

Bradley grabs a dirty white rag out of his back pocket and bends down, hovering over the boy's head. Is there a point to this? He tries to apply pressure to the boy's forehead and he feels the skull crumble and the rag become warm. He's glad he has to throw up because it gives him an excuse to walk away.

The police arrive and Bradley lights cigarette after cigarette. They don't ask him anything, which is fine because he has nothing important to add. Bradley's boss, Sanjit, arrives and forces Bradley to go home.

*

He sees the big vigil on the news the next day, and he learns that the boy's name was Dominic Sanchez. Dozens of high schoolers are crying and lighting candles. Bradley's mother posts every redundant news article related to the incident on his Facebook wall until finally, over breakfast, he begs her to stop.

On the news, they also interview the guidance counselor of Kissimmee High School, a girl around Bradley's age with a curly blonde up-do and an olive green pantsuit. She positively beams in front of those cameras, smiling while saying that plenty of grief counselors would be on hand. It's strange for Bradley to see people his own age in real jobs, taking on careers, wearing pantsuits. He wants a career too, but isn't lucky enough to have one yet. He has honestly stopped trying for the past few weeks. Typing those slightly varied cover letters has become exhausting. He has received no calls for interviews. He sometimes thinks about buying a Racetrac franchise himself, though with his student loan debt, that's not fiscally possible.

The pretty young guidance counselor also says that students wouldn't be in trouble for missing classes on Monday. When Bradley was in seventh grade, Jake Walters, a student who sat

in the back of some of his classes, flipped his go-kart upside down and ground his entire head off. Bradley knew exactly what Monday would be like at Kissimmee High: the teachers abandoning their lesson plans for an entire day of grief while students either were, or claimed to be, too upset to focus on Geometry and Social Studies. On that day in the seventh grade, the only one he now fully remembers, he had sat at his desk and his husky science teacher had sat at his own desk and stared down with red, watery eyes and absolutely nothing in front of him. Even seventh graders knew to tiptoe in and out of that room.

For several different hour and fifteen minute-long periods, Bradley had to sit in poorly air-conditioned portable classrooms and contemplate eternity. He had nothing to listen to but the rattle of the AC units and the hollowness of the floors as students caved under the pressure of the silence and went off to wait in line for a grief counselor or begin to ineptly smoke behind the cafeteria. He wasn't sure how upset he was allowed to be because he didn't really know Jake. But he was upset.

*

His first day back at work, four days after Dominic died, another handful of kids are gathering on the side of the road holding candles, and Bradley watches them through the window from behind the counter. Two different groups walk up at about the same time, when it becomes completely dark. There are five total: two boys and three girls. The two boys and the three girls are standing in separate tight groups facing a telephone pole on which some of them have posted pictures and messages written in colored pencil and magic marker on construction paper.

Both boys and two of the girls are smoking, lighting their cigarettes with lighters. Bradley wonders if they don't light them with their candles out of respect. He doesn't think they're good

at smoking: those juvenile, half-second, open-mouthed puffs. The smoke tumbles out before it has a chance to infiltrate any of their tissues and truly get any of them addicted. Bradley remembers when someone told him that he wasn't actually inhaling. He was eighteen and sitting alone in the grass on a golden afternoon between classes, trying to look like he wasn't trying to look cool. A girl walked up and sat cross-legged across from him in skimpy khaki shorts and he could see a little bit of her pubic hair. She pulled away some of her long dyed-red hair that stuck to her lip gloss and she started laughing. She wore a tight blue flannel shirt and giant yellow-rimmed sunglasses. He didn't feel cool enough to even look at her. He choked as he tried to deeply inhale, but went back to his shallow puffs. He reopened his copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*, hoping she'd ask about it.

“You're not really smoking, you know. You're not doing it right.” She took away his cigarette and drew a large cloud into her mouth, opened it to show it to him, sealed her lips and inhaled the cloud. She opened her mouth again, holding her breath. Then she closed her mouth again and let the smoke drip from her nose. He ripped at pieces of grass while she finished the whole cigarette.

“Thanks for the tip,” he mumbled as she got up to leave. He hated girls sexy enough to go around finishing boys' cigarettes. Maybe she hadn't bought a pack in two weeks. Maybe she'd never bought a pack. He wanted at least to get the cigarette back and taste the lip gloss but he didn't even get to do that. On the whole, he hated the memory, but he relished it after he eventually learned how to inhale and encountered others who hadn't yet been embarrassed into damaging themselves correctly.

Sanjit walks up behind him and Bradley worries he'll ask if he sold cigarettes to any of

the vigil kids. Instead, Sanjit puts his hand on Bradley's shoulder. It occurs to Bradley that he's never asked Sanjit, who is old enough to be his father, if he has any children.

"It was so busy on Saturday," Sanjit says. "We moved a lot of snacks. Of course Saturday is already busy, but with that big vigil," he trails off. "We could have really used you."

"I wanted to be here. I called three times asking if I could come in. Didn't Katie tell you?"

"I know, but didn't you need time?"

"I really didn't."

"There's a lot of restocking to do. Make sure Katie finishes it tonight. She's on her way. I'm going home."

"Alright. Good night," Bradley says, turning back to the window. An old woman is pumping her gas. He wants her to move her old red and tan Suburban so he can see the kids better.

Why a Slim Jim? Why would anyone ever want to eat a Slim Jim? Was his Mom a bad cook? Maybe Dominic already had a trucker's knack for identifying quick, greasy protein eaten in lieu of regular meals, comfort food for the lonely or for those who had never known good home-cooked meals. But Bradley assumes that all Hispanic women are good cooks and wonders if this is racist.

After four nights, he's surprised kids are still meeting out there. It might just be a thing to do. What else is there to do in high school in this part of central Florida, besides studying, drugs or learning how to seriously computer hack? How did these five kids know Dominic? There are quite a few distinctions between the two groups. The two boys stand a few feet away from the

three girls. The boys are Hispanic. The girls are white. The boys wear over-sized t-shirts, one white and one light blue, and baggy jeans. The girls: a blonde in a yellow sundress, a brunette with long hair in some sort of pink jumper, and a brunette with short hair in tight jeans and a blue and white striped shirt that reminds him of a sailor. The girls look too cool to have ever hung out with Bradley. They are seventeen, or maybe sixteen, but he can't stop thinking of kids that age as peers. The boys are somber and quiet. The girls are chatting and almost smiling. Now they are heading for the store.

Bradley utters a "hello" that the three girls don't acknowledge. He rarely actually follows the policy of greeting customers as they enter. They stay close to each other and walk to the candy aisle. They murmur and he strains to hear them. They locate the Sweet Tarts that the blonde one desires in the candy displayed below the counter. Bradley hesitates to ring them up and says "I'm surprised you're still out there. You must have been close to Dominic."

The blonde sundress girl fixes her heavily made-up eyes on him in utter seriousness. "How do *you* know him?"

"I don't really. I mean, I didn't. I just saw..." He won't tell them. "I saw the news."

"We knew him," the short-haired girl pipes in, not looking at Bradley. She looks through the glass doors at the two boys still holding candles by the telephone pole. "They didn't."

The blonde girl continues, staring at Bradley, "They shouldn't even be allowed to be out there. They wouldn't have been caught dead hanging out with Dominic. We were his only real friends and all these fucking assholes come out and hold candles and feel important."

"Were you working when he died?" the long-haired brunette asks, adjusting her bra under her pink jumper while trying to make eye contact with Bradley.

“Yeah.”

“Did he die quick?” she asks.

The blonde scowls and shoves the Sweet Tarts toward Bradley, “Ring them up. Jesus. Why are you asking him that? What could he possibly know that we want to know?”

“Hey, just. I think you should just leave those guys out there alone,” Bradley offers, trying to give advice like an adult. He tests out a mildly admonishing tone. “Maybe they’re freaked out about death. Or maybe they want to honor someone that was part of their lives.”

“But Dominic *wasn’t* a part of their lives. They have no right,” the blonde says, putting two dollars on the counter and walking out. She lights a cigarette as soon as she’s out the door. The others follow her reluctantly. The short-haired brunette glances back through the window and Bradley looks down at the scratch offs. They don’t want to know what he saw. He could have said that it was quick, though Dominic was still writhing in that strange, automatic way by the time Bradley made it out to the road.

The blonde walks right up to the two boys and starts yelling and pointing in their faces. Bradley can’t hear anything from inside the store.

Katie comes in through the back and he hears her slam a book down on the counter behind him. She never tries to hide her Nora Roberts novels from Bradley. She’s told him many times that she won’t take orders from someone her son’s age. She says, “Hey there, sweetie. How’re you?”

“I’m fine. I’ve been fine. I wanted to keep working. I wish Sanjit had just let me come in earlier.”

“Honey, I don’t know how bad it was, but it was bad enough to kill the poor sweetheart

so it was pretty bad. Anyone would need time to recover from that.”

“Well, I wasn’t that affected by it. I didn’t even know him.”

“And why would that matter? You saw a human being’s brain and—”

“Look. There’s a lot of restocking to do tonight, Katie. I’m going to stay up here but I really need you to get on it. I know you don’t give two shits about what I say, but if you could help me out tonight, I’d really appreciate it.”

“I can handle that,” she says, sticking the book back into her khaki shoulder bag and tucking it under the counter.

Bradley turns back to the window. The fight is over, and the two boys are headed into the store. They’re looking purposefully through the window at Bradley, like they want to talk to him. Like they want to see him more than they want to buy a frozen Coke or some Funyuns.

This isn’t true, though, because once they get the door open, they head for the drinks. Bradley thinks people their age should be able to have alcohol. They probably need it. The vigil would be so much easier with a beer or two. One kid gets an orange Vitamin Water and the other gets a Cherry Coke, and one of them is paying for both drinks. Bradley wants to tell them that they shouldn’t feel guilty for not hanging out with Dominic, or whatever else is causing them to stand vigil tonight. It’s really not their fault.

They don’t ask him any questions because they have nothing to ask. Bradley can’t bring himself to say anything. They walk back out and relight their candles as though the tiny flames will ward off the angry blonde girl. The fight must not have been too bad because they’re heading back over. Or maybe now they’re not leaving just to keep bothering her. Or maybe they want to stand out there because they’re scared and they aren’t religious and they can’t think of

anything else to do. Maybe they didn't go to any of the other vigils because they felt they didn't belong and now they've convinced themselves they can be there. Maybe Dominic's parents moved across town to get him away from these two boys, and the boys thought that if they hadn't gotten Dominic into drugs, then his parents wouldn't have moved him, and he wouldn't have been crossing that road on that night in front of that car.

Bradley watches the five kids standing and standing. They aren't saying anything. They aren't smiling or drinking their drinks or eating their snacks or smoking their cigarettes. They all stare at the road or the apartment complex across the street, taking in the view of the squat yellow buildings with a few missing brown shutters. He knows they can smell the dumpsters from there. A few men are in front of the first floor apartments, drinking from bottles in brown paper bags and sitting on cracking plastic lawn chairs. Bradley hopes the kids don't realize what a shitty place it was to die or that it was an even shittier place to live.

"Katie, I'm going out for a cigarette break. Watch the counter, ok?"

"Sure," she mumbles from the toiletries aisle.

Bradley lights his cigarette and walks carefully around the gas pumps, as the kids have not been doing. He stands several yards away, not sure of what to say if he gets any closer. He wants to walk up and just be there. He wants all six of them to join hands or cry or something, for whatever fucking reason they want to cry.

Instead he keeps his distance, about thirty yards, and looks at the spot in the road they're all staring at. It is approaching the exact time of night at which Dominic was struck. They're not quite right. According to the police report, yes, Dominic had been hit there, but his body was thrown rather far. He landed where Bradley is standing. He thinks he should tell them this. They

should move the construction paper signs and pictures and candles and teddy bears. He should tell them that they don't know how to smoke yet. And he thinks he will, but when he opens his mouth to speak, a piece of sod falls off of a truck and lands in front of him, almost hitting him, its black, gritty belly rendered vulnerably up to the sky, crumpled like a small slain animal or a thick chunk of hide.

THE CARTON

Jessica sits alone at three in the morning on the rough, beige carpet of her studio apartment, determined to make an accurate list on a hot pink Post-It note. She's still shaking because her purse was stolen only a few hours ago, but she's just thinking about the money she lost. She needs to take inventory. She had never bought an entire carton of cigarettes before, and though she'd been told by the cashier at 7-11 that it would save her money in the long run, they had gone so quickly. Pulling a mechanical pencil out of the deep pockets of her soft green robe, she gets to work and writes as small as possible, not wanting to squander the Post-It, even. They had also been more expensive than she could have ever dreamed. Standing at Staples, she had been shocked that something so seemingly inconsequential could cost so much. But the fifty dollar investment in the carton had made sense at the time.

*

Roughly half a pack went in the first hour. The carton felt so heavy and solid in her hands. It looked to her like one giant pack of Camel Lights. Jessica sat in her yellow VW bug, the only gift to ever come from her father, and tilted the rearview mirror in such a way that she could watch the bottom half of her face as she puffed and practiced blowing smoke rings. Her lips were remarkably thin. She thought she was already getting wrinkles, at twenty, and almost liked that. Her love for Florida's sun was certainly a contributor. She wanted to look a little older, world-weary and wise. She assumed that two of the creases had formed, the two around her mouth, the instant her mother had finally died of lung cancer.

If someone walked by, their feet crunching on the gravel of the campus parking lot, Jessica tilted the mirror into its normal position, then, glancing around, finally moved it back.

She listened to the swishing palms and didn't mind that she had recently blown out her speakers.

The second half of that pack was thoroughly consumed before, during, and after her afternoon shift at Denny's, two of them going to a coworker she didn't like very much. But Jessica felt lousy with cigarettes, as though she had won a cigarette lottery, and was tempted to toss handfuls in the air. So two could go to Iris, though Iris smoked so quickly that Jessica was left alone for the latter moments of both smoke breaks. Jessica's mother had died two months before she got the job at Denny's, so there was no way to bring it up in conversation with any coworkers. She considered pretending to have it happen more recently, during one of her days off, so that she could more gracefully inform the other waitresses. She wasn't seeking sympathy, she told herself, it just felt like an important thing that people ought to know about her from now on.

Another entire pack went while Jessica was at the Tavern after her shift. She'd arranged to meet three girlfriends there and only one had shown up so they faced an onslaught of unwanted male attention, and smoking was a good way to ensure that some of them kept their distance. She drank four margaritas without the salt and began the unsteady walk down the block to her car. She sat, hoping to sober up in the five minutes she was willing to wait, and decided to count how many packs came in the carton, because she couldn't find it noted anywhere on the carton itself. She pulled them out and balanced them on the passenger seat, and didn't see one fall underneath it, never to be retrieved. Haphazardly, she threw them back into the carton and didn't know that one hadn't been counted. For a long time, she thought that nine packs came in a carton.

Jessica remembered that she enjoyed three and a half packs over the weekend, ignoring

her Communications 101 homework and pretending to be really into shopping. She enjoyed being able to go out and not have to think about having to stop for cigarettes. It was freeing, as free as she would ever feel without actually quitting. Tracey and Lanae, two girls she knew from volunteering at the college's radio station, asked her along to the outdoor mall, and the fact that she could smoke from shop to shop was very appealing. Tracey and Lanae knew that Jessica's mother had died of lung cancer, and made some conciliatory remarks. She asked how they found out, and they said they weren't sure how they knew it, probably someone had been whispering about it in a classroom. The two of them spent that entire Saturday asking Jessica how she could still be smoking. No offense, they'd said, but we're curious. When they asked, they had looks on their faces like they were pretty disgusted with smoking in general. Most people she met acted like that lately.

A better question would have been how was her mother still smoking, up until she died? It was a question Jessica never asked. Somehow her mother hadn't even been upset to find out that Jessica, at seventeen, was a smoker too. Instead, they smoked together and talked about how people who had never even smoked sometimes got lung cancer. They sat in her mother's room reading books on Hinduism, Scientology, and ghosts, most other belief systems having already been systematically eliminated throughout their lives. They imagined being ghosts, vapor, smoke: utterly in their element. Jessica had no grandparents. She had one estranged uncle and one estranged father. Sometimes her mom would very innocently ask why no men were falling in love with her. Jessica was relieved when her mother finally stopped asking her why they were alone. There were no answers. Better to refer to the books.

Another half-pack had gone while Jessica sat on the cracked concrete slab behind her first

floor apartment on a Monday morning. She drank her coffee and contemplated how quickly she was smoking, but the coffee made her want to smoke. Her unfinished homework made her want to smoke. The accumulating text messages from Tracey and Lanae made her want to smoke. Thinking about buying a chair for her patio made her want to smoke. It seemed like such a journey.

*

Jessica shifts onto her stomach, to relieve the ache in her ass from sitting cross-legged on the living room floor. She wraps her robe around her tightly and hears an owl just outside. She wants to sit outside and try and look for it, but she is out of cigarettes, so really there is no point to being outside. The list continues, and it's getting harder.

*

She can't remember if there were one or two packs in her purse when it was ripped off her arm in the Denny's parking lot after work. She had refused to give a cigarette to a man in his late thirties picking butts off the sidewalk when she'd gone in for her shift, but she couldn't be certain that it was him who'd snatched her purse in the dark. When she ran back into the restaurant, the other waitresses stopped vacuuming to listen to her story. They seemed puzzled that she couldn't describe the robber. When the police came, she was tempted to describe the butt collector, but she somehow doubted that he'd wait around for six hours to take her purse, because she felt as though he wouldn't be quite that desperate. Jessica drew very complex lines of desperation.

There were no more packs in her car, except for the one she would never find under the passenger's seat. Luckily, she had her keys and was able to make it home, thinking the entire

time about the nearly full and final pack left out on the bird-poop splattered back patio. She liked to think it was waiting to welcome her home, except that it had rained, and it was ruined. It hadn't even rained at Denny's. Maybe rain would have kept away her robber. But in Florida, the rains are as seemingly random as cancer.

*

So she sat down to make her list, some sense of the waste, because if she didn't, no one else would. Jessica finally stands, her list as complete as it could be, and goes out into the dim light of the expensive eco-friendly outdoor bulb she'd purchased before her mother had died. She peels back the lid of the water-logged pack and it crumbles. If she hadn't opened it to have one more before leaving it out there, perhaps the cellophane would have saved it. The white paper surrounding each cigarette is soaked, dark and translucent at the same time, revealing the shards of tobacco compressed into each cylinder. While it is really only a five dollar loss, she is now completely without cigarettes at three in the morning. There are places open, certainly, but she doesn't want to have to go back out.

She liked the security of the carton, though probably, with such abundance, she was wasteful. Because of this, she won't buy another, but she will now always miss the joy of going elbow deep into the sturdy cardboard box rather than all the way out to a gas station; she'll miss the feeling of having it with her rather than having to go out looking for it.

GLASS CUTTER

Klein roughly fingered the last of the sugar out of its packet and into his coffee. He stood at the edge of the counter, feeling that he was obstructing someone's use of the creamers, and turned to get out of the way, his back knocking a few flyers off the green, corrugated wall behind him. He was struck by the green-yellow eyes belonging to the round-faced girl behind him. They widened and twitched while she eyed the pile of empty packets.

"You only live once," he joked. She shuddered underneath her dark orange corduroy dress. He even thought he saw her nipples hardening beneath it in the dim gray light of the eco-conservative coffee shop. She was flat enough not to need a bra and Klein was always trying to convince himself he was an ass man anyway, as pleasantly-shaped asses were easier to find.

"I hate that phrase," she said, getting a cigarette out of her small houndstooth purse and putting it behind her ear on the side of her head with short hair. She didn't have any coffee and was likely one of the kids who hung out at Dagmar's Cafe all day without buying anything, smoking, drinking water, distributing flyers, and pretending to know how to fix their bikes out front. Places like this didn't give Jacksonville character because, actually, they were everywhere. Soon, he realized, he would be here all day too. And sleeping in his car. At least poverty was somewhat hip. No one could tell when it was real or not. Safety nets were invisible.

"Why?"

"Some people can joke about mortality but I can't. Don't make me explain." She sounded serious but smiled while she talked. Maybe she'd run out of free waters and was thirsty, moving her mouth around dramatically to create saliva.

"What? Why not?"

“I’ll have a panic attack,” she said, stepping toward the door but hesitating, waiting for him. The feeling that he really liked her came over him with the same gentle surprise as when he noticed that his nails had grown back after the last time he’d bitten them down.

They sat down just in front of the low, gray brick standalone coffee shop. A row of baby palm trees fluttered between them and the street, shielding their shins from the dust kicked up by passing trucks. They both tried to balance their lighters on the metal lattice top of their small table. He tried not to think about how young she must be. He was thirty and, while he was convinced he didn’t look it, he still felt too old for every one of the girls who hit on him.

He asked where she worked and she gave an evasive answer having to do with taking a break from school. She talked about politics and war for a while, and he listened politely, having no real opinions on those matters, and was glad when eventually they started talking about death again, which began with realizing they were both raised Catholic.

“I’m jealous of religious people, of that peace,” she said, punctuating her statements with sips of water. To Klein, it seemed more ritualistic than nervous. “It must be peaceful, to think you’re going to die and have a nice little family or dog reunion. I never feel peaceful. I can’t even sleep on my back.”

“Wow,” he said. “Neither can I, but that doesn’t really have anything to do with death. I just find it uncomfortable.”

He let his eyes rove the inch-long straps of her dress which created plump little flaps under her armpits, even though she was a skinny girl. He was glad to see some malleable flesh clinging to her somewhere.

“But think about it. I lay on my back and think about being in my coffin. I’m going to

spend eternity on my back, so for now, I sleep on my side.” If she was going to have a panic attack, it would have happened by now.

“Maybe that’s why I can’t sleep on my back either. I never thought about it that way. As scary as the thought of a coffin is, I don’t think I could bear to be cremated. Really, I’m thinking cryogenics or transhumanist mind uploading.”

“What the fuck is that? Are you into sci-fi?” she asked, turning her nose up.

“No, the mind uploading stuff is almost real. Well, they’re working on it. Check out the transhumanism Wikipedia.”

“Do you want to keep talking about death? Because I don’t.”

“I’m just surprised to find someone else who feels the same way,” he said, lighting another cigarette, glad she hadn’t made fun of him for smoking. She shook her pack of Parliaments and then grabbed one of his Marlboros without asking.

“I don’t think we do, because I hate talking about it. And you seem to love it.”

“I don’t love it, but I’m always thinking about it. Not talking about it doesn’t mean anything because I’m still thinking about it.”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you look like a hipster Superman?” she said quickly, sounding nervous for the first time.

“No. How so?” Yes, they had. He wanted to tell people that it didn’t make his life any easier, but it did. He probably got more free coffee than any other Dagmar’s regular.

“The hair, even that little curl. And your build, I guess. Though it’s sort of hard to tell under that jacket.”

“Well. Thanks.”

“Do you want to get out of here? I think I’m being cryogenically frozen right now,” she said. The sun was setting somewhere behind a graffitied, broken-windowed skyscraper, and Klein remembered hearing on the news about the cold front. It was supposed to freeze at some point that night. Having lived in Jacksonville his whole life, and never venturing too far from Florida at all, he wasn’t used to days colder than the inside of his fridge. What would the homeless droves in Jacksonville do? Would they walk to Orlando, or Miami? What would he do? He really wasn’t sure if he’d rather freeze in his blue Festiva than show up at his parents’ house needing a warm bed. He wanted to offer her his jacket but was getting too cold himself.

“We can go to my place,” she suggested while he gathered up his cigarettes, lighter, and wallet. “My roommates went to St. Augustine for the weekend. Let’s just have sex and forget about death.”

He nodded while he fished his keys out of his pocket, declining to mention that his grandfather had died while having sex with his twenty-year-old gold-digging fiancé.

*

Pulling his car into her gravel driveway, he saw he should have been able to imagine her house, a shabby pink Victorian in the suburb of Springfield, just outside of downtown. It was a predominately black, historic neighborhood, but now a lot of white kids lived there in groups and controlled squalor while they funneled money from their parents and sort of attended community college. He knew this because he’d done it too, and had lived in six different houses around Springfield before until he was finally cut off and opted for a studio in a squat, beige apartment complex in the shitty suburb of Arlington.

The stink of incense and patchouli greeted him at the front door with the same lazy fervor

as the three cats winding their way around the empty bottles of Miller High Life on the floor. The mattress lying flat on the hardwood floor of her bedroom told him she couldn't be any older than twenty-two. He plopped down on the sheets, trying not to examine them closely, and instead took in the record covers tiling the walls. She returned from the dark kitchen with two beers, though he hadn't asked for one. She kicked off her shoes and lit a group of candles that had been dripping all over the wooden floor for a long time, waxy blue trails oozing over to him, indicating the floor's slant. He wanted to keep talking to her, but he was worried he would bring up death again, and even more worried that she wouldn't.

"So, what do you do?" she asked, squeezing in next to him on the bed. Wind hissed through the low window against the bed behind them, sneaking right up the back of his shirt and jacket.

"Nothing too professional, if it matters to you. I don't really want to be anything, though I like to do a lot of things."

"You don't want to *be* anything?"

"Well, I'm worried about choosing a career, and then *being* that. It's so reductive. One of the things people will say about me is that I was an electrician or an accountant."

"Was?" she asked, rolling her eyes. He smiled and traced his beer along her thigh where her dress had ridden up. She leaned back against the window like it felt really good. Klein took off his jacket and realized how freezing cold it was in her house.

Klein knew that being scared of dying was boring, so he tried to stop talking about it. But he hoped that the way he was scared, the multiple ways in which he was scared, were interesting, different. He wanted to be scared of dying in a way that no one ever had been. He didn't even

necessarily want to turn it into something good or creative; he just didn't want people rolling their eyes when he admitted his fear. He wanted people to be interested in his death in a way that they weren't even interested in their own. Mostly, he wanted other people to be scared, or admit they were scared, so they could all be scared together. He understood the allure of disaster movies. They were in it together, faceless silhouettes tumbling into icy chasms or off of sinking liners. For once he might have found someone who understood.

“Well, I was working at a mechanic's shop for about a year, but I just decided that wasn't right for me.” Some of these Springfield girls eat up that blue-collar stuff, he thought, but really he'd just been a receptionist at the shop and was fired for incompetence. He debated telling her he liked to paint, though he didn't.

“I used to fantasize about marrying a mechanic, so I wouldn't get fucked every time I took my car in.”

“My Dad was a mechanic, but I think he viewed his whole career as a hobby, because he came from money. He knew he'd get it eventually.”

“Is that what you're doing?”

“Does this even shut all the way?” he asked, twisting around without moving his legs and shoving the window down in its frame. The tiny metal latch in the center of the glass wouldn't catch.

“No, the lock's fucked up. Most of them are. But I can think of a way to warm you up.” She laughed at her own cheesiness and so did he and he kept laughing even as she undid his jeans. He was relieved to see the cold wasn't affecting him and also relieved, though for a second dismayed, at the colorful bowl of condoms on her bookshelf. She jammed her tiny mouth down

on him, unable to look up at all, which bothered him a little. He would have liked to see her eyes flickering in the candlelight while he attempted to hit the back of her throat, perhaps see little slivers of tears welling up. She stopped after a minute and looked up at him with a curt smile that meant she was done. That was enough of that.

She wanted him to be on top, and squeezed her eyes shut the whole time, her mouth just hanging open and her lips catching unattractively on her dry front teeth. She was apparently having a good time but he wondered at the actual effect he was able to have on her since she had a slightly oversized vagina. He tried to figure out if she was finished, but then he couldn't wait to figure it out anymore and was done. Ten minutes later, she was sleeping soundly on her back.

By morning, she said she thought she was maybe ok with the idea of death. "I just slept really well, and it made me realize that when I'm dead, I won't know I'm dead, so how could it possibly bother me?" She smiled and put three different pans on the stove.

He balled up his fist and shoved it in his eye, rubbing away sleep and frustration. "That's why it bothers me! You won't be bothered because you won't be anything. You'll be nothing. Like before you were even born. How can obliteration not bother you?"

"It bothers me now, but it's kind of nice to know it won't bother me when I'm dead."

"That doesn't make any sense. That's so stupid. If that's how you feel why don't you just kill yourself now and be done with it?" He wanted to go on, but she was narrowing her eyes. He wanted to convince her to sit down with him right then and really think about it, think about nothingness, the way he did each night as he was falling asleep. A good night's rest wasn't a comfort. A black, dreamless sleep was a horrifying preview.

"Why don't *you* kill yourself! Or grow up. Or ask Mommy and Daddy for more money,

so next time you can just get a hooker,” she said, taking the mug of coffee she was about to offer him and trying to dramatically dump it into a paper cup, most of it just dribbling down the side. She turned and threw the whole thing into her garbage can. Her face didn’t reveal whether or not she’d burned herself badly.

Klein waited, but she screamed. “Get the fuck out of here! What are you waiting for?”

She continued to make her breakfast and didn’t make any motions to follow him. He left the kitchen and passed through the living room. He wanted coffee so badly. Her purse, the little houndstooth thing with a gleaming silver clasp, sat on top of a low bookshelf next to the front door. He opened it to find a red, plastic wallet. Inside the wallet he found forty-three dollars. And he took it.

*

He sat at Dagmar’s, switching a cigarette from hand to hand, glad for the sun glinting off the skyscraper across the street. After the forty-three dollars, and his unemployment benefits, he only needed another sixty to make his rent. He’d let it lapse last month, so there was no more time. Looking around in front of the café, he couldn’t believe he couldn’t squeeze sixty dollars out of this world. It was like when he had cigarettes but no lighter and he couldn’t find anyone else who had one. How are we so far removed from fire?

His friend Georgina, a regular at Dagmar’s, spotted him from the gas station parking lot next door and walked over, stiff-legged.

“Fuck, it’s cold. I’m trying to wear tights under my jeans and it’s not working. How the hell are you sitting out here?”

“The perils of keeping it real.” He waved his cigarette around and they laughed. She

pried one tiny hand out of her tight red leather jacket and grabbed one of his cigarettes. He only had six left, but he let her, because he was about to ask her for money.

“What have you been up to? You haven’t answered any of my texts,” she said, easing her way onto the cold metal chair. The taut flesh of her back was exposed as she sat, and she leaned forward to make sure it didn’t touch the chair.

“No, I just let my phone plan lapse.”

“Oh.”

“I met a girl here yesterday. We hung out last night, but I really don’t think it’s going to work out.”

“A regular?”

“God, I hope not.”

“So, you fucked her.”

“Yeah, but you know what? I can’t afford a girlfriend right now, anyway. In fact…”

Georgina looked at him with a wide smile, revealing her crooked, yellow teeth. He sometimes wondered if those teeth were the only reason he wasn’t in love with her. He didn’t know why she was smiling. She smiled all the time at nothing.

“What?”

“Think I could borrow some cash? Just until pay day. A hundred bucks.”

“Wow.”

“I know. Believe me.”

“After three years, you’d think you’d be used to not getting money from your parents,” she teased him, which he hoped was a sign she would do it.

“My rent just eats up all my pay,” he said, not sure if she knew he’d been fired.

“No,” she said. “I just don’t have it. But I’m going to take one of your cigarettes anyway. How much is your rent in Arlington? Forty dollars and a button? Can you pay them in pocket lint?”

“I’m sure I could pay them in crack. But I don’t have any crack.”

“You should seriously consider becoming a drug dealer. They make great money,” she said. “Or you could rob all the houses in Springfield. None of my windows lock. My landlord won’t even return my calls.” She seemed to really want to segue into various complaints about her new house, and he let her, and smiled appropriately, and lit her second cigarette for her when she needed it lit.

He daydreamed about one day joking with Georgina about her little comment becoming his new livelihood, maybe getting so good at it that it was somehow admirable, and someone would make a movie about him, or maybe eventually he would just rob her too.

*

Klein had met Jace and Melody exactly once, at Georgina’s housewarming party. He knew he hadn’t made much of an impression on the couple. Georgina introduced him to Jace and Melody because they were amateur paranormal researchers on top of being successful graphic designers. Georgina said she thought seeking out ghosts and being afraid of death went hand in hand, and actually, she was right, but Klein was too distracted to dive right into that.

“You’re *both* paranormal researchers *and* graphic designers?” he asked, dipping his thumb into his White Russian. He tried to keep looking at his drink because he knew otherwise he would stare right at Melody’s round breasts popping out of the top of her pink tank top. He

was jealous of the couple in the way that he was immediately jealous of all couples, especially when they had so many shared interests. Her breasts didn't help, either. The three were cramped into the little, though unfurnished, dining room, Jace and Melody sitting with their legs crossed on the big red cooler and Klein on the uneven wooden floor, legs stretched out, leaning back on the blue wallpaper he felt crackling against his jacket. Georgina's new house was kind of shitty, like every Springfield house he'd ever occupied, but right around the corner from her favorite bar.

Melody had long blonde bangs in her eyes, and an ineffectual pink headband balanced above them. "Yes, but 'paranormal researcher' isn't a real title we've earned or anything," she said. "We just study it on our own. And we're starting to buy the gear."

"The gear?"

"Yeah," Jace responded, smiling a bit under his brown mass of beard, "ambient temperature thermometers, EMF meters, digital audio recorders, a couple of 33 millimeter cameras. Saving up for the really good infrared shit." He shimmied the label off his beer and stuck it in the front pocket of his blue flannel shirt, his eyes looking up and away, maybe documenting their gear in his mind.

"You guys live downtown?"

"No, here in Springfield," Melody answered. "That green Victorian around the corner. Well, the bottom half anyway. We were hoping it would be haunted."

"It's weird that you're both so into that," Klein said, hoping he didn't sound rude. He realized that these two didn't seem to have any questions for him, which he always found annoying.

“Is it?” Melody asked.

“I guess I just need to find a girl who shares all my obsessions.”

“Heh. It is nice to be able to indulge each other and not have to bore our friends,” Jace said, noticing that Klein was eyeing Melody’s chest. Jace stood up and grabbed a pack of Pall Malls out of his other shirt pocket. Melody stood to follow, holding out her hand for one of his cigarettes.

“Hey, guys,” Klein called after them, making no motion to get up though he really wanted to smoke too. They stopped and turned halfway around. “Did you ever get anything? Footage, or voices or whatever?”

“No,” Melody said, not sadly, and ambled with Jace the few steps to the crooked front door.

*

Thirty of the forty-three dollars went to purchase the glass cutter, which was more than Klein had anticipated. He’d hoped to have enough left over to buy additional, innocuous supplies because he thought the girl at Ace Hardware would know what he was going to do with this. He wanted to find a circular one with the suction cup, like the ones from movies and cartoons, but he couldn’t find them and didn’t want to ask a clerk if they had them anywhere. Instead, he ended up with something that looked like a pen and a bottle of olive oil for lubrication. He sat at the library and read how-to’s online, but all of them said to lay the glass down flat first, on a blanket. Other than that, he’d try and follow all the same instructions. Really, he wanted the windows to be left unlocked, but if they weren’t, he knew exactly where the latch was and how to unlatch it.

He didn’t waste any time casing the joint or staking the place or however he was deciding

sounded least juvenile in his head, and pulled up to Georgina's house at three o'clock that morning, not knowing where else to park. He knew she was likely passed out inside after a night of dancing to Indie mash-ups at The Pearl. He had a six-dollar bottle of wine and was going to tell her he wanted to repay her for her kindness, and lie and say he found that bottle lying around his house, if she happened to notice him pulling up. He had a feeling she wouldn't mind seeing him coming up to her house late at night, and maybe wouldn't mind lending him a lot more money. He considered this before getting out of his car. He realized he'd rather steal and walked around the corner to Jace and Melody's house, ambling down the sidewalk at first, then gradually moving closer to the dark old houses.

The cold suited his purposes because he could dress in a dark hat and scarf without anyone thinking anything of it. He wondered how people robbed houses in Florida in the summer. He wondered if he would be finding that out himself. He could tell which windows led to Jace and Melody's bedroom, since they'd fallen asleep with a *Sex in the City* DVD in, the images on the menu screen gliding around in sexy repetition, flashing reds and blues out into the side yard. Through the living room window, he saw two laptops and three cameras that would make this a worthwhile endeavor, almost obscured on the coffee table by piles of used Kleenex. He didn't want to try to open the windows in the front so that left him with the one side living room window. The kitchen window in the back was far too small to crawl into. He'd thought he'd have an array of options before him, but he was down to one window then and of course, of course, it was locked.

He slathered olive oil on the window with one of his gloves before taking them both off and sticking them in his pocket. Instantly, the cold gripped both his hands, and by the time he'd

scored an imperfect rectangle at the top of the bottom pane, he couldn't even feel them. He had trouble gauging the pressure with which he popped out the piece he'd cut, hoping he wouldn't fling it too far. It landed with a plink on their white shag area rug. For whatever reason then, the streetlight in front of their house cut out, and this bothered him because he knew he was already concealed in the shadow on the side of their house, and he worried he wouldn't be able to see anything once inside. He stuck his hand through the rectangle and felt up and around for the metal latch which was exactly where he thought it would be. It flipped smoothly sideways, and he slid the whole window up, climbing easily inside. There wasn't even a screen.

It occurred to him the second he was standing all the way up in their living room that they might have pets, or they might have all their infrared shit set up, hunting ghosts in their very own living room. He stood and held his breath until he finally believed neither of these to be true. He reached over to the coffee table without even having to take another step and the streetlight flicked back on, illuminating the steady black stream oozing from his wrist, landing in giant black splotches like cross-eyed pupils on the two white side-by-side MacBooks staring up at him.

*

Klein stood in Jace and Melody's bedroom doorway, hopping from foot to foot like a kid scared to tell his parents that he was too sick to go to school. He'd looked around the kitchen for a phone to call 911, but couldn't find one, and was worried he wouldn't make it back to his car without passing out. He didn't want to die like this or in any way at all but especially not like this and what if he passed out right here on the white shag and oozed all over it and died while they slept or died in the street on the way to his car. He had no idea how bad the cut actually was, but

he felt his arm get cold and then warm and then cold again and he knew that whatever he was up to, he had to wake them up and get help. He could explain later. But, he realized, there was no way to explain it.

“Hey, Jace. Jace! Melody! I need help!” he finally shouted, from the somewhat comfortable distance of the doorway, repeating their names like it would save him. Melody sat straight up and blinked twice before screaming an amazingly beautiful, monster movie scream. She bounced up on to her knees while shimmying back as far as she could on the bed, and screamed again, and she was wearing a shirt which, even at that moment, disappointed Klein.

“Fuck! Holy fuck! What the fuck!” Jace shouted, jumping up in his boxer shorts, and sweeping one hand into the closet to grab whatever weapon was concealed there.

“It’s me! It’s Klein! We met at Georgina’s party!” It was only important that they understand that fact. That they had met. Once. At a mutual friend’s party! Oh my God, do you remember the tiny sausages in the goddamn crock pot?! Fuck!

“Klein.” Jace said, putting down the baseball bat, not as though he recognized him but as though he was testing out the word. “Klein. What the fuck?”

He had no answers for their questions, and Melody was wearing a shirt, so he closed his eyes and pretended to pass out for the two minutes before he actually passed out. They ran completely out of the house, leaping over his body slumped stiffly in the hallway, and he never got to hear if they actually remembered him.

*

Klein woke up in the ambulance but didn’t open his eyes. He fought the instantaneous human or maybe animal urge to examine his new surroundings. He didn’t want to face the

consequences yet, though he was desperate to know about the stability of his condition. It had to have been clear what was happening when Jace and Melody saw the rectangle cut out of the window, but they hadn't actually lost any stuff. He only bled on it. Maybe they wouldn't press charges. Maybe they would. He listened to two men, the paramedics, talk, hoping he was keeping his eyes closed in a way that looked natural.

"Doesn't the glass cutter kind of look like Superman?" a squeaky, young-sounding voice asked.

"Which actor?" asked a deeper, older, New York accent.

"None in particular. Just like he should play Superman in a movie. I bet he gets tons of pussy."

"Maybe. But he must be broke. He's like Bizarro Superman."

"You don't have to say Bizarro Superman. The character is just named Bizarro," the young one explained.

"You're a loser."

"This is boring, anyway. What a boring fucking night."

"Maybe there'll be a shooting in Arlington later."

"Shootings are boring too. I'm thinking of a severed limb or something."

The thought of a severed limb paired with the cracking sound of the ambulance turning a corner scared Klein, and he fought to keep his eyes shut.

"You're like a Bizarro paramedic. You aren't supposed to want to see bad shit like that. Believe me." The older paramedic's voice cracked with what sounded like feigned world-weariness.

“But I do, and that’s why I started doing this. I don’t care about admitting it. Besides, death is a natural thing. It happens to all of us.”

“Just because it’s natural doesn’t mean we have to like it,” the older one laughed. “I do this so I can save lives. I want to help people avoid it for as long as possible. Even people like this.”

Klein opened his eyes, asked if he would be all right, and apologized for being boring.

THE STUFF

Was it a beautiful young couple, married young because they were religious and couldn't wait to have sex, killed in a car accident coming home from a late movie? Maybe their moms and dads couldn't bear to go through their things so they just piled it all up neatly here within the white lines of a single uncovered parking space in front of my condo building, price tags still on half their wedding gifts. I'm just guessing, though. And there aren't really any price tags, just some nice, newish pillows, appliances and boxes piled as high as my waist. Everything, the futon and the toaster and the cases on the pillows, it's all the black or white or gray or beige of a young couple that couldn't agree on bold colors, or were scared to even try. Even though the two-story building I live in is beige, I've painted every wall inside my rental a different color. There hasn't been a boyfriend around to disagree with me in more than three years.

I know this stuff belonged to the people just downstairs because there's a new For Rent sign in the window of their unit, but I won't miss them because in the eight months they lived there, I never even saw them. I only heard their television. Even out on my balcony, I never heard them come out on to their patio below me. I was worried they'd complain about my throwing bread to the ducks on account of all the crap accumulating on their concrete slab where the ducks waited for me all day in the shade. At night, I'd look down between my feet, squinting through the dark wood slats, but I only ever saw a warm yellow light coming from their sliding glass door. They must not have liked the humidity or the salty air. We're only a mile from St. Augustine beach, which is why I live in such an ugly building. It's the cheapest rent in the zip code. They just sat in there loving each other, ignoring the weather, and using their white George Foreman grill. But that's for me now. I can have that.

I'm just upstairs, though it is a particularly hot April day. Also, I'm pretty constipated today. Everything I eat compacts itself into individual rocks and I can feel each one of them being budged through my body. Moving the stuff wouldn't be easy. A gynecologist told me that I don't drink enough water. His fingers could tell. He said that even though I was thirty, I had the digestive system of someone twice my age. But I hate water; it tastes like nothing, though I didn't try to offer him an excuse. The couple could have come out, even had whole parties outside, while I was in the bathroom.

A sun-spotted green Celica stops short in the little road that wraps around our complex and an overstuffed white garbage bag flies forward off its roof, bouncing once on the hood then exploding on the concrete. Papers fly away, and it looks like a celebration. A squat shadow inside flails its arms in a rage.

An extremely overweight woman gets out, she's fifty or sixty, and starts walking up to me as though maybe I'm selling the stuff. She's trying to prepare her face for bargaining, pretending she doesn't even see her Marie Callender boxes tumbling away in the hot ocean breeze. I wonder if her curly little bob is naturally brown or if she's dyeing it. I bend over with my hands on my knees like I'm inspecting something in the pile but really I'm trying to suppress a cramp. I really don't want to have to go back upstairs until I figure out what I want and haul it away.

"Is all this free?" she asks.

"Yeah, there was a sign that said so earlier but it blew away," I lie.

"What did it say exactly?"

"It said 'Free. Please take.'"

“Very good.” But she doesn’t look like it’s very good. She looks at the stuff like she hates it. My cramps are urging me upstairs, but first I grab the George Foreman. I start wrapping the cord around my whole forearm like it’s really long but it’s not very long and it only wraps around once and a half. I just don’t know what to do with my hands. I try to think of something to compliment the woman on, but between the elastic-waisted denim pants with the awful pleated bulge above the crotch and the embroidered denim vest over a worn-out yellow t-shirt, there’s really nothing to say.

She bends a little, not moving anything around too much, still hesitant. Still maybe worrying it will cost something. The dimples in her giant elbows are comforting. I hope I become that sort of older woman rather than the kind that slowly evaporates through bone loss, hair loss, and tooth decay so gradual I don’t even notice it until they gently dislodge in the night. Everyone in my family is so thin. My grandmother wasted away and she didn’t even have cancer or any particularly horrible illness. She just outlived herself. She died throwing up her own organs in the passenger seat of my aunt’s Corvette.

The heavy woman has been preoccupied enough with the pile not to notice my staring, so I just move a few more things over to the side: a squat little bookshelf and a pillow. I place the grill on top of the pillow and carry it all upstairs, slowly. One stair at a time.

*

I’m relieved the skinny woman finally limped up to her apartment, even though she got the George Foreman. I’ve always wanted one of those.

Oh, love, I wish I could call you and tell you what a bargain all of this is, but you wouldn’t have wanted it anyway. Even though, with all of this, you could have filled a whole

apartment, right back here in St. Augustine, where you belong, with your mom, and you could have started over. But you'd never take things from thrift stores or garage sales, or even things that came from Wal-Mart. Even when you had less than no money, you managed to spend because somehow you thought you deserved it. I don't know how a bank let you pay with negative money. You even said they fined you for not having money. It doesn't make any sense. You thought the bank would stop you from buying two surfboards or taking that girl to Disney for a week. And I told you she never even liked you. But that was the last I heard of your personal life. The banks wanted you to do it, not caring if that girl ever called you again, not caring if you ever learned to surf, and never anticipating that you'd truly escape repayment. Of course, you wouldn't let me stop you.

I could've lied and said I bought these things for you. But your first question would have been about where it came from. You might've even asked for receipts.

I pick up a pillow in a beige case, the ends of feathers poking out like needles, and balance it on top of a white, plastic bathroom shelving unit. The pillow case peels back a bit in the breeze, and I can see brown dried drool patches on the pillow underneath. I pretend for a second that they tell a story, but how could they? They're just drool patches. Someone turned their head this way and that. I always want to think that the things I find in thrift stores tell stories but the only story they seem to tell, over and over, is that people are filthy. They fill their couches with socks and condom wrappers and change and bank statements. They stuff used Kleenexes in the backs of all their desk drawers. They let their kids drag their toys through the dirt then somehow decide to donate them later, where some poor kid pulls them out of a bin and falls in love before their parents have a chance to snatch away the really dirty ones. Everyone has

a limit. I do too. Still, there feels like almost no difference between walking into a thrift store, or finding a pile like this, and entering some archeological site. I say that like I know what archeological sites are like, but perhaps I still have a vivid imagination.

I won a school-wide writing contest in third grade and they were going to try and publish the story, but then it got to the principal and he saw that it was about man-eating butterflies and he did not approve. He said that perhaps writing was not for me, and I was shamed into agreeing. I had such awful ideas, mimicking the monster movies I watched with Dad. So Dad met with the principal and they figured out my inspirations. They both asked if I could create something new and why it couldn't also just be a nice story. The teachers who'd selected me in the first place didn't come to my defense, and I never got around to rewriting the story.

Well, perhaps this story would have no characters because I don't know who it happened to. It's just a pile of stuff out here in the elements and I have to take some of it before it disappears. Under the pillow was a Hello Kitty coffee maker. Why hello, Hello Kitty coffee maker. You don't quite match the other things here. You look like you've never been washed, but at least you're different from the other things. You're pink. People throw things away without even thinking about donating them. There's a Goodwill literally two blocks away. People are just so lazy. I love taking things from the curb that people are ready to have hauled away and bring them to thrift stores. Then I go back every week and watch people buy those things and it makes me feel so much better. I was able to help someone get a good deal. I kept things from going to rot.

I admit I started doing a lot of these things when you left for school. Work only took up forty hours of my week. You were stupid and you didn't realize all those credit card statements

would be coming to my house. Of course I tried to intervene. But then you changed your cell phone number, though the statements kept coming. I went to Miami looking for you. I even joined Facebook. I always suspected that you wanted me to see the statements. You moved so many times but never updated your mailing address. Afterward, I got to see where you had lived and I got to see all those amazing, ridiculous things before they were taken away. That big special chair just for playing video games? The TV almost the size of a wall? I stood in your apartment thinking I'd entered a horrible version of the future. I hope that, under the circumstances, someone ended up getting good deals on those things.

I cradle the Hello Kitty coffee maker. She looks up at me with her white, emotionless face but the rest of the thing is pink and I think that, on the whole, it looks like a happy pink baby. I let my vision blur. My fingers are already coated in the familiar dust of other people's things, which always ends up smelling the same. Every thrift store on earth, or the tri-county area, smells exactly the same. Maybe you don't remember from when you were a kid, but the closest I can come to describing it is a somehow pleasant combination of baby powder and body odor.

So maybe this story would have no characters, or maybe this kid was a kid like you. Of course I think that. Why wouldn't I? Is it too predictable? I don't really believe it, but I think about it. He grows up with just a crazy mom who likes to go to thrift stores, not just because she's cheap but partly because she's cheap, and the kid hates it. He hates almost everything anyway but he says he hates going to thrift stores the most and he says he hates his mom, though of course she doesn't believe it. He says he hates his life, though that proves to be true. He goes off to college. Let's say this young man went to Flagler in town here though his mom is far

away. Maybe she lives in Miami. He goes to college and drops out sometime in the beginning of his junior year. She doesn't know exactly when. And his mom doesn't know if he'd made the decision to hang himself before or after amassing forty thousand dollars in credit card debt.

Then, because his mom is far away, the repo men just pile the things up that they don't want to take. And people come and pick it over. But it's pink. A remnant from a girlfriend. One that never really even liked him. All of his other things are vaguely manly or unisex. The Hello Kitty coffee maker was a gag gift. She never thought he'd actually use it. The girlfriend found it at a thrift store, though she doesn't tell him this. Or perhaps she does. He plugs it in without even washing it and makes coffee to prove that he will keep it. He's not too good for this. Three months later he runs into her, at the mall, and she can't remember his name.

The property manager on duty stops his golf cart facing my car, almost bumper to bumper, and asks me, "Is this your car?" He leaps out like a wiry little cat, unable to fully straighten his back, and tries to make his face look official and just mean enough. A dirty paper plate flaps up from the road and is blown against his shin. He shakes his leg free like the plate is a vicious little dog, and grease spots appear on his khakis.

"Yes," I say. I realize I've tightened my grip on the coffee maker, and I know it's ridiculous but I worry he's going to take it away from me.

"What's all this stuff?" He looks bewildered, his curly yellow moustache twitching in the breeze. He's so tan I want to warn him about skin cancer. His dark green polo shirt has not been washed in weeks. He's the kind of man that likes to be in charge for rich men, even though they probably pay him minimum wage. I want to educate him about how they work him too hard, and

I also want to wash his shirt. He thinks there is no difference between the pile of stuff and my scattered garbage. But there's a huge, huge difference.

“You're going to have to clean this up,” he says. “I'm going to have to ask you to do that.”

“None of it's mine,” I say, walking around the back of my car. Hello Kitty goes in the passenger seat. I back up and go around the golf cart, going much faster than the ten mile per hour speed limit, flattening the plastic TV dinner trays, leaving them to melt and bake right into the concrete. I turn out of the complex, afraid the manager will follow me to my unit, but I have nowhere to go and I can't wait to finally get home and clean out the coffee maker and donate it. Or maybe keep it.

*

I watch through my kitchen window as the heavy woman speeds off, but I can't tell if she took anything. The property manager noses around for a while, but he definitely doesn't take anything. I have one foot down the stairs when a tiny girl shows up in a U-Haul. She's driving it alone and now trying to back it up alone. I withdraw my step and retreat inside to watch her through the window. She hasn't noticed me. I guess she's in her twenties but she looks twelve. She has a side ponytail and I can see every bone in her chest through her tank top as she tries to unlatch the heavy door. The shape of her sunglasses makes her look mad and she should be mad, there's fucking garbage blowing all over, paper plates latching onto the pile like leaches. It's also getting really hot, and she was already sweating when she showed up.

She puts her hands on the hips of her jean shorts and surveys the pile. She bends over and drags the futon mattress up the dirty metal ramp, smearing the beige cover with a long black

smudge. They never clean those ramps. When she gets it to the top, she tries to pick the whole mattress up and move it into the back, but she collapses under the weight of it. Her arms and legs wiggle around its edges. She looks like a turtle. She finally gets out from under it, and I see that now her legs have long black smudges too.

It was stupid for her to move her stuff outside before getting the truck. Luckily she's crying now and distracted, and she'll probably never notice that some of her possessions are gone. She's lucky because I had my eye on the futon, too, though I didn't have time to move it. One day she'll be walking through the mall, arm in arm with a fiancé, and she'll realize she used to have a white George Foreman grill. I can remind her of this lonely day, and she'll appreciate her new life even more. Or, more likely, she'll forget when she might have lost some of her things, as though appliances and shelving units and drool-stained pillows simply evaporate over time as she outlives them.

EVEN MORE THAN RINGWORM

When my ringworm disappeared, I missed it. Though maybe this shouldn't have been the first thing I said to Ewan, but it's just what I was thinking and it fell out. I embarked on the long trek to the front of our property to get the mail, which was a fucking event for me because I was sixteen and homeschooled, and this boy stomped off a big yellow bus like he meant to visit me specifically.

He stuck his hands under his whiteout-checked backpack straps and stared at me. He was a head taller than me, maybe five eight, thin, and faintly Puerto Rican. Maybe half white and half Puerto Rican. I assumed this based on the ethnic makeup of Central Florida. Really, I had no idea. I liked his linear scribble of a moustache and his mop of straight, dark hair that seemed impeccably neat at the end of a school day. I also liked his plain red t-shirt and tight jeans. Is this how they were dressing at public schools?

I didn't know what to say next. I thought this guy was gorgeous. "Why?" he asked, looking at me like he was trying to decide if my overalls were cool, or maybe trying to decide if I carried my weight well. I heard Mom describe me that way on the phone to my Aunt, that I had weight but that I carried it "well." "Why do you miss your ringworm?"

It had been a painless, slow decay, and it made me feel closer to my Dad, who died when I was six from a combination of stubbornness, lack of health insurance, and a black widow bite and it felt good to see my young body afflicted, affectable. I didn't have a death wish, but living alone with Mom in that trailer, five acres of piney woods around us, got so fucking boring that I felt I would never accumulate any experiences. Our property, and even the trailer, was inherited from my Mom's Mom but it felt like the bad kind of inheritance: like cancer or weak vision.

Ringworm was an experience, but Mom robbed me of it by sneaking into my room at night and slathering my stomach with athlete foot's cream. While attempting to figure out how best to explain all this, I leaned casually on my mailbox and forgot that black metal would get hot in the sun, in Central Florida, in May.

"Shit, are you ok?"

"I'm fine."

"My name's Ewan."

"That's cool. Why are you getting off a bus here?"

I felt blood rushing all around my body, mostly in the lower half, and for some reason my Mom's terrible sex talk from when I was ten popped into my head: "Now Molly, you might not know this but you have another hole down there that's neither a pee pee nor a poo poo." Right in front of this boy I nearly passed out, and stuck my hand on the mailbox yet again to support myself. Ewan jumped away. He didn't seem to want to catch me.

"Are you sick? Do you have to stay home because of that?"

"No." I said, kind of crouching down before popping back up. "I'm homeschooled for no good reason. I think it was all because when we moved here, there weren't any buses and Mom and Dad didn't want to have to take me to school. I hate it, but it'll be over soon."

"Why? It sounds awesome. You don't have to get up early, and you don't have to ride the shitty school bus. I'm the last stop out here and I *still* have to walk half a mile to get to my dad's house."

I *did* have to get up early, but already I was more interested in getting him to talk about himself. "You just say your dad's house? Not yours?"

“Well, I guess it’s mine too. I can’t wait to move out next year, so I guess I just already think of it that way.”

“Your mom doesn’t live there?”

“No. She moved out about two years ago.”

I raised my eyebrows a tad like I wanted to hear it, but he shifted his backpack, which didn’t seem to have much in it, and started looking around. Don’t go! I’m funny! But I also didn’t want to be that homeschooled girl he met, desperate for attention, even though I was. “Ok, it was cool meeting you, I guess.”

“You guess?” he said it with a little half smile.

“Well, it was cool to finally meet a neighbor. I had no idea anyone young lived around here. It seems to be all rednecks, shooting off into the woods.”

“That’s me doing target practice.”

“Really?”

“Fuck no.” He laughed. “I guess I’ll see you around. Maybe on Facebook.”

“Maybe,” I answered, but he never asked for my name.

*

We were lying on filthy white chaises, the most generic KOA kind you can imagine, according to Ewan, but I thought what a luxury to be able to lay here and look up at the trees swaying in the dark over us and it felt good to sense the plastic straps giving under my weight. It was comfortable. I didn’t care that I would have black horizontal lines like grill marks on my legs and ass and back. Their neatness could prove to Mom that I wasn’t up to what she agonizingly called “funny business,” even though I so desperately wanted to be. I briefly

considered trying to do something sexy with the end of my Slim Jim before I just took a bite of it and sucked 'til it was flavorless mush in my mouth. Ewan played something on his unplugged, red and white electric guitar and it sounded great. The only light came from the flood light on the front on his house, and we were far away from the glare. I watched the shadows on the sinews of his forearms shift while he played, and I was glad I'd positioned myself back at the mailbox for three days in a row before catching him again and giving him my home phone number.

“Did you recognize that?”

Of course I hadn't. “No, but it was cool.” He kept strumming quietly, looking between me and the guitar quickly, like he was afraid it would do something by itself if he didn't keep an eye on it.

“It was Neutral Milk Hotel. Do you like them?”

“Haven't heard of them.” I was glad that he still bothered to ask even though I hadn't heard of any of the bands he'd mentioned throughout our two week friendship. It was nice that he kept trying to find out if I was cool. He was glad I had an affinity for the Beach Boys. I had a dusty bag of my Dad's 8 tracks and his old player and that was the music I liked. Ewan called it retro music, like Chicago and David Bowie, and he was glad I didn't like it “ironically.” I wasn't sure how anyone could like music ironically. Ewan kept telling me to look up music on the internet, but it just seemed too daunting. Where does one start? I also loved that he had started making me mix CDs. I never wanted that to end. I wanted him to think I really needed him for something that important.

“Well, they're good,” he said and started playing again, as if to prove it, starting over several times if he didn't get it just right. This dedication lent a weird hollowness to the music, as

I started to learn by listening to the CDs. His desire to replicate the songs precisely took all the feeling out of them. But what the fuck did I know? I couldn't play any instruments or even sing. But he didn't sing either. And maybe it was more than just the way he played the guitar. It was the way he talked about books and movies, too. He would sound emphatic and rehearsed at the same time. Still, he picked good books, books I also liked, to talk about, and he strummed scientifically through what sounded like really great songs. It was like a current flowing to a dead bulb: the switch was on but he didn't create his own light.

He strummed with his greasy Slim Jim fingers and I sort of understood at that moment why people got married. So you could sit around together and do fucking nothing but feel like you were up to something. People could ask, "What did you do the other night?" and you could say that you were with your husband or wife, and it didn't matter what you were doing.

"It's so nice out," I said when he paused.

"It's too hot."

"No way. It's like seventy-five."

"Too humid, then. Did you ask your mom about getting a cell phone yet? I'd like to be able to talk more often, and not have to call your house."

I hadn't asked her, but over the phone I wouldn't be able to stare at him. Even so, I was excited he wanted to keep in touch at all, in any way whatsoever. I needed a quick excuse.

"Yeah, she's still being a bitch about it. She said when I can pay for it, I can get one. Which is funny because I have absolutely no way to get a job or get around. You live half a mile away, anyway. I don't see why we would need to talk on the phone, other than to figure out when we're going to hang out. In person."

“True. Did you *want* to get a job? My dad might be able to help you out. He owns the Subway in town. I think I said that before.” He continuously flicked his head in an effort to keep his hair out of his eyes but sometimes his hair didn’t even move when he did it. I wanted to stick my hands in that hair. I wondered if his neck hurt.

“Do *you* work there?” I asked.

“Fuck no.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I don’t have to. He pays for *my* cell phone. But I could get you a job there.”

“I don’t know why you hate your dad so much. He does everything for you.” I suppose I didn’t phrase this exactly the way I should have, and Ewan sat up in his chaise and put his guitar at his feet, right in the dirt that comprised the entire front yard, too shady for even the most costly attempts at landscaping.

“He doesn’t do shit for me. Paying for my things is his fatherly duty.”

“Not for things like cell phones or guitars.”

“I don’t even have a car! Do you know how many seniors at school have cars?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, a lot of them, and most of them don’t have jobs. And look where he makes me live!” I glanced back at the sprawling two-story red brick house. Ewan really was a retard sometimes, but what a beautiful retard. His dad bought this property for peace and quiet and space, not because it was the cheapest in the county, and certainly not because it was inherited. He probably designed the whole damn house, or at least had endless options while it was being built: the style of cabinets, the flooring, how big the kitchen would be, the color of the metal of

the fixtures. I knew I never wanted Ewan to see our trailer. I was embarrassed enough by the state of the front of the property he'd already seen, with its fallen trees and tangles of weeds.

“I guess we can always think of people better off than we are, if we want to make ourselves feel worse. Or we can think of those worse off to feel better.”

“What are you saying?” He dragged the bottom of his guitar around lightly in the dirt.

“I guess just that I don't think you have anything to complain about and you can just as easily try and make yourself feel better rather than worse. You think I sit around and worry about kids that are out every weekend, at parties, drinking, having fun? Going to the movies? Shopping whenever they want?” I realized that I *did* sit around and worry about that, a lot actually. It was just hard not to think about. I always had a lot of time on my hands and finger weaving and writing dog shit rhyming poetry and building shaky tree houses and raising rabbits, that didn't eat it all up.

Ewan went to Disney with his cousins nearly every weekend and I had only been once, when Mom and Dad had been enthusiastic about moving to Florida. I was four, so I don't quite remember the experience, even though I've tried to. The whole hazy memory is colored by Mom always telling me how much I hated Epcot— how I sat in my stroller and screamed and screamed, frightening away the good-natured remote controlled robots. I was tired of making my new friend feel better by having him compare his pretty cool, normal life to my relatively fucked up one, but I still didn't want to leave. I had this panicky feeling that I should apologize though I hadn't said or done anything wrong. He leaned the guitar against his chaise.

“I'm going to bed now,” he said, standing up and stretching his beautifully gawky arms, and I could see his underwear with glow in the dark skulls billowing out around his narrow

waist. His tight little shirt rode up and I wondered if he was trying to give me a show. If he was, I pretended not to care.

“Ok,” I said and got on my bike, crashed in the leaves and dirt right beside my chaise, and I guess he had no qualms about letting me ride in the dark, alone. There was no real danger in those woods, but I still thought it would have been nice if he’d said something to pretend that there was, so that I could show off my bravery, and ride off feeling like I was remotely interesting to him.

*

I had a friend, the one girl I found tolerable from the homeschooled kid meet up, come over about three years ago and she said my house was nice and big, for a trailer. And not even that dirty. I remember seeing her run her pointer finger along different surfaces like an inspector. I called her a cunt and she left, crying, and later, when I tried to go to her house to apologize, I saw that it was a much smaller and dirtier trailer.

When I’d casually mentioned to Ewan that Mom would let me drink beer, I saw the look on his face and knew there’d be no keeping him away. He didn’t even call on the Friday evening he decided to show up. He just came. Mom knew I hated beer and I wondered if she’d said it just to say it, and if the policy would have remained if I’d turned out to love beer. When Ewan waltzed in like he owned the place and headed for the fridge, I was hoping Mom would get mad and kick him out, so we wouldn’t have to stay in my house. Instead, she came out of her bedroom where she’d been watching TV, saw the beer in his hand and gave him a faint nod.

“Hello there. I’m Molly’s mother.”

“Hi. I’m Ewan. Thanks for letting me come over.”

“Well, I don’t remember giving any permission, but you’re welcome.” Ewan shuffled out of the kitchen and sat next to me on the couch.

“Yeah, thanks Mom.”

“Molly, do you remember how you were crying about your acne the other day?” she asked.

“Vaguely,” I mumbled.

“Well, look at *this* shit,” she said and punched a number into the remote, switching the TV in the living room from the Weather Channel. I could see the title of the show on the pop up cable guide before the picture could even assemble itself and it was called “Born Without a Face.” Great. I could see her point already. It could be worse. Things could always be worse. But that’s the misery of cable: you flip between a show like that and one where sixteen year olds are spending a half a million dollars on their birthday parties. It could also always be better. I preferred our lives before cable, really. I read more.

So this little girl was going on six or seven and she was born without bones in her face. Her eyes and sporadic teeth floated in a sea of flesh, anchored somewhat by a lolling tongue. We all watched for ten minutes, horrified. Mom stood with the remote still poised. The girl couldn’t eat normally and had to breathe through a hole in her neck. And then they sent her off to school where she made friends and excelled academically.

“Look, Mom. Even *she* went to school. In the end, she’ll turn out more normal than me.”

Mom made a mean face at me and sat down in the recliner to keep watching the show, enraptured.

“Can I see your room?” Ewan asked, not seeming interested in the faceless girl any

longer. I couldn't tell how he felt about seeing my house so far: the dusty hodge-podge, the floral Goodwill furniture, the fake Christmas tree still up in the corner, the inexplicable collection of porcelain knick-knacks and happy meal toys covering every inch of counter or shelf space. But my room was worse. I wasn't expecting company.

The dark brown carpet was worn thin in the hallway leading to my room. You could almost see the wood underneath. I went in and sat on my bed, using my ass to wedge a space for myself among the books and clothes. He looked around with a funny smirk on his face. My country flower wallpaper clashed a bit with the neon green bedding I'd chosen.

"Not what I was expecting," he said, picking up a Coke can from the ten or twelve gathered on my desk, lined up all around my typewriter. The cans were heavy but were no longer filled with liquid as it had congealed into a solid, moldy mass.

"No? I guess I'm glad."

"I don't think I've ever met anyone who's owned a typewriter. Do you really use it?"

"Yeah, it even has a white-out tape built in, so it's easy to correct mistakes."

"Ah."

"So, what's new?" I asked, as he sat down on the floor next to my bookshelf, seeming pleased with what he was finding there. He twisted his Bud Light bottle down into the carpet until it was stable.

"Well," he grabbed a book off my shelf, *Rabbit is Rich*, and kind of held it in front of his face. He wheezed. I realized he was crying a little.

"Are you ok?" I asked.

"I graduate next week."

“That’s great!”

“No, it’s not. It sucks! Dad’s gonna make me work. I don’t know why I didn’t make plans to go away to school.”

“I thought you were gonna go to Valencia.” Community college was my plan too. I couldn’t imagine a farther destination.

“I am, but Dad said if I want to keep living here, I have to work.”

“At Subway?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re lucky you won’t have to go around *looking* for a job,” I said. I knew he clearly didn’t see it this way. Tears welled up in his small eyes and somehow I felt so, so sorry for him. I wondered if I could use this as an excuse to hug him, but I just kept sitting on my bed while he cried. “Can I do anything?”

“Yes,” he said, slamming the book shut, and chugging most of his beer before continuing. “I want to have a last hurrah before I have to start working.”

“Alright,” I said quietly, hoping he would kiss me.

“You know what I mean. Anyway, you don’t even have to play but I was wondering if we could use your property to play paintball.”

“We?”

“Yeah, me and a few guys from school. My Dad keeps our property too nice. Yours has lots of fallen trees and places to hide.”

“I’ve never played paintball.”

“I have all the stuff for it. You’ll like it. And like I said, you don’t even have to do it.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Well, Joe broke his finger once ‘cos someone shot him from close up, but it’s not really dangerous. I’m sure we’ll go easy on you.” He stood up to leave, his beer gone, and I was surprised he didn’t want to hang around and have another one. “Well,” he checked a non-existent watch, which was supposed to be funny.

“I’ll walk you out,” I said. I wondered if he’d taken the last position or if he could still help me get a job at Subway later. While following him out, I decided that I wasn’t going to ask just yet.

We walked past Mom watching *Jeopardy* in the living room, where she was making wrong guesses at the answers. I felt bad for her. Then I remembered that she was my teacher. I felt bad for me.

*

“Ewan’s right. You *are* hot,” Joe said, fingering his paintball gun. I coughed up some of my Capri Sun, which Mom provided plenty of. She hid the beer, or maybe drank it all, since I guess she didn’t want us drinking and playing paintball.

“Holy shit, did he *say* that?”

“Nah, I’m just kidding. I think you’re hot though. I like a girl with some heft to her.”

“Well, *I’m* not a big fan of heft.”

Joe looked hurt but I didn’t care. I was just letting these retards come over to make Ewan happy. I pretended to want to play for the same reason. Ewan lent me most of his pads, which I took to mean he was madly in love with me, or hopefully at least wanted to make out with me. He also lent me his mask and was wearing an old gas mask as he played, looking particularly

ominous. Ewan and his friend Garrett loaded up their paintball guns about fifty yards away, having already filled mine and Joe's. We stood on the tilted wooden staircase to the front door that Mom and I called a porch sometimes. She poked her head out, gray-blond mullet flapping and said, "I'd tell you not to hit the house, if I cared, but I don't actually care." Joe looked at me as if to say "what the fuck is wrong with your mom?" and I started walking over to Ewan.

Before I could even make it over there, Garrett and Ewan sprinted off in opposite directions, starting without me or Joe, I guess. I didn't know if there were rules. I supposed we just tried to shoot each other and not get shot. It couldn't be that complicated. At the end of May, it was so hot in the protective, black vest. Everyone wore masks, but only Garrett had a vest on too, but he was using it to carry tons of extra paintballs, not, as he'd explained when he arrived, because he was a pussy.

Twenty minutes in I was thinking maybe I was really good at this game because I hadn't been hit. I laid on my stomach behind a fallen pine and watched as Joe trudged out of the woods, his white shirt splattered with red, orange, and green, with a single green shot on his crotch. I noticed when Ewan was loading my gun that there weren't any solid red paintballs, only red mixed with orange, and solids of every other color. It shouldn't ever seem too real. I thought the guns were making pretty loud noises, though I hadn't shot mine yet, but then I realized that the neighbors thought it was a beautiful day for target practice. For every shot of our paintball guns, I heard three or four real gun shots.

When a mole cricket crawled up my arm, rearing its ugly blockish head in the sunlight, I decided I'd had enough and wanted to get hit so I could go have another Capri Sun and maybe ask Joe if Ewan had ever really said anything nice about me. I did want to shoot my gun a few

times before being hit myself, so I crept around until I finally spotted Garrett, standing and looking down at something near the base of a tree trunk. Twenty or so yards from Garrett, I couldn't understand why he wasn't trying to shoot me. Surely he could hear me, I was already laughing, but he didn't look up. He was looking down at Ewan, sprawled on his stomach, gas mask twisted off to the side. I couldn't resist, and fired my gun right at his perfect ass. Orange, red-orange, and green speckled his tight little jeans but he didn't move at all, and I stopped laughing, and I looked up at Garrett, and he made a shocked face as though he'd just arrived at the scene and just then understood and he yelped out, "We'd better go get your Mom."

*

We didn't hit the house that day, though Mom had said she wouldn't care, but a stray bullet did, making its way all the way into the living room and taking out a few porcelain ballerinas. She knew it was the asshole neighbors and called the non-emergency police number before even knowing what had happened to Ewan, and it was a pretty big surprise to see two cops standing on the stoop when Garrett and I ran up, trying to imagine what to say.

*

I know I'm fucked up because I stood at Ewan's viewing and all I could think was, well, at least now you won't have to work at Subway. That gorgeous hair of yours will never be restrained by a hairnet and a visor. Your fingers will never yellow from the countless cigarette breaks you would have started taking. We're burying you perfect and untouched by any real adult hardship. I tried to view this as a victory and for a second maybe I was even jealous and mad because now he wouldn't be able to help get *me* a job at Subway. I remembered how he cried that night when he learned he would have to work and I knew he wasn't the type to feel

enriched by any difficult experiences, only broken and defeated. Not too many people from school had time in the early summer to come out for this, though more would show up to the funeral. Ewan's family and Mom and the few kids mulling around all kind of stood back when I went up to the coffin, and this made me sickeningly giddy. Like we'd been dating, and everyone knew I'd be especially sad and need my space.

"This is probably for the best," I said, realizing immediately how retarded that sounded, and glad no one could hear it. I leaned in to kiss his cheek and I got so nervous, as though he was still alive and I was somehow going to blow this.

EMERGENCY HAMMER

Sean had just been “away” for his first year of college and Martin, at sixteen, already had a car. My two younger brothers didn’t need me for anything. We used to be as thick and close as the hairs growing out of freckles, or moles, I guess. Dad reassured me that they were still constantly seeking my approval, but they were apparently doing it by either making fun of me or pretending I didn’t exist. Sean chose the latter during the entire ride from the Greyhound station in Fort Lauderdale to our parents’ house in Hollywood.

Mom didn’t run out to hug Sean because she was mad at him for making her miss him. And Dad was at work on a Saturday. Without a doubt, he’d have run out to hug Sean if he’d been there. Sean entered the family room after dropping his bags off in his old bedroom. His nostrils flared and I knew why. I pretended not to notice. I rooted through the crumb-powdered couch cushions for the remote.

“Where’s all my stuff?”

“In the garage,” Mom answered, behind the fridge door. “You need to sort it out so I can have a guest room again.”

“It looks like you already do!” He balled up his fists and pressed them to his face. He looked like a kid, and it comforted me. Overall, he looked like shit. His eyes were farther apart, sunken, and tired. He was too thin. His longish dark blonde hair hung in oily clumps on his forehead. Rather than his first year of college, he looked to be just recovering from a virulent disease.

“Sure.” She laughed, “if they like sleeping on ninja turtle sheets. The room is exactly the same except that some of your stuff is in the garage and you took your sheets and that little chair

with you. Set those up again and calm down.”

“Well, I’m here for the summer, and I want some of my *other* stuff back in my room. God, it was bad enough you made me ride a bus like a homeless person.”

Mom shot a look at me. I don’t know why. She liked me best, at the moment, because all my stuff was out of her house. She also liked me best, Sean knew, because I hadn’t moved too far away. She’d waged a silent war on him by not calling or e-mailing, which Sean had barely noticed for a year but seemed suddenly to notice at that moment.

“Ok. But by the end of the summer, I want you leaving that room empty.” Sean blinked at her. “You’re going to paint it for me too.”

We knew that wouldn’t happen. Sean was home to surf and tell his friends online that the only reason he came back was to surf, dude, or man, or whatever. He could have surfed in St. Augustine but he would have had to rent a place to live for the summer and he didn’t qualify for enough student loan money for that. He didn’t want to work. He was stuck with us.

“We’ve missed you,” I said, though there was nothing to miss. I’d forgotten who he was a year before he’d left.

*

Sean and I had been sitting on the couch for about an hour watching *Antiques Road Show* when he suddenly said, without looking at me, “Where the fuck is Martin?”

“I guess he really missed you.” I chuckled.

“I should have lived in the middle of nowhere,” Mom said, washing the dishes from our late breakfast. “Somewhere you boys wouldn’t have any friends to play with. Then you would’ve played with each other.” She didn’t make me do the dishes because I was technically a guest.

She probably didn't let Sean do it because she wanted him to feel like a guest, not that he had offered.

"We *did* play together," I said.

"When we were kids," Sean added like a correction.

"Yeah. What would we have played when we were any older?"

"You're still kids," Mom added, sounding a little envious.

"Monopoly?" He had a point. I did like to read. I suppose I should have read less.

Suddenly I was really in the damn mood to play Monopoly, but mentioning it would have sounded like I was trying to make it up to him now.

"Martin's probably just sleeping." Mom said, snapping the dishwasher closed. It gurgled to life and I anticipated the smell of the steamy plastic. I didn't have a dishwasher at my new apartment. "He will be happy to see you," she said, "when he wakes the hell up."

Sean's eyes flared with jealousy that Martin didn't have to be a grown-up yet, but that jealousy itself made him feel deliciously adult. I could tell. He seemed to want to impart to Martin the world of hurt he would one day be in for, even as they shared a lazy summer together.

"How is he?" He asked me this because he wouldn't want to ask his younger brother directly. Sean wasn't interested in Martin's life but rather wanted to gossip about whatever failures I could find. Martin did annoy me from time to time so I gave Sean what he wanted.

"He announced the other day, during dinner, that he'll only talk to me through Facebook."

"Why?" he asked, disgusted.

"Who the fuck knows? It was probably a joke. Do you two ever message on there or

anything?”

“We’re not even friends.”

“You mean Facebook friends?”

“I guess. Hey, why did you move out?” Sean asked me suddenly, sounding almost betrayed, almost like he’d miss me not being home every day. I was almost touched.

“Because Martin wouldn’t let me into the bathroom.”

“Why doesn’t he just jerk off in his bedroom?”

“He does. I just think he likes to mix it up,” I offered. Sean laughed, and I wished that he would like me and not just my jokes. But if we had to base a relationship for the summer around teasing Martin, I was up for it.

“He’s going to die in college. And how the hell does he afford that car?”

“He had a job,” I offered, “for a while. Now I think he plays the stock market.” No one laughed, so I sat on my hands. We both knew Mom and Dad had to have given him money, but we were scared to talk about it when Mom was in earshot. We wondered if he deserved that money, if it was a bribe to keep him out of trouble neither of us could understand.

“What are his plans for *college*?” Sean of course wanted Martin to follow him to the same private school, even if they didn’t really like each other. Maybe just so Martin could give him rides.

“I once found a list in his bedroom of successful people who didn’t go to college,” I said. They were Nobel Prize winning authors and century-old industrialists, but Martin hated both writing and industry.

“What were you doing in your brother’s room?” Mom asked, overhearing me.

“Snooping. Probably when he wouldn’t let me in the bathroom.”

I snooped in Martin’s room a lot. He’d left me plenty of time for it, and I thought I could get to know him through his mess. The little slots for “interests” on his internet profiles were starkly blank, and I wonder if it bothered him as much as it did me. There wasn’t anything I could research on the sly and pretend we were both interested in. I hoped to see him list a local metal band I could take him to see. Or something about motocross. I knew it wouldn’t be anything I could relate to, but still. The books I bought him went unread in a pile on his cluttered desk. He hadn’t cracked the spines of *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Post Office*, though I wasn’t very surprised at that. When I gave him books, I was embarrassed, knowing that they were terrible gifts but that I hadn’t any better ideas. I really just hoped he was secretive and not one of those people who seem only to be interested in living: providing themselves with the essentials and then consuming them and getting tucked snugly into an adequate bed every night. One of those people who say they like “all kinds” of music, or worse, someone who really means it.

I’d rather my brothers have been slightly interesting rebels than normal people. I wanted them to want to do a little bit of drugs and fuck around and call it performance art more than I wanted them to get shitty, normal, good-kid jobs, but I would have never told them that, and they didn’t seem too keen on the job idea anyway. I wanted them to be lion tamers or internet billionaires (if either still existed), Ping Pong champions, even survivors of parachute-less free fall. Martin’s adoration of physical pleasure worried me. I thought it meant he didn’t want anything he didn’t already have. Really, he probably had it all figured out. I hoped he was planning something more interesting than I could have even thought of. And I hoped that something was legal.

As mid-day approached, Mom switched off the air conditioning and the house exhaled and sagged. The cool air pooled around our feet. We were hoping to sweat Martin out because Mom wouldn't let us walk in and wake him up. I guess she was afraid he wouldn't be sleeping and she told us without telling us that she had mistakenly tried to wake him up recently. An infomercial had been on for half an hour, but we didn't know what to change it to. The summer had just begun.

"Do you have to work today?" Sean asked me.

"No. I took off."

"For *this*?"

"Yes. Are *you* going to be looking for a job this summer?"

"I can't imagine who would hire me for just the summer."

"Summer for you is four months now, not two. So, anyone in the restaurant industry."

"Ew. And be a dishwasher with a bunch of Mexicans?"

"Well, I started that way because I was so young. You could probably jump right to server," I said, knowing Sean would be a terrible server and probably a worse dishwasher.

"I want to know how Martin can sleep and jerk it all day and have a car."

I laughed and fingered the sweaty, useless remote. My left hand sat on the couch next to Sean's and looked about ten years older. His fingernails were so shiny; I was startled to realize he might even have put effort into it.

"It's actually pretty easy," Martin responded from the hallway. Sean peeled himself off the sofa to give Martin a one-armed hug and an awkward, slippery high-five because Mom was standing in the kitchen just to watch. It was sweet, I guess. Martin had buzzed his head in the

three days since I'd seen him and I didn't say anything about it to see if Sean would.

Martin wedged in between us on the couch smelling sweaty and like his bed, which was probably also sweaty. He had those clothes on that could be either pajamas or sports gear: convective, shiny, metallic shorts spotted with fading blotches.

He smacked both our knees while saying "You know, Benjamin Franklin said that masturbation is proof that God loves us."

"No he didn't!" I laughed.

"Then who did?"

"Nobody, retard. He said that about beer," I snapped, not able to help myself. Mom entered the family room and sat in an adjacent recliner.

"Dad's coming home soon, and I want you guys to go to the store and pick up a few things before he gets here."

"Oh man. Why?" Martin said, and I was so ashamed of him. It's hard to tell the difference between someone turning into a teenager and someone turning into an asshole. He heaved himself up from between us and headed over to the computer desk which sat in a corner of the family room and not in his bedroom. He swiveled heavily on a flimsy black desk chair while snapping a few switches. His new haircut revealed unattractive creases on the back of his neck and bluish skin all over his head. The computer buzzing to life sounded just like the bugs outside the breathing screen door.

"Because I said so, and I don't want him to have to go since he has three capable boys who have cars and can go for him." She dropped a list in Sean's lap and went into the living room, which she always claimed was cooler.

“I *don't* have a car,” Sean said and slumped himself farther into the couch, holding the list up for someone else to grab.

“Well, if you ask *nicely*, you can ride with me.” Martin smirked, relishing that he'd hit a nerve.

“I hate you,” Sean said to him and I felt the need to intervene.

“What's wrong with you? Did you fail everything?” I asked.

“Fuck you, dude.”

“And a mouth now, too. Good job,” I said.

“A mouth? How old are you?”

“I'm more perturbed by 'dude' than 'fuck.’”

“I'm perturbed by 'perturbed.' Tell Dad about my mouth. I don't give a shit. At least I tried to actually *do* something and go away to school.” Martin sort of smiled at me, as though I'd stood up for him, when I wasn't sure I had. Sean looked away from both of us and gazed at the quiet TV. Soon it was like we hadn't even been talking.

“We'll take my car,” I said.

*

I didn't want to turn on the AC for a two-mile drive. My brothers couldn't understand this. On the way to the store, we inched behind a squat little hatchback that had recently scraped a huge die-cut sticker off the back window.

“What did it say?” Sean wondered, squinting, gripping for a second at a time the scalding dashboard.

“FIU,” Martin said from the back seat.

“Oh well.”

“Not interesting enough?” I asked.

“No. I guess I feel bad for him.” Sean said. “Couldn’t even stay in that shitty-ass school.”

I didn’t try to defend FIU. Sean thought it was shitty because it was close, or maybe even because I went there. Sean kicked the glove compartment with his Ben Sherman shoes while crossing his little legs. My emergency hammer fell from its Velcroed position.

“What’s this?” Sean asked.

“It’s an emergency hammer.”

He burst out laughing, “You couldn’t hammer your way out of a sack of shit!” He poked hard at my little gut with the flashlight end of the hammer, inviting me to kick his ass right there in my car. In his apparently weakened state, I thought I might have stood a chance.

“No. It’s for when you’re in an accident or end up underwater.” I tried not to be mad.

“Would you be underwater and it not have been an accident?”

I laughed. “That’s why *you’re* in college.”

“Still, it’s pretty practical. I wish I were as practical. I’d never have thought to buy one of those.” He was trying to be nice to me, and I blew it.

“You’ll need a car first.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“I’m just saying. The hammers are cheap. I’ll get you one when you have a car.”

“Did you get one for everyone?” He asked and threw the hammer to Martin in the back.

“No. Be careful, for fuck’s sake,” I muttered.

“Oh! I’ve seen videos online of people going ape-shit with these in junkyards. Have you

smashed anything with it yet?” Martin almost squealed.

“I actually bought it to *avoid* going ape-shit.”

“You know what I mean, though. That little weighted point in such bright plastic. How can you not want to know what it can do?”

“You just said there were videos on the Internet.”

“It’s not the same.”

“Do you think we’re actually being cooked right now?” Sean asked. “Literally.”

“No,” I said, “Martin might start smelling *better* if his flesh were cooking.”

*

The walk from the mouth of the store to the car was enough to coax rivulets of sweat out of the milk and anything else cold we had in our hands. Even the room temperature soda sweated as it dangled in the plastic bags, molding grooves into the fleshy parts of our fingers. I had parked pretty far back in the lot to avoid stray carts and people who parked like assholes. My car wasn’t that nice or even remotely new, but the dents it had when I bought it gave it character. One more dent, I decided, and it would be a piece of shit.

“The new tar smells nice,” I said.

“You’re nuts. The tar’s not even new. The sun’s melting it,” Martin spat. “We may not even make it to the car.” He started making himself laugh. “Mom will be so pissed.”

“They’ll find us here in a million years and try and figure out what the fuck we were thinking going out in such weather,” Sean added.

We’d only been parked for about twenty minutes but plumes of heat wafted out of the car smelling like moldy shoes and fast food. Martin and Sean tossed their bags carelessly into the

backseat. I got in the front and leaned back to make sure nothing was spilling or getting crushed.

“Who cares? It’ll all be curdled when we get home anyway,” Sean said, buckling his hot seat belt in the passenger seat, tossing it from hand to hand. Martin stood outside waiting for the heat in the back to subside.

“Oh shit,” he said quietly. Sean and I didn’t know what he was looking at. I turned around and got comfortable in the driver’s seat, trying to decide whether or not to light a cigarette in front of my impressionable brothers. It was a habit I’d picked up while living alone and one I didn’t think they’d like because they always criticized Dad for it. But I still wondered if they would think me cooler because of it.

Martin leaned in and grabbed the emergency hammer from where he’d left it on the floor of the back seat. He approached a new, black SUV parked directly facing my car.

“What is he doing?” Sean whispered. I wondered if he didn’t want to get out because he’d have to touch his seatbelt again. I didn’t say anything.

Martin tapped the SUV’s rear passenger window once with the hammer and nothing happened. He raised his arm to really smash it a second time.

“STOP!” came a nasal scream punctuated by a loud, tinny gun shot. A squat Hispanic woman in scrubs stood, holding a small pink hand gun, and even she looked surprised that she’d hit him right in what she considered to be the offending hand. She’d gotten pretty close before looking up from her purse. The shot silenced birds and even traffic, though that couldn’t have been true.

It happened so quickly and didn’t seem dramatic enough. Martin was still for a second, probably a microsecond, but it seemed to be forever. I thought night should start falling. It was as

though the course of that bullet had been set while we were sleeping, and a few hours later we just wandered into it. Sean and I didn't look at each other. I don't think we breathed while we sat there and felt inexplicably cooled. Martin dropped the hammer, of course, and a little hole appeared in the car's window, the shattered glass blossoming out from it like the arms of a snowflake. Martin would later tell me that it looked just like his own wound: just like it. I thought it looked like a fucking mess. I suppose he was looking at the hole, or through it, during the fascinating seconds before it bled.

I got out of the car, unafraid of being injured. I noticed Sean making a call on his cell phone inside my car. The forty-something woman stood frozen with the pink gun in her hand.

"I'm sorry!" she said and threw it down, her thick fingers jammed for an anxious second near the trigger. Martin let out an initial, guttural moan and wiped his hand against his shirt like he'd been bitten by a horse fly.

"Are you ok?" I asked. He had on a terrible, twisted frown, but he nodded and was eerily calm, clamping his mouth shut, emitting no more noise or words. His face turned as pale as the rest of his head while his eyes were locked on mine. I kept waiting for him to fall down and die on the tar. A part of me wanted him to start screaming. I thought the air needed it. The gun shot had created a tension that had yet to be broken.

He walked past me and sat in the back seat of my car without closing the door, cautiously and courteously allowing the blood to drip onto the ground. Sean took off his shirt and wrapped it around Martin's hand too loosely to really stop the bleeding, and I probably would have been just as ineffectively solicitous, if I'd even thought of it.

I looked at the black SUV and saw a whimpering baby through the hole in the window

that was letting in the only fresh air.

*

At the hospital, when we found out that Martin would fully recover, Dad was the first one to start making jokes.

“I guess he won’t be painting us any masterpieces for a little while.”

“Or doing anything else with his right hand.” I knew Sean couldn’t resist.

“Luckily he’s ambidextrous,” I muttered.

“No he’s not! No he’s not! I don’t know how he’s going to get through the last month of school!”

“Sorry, Mom. I was just kidding.”

They let us see him within minutes of his arrival at the hospital. Because the gun shot was so public, they’d sent an ambulance. The police said they’d received twelve different calls about it. That irritated me because nothing had happened to anyone else. It was our call to make, and Sean *had* made one. We could have easily driven Martin ourselves. For some reason, I thought we should all be holding our heads in our hands during the few minutes we waited and not making jokes about what he wouldn’t be able to do for several weeks. But he was ok.

The first thing he asked me was “Is that baby ok?” and I said yes. He sat on the edge of a table in the ER, just barely swinging his heavy legs. We couldn’t say that Martin had saved the baby’s life, though, as the nanny was just getting back to the car when he got his hand shot. Martin didn’t seem to care what would happen to the nanny. He seemed to feel bad for someone with poor enough judgment to leave a baby in a hot car and then even shoot toward it. Mom was approached by a tall, thin policeman, who led her behind a set of swaying blue curtains to

discuss the charges, though we could hear everything.

“Aggravated battery? Should be aggravated battery,” she said.

“Well, no ma’am. Not since he’ll fully recover.”

“What about reckless endangerment of that baby?”

“That’s not really your concern, however, she’ll likely be serving time for that. For the battery with a deadly weapon on your son, alone, however, she can receive up to three years.”

“Mom, it doesn’t really matter,” Martin said. She frowned and led the policeman out of the room.

“I’m proud of you,” I said. Martin didn’t say anything. No one else said anything. Dad patted his knee. Sean stood in the corner like he was at the funeral of someone he didn’t really know. I wondered if we’d have anything to say for the rest of the night or the summer. But that was when I realized that we were united by more than blood or interests: we were united by common sense. My family was made up of good people. I thought my brothers would always do the right thing and I pretended, for that very brief moment, that that had something to do with them growing up immediately after me.

“The nanny probably just wanted to see what it could do,” Martin offered finally, smiling. “And jumped at the chance.”

LIFE SUPPORT

“I think I’m ungrowing,” Mom says, her face twisted into a frown that must be taking a ton of effort to maintain. My little sister Paula’s gone to bed because I’m here to take over the late-night talking shift for a few days, a long weekend away from St. Augustine where I’m still living and just waiting tables after having graduated college there. Mom stopped seeing her psychiatrist years ago, which my sister and I called “the talking doctor” when we were little. We liked when she went to the talking doctor. It helped.

“Do you mean shrinking? Don’t be ridiculous,” I said.

“Do you remember Grandma’s hump?”

“You mean Great Grandma’s hump?”

“Yeah.”

“I remember.” Two things I remember about Great Grandma: her hump and her tiny porcelain pill holder. It was beautiful.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get into that writing school, but you’re so young. You have so much to look forward to. But me. My life is really over,” she says and tears up. I’m tired of this. Sometimes I think she’ll live forever because of her lack of activity. But depression is not a hyperbaric chamber. It wears her down. She wears herself down. She looks at me and realizes that I ran out of conciliatory things to say when I was seventeen. She realizes I have my own life now. She tells me I drink too much, and I like that. I hope she thinks about me being out and having fun and maybe sometimes imagining me doing dangerous things. I let her say it while she drinks her beer. I’m not drinking now. I get up to go to sleep on the couch in the living room because Dad has to sleep in the guest room, which used to be my room. We say we love each

other.

“Claire,” Mom grabs my arm after I bend over to hug her where she sits on the couch in the den.

“Yeah?”

“How long are you staying?”

“I think I’m going to head out tomorrow instead of Sunday.”

*

I feel bad starting out the night during the day, but it’s almost summer and it stays light way too long. Happy hour’s over and I’m standing behind the American Legion waiting for my friends. One of them, Erica, is actually a friend but Yvonne’s just a girl I call when I think Erica won’t show up and I need a drinking backup. I will never tell Yvonne she’s a drinking backup, though maybe I am hers too. It really doesn’t matter who’s there as long as I’m not alone. I can’t afford to drink in St. Augustine unless I have a companion because I won’t go into the cheap dive bars alone, the Legion being among the seediest in town.

I’m just glad I’m not at my parents’ house anymore. I could wait here forever. The back of the Legion has a decent view of the spiky, tiny, but admittedly beautiful St. Augustine skyline. On the drive back up to St. Augustine from the rural little town south of Orlando where I grew up, I called people to see if they wanted to do anything. I got text responses to my voicemails.

A group of popped-collar boys are walking by and I check my phone, just to avoid their eyes. Neither Erica nor Yvonne have texted me about being late, which they are usually polite enough to do, so I assume they’re still trying to park somewhere. None of our college parking stickers are good anymore so we can’t park in the campus lot, which is convenient to everything

downtown. I step back from the street and sit cross-legged on an electricity box, lighting a cigarette and looking up at a giant oak tree.

I haven't talked to Wallace in two years, only drunk nods on the way to the bathroom at the Tavern, but he decides to come up to me now. I see him in his yellow board shorts veering toward me as he comes down the cobbled street. He's a scruffy, squawky nineteen-year-old, who used to work with me at Magnet Force, a magnet shop on St. George Street, the pedestrian, mile-long historic street turned gift shop. "Aw, poor Claire," he says.

"Poor Claire what? How are you, Wallace?" I realize I have no specific questions about his life because I don't really know him anymore and I'm never curious enough to check his Facebook profile. I'm genial but I don't want him trying to drink with us with that fake ID he made out of a Barnes and Noble gift card.

"Poor Claire stuck in *shitty* St. Augustine."

I guess he checked *my* Facebook and saw my muted update this morning about not getting into the Iowa Writer's Workshop and having to stay here. It wasn't funny. I usually try and make them funny.

"I'm glad you absolutely adore the town you happened to be born in. Congrats," I say.

"*You* weren't born here. How can you already be sick of it?"

"I got tired of it after four years. What's wrong with you?"

"I get to fuckin' surf every day."

"I hate surfing."

"Things could be worse," he says, shrugging and pantomiming smoking until I hand him a cigarette.

“Ok, so I didn’t get into *Iowa* but I’ll think about kids dying of cholera in Africa and it won’t seem so bad.”

“Wow. You always seemed to be trying too hard to say weird-ass shit. Do they even *get* cholera in Africa? I thought it was malaria...and AIDS, of course,” he adds quietly, like AIDS is a secret.

“But of course!” I say in a French accent.

“Do you write like you talk?” he asks, pantomiming a lighter now with his long, smooth, fingers.

“Why?” I’m surprised because I was thinking I might write about this conversation. “It is kind of funny.”

“It’s too weird. No one talks like that.” He kicks at the thin coquina curb boxing in a palm tree, scuffing the already scuffed rubber of his sneaker.

“Maybe.” I remember moving to St. Augustine and being amazed by coquina, the tiny beautiful shells it was made of and how it could easily absorb enormous impacts, cannon balls still lodged in the sometimes deep but never wide holes in the side of the Fort. It never let an onslaught cause major structural damage. The Fort was never overtaken in a battle. Now I just think about how bad it hurts when I drink too much, pass out on the sea wall, and wake up with intricate coquina imprints on my arms and my face.

“I am sorry you didn’t get in the thing though,” he says.

Yvonne and Erica are walking up together. They must have parked close and spotted each other along the way because I know they weren’t hanging out without me. They don’t do that. Not because I’m so cool but because they hate each other. They are eager to call out to me

to break what was surely a silence and I wave both my arms, the tiny butt of the cigarette burning my eyes and my lips. Wallace, intimidated by an entire group of pretty college graduates (two of which never even worked at Magnet Force), ambles quietly away.

I'm glad they're not complaining about starting out at the Legion, a veteran's bar open to the public. It's filthy: every seat duct taped, unsticky black gum spotting nearly every surface, and full of the nastiest people in town. The slatted closet-style doors in the bathroom don't close all the way. We always just call it the Legion, and after we've had some of their cheap, strong drinks, it sounds like we're saying Lesion. And that's about right. Like a lesion on the skin or a lesion on the brain. Not a legion of people. Not a brotherhood. Maybe legions of people with lesions. We're here because it's cheap and it's early enough that it hasn't overflowed with all the waiters and waitresses in town. We'll leave before that happens, I think while ordering my Yuengling. I'm frustrated that I've actually waited tables at the restaurant next door for four months but still don't see a flicker of recognition in the sunken eyes under the bartender's baseball cap. I'm not sure if there's a discount anyway, and it's too cheap to bother asking.

"Dan's coming out later," Erica says of one of her male friends we've all deemed undateable, not that he's shown any interest in us. Naturally, we speculate that he's gay. He's kind of funny.

"Cool," I respond.

"And," she breathes, waving absently at the bartender holding up her debit card. We leave tabs open. Never do we have the foresight or ability to close a tab immediately.

"And?" I ask.

"Well, there's a *guy*. Geoff. I met him at Zhanra's last night." I hate the dreamy face

she's making now, like he's right of front of her with roses though that will likely never happen. We take one of the little wooden tables along the wall, near the pool table, in case we want to play. I like sitting at the bar to make it easier to keep getting drinks, but no one ever wants to do that with me.

"And he's coming out?" I ask. She always brings out new guys right away. She claims to need our opinion but she really just likes sitting there with a guy's hand up her skirt, trying to make us jealous. Absurdly, if we're lonely enough, it sometimes works.

"Possibly." She must have gotten a noncommittal text from him about it.

"Did you have sex with him last night?" I ask with no emotion. Yvonne looks away, knowing maybe she's not a good enough friend to be in on this.

"No. Just a nice little kiss."

"Cool," is all I give her. Erica looks disappointed. She wants me to ask what he does or what he looks like but I'm tired of learning about guys that I suspect none of us will see again. This happens to all of us, not just Erica. But it happens to her a little more often.

"Iowa, huh?" Yvonne says somberly but with a shitty half-grin on her thin, coral lips. She's read my fucking Facebook too. I put it on there so I wouldn't have to tell anyone in person. Your friends only want to hear about your life when it's going badly. And if yours is going badly, theirs is going worse. If you had a bad dream, then they couldn't sleep at all. If you were dumped after a two year relationship, they were dumped after two years, at an *Arby's*. Or maybe it's not your friends. Maybe it's just my friends.

"Yeah, it's ok. Fuck it."

"A year off can be good for you. You've been having fun since graduation, right?"

Yvonne has already finished her first vodka cranberry, and heads for the bar to get another one or two, not waiting for me to answer. She graduated a year before me and claims to still enjoy waiting tables and drinking all the time. An extremely drunk old man at the bar next to her tries to light a cigarette with dirty, worn-down fingers and the flame is very close to Yvonne's ponytailed mass of curly brown hair.

"It's been fun," I say to myself or maybe Erica. But what if this next year is like the past month? I will fuck even more douchebags, spend all my money on alcohol, and learn only that there are no more lessons to learn here. "I don't know."

"You should have applied to more places, if you wanted out so bad," Erica says, irritated, adjusting the napkin under her pint of Yuengling with both hands. She's even more dedicated to St. Augustine than Yvonne. She's been looking at houses, since the prices are so low. She was lucky to get a teaching job in the area, since they are scarce, but I don't really think that's lucky. I want her to be forced to leave. It's hard for me to realize that not everyone wants to live in a big city, which, after the clarity of just half a beer, I realize is pretty much my ultimate goal in life. It's suddenly not so impressive. I just know I'd be happy there. I also think I would have been happy in the nation's top writing program. If these two were really happy here, I'd be fine with them staying. But I know they're not.

I slip off my flip-flops and prop my feet up on the edge of my seat, itching mosquito bites on my ankles 'til my fingers are covered in blood. But I'm young. Anything disgusting I do feels less so as I watch the old, unfuckable bastards leer and make attempts at pretty girls, mostly other waitresses from the giant restaurant next door. Yvonne comes back to the table with her vodka cranberry and a scratched up black tray of buttery nipples. They're my favorite shot and I

don't care if this is her way of showing off that she makes three times what I do at a restaurant half the size and working half the hours because it's nice that she remembered my favorite shot.

"Listen, guys," Yvonne says, taking a piece of paper out of her blue corduroy purse.

"Ok," I say, taking two buttery nipples in a row. Seems like buttery nipples should always be taken in pairs.

"You might think it's dumb, but I just got this chain letter where you send someone a pair of flip-flops in a big manila envelope and then you make six copies of this letter and send them out, putting your address and shoe size in this spot, and you end up with thirty six pairs of flip-flops for the price of one!"

"Jesus! My sister was telling me about this yesterday. And it *is* fucking stupid. I can't wrap my mind around how it works. And it's just too many goddamn shoes!" I say.

Yvonne looks hurt and even though Erica doesn't like her, she wants to make her feel better, I guess. "I think it sounds cool. Mail one to me." Maybe they all just want to rally against me, now. And they can all stay here forever, happy and bored and walking around in their fucking flip-flops, talking about how dumb I was to ever leave.

*

My sister shows me her flip-flop chain letter and I try not to let my first response be, you're eighteen and *this* is the stuff you're up to instead of looking for a job? I love seeing her, and I know she loves seeing me. I try to be a good sister during the few days I can make it down.

"What is it?"

"Well, it's like a chain letter. You buy one pair of flip-flops and mail them to this address in spot one and then you write down your shoe size and address in spot two and send this letter to

six friends, anyway, you end up with thirty-six pairs of flip flops for the price of one!”

There are short phrases that you hear a lot, hopefully, like “I love you” or not too often like “I love someone else” but the vast majority of sentences have never been uttered before and will never be uttered again. I learned about this in a language theory class and it comes to mind when I hear myself say “Why would I need thirty-six pairs of flip-flops?”

“Why *wouldn't* you need thirty-six pairs of flip-flops?” Paula says and I wonder if her voice will ever sound adult to me. She hasn't moved away from home and probably won't for a while. When she starts moving stuff from place to place, she'll understand.

“Don't you want to get out of here, though?” I can say things like this in the den at three in the afternoon because Mom won't be up for hours and Dad's mowing the lawn.

“Of course,” she looks down, frowning. “But it's not as easy for me.” Not much happens in her life so I should have acted more excited about her flip-flops.

“Why?”

“Because it's not just Mom, you know. I have problems, too.”

“Yeah, but you can admit it. You're smarter than Mom. You're on the medications and I've seen you get so much better. I remember when you wouldn't set foot in Publix.”

“The medicine got me through high school, but I'm not going to college. I don't know what I'm doing.” If she truly doesn't want to go to college, I have no advice for her. College was my only plan and now that I've graduated, I wonder who's more lost.

“Well, I just mean, you'll be surprised what you end up having to get rid of, when you *do* start moving around.”

“Flip-flops aren't heavy,” she says while walking away from me and into her bedroom.

I've upset her but I'll let her cool down for a while then take her for ice cream and we'll smoke in the car and I'll try to talk to her about Mom in a way that lets her know that I'm still bothered by what's happening even though I've moved away.

If she had a chance, a real chance, to be out of here, she'd take it, toting all those shoes. She can't remember the days when Mom got out of bed before sunset, and she's probably seen even worse since I've left.

*

One of the gross old dudes creeps his way in to the Legion, a bright yellow, multi-pocketed shirt flapping at the void created by his gut, and he doesn't even buy a drink. He stands with his back to one of the windows and stares, trying to decide if the place is worth his investment in a three dollar gin and tonic. He stares with disturbing equality at every human in there with a vagina, his completely round head tipped forward in almost calculated creepiness. I could vomit into my pint glass and still walk out of the Legion feeling like a winner. We decide to move it to the Tavern where at least the creeps are younger, and sometimes we even go home with them.

The St. George Street Tavern is a long, thin, dark strip of high-backed wooden booths, leading us always to believe that we can have intimate conversations despite the incredibly loud music thumping from the digital jukebox. It's easier to avoid the old men or getting hit on at all when we pack ourselves two or three deep at the table. We position ourselves differently when we do want boys to join us, sitting farther apart from each other with all of our legs almost imperceptibly spread. There's no lock on the bathroom door here, either. But the drinks are almost as cheap as the Legion and, despite its location in the very center of the quaint historic

district, a tourist rarely wanders in. Most of St. Augustine's tourists fall either into the biker bar or twelve dollar martini bar crowds.

Dan appears at the edge of our long, wooden booth, rubbing his gut. "I know why Chinese people are so skinny. It's 'cause their food makes you shit so fast, comes out just like the noodles that went in," he says by way of explaining his lateness. We don't care. He joins Yvonne, alone on her side of the booth, and takes a plastic cup from the stack we always keep on the table, filling it with our pitcher.

"There are fat Chinese people," I say.

"Be nice!" Yvonne says to me, gripping my forearm hard across the table. She's not smiling. She's drunk, sweat gathering at her curly hairline.

"How was work?" I ask Dan, my standby question. Sometimes I accidentally ask it of people I should have remembered were unemployed. I remember, though, from the two or three other times I've met Dan, that he works at a fancy nursing home right downtown. He tries to make his job sound sad and gross all the time, but at least those old people have money.

"Good. Got everybody fed. No one died."

"I could never put my parents in one of those," Erica says, taking the cigarette out of my mouth and puffing on it ineptly, her fingers splayed out all the way.

"We don't have to worry about that for a long time," I say.

"My parents are in their sixties," Erica responds, sitting up every three seconds to look at the front door.

"Oh yeah," I say. They all raise their eyebrows, remembering that I'm the baby of the group, and that some of these people have half-siblings the ages of my parents, in their early

forties. I'm not too much younger than my friends but my parents were very young when they had me.

"Mine are old, too." Yvonne says, her chin resting on the closed top of a water bottle she's brought but hasn't once sipped out of yet. Hers are what? Her whats are old? I should ask if I could have some water. Maybe I will.

Erica's waiting on Geoff, Yvonne's nearly passed out already, and I don't know Dan well enough to have an easy conversation. I count out my cigarettes. I'm just glad no one's asked how my visit home went. I don't want to tell them about it. Alright, I do, but I don't want to have to volunteer it. It's all I can think about. I kick off my flip-flops again to sit cross-legged in the huge booth, resisting the urge to scratch at the crusty, bloody pustules on my ankles. I'm surprised I always remember to put them back on when I get up, at my drunkest still knowing that I need a barrier, even a thin, foam one, between the bar floor and my bare feet.

I lean forward and see that Geoff's sitting at the edge of my side of the booth, Erica between us. I hadn't seen him come in. I accidentally shake his hand a second time after he makes the circle of introductions. Everyone laughs. He's tall with a buzzed head and dark circles under his eyes. He might be twenty-five or thirty-five. We're all quiet while Geoff and Erica talk, looking at them and nodding sometimes like we're having one conversation. Geoff has bought us two more pitchers. I can't hear anything he's saying but I can hear his awful rural Florida drawl. We shouldn't have two more pitchers but there they are on the table, getting warm because this isn't a fancy place with ice bags or any shit like that to keep them cold.

Erica's too soon confessing her frailties and flaws in an effort to seem endearing: why none of her other boyfriends have worked out, the constant ache in her back, her strategy to burp

in front of new prospects to weed out the wimps. And to prove it, she produces a burp: a forced, flimsy one. I think it would have been better if it were honest and resounding. The way she's been chugging beer, I can't believe it's not.

I wonder if my face looks normal since it feels warm and numb. I guess we're talking about life support. The talk everyone feels compelled to have, with anyone, after they hear something sad about a coma victim on the news. Dan's saying that some old people deny their mortality for so long that they hesitate to inform anyone of their wishes, and before you know it, they're hooked into dozens of machines living for them, and the family's left trying to puzzle out what they might have wanted, which conveniently coincides with their budget and/or the impending inheritance. "It must be easy to write about us," Dan says to me, emptying one of the pitchers.

"I try and make interesting friends. You seem to have great stories and you don't even want to write them."

"No, I just mean, like, fuckin' Americans. They'll unplug anyone for the right price. It's all about greed and selfishness."

"I try and stay away from such vast generals." I can't believe I tried to work my mouth around the word "generalizations." I can barely think it.

*

Mom, Paula, and I are watching TV at two in the morning, and a man, half decapitated by a snapped fan belt only to have the gaping wound stitched together again, stares blankly out of a dark brown, pockmarked face. The blood fell out of his head and now he is brain dead. His heart and extremities tried to pump some more up there, but it was too late.

“Your Dad,” Mom says condescendingly “wants to be kept alive if he’s brain dead.” She says it with such disdain that I’m surprised she’s repeating his wishes for us to hear. His snores emit rhythmically from the guest room like a badly pitched heart monitor.

“What a fucking depressing show you guys are watching,” I say, though I’m watching it too, and I watch these real life ER shows all the time, alone. “And by the way, Mom. I want that too.”

“What?”

“If I’m brain dead. I want to be kept alive.”

“For how long?”

“Until the money runs out, I guess,” I say, not knowing which money I’m referring to. Mine or theirs or maybe pooled from relatives. Mine wouldn’t last a business day on those machines, probably.

“Not me.” She chuckles. “Coma: give me two weeks. Totally brain dead: give me one.” Paula and I have nothing to say to this. So Mom continues while unwrapping and rewrapping the soaking paper towel around her plastic cup of beer, “You’d probably be so glad! You’d be like woo-hooo!” She tosses half-bent arms in the air in a quick little seated dance. She throws her head back and laughs.

I try and figure out if I can craft this into a funny enough story to share somehow with a group of people at a bar, but I can’t, and so I keep it to myself.

*

“Me too,” Erica says to Geoff, and I realize we’re still talking about life support. I wonder if I’d joined in at all. “I want to be kept alive. I don’t care what the brain monitor says.

People come *back*.” In every conceivable way tonight, she’s told him “I would be an enormous burden.” This revelation dawns on him in the strained way he looks down at her, much taller even while sitting, but the fact that he runs his fingertips up underneath the hem of her skirt, in my plain view, says that this in no way interferes with his fucking her tonight. And neither will I. Is it cruel to sit there and let people be themselves?

“They still fuckin’ go at it, you know?” Dan says.

“What.” Yvonne manages from beneath her arms. No one can follow vague statements anymore.

“The folks at the home. They have sex all the time. One even broke his hip doing it last week. I had to pick him up.”

We all cringe. We sit there deciding whether or not we’d still want to be horny when we’re ninety.

“I hope I’m still horny then,” I say.

“Oh, yeah?” Geoff flicks his eyes at me, waiting for the glorious drunken turning point when the girls at the table divulge their most intimate thoughts. He doesn’t know that we’re past that though: too drunk to be giddy and revealing but not drunk enough, or maybe just too tired, to start making out.

“Not me. I’d rather be dead than still following my dick around. Especially if it’s leading me to ninety-year-old pussy.” Dan sticks his tongue out, yellow and furry from too much smoking. I’m so drunk I’m trying to imagine that tongue in my mouth or circling my belly button, but it’s making me gag on my cigarette. Even at my drunkest, it’s hard to imagine going home with someone each of my friends and acquaintances have systematically deemed

unfuckable.

“Maybe it’s like high school, though, when you realized the middle schoolers looked so little. Maybe ninety year olds look normal to you when you’re ninety.” I think my statement is pretty profound but can’t say it eloquently enough. Really, though, we can’t imagine any scenario in which we’d be really excited to fuck a ninety-year-old.

Now we can only think of the saddest or funniest things. Sometimes they’re both, which is why we’re thinking of my old story of the sixty-year-old woman dying of a heart attack in the parking lot of the Dairy Queen she’d worked at for ten years, and I’d worked at for three months. Erica encourages me to repeat it for Geoff, and I feel bad using the end of this woman’s life as a go-to bar story, but I do it anyway.

Erica’s laughing and looking guilty, and I think it’s maybe about my Dairy Queen story, but she’s saying something and kind of pointing, even though I’m right next to her and she’s hiding her face in the front of Geoff’s shirt. I’m mortified when I realize what she’s talking about. “And she looks up like a deer caught in the headlights, and then stuffs it away under her sheets!” A few days ago, my roommate let Erica in and she caught me sniffing the shirt of the guy I’d fucked for two weeks before he’d abruptly stopped calling me. She tells it like it’s a funny story, and I kind of want to kill her. Whore. Fucking wh-ore. But my mouth doesn’t form the words in time. I give up on being mad.

Yvonne tries to sit all the way up and takes the opportunity, as she does most nights, to complain about her posture. “I feel like I can never sit all the way up.”

“It’s ‘cause you’re drunk,” I say and laugh. I’m at the point of laughing at things that aren’t funny, which means I’m going to throw up soon.

“No. Maybe I’m shrinking.” Yvonne’s pretty shitfaced and she phrases this thought more cohesively than Mom had.

“What’s wrong?” Dan asks me, maybe because we’ve run out of other things to say.

“Nothing. Why do you say that?”

“You’re making a face.”

“Maybe my face is making me.”

“What?”

“She’s just mad she has to be here with us.” Erica offers.

“Not true.”

“How else can you explain it? You didn’t get into a school far away. You don’t have time to apply anywhere else. You’ll be here for another year at least, and you’re fucking miserable.”

“It’s not so bad,” Yvonne says quietly, her eyes almost closed.

“We’re supposed to sit here and try and make you feel better about having to stay here with us?” Erica continues, really letting it out now, and I don’t have much of an argument. “You should just move back in with your parents if you hate it here so much.”

I can’t think of anything to say, and so I kind of just hold her hand for a second, and we all get quiet.

*

“Claire, you’re blacking out again. Ugh, I gotta get outta here too,” Erica mumbles. I don’t really believe her because I think I remember everything, but then I look down and see a pile of white between the blue of my jeans. Three cigarettes have rolled between my thighs, and I’m glad I didn’t manage to get any of them lit before they fell out of my lips.

Geoff stands to leave with Erica, leaning forward over the table as crowds push past behind him. “I got this super tampon in,” Erica complains. “Even though I’m only bleeding a little. It’s giving me a headache.” Her eyes widen and she looks up at Geoff and reiterates “Just bleeding a little. Almost gone.” He’s heard her though, and starts walking out the back door. We’d be stunned if we were able to be stunned. She’s parked out the front but she follows him out the back, as though he just meant to get out of the way of the crowd and wait for her. And maybe he did. So they’re gone and I think Dan’s in the bathroom or hiding out somewhere to see if we’re going to buy another pitcher. Yvonne is asleep on the table and I’m already aware of forgetting about her.

I’m so drunk I start to think my teeth don’t fit together when I close my mouth, and I wonder if they ever did and if I’m just becoming aware of the problem. How was I fooled before? How did I chew? I want to say this. Have I said this out loud to no one? Did I just hear someone else say this in another booth? I want to call and ask someone about this, someone whose shirt Erica caught me sniffing, and I’m thankful for the terrible cell phone signals in the downtown bars. I threw that shirt away, stuffed it right into the tiny garbage can in the kitchen. My roommate was mad I wasn’t going to donate it to the thrift store. I wanted it go somewhere and rot and rot and rot.

Then I’m out front though I don’t remember the journey through the crowd. I’m proud of myself for picking the direction of my car. The homeless man perched atop the garbage can at the corner of Hypolita and St. George always tells me I walk like a cripple. “What’s wrong with your legs?” is how he puts it tonight, cackling like it’s really funny. I make a mad face at him and he opens his mouth and gasps like he can’t believe he finally hurt my feelings. He has a giant

black garbage bag with him all the time, and I'm dying to know what he thinks is important enough to haul around. No one knows his name and everyone calls him Spyder and we realized that we all *imagined* it being spelled with a Y even though, of course, we'd never seen it written anywhere. Maybe Spyder thought he was better than a city, better than his friends, better than his family, better than everyone he'd ever loved, and he packed up that black bag, and came here to sit on that garbage can.

The moment comes when I'm relieved that it's happening now and not in the morning: I'm throwing up on my feet in the street, thinking for some reason this fucking puddle won't splash back at me. It looked like it could be a dark, bottomless absorber of my contents but now I've learned that it's not.

Spyder doesn't get up but pivots all the way around on his garbage can, facing me. He pities a drunk. He understand this. "Whoa, you're ok girlie. Get it out. You're going to be ok. Everything's going to be ok."

"Not tonight," I say, vomit drizzling from my nostrils as I stand to face him. I wipe it down my chin quickly and feel it starting to cake in the dense humidity. I try for a minute, but I can't imagine how I'm going to feel tomorrow. It's a relief.

MOUSE HEIGHT

Three sixteen-year-old boys stand bored at midnight on the bridge into Tomorrowland. Two lean against the concrete railing and look down into the perfect dark water, a line of mallards swim through the pink and purple reflection of Cinderella's castle. It's grad night at Magic Kingdom and thousands of Florida high school seniors, who have spent their lives pretending to hate Disney and everything it stands for, are losing their minds to mainstream pop in front of three different stages throughout the park. Lines for every ride are short, but there are just too many options. It's paralyzing.

Mickey comes around the corner, and begins traversing the bridge, swaggering his jolly way to a meet and greet. It's May and still hot, even this late. Martha, in the Mickey suit, is pleased with the new invention that she is eventually hoping to reveal to other cast members. An engineering graduate student, she has devised a small portable AC unit that she wears around her neck inside the costume. She based the design on ones meant for soldiers wearing protective suits in biological warzones. It's electromechanical, because she can't yet afford the elements to build a thermochemical compressor. A part of it, a bulge at least, may be visible from outside of the costume, and this would not be tolerated. Soon, she thinks, she won't need this job anyway.

The three boys, in various colored plaid shirts and various shades of floppy hair, stand against the side of the bridge. She tries to avoid them altogether and make it around the corner to the character pavilion. She's already running late. But as she passes, the three boys grab her. She can't see any of them at all and can only assume it's them: three pairs of hands strong not because they have to try to be strong but because they are young. At first, she says nothing. It happens all the time.

In high school, she had dressed up in a giant foam lighthouse costume for a parade and people had grabbed and hit her all day. She knew what she was getting into when she applied at Disney. She was disappointed she would sometimes have to be Mickey, and not just Minnie. She was mouse height, so would play any number of characters of that size. But still she took the job. A part of her enjoyed the anonymous, lighthearted abuse: people exuberantly clutching her, not knowing or caring anything about her. It's only about them. The guest's enjoyment. She said this during her interview and they had smiled.

So she let the three pairs of hands grab her, two pairs around each of her biceps, and a third grabbing her around the small of her back. She thinks of the head of the suit as a helmet. It's large enough to protect her from most major assaults. She is absolutely not supposed to speak. It takes the magic out of a moment like this, but she becomes aware that this is no longer a magic moment. The exuberance of three high schoolers can be more dangerous than she wants to admit to herself. They hoist her up onto the concrete rail by her arms; briefly she teeters in a sitting position.

So she screams. She screams. "Stop it! Are you crazy!?"

The hands around her left bicep weaken, "Shit, dudes. Mickey's a girl."

But the hands from her back are now under her knees, expertly dodging her kicks, and they grip her ankles and push them up, up into the pink and purple sky.

The fall alone will not kill her. Martha knows however, while she falls, that her AC unit will electrocute her. She does not have time to realize that this simple fact scares her. It is just a fact. And through the dense, dark webbing of the costume's head, she sees the lights of Tomorrowland outshining the short burst of electricity that ends her life.

The boys lean over the rail excitedly. One of them slips a bit as he leans over the rail and hits his face on the concrete. He looks down into the water with broken glasses: there's no time to assess their damage. He looks through the cracks and sees Mickey lying still, water rippling in pink and purple waves, and ducks flapping their way up out of the water.

The water is shallow, though Mickey's entire body is submerged. Only the front part of his smiling face bobs out of the water. The boys know people must have seen them do this: seniors from other Florida high schools. They don't know anyone around them on the bridge. And actually no one is giving them accusatory looks. The best thing to do, they are certain, is to run into Tomorrowland.

They walk, shaking and stiff-legged, onto the People Mover, the slow moving ride that never has a line because it never stops moving. They ride it around and around. The attendants don't make them get off. Every ten minutes, the ride passes high above the bridge, and on their first pass, no one is looking into the water. They aren't sure if they are relieved or not. On the second pass, they see the flashing yellow light of a security truck moving along the edge of the small lake, as though it had emerged from underneath Cinderella's castle. Three dark figures wade quickly into the water. Dozens of laughing teenagers point down from the bridge. Seeing Mickey on his ass is a rare sight.

The boys are suddenly submerged in the darkness as the track veers again into the outer edge of Space Mountain. They can't see each other. A booming voice explains the perils of space travel, and they almost have the short script memorized. Their car finally passes back into the light, and they look at each other. One of them is worried that if he vomits, he will be asked to get off the ride. They won't get off the ride because they don't know where else to go.

A third pass over the bridge comes around so soon. They are ready to see a grand spectacle. They are ready to see police crawling through the crowd, and strong teenage limbs pointing up at them from all around while they circle the scene of the crime. But the security truck is gone. The water is dark, and the castle's reflection is beautiful, unwavering. The booming voice again repeats its speech about the limitless possibilities the future holds.

ALL AGES

“You did what?” J.R. demands, digging his dirty fingernails into the sides of the spongy black plastic encasing his iPhone. I know he’s talking to his sister Keely because I saw her smiling picture light up from the middle of the metal table. I saw her slender face, the long brown hair, and her big white teeth. She looked beautiful. We’re outside and it’s dark and we’ve made the switch from cigarettes and coffee to cigarettes and beer because Dagmar’s, our favorite sufficiently alt coffee shop, caters to our every need. Keely is seventeen and I slept with her last night, and I think she might be telling her brother she slept with a twenty-six year old guy, but not that it was me. If she’d said it was me, he’d be looking at me.

Now he’s looking at me, where I sit across from him, but he’s rolling his dark eyes with exasperation. He uses his free hand to roughly rub at his buzzed head. Then he fingers the gauge in his ear.

“Why are you such a fuckup?” he asks her, quietly enough so that I know he’s really upset. He’d upbraid her loudly if he didn’t really care, make her a point of conversation with acquaintances at other tables around us. Dumb bitches, little slutty sisters. But he doesn’t want to do that, though he’ll likely discuss it with me afterward. “Fuck. Why did I invite you to that show? Who is this asshole?”

We have the most coveted spot in front of the coffee shop, an alcove surrounded by glass windows with wide wooden benches built into the walls. We’ve convinced ourselves the wood is more comfortable than the metal chairs. The windows are covered in flyers for upcoming concerts, readings, and people needing roommates. The benches are carved and marked with things like “HIPSTERS SUCK,” LGBT rainbows, and, of course, several drawings of cocks. We

argue about which is our favorite from time to time. One of them I drew nine years ago. No one ever votes for it. I stare at it as I listen to Keely's impassioned voice on the other end of the iPhone. I suspect she's trying to assert her adulthood to him, because he's ten years older and she has always wanted to do so. It's probably the only reason she chose me last night.

A woman walks by without shoes and her yellow skirt slips down with each step to reveal a bit of her flat ass. She's my age and relatively pretty but why does she look old? Not old, but older. She has laugh lines and crow's feet. I can see them from the side as she stops to talk to friends. She does smoke, which may explain it. I wonder if someone who doesn't wear shoes has a job, and what that job is exactly. Her corgi follows her, unleashed, but stops to smell the wilting gladiolas in a corrugated metal pot in front of the alcove. What would happen if he ate one? I should know that.

When we met here at Dagmar's before the show last night, Keely was surprised I knew what the flowers were called. She had taken the perpetually full metal water dish normally left out for dogs and used it to water the flowers.

"The gladiolas thank you," I said. What a stupid fucking thing to say, but I could tell by the half-smile on her smooth, shiny face that I shouldn't go on to explain that I used to work in the garden department of Lowe's before being laid off. Let my flower-naming proficiency be a mystery. I hoped, and was eventually proven right, that it wouldn't take much more than that to impress her.

J.R. is quiet on his end, listening. I expect him to hound me about who it was. Did I see anyone macking on Keely at the show? What about at the bar afterward where J.R. was surprised to discover she had a fake ID and even more surprised that she never had to show it? I thought

she was with us the whole time, he'll say. Maybe he'll figure it out. I contemplate standing up and shrugging like I can't wait for this, but I have a full beer and we have the alcove. We spent two hours trying to get the alcove. I can't leave. He knows I just temporarily gave up on the job search and live with my parents and can sleep until three tomorrow.

Seventeen-year-olds don't care if you live with your parents. They are relieved, however, if you have a private entrance to your bedroom. They don't care if you tell them you love them during sex, and they're good about not asking about it afterward, even if you almost wanted them to.

"If I tell Mom and Dad, you'll be in a mountain of shit," he whispers. He rarely gets upset, because he smokes a lot of pot. He sometimes gets upset when I don't want any, even when I explain the job hunt. I don't understand why he wants me to smoke it so badly, as though my abstaining is a condemnation. I don't know how anyone could be in a mountain of shit. On one, maybe. I don't like the way he's talking to her, but I can't explain it. I can't. It can't be stopped.

A truck that doesn't understand the rules pulls into the parking spot facing the alcove with its headlights still on. There aren't real rules, but we have Dagmar's rules that involve turning off your lights as you pull into parking spaces at night, notifying others of your intentions to vacate the alcove, and refilling the water bowl for future dogs or wilting flowers. J.R. would probably like to add to the list that regulars shouldn't sleep with each other's seventeen-year-old sisters.

So we sit in the blinding beam, certainly not moving from our spot. It can't be much longer before the driver of the truck realizes his error, or turns them off because he was going to

get out anyway.

“Well, I hope you’re not planning on seeing him again. At least, not with a face.” J.R. sometimes alludes to owning guns though I’ve been afraid to ask if that’s more than just talk. “What do you think it means? It means I would fucking disfigure him,” he explains. I’m not sure why sleeping with his sister warrants disfigurement. How old does she have to be before he stops thinking that way?

After a second, I’m even more upset to hear him say, “Good. That’s right. I mean, at least someone your own age. And maybe next time a working man.”

J.R. got a job at Taco Bell four months ago after failing out of his second attempt at community college. But he is, as he will often say, a working man. When I complain about the uselessness of my degree, he calls me “college boy,” and laughs. Dust, mosquitoes, and ash swirl in the light between J.R. and I, mostly moving upward.

“Well, I’m never fucking taking you to an all-ages show again,” he says and hangs up. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

“That’s rough,” I say, in a tone I’ve been practicing in my head.

“I don’t understand why bands even opt to have all-ages shows,” he says, as though the fact that the concert existed is the biggest reason why Keely slept with someone. “Like we really need to see a bunch of kids crowd-surfing while their parents wait in the back.”

This is how he wants to talk about it. He doesn’t want to dissect the loss of her virginity. He may or may not know if it was the loss of her virginity, but it was.

“Well, asshole, we were those kids,” I try to joke. “We went to those same shows downtown, or out by the beach.”

“But we didn’t look so stupid. I mean, do you really want to see that?”

The headlights go off. J.R. is only a tense, smoking shadow as my eyes readjust.

“No, I’d rather not see it again.”

I had told her, afterward, while I held her in my bed, that even though I was almost ten years older, we were really in the same position. I thought it was endearing, the economy bringing us together, dissolving our gap. But seventeen-year-olds, like everyone else, do care if you have a job. They don’t care if you have a degree in Communications. They don’t care if you’ve submitted thirty-nine resumes and have been on four interviews. They don’t care if you actually really liked them, and told them so, and gave them your number, and are really looking forward to hearing from them.

TELLING COMPUTERS AND HUMANS APART

I'm in the Downtown Disney parking lot and he starts to ask for money but I hold up my hand like a crossing guard to tell him no. I slam my car door shut by its frameless window, like I'd told myself I'd stop doing. Dusk falls pink and almost as neon as the AMC sign that glows above us. Hundreds of people file into these huge parking lots every night because going to Downtown Disney is like going to Disney for free if you can avoid spending money at any restaurants, venues, shops, or the movie theatre. The traffic moves so slowly he hardly regards it while scuttling toward me. He wants to tell someone a story over a good meal. It's a line, but a good one, and he doesn't look too dirty and is well past the age of virility that makes men seem threatening. I guess he might be either forty or sixty though he looks sixty.

"Ok, but we're going to McDonald's," I tell him. I call my friends to let them know that I won't make the movie. They're upset because they're in high school and have been planning this for days. A few weeks into college, I've already learned that there are more important things in this world.

He asks me if I know what a CAPTCHA is, and I tell him that I do, but I want to hear him try to explain it. "No, please explain."

He smears his dog-poop shaped pile of ketchup into an asterisk with his stubby fries and says, "Well, when you're on the internet and you see wavy letters you have to type, that's a CAPTCHA. They prove that you are a human or...humanoid," he laughs.

"Because computers still can't recognize images," I gently explain to my new friend Jonah. I taste my hot-fudge sundae in tiny bites. We sit outside because it's nice out and security goes by every so often in their golf carts. I am a young woman eating with a homeless man, so

I'm trying to play it safe, though he seems harmless and took an adorable amount of time to pick out his value meal, tugging at the hem of his dingy green winter coat appropriately inappropriate for September. People like him do have to wear their beds. "Isn't it an acronym?"

"I don't know," he responds, looking just above my head. His milky eyes had been clamped on to my face in the parking lot but now that I've been lured in, he doesn't care to examine me.

"Well, what about them?"

"Well, I think I have to start a little earlier than that." He's not hostile at all but I start to get the feeling he'll try and keep me there at that concrete table until my ass falls asleep.

"Well, do it."

Jonah had been sleeping under the go kart tracks at Old Town for a couple of days. I have to keep myself from saying habitual things like "that sucks." So I decide not to say anything and that's fine with him. I could probably walk away and he'd continue his conversation with the dragon made of Legos looming behind me.

He says it was strangely peaceful to sleep under the tracks while people zoomed above: the louder the better. I'd been to Old Town a week before, and I was surprised to see homeless people there. It isn't even a real town. It's the two-story fake downtown of a supposedly idyllic little burg, and it's getting dirtier and scarier every year. It's roughly a ten minute drive from Disney property but might as well be on the other side of the world. I'd seen the go kart tracks but couldn't believe the price people were paying to do it. I'd also seen a kid, maybe seventeen, scrambling across the tracks in uniform to retrieve a piece of trash between carts, and I think now that I feel worse for the kid *on* the tracks than anyone sleeping under them.

Well, one night Jonah woke up to find enough money under his face to get a beer from a sexy little beer-cart girl who'd practiced a straight face for just such occasions. The homeless, the only real residents Old Town had ever known, were still customers and were ultimately the cause of, and slapdash solution to, the attraction's economic problems. It was ten at night on a Friday, and the beer-cart girl wished she'd been stationed closer to the free fall "sky coaster" because her pedestrian street corner was starting to get blustery, creepy, and darker and darker as the shops closed. He held out his two dollars and she gave him something, and he supposed it was the only beer that cost two dollars. Otherwise, that would have been very rude of her.

He debated gulping it fast and heading back to the tracks before the go karters got too drunk to keep karting. But it was a nice August evening and he'd left all of his things under the tracks and he felt light and airy, his elbows tipping up like he'd stepped out of a tight doorframe. He tried pretending all of his things were at a home. When that proved difficult, he walked around with his nose in the air because he'd almost thoroughly convinced himself that he had a lot of stuff in a storage unit somewhere.

Next to the arcade where half of the games, and half of the light bulbs, were broken, he stood and watched a little girl, four maybe, trying to maneuver a dollar bill into a dark slot against the wall that didn't seem connected to anything. He squinted and was annoyed by her lack of motor skills because he wanted to know what that dollar would do. When the slot finally licked it up, a dark corridor brightened revealing a dummy in an electric chair that screamed and swore and shook very violently while getting shocked. Its plastic head smashed against the back of the chair too rhythmically to be convincing, though it was pretty scary. I tell Jonah that it couldn't have possibly sworn. The little girl pissed her pants and Jonah had to pause to make

sure he hadn't as well before laughing at her out loud. The girl's parents were upset and pointed scowls at Jonah but it was probably more about the electric chair than Jonah, though it might have been both. He walked along, sipping from his plastic beer cup and drinking in the soupy night air. He noticed for the first time (though he'd made the sojourn to Florida nearly every year for the past ten years) that there weren't any fireflies in Central Florida and he debated leaving that night to try and make it back up north to catch the last of them before it got cold.

Anyway, he took his sweet time sipping that little cup of beer, lounging on one bench and then another and sometimes at the wrought iron tables of dark ice cream parlors that wouldn't let him sit there during the day. He didn't bother trying to look pathetic enough to ask for money because most of the people still at Old Town were drunk, which meant they would be generous with their friends but not strangers.

He thought he fell asleep on a bench in front of the haunted house because he blinked and then there was a man sitting next to him. He thought it might have been one of the people who try all night to get tourists to go into that crappy haunted house because they can move like a shadow when they want to. They might be demons.

I can't help but roll my eyes.

"But he wasn't dressed that way," Jonah insists.

"Like a demon or someone who worked at the haunted house?"

Anyway, he looked too normal, even though he moved like a shadow. He was bald with wisps of brown hair clinging oily and close to the sides of his head. He was short and thin and wore a Disney t-shirt under an unbuttoned pink Hawaiian shirt. Jonah knew that somewhere on that Disney t-shirt would be a little hole covered by a green iron-on starfish and that that was

why they were five for a dollar. Five was too many to carry so Jonah had had to haggle them down to two, which they didn't know how to price. This might have been at a store in Old Town but he couldn't remember.

“Hello there,” the bald man said.

“Why hello.”

“Can I buy you a drink?”

“No. I'm desperate but I'm not that desperate,” Jonah laughed but then realized that the last of his beer had drizzled out of his sleeping hand and down the hem of his pants, pooling in the arch of his moldy sneaker.

“It's not like that at all, sir. I have a business proposition for you.” The bald man had no accent. He sounded like a news anchor, but he sure didn't look like one. His eyes were red but he didn't talk like he was drunk or high.

“For me? Are you sure you know who you're talking to?” Jonah referred to himself: his torn Disney shirt and hoodie, the stained green corduroy pants he'd found flattened on the road like someone had carefully ironed them onto it.

“Well, I didn't catch your name but you seem to be an upstanding fellow.”

“I'm Jonah and I'm fifty-five years old and I haven't had a home for three years.”

“Which is why I thought you might be open to the opportunity I'm presenting to you.”

Bald man sat with his fingers patiently crossed like he was on Larry King.

“Are you a demon?”

“I forgot to mention that I am *not* a demon,” the bald man responded quickly and without a smile. “I'm in computers.” The phrasing of this sentence momentarily blew Jonah's mind but

then he remembered the drink offer.

“Well, then you got yourself a deal! I’ll have a gin and tonic.”

It didn’t matter what Jonah wanted to drink because what he got was a mickey, as he calls it, and the bald man assumed that Jonah wouldn’t know the difference between passing out on his own on a bench and being knocked out by the first drink that wasn’t beer that he’d had in two weeks. He hadn’t even had to leave the bench to get it. The bald man smiled like a demon while Jonah took a sip. In his head, Jonah called himself a lucky dog. He would later be upset that he’d passed out before remembering to ask what the actual drink was called because he’d kind of liked it.

When he woke up, he was in the passenger seat of what smelled like a rental minivan: the light peppering of fast food and smoke people thought they could get away with. A large piece of machinery clunked along in the back. The bald man drove and when Jonah woke up, the bald man acted.

“Oh my gosh, Jonah. I’m so glad you’re okay! I thought I was going to lose you!”

“You never *had* me.” He was coming slowly out of the haze. “I don’t even know your name.”

“You can call me Boss.”

“Are we going to Kissimmee?”

“No.” Boss was incredibly upset that Jonah had already woken up, and Jonah wasn’t too dense to feel that. It was still dark and Jonah could tell they were approaching Kissimmee by the frequency of the red lights on 192 and the reduction of the neon glow that dominates Orlando. Jonah figured that if he ran into another homeless person in New York City or Timbuktu they

could rhapsodize about the various regions of Florida because it is the annual homeless Mecca. Boss knew this better than anyone.

The van pulled sharply off the road into the parking lot of an abandoned Chinese restaurant that stood alone on a weedy plot of land. A little courtyard on the side, overgrown with weeds, made it look more authentic than the columns wrapped in faux-marble sheen or any other knick knack on the scene, like the obligatory lions and dragon-lined handrails. Jonah was relatively certain by now that he was under the spell of a demon because he walked right into that graffiti-scrawled restaurant without even having to be forced. The spell was really just curiosity but Boss was relieved. He stood in amazement beside the van while Jonah picked his way to the front door like a preteen trespasser scoping out a place for laser tag or paintball. Boss scurried to open the huge wooden front door and waved a hand inside like he was inviting Jonah into a very exclusive club.

Three days later and Boss was having trouble getting any other homeless people to be as gullible as Jonah. I say gullible, but Jonah says reasonable. Boss had been able to reason with Jonah that being inside, even inside a burnt-out, rotten, abandoned restaurant, was better than being outside, and he paid him twenty dollars a day to type.

Inside the restaurant, which seemed at one point to have had a large fire somehow not visible from the outside, were roughly 70 tiny cubicles. At least a third of these contained computers that looked to be even more dated than the ones at the public library. The fact that the place had had a fire and not a flood made it actually smell pretty good, like an extinguished campfire and not like mold. Someone had carefully cleaned and emptied the kitchen so Jonah could neither scavenge nor pretend he was in a zombie movie. It was dark all day long as tiny

licks of daylight filtered through the tops of the boarded up windows, and at night, the single computer screen provided the only light.

Jonah wished for more people, at least one more, to join him there so that their computers would be on at night and he would have a better sense of space. He walked outside sometimes, but there wasn't much to look at. He was too far away from anywhere more comfortable (or safe) to stay, so he slept there at night. A dying mall lay across the street that wouldn't have anything palatable in its food court so Jonah waited to get the McDonald's breakfast that Boss provided every day. Jonah was saving his money.

"How is this a way of making money?" Jonah had wanted to know during the bargaining process. "Maybe I can explain it to some of my friends, recruit for you a little."

"Well, it's a way to help spammers get their advertisements on high profile blogs and other forums. We type the wavy letters to solve an encryption and then spammers get free reign over areas that were previously inaccessible to their robots. It proves that you're human."

"That sounds like a perfectly legitimate industry to me. Maybe you should have an office building for it."

"What do you think we're starting here, Jonah? By the time this place is full, you'll be vice president." Jonah did think it would be nice to get in on the ground floor, maybe be a stockholder, all the while pretend to be just another one of the drones.

"How do you know about all this?"

"After programming and designing knock-off Disney ticket websites for ten years, I thought I might be able to use computers to make money without having to actually work."

"But I have to work?"

“Don’t think I’m not working, Jonah. I just have to man the control center, which isn’t here.”

For three days he’d been typing CAPTCHAs. Boss tried to explain to him how clever he was by using Kissimmee’s free wireless Internet but Jonah didn’t care. I’d always thought the Internet should be free for everyone but I didn’t think of it spawning this kind of crime in the community. Jonah wasn’t afraid of Boss because every day Boss was visibly less sure of his plan, and Jonah knew that it was only a matter of time before he was out on the street again. He wasn’t a prisoner. He rode it out with the same curiosity with which he’d entered. Jonah’s mother had been a secretary so he was able to pretend that this was right up his alley. Jonah liked to type with his hands hovering in the air like hers had, though they moved much slower.

The biggest inconvenience, Jonah thought, was having to hoof it over to the mall to have access to a flushing toilet. He enjoyed shitting in secret in the dry toilets of the restaurant and thought he’d wait ‘til Boss found out before he would stop. He was sure he’d never notice since Boss only showed up at the beginning and end of each day. Jonah assumed he had a secret spy way of knowing how much he’d typed, and, in fact, he did.

At the start of the fourth day, maybe, Boss walked in with breakfast and saw that Jonah was not typing. He sat at the computer with his arms crossed over his slight gut.

“Why aren’t you typing?!” he whined.

“The computer’s out.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? How long has it been out?”

“Fifteen minutes or so. You pay me to type, not report on technocological issues.”

“Goddamn it!” Boss headed outside, shutting the door behind him. It was very dark, just

after dawn. Jonah slept each night on the long, leather benches where customers used to wait for a table, so he headed back there while Boss worked on getting power back into the building. He liked his job, so far. It was easy. He munched on his sausage McGriddle and thanked God he was alive to taste it. It was one of the most gristle-free ones he'd ever eaten. He drank his coffee black because Boss didn't ask him if he wanted it any other way, and that was ok. Mostly, Boss wanted him alert and ready to start his workday.

From the bench where Jonah sat, he could see a sliver of his computer screen. It glowed warmly to life in the darkness before dimming out again. He heard a dull bang and a quiet pop outside. Jonah fell asleep with that pop in his ears and woke up around noon, which he gauged by the heat. It was dark and closed up, so the restaurant was usually able to retain the cool evening temperatures but Jonah wanted to know what was going on outside. He wanted to ask Boss if he'd make the full twenty dollars if it was the computer's fault, but the huge wooden doors wouldn't budge. He tried to not be worried because he'd planned on spending all day long in there anyway.

"I'm not sure I believe you," I say. No one else is sitting around us anymore. But there are still people walking around and I feel pretty safe.

"Why would I lie?"

"To get a free dinner?"

"Well it was very good but I already ate it. Why would I lie now?" He has me there. I rest my chin on the closed top of my bottle of water and listen, my arms hanging down into my lap. He knows I'm interested even though I don't look it because I don't look as annoyed as I did at the beginning.

Jonah ran out of water about two days after Boss disappeared, he guesstimates. He hadn't been in too much of a hurry at first, but water is the only easy thing to get when you're homeless, he tells me. The small stock pile of warm bottles he'd had next to the computer dwindled and was gone. He was mad that the computer was still out because he couldn't even type. He was also mad that he'd been shitting in those toilets for days. Each window was boarded from the outside and the inside. He lost three fingernails trying to pry boards off the inside of the windows only to reveal another layer of wood that he couldn't get a good grip on. His fingernails dangled by little stretchy strands off the rough, unfinished edges of the boards and he didn't have the heart to pull them off. They died trying, he says. He tried throwing himself and computers through the remaining boards, but started to bruise his ribs. Chinese wood, you see, is very strong. For the first time since that night at Old Town, Jonah was really scared because he was used to no one caring about whether he lived or died but he was not used to being trapped inside an abandoned restaurant. He explains this to me like I should say "naturally."

"This is a new one," he said out loud in the restaurant a couple of times, enjoying the sound of his own voice. He fell asleep the day after he ran out of water and was awakened by the sound of twinkling glass. This is what he says, even though he made it sound earlier like there wasn't any glass in the windows. Two young homeless guys, Jonah says, were not sure what the hell they were looking at. One held a hammer that'd he'd use to rip through the boards and one held a bottle of Admiral Nelson rum, and they were hoping to hunker down during the summer storm that Jonah could smell coming.

"Storm coming fellas?" Jonah asked politely and prayed they wouldn't run. "I am so glad that you boys got me out of this. I've been trapped!"

After ascertaining that neither of the guys in their late teens were demons, Jonah started to tell them the story.

“And I was sitting in front of the haunted mansion and I should have been under the go kart tracks, if I’d known what was good for me,” Jonah began, while the two guys edged toward the window they’d broken into, looking all the time at Jonah like he was pointing a gun at them. “Don’t you want to know the story?” The young guys were ready to leave since the storm hadn’t really come, and they did so without even consulting Jonah. He’d thought they were all in it together but saw them hop in a Volkswagen Jetta in the restaurant’s parking lot and hightail it outta there. But then he realized that he didn’t know the end of the story, or how he’d gotten stuck, and it’s a good thing that the boys hadn’t seen the end of the story before breaking in or they wouldn’t have broken in.

Because Boss was melted against the side of the building, partially hidden under some viney weeds and beside a granite lion that might have fallen over yesterday or three years ago. Boss’ hands were permanently fused to some orange cables that led from the van, parked inconspicuously in a field just past the parking lot, into the side of the building. He looked very mad and not at all peaceful. His khaki pants looked full and soiled so Jonah decided not to desecrate the body by searching it for cash. Jonah knew Boss wouldn’t have left him trapped there on purpose and he tried to say a prayer about how that made him a good man. But then he knew he had to leave. What could he do for him now?

By the time Jonah made it back to Old Town, all his stuff under the tracks was missing, and after briefly accusing the seventeen-year-old employee of stealing it, he decided to head for Disney property, where nothing bad can ever happen.

“Well, they won’t let you stay here long,” I say. It’s dark, windy, and balmy. Pleasure Island is aglow behind Jonah as other shops shut off their lights. Bored teenagers realize that they aren’t going to sell any more framed autographs or churros but still have to man their stations for another hour or so.

“Who won’t?”

“Disney. They don’t like homeless people. If you managed to be here last night, you probably won’t last another. Maybe you could get a job here. You’d get into the parks for free.”

“I’ve thought about it but really I think that Mr. Disney is a demon. How else could he have thought of Fantasia?”

I don’t know what to say.

“Did you like my story?” His Big Mac wrapper blows away down the street like a tumbleweed spreading sesame seeds. They’d get rid of him for *that*, I think.

“It was pretty good. An attempted CAPTCHA sweatshop in our own backyard.”

“I hope that wasn’t *your* backyard because the whole area was a dump.”

I realize that I keep imagining it full of Chinese CAPTCHA-solvers just because of the type of restaurant. I mostly like the idea because it has nothing to do with tourists and I’d rather that kid from the tracks be working there, typing for a few bucks a day rather than making minimum wage kissing the asses of people who will never remember him and who will tip poorly because they are certain they won’t ever be coming back.

“Thank you for dinner,” he says, adjusting his giant coat, shaking dust motes out of it that I try not to breathe.

“You’re welcome. Good luck,” I say and head back to my car, timing my walk to match

the pace of a security guard nearby. I feel bad for Jonah but not bad enough to offer him a ride anywhere or give him any money. What could I do for him, anyway? He's in the happiest place on earth. He even lives there.

YOUNG THINKER

(I don't want you to be surprised because what I'm about to describe is actually on TV and in a minute you're just going to see me sitting cross-legged on the black leather couch in a faded red sundress with my heels digging into my vagina so that I can scratch myself without using my hands. Yes, I masturbated this way once or twice, when I was pretty young and just figuring it out. My hands are covered with the thick, powdery cement of white cheddar as I finish a bag of cheesy popcorn. Yes, I am finishing the bag in one sitting. Don't ask me why but every few minutes I look at the front door's deadbolt to make sure it's still locked. I started doing this a lot recently but since I don't have to do it a specific number of times, I don't think my compulsions are too bad.)

Before me is a beautiful, shiny-bodied moron, sitting shirtless on a Nicaraguan beach. A million verdant leaves shine in HD behind him. He explains to unheard prompts about why, yes, he is frustrated to have been voted off, but he knows that God is following his entire journey and has already made all of these decisions. I really am envious of having faith like that, if only to relieve some of the pressure of our bad decisions, like applying to be on a reality show or, worse, sitting unemployed and twenty-eight, wishing I'd applied to be on a reality show. Is it too late? How many more seasons of *Survivor* can there possibly be? Are they running out of islands? Am I in shape enough? My body is probably a little too sloppy. They only let the much older people have the sloppy bodies. No one under fifty has a sloppy body. I know that none of the viewers would root for me because I don't really need the money. Someone with a family should win. Really, it's best that I not even apply. Maybe God already decided that for me. Nicaragua is gorgeous. Goddamn, I bought a nice TV.

Outside, a car door slams and I turn my head to see my roommate's aquamarine Geo Tracker in the steep, cracked driveway. I can always hear her close her car door. My new Jetta's doors snap shut like a whisper. It allows me to sneak up on her, which I always think is funny. I first met Allison in a Wendy's parking lot after I saw her roommate-wanted ad on the Orlando Craigslist, and I told her I'd always wanted a Geo Tracker. She looked at my car and laughed. She said, "Are you fucking kidding me?" And that's probably when she stopped liking me, if she ever had, if for some reason she had liked the look of my face as I walked up. Maybe she liked me when she pulled up a few spaces away from me, honked her horn, and saw me drop an almost full Frosty on the concrete. She seems to enjoy other people's misfortunes in a competitive way. For the first six months we lived together, I pretended to be busy when she walked in after work. Then I ran out of things to pretend to be doing. I hung up all my posters, built all the IKEA furniture I'd bought, and then I bought more IKEA furniture, then I built that, and then I tried to at least be cleaning when she walked in. Eventually it devolved into reading, which didn't seem too bad. But now it's TV.

"Well, well, well," she says, methodically untying the long black apron from her waist while the old front door slowly creaks shut. She works at the Cheesecake Factory and she always smells amazing. The shows I watch never interest her, but she usually stares at them anyway when she walks in, rather than looking at me. "Looks like you've had a busy day, Gable."

"You don't have to say that all the time," I sigh. There are no books within reach, but maybe I can pretend I've been reading the old issue of *National Geographic* on the coffee table. Nothing I engage myself with, or pretend to engage myself with, really matters to her anyway. It wouldn't matter if I was sculpting when she walked in, or writing a poem, or doing a puzzle.

What matters to her is that I don't have to work. My parents are patent attorneys and they give me everything I need. Not everything I want, but everything I need. I assumed this would reach a cut-off point but it hasn't yet. They allude to the fact that the next step for me must be getting married and having children. They know I don't want to go back to school or work if I don't have to. I'm an only child and they don't like to travel. They don't ostensibly spend any money on anything other than me.

Allison is friends only with other waiters and waitresses, and I think she pretends this is on some sort of blue collar principle, but it's more likely that her job is the only place where she meets anyone. That's normal enough. I know that's why I don't have a ton of friends. Neither of us has been in school for a long time. It all makes perfect sense to me, and I don't get depressed about it.

"I'm sorry," she says, like she doesn't mean it at all.

"How was work?" I shudder to ask, but I have to ask. Am I a bigger asshole for asking or not asking?

"Horrible. I hate lunches. You make less, you have to get everything ready for the dinner rush, then you have to like run food for all the douchebags just coming in and taking early dinner tables. Like they're so fucking special they can't even run their food yet because they have to save their energy. And they make more on their first tables than I did all goddamn day." She leans against the front door and pries her shoes off with her toes. I see the familiar brown mush embedded into their skid-proof bottoms. They thump on the hardwood floor with some of the brown flaking off.

"That sucks," I reply.

“And they’re all running around eating, like they don’t eat all goddamn day until they get to work. Which is probably true. They’re grabbing bread and soups and eating while their first tables are eating their appetizers. And the one time I get caught eating on the clock, I’m nearly fired. It doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

“So why do you work lunches?”

“Jesus. Because I fucking have to, Gable. Do you think they just, like, hand out the dinner shifts? Like you start and they’re just, like, ‘Hey, do you want to work the best shifts and make a ton of money on a bunch of fucking easy two-tops?’” She sits down at the edge of the couch, far away from me and wraps her long red hair up into a bun. This is a nervous habit of hers; I know she’s just going to get into the shower in a minute.

“I suppose not.”

“We’re having game night over here tonight. If that’s ok,” she says. She isn’t necessarily asking. I’m happy to have people around, even if they aren’t the greatest people. Even if it just amounts to noise in the house.

“Of course. I like your friends.”

Allison looks at me for the first time since coming in, almost stares at me with her sunken brown eyes and disarming red eyelashes. “Good.”

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I go to the store and buy four different six packs of imported beer. I vacuum and Swiffer-mop the house while Allison showers and gets dressed. It’s expected that I do more chores because I don’t have a job, and I don’t mind because it does give me something to do. I also don’t trust Allison to clean the dishes as I would. She puts the cups upside down in the old

cabinets, and then I don't want to put my mouth on them. When I moved in, I replaced all the contact paper in the cabinets but that wasn't quite enough for me. They still shouldn't be upside down.

While I finish the last of the dishes, Allison's in the living room on the phone with Leanne. Allison says, "I see you out there. Get your ass in here!" They need to talk on the phone until the second they're in the same room. Leanne is the only friend of Allison's I hate. She always talks too loud and close and wears pseudo-athletic short shorts with words on the butts, like Princess or Diva, in glittery script. And she's always furious at some "dumb skank" or another, usually another waitress, but never Allison. Even though Allison has, on occasion, slept with Leanne's boyfriends behind her back. They tell me everything on game nights, or rather, they tell each other everything, and I happen to be there. I'm not important enough to halt the gossip.

Leanne skids into the living room as though she's been running, even though she hasn't. I'm still in the kitchen but I can hear her. I can hear her big, black rubbery Adidas flip-flops pounding on our worn floorboards, and I almost hate those shoes as much as I hate her. She comes into the kitchen and opens the fridge. She and Allison are laughing nonsensically, as though Leanne is a physical comedy genius. As though her way of slumping her lumpy body, scantily clad in athletic gear, into the kitchen and opening the fridge and taking a Stella is the funniest thing either of them had ever seen.

"Hi Gable," she barks. I rinse the last two forks and place them tines up in the utensil cup of the dish rack, which worries me because I think I might trip and fall on them in the night, but that's not as concerning as the tines resting in the bottom of that cup which always looks filthy

and yellow no matter how many times I rinse it, or bleach it, or wash it. Our old house doesn't have a dishwasher. If Allison does the dishes, she puts them in the cup tines down. And I have to wash them again, but only if she's not around, and if she is around I have to pretend to drop a fork to justify rewashing it. She probably isn't even watching me. She probably wonders why I drop so many forks.

"Hi Leanne. How's it going?"

"Good," she breathes. Her mouth is always open; words are sometimes formed when she exhales. I wonder if someone who looks like that, with their mouths open and their eyes slightly askew and angry looking, could ever be intelligent. To what extent can you see intelligence in someone's face? Do you ever meet anyone who has a PhD who has a look on their face like that? If I was still interested in finishing my Psychology degree, I'd do a paper on it. "How're you?" she asks.

"I'm great," I say, folding the dishtowel three times and putting it on top of the microwave. I turn to face her. She's rubbing the Stella on her forehead, because it is about ninety degrees outside, even at seven P.M. The setting sun is blasting into our backyard, but they both decide to sit out there anyway, because they smoke.

As Leanne reaches for the deadbolt at the top of the back door, she asks me "What have you been up to?" She opens the door and steps halfway outside.

"Not much," I say, which is true, but also the same thing that people who have been up to a lot of things say. I'm grateful for that. Leanne laughs her way on out, leaving the door open behind her for Allison.

Allison looks guilty. Sometimes I can see on her face that she's aware of how

disgustingly stupid Leanne is. “Hey, I’m sorry. Thanks for doing the dishes. It looks great in here.”

Allison goes outside, leaving the door open for me, but I close it behind her. I clean up after Allison enough to be considered her maid. I should maybe even get paid for it, or have to pay less rent. And if people ever ask me what I do I won’t have to say “nothing” and explain that my parents are rich. Instead I can say that I’m a live-in maid, and that’s a thing. People have heard of that.

*

It’s usually hard to pretend I have something to do in my room during Allison’s game nights but I’m really into Angry Birds right now, and I have beer. There’s something remarkably satisfying about killing those smiling green pigs and progressing to the more difficult levels. Then I think back on all the really hard ones, the ones I had to use YouTube to solve, and I’m proud of myself. I can talk to a lot of other people, even at the Starbucks down the block, about certain levels, trade war stories, and they know what I’m talking about. The three-tiered house shape? Six pigs inside? How many were helmeted? Was there any TNT to implement? I don’t really call them war stories, and I wouldn’t ever say out loud that I considered them accomplishments, though I do.

The bulk of Allison’s friends have come and gone. I know how the ebb and flow usually works. A few of their male waiter friends stopped by and did shots of Patron and hinted that it would be nice to get laid. When Allison, Leanne, and the other girls were legitimately more interested in their card game, the boys got bored and went off to do coke in some of the bathrooms downtown and try to find girls there in the scrambling countdown to last call or, as I

like to call it, fuck or fight. Fuck or fight would make another good paper. I've heard a lot of stand-up comedians describe the phenomenon, so it isn't a brand new idea, but around last call most men at the bars need to either fuck someone or fight someone. Hoards of these meatheads stand outside shuttered bars at 2:15, bouncing on their heels, glancing angrily from side to side. Women, even waitresses, tire of the bars a little earlier than men.

"Hey, Gable," Allison calls through my bedroom door.

"What's up?" I put down my phone, but I don't yet get up.

"Marble game?" she asks.

So they want to play the marble game, and they must be in need of a fourth. It's a board game my parents made for me out of a countertop. It's originally based on a German board game called *Mensch ärgere dich nicht*, and Wikipedia tells me that means, "Don't get angry, buddy." It's a lot like Parcheesi, or Trouble. It was a family tradition, though I was the one to research its origins. My parents only ever knew it as the marble game. They had their own homemade board from my father's parents, and they made me one when I left for college.

Allison and her friends often play without me, and I don't mind, but I am happy to have been asked. I don't even care what they're talking about while we play the marble game, because I love it so much. I'm very competitive, probably because I never had to get used to losing. My parents always let me win.

I get up, straighten out my shirt, and open the door. "Sure? Who's playing?"

"You, me, Leanne, and Fiona."

"I want to be Fiona's partner."

"Why? She always loses."

“The odds favor her for a win,” I say, gathering the heavy game board and box of marbles out of the hallway closet. Really I just don’t want to be Leanne’s partner. She never listens to me. She wastes sixes on getting out of jail, like an idiot, when she should run marbles home.

I stop and check that the front door is dead bolted on our way to the backyard. Allison sighs. “If all our shit was stolen, Gable, you’d have the money to replace yours in a minute.”

“That’s not what it’s about.”

“Maybe if you had a job, you wouldn’t waste time worrying about nonsense,” she says. I don’t say anything. I don’t see how not wanting strangers to come into your house and murder you is nonsense, but I never win that argument.

I follow Allison outside and put the heavy board and marbles on the table. Fiona and Leanne are having a heated discussion.

“Well, maybe it’s because she’s a fucking slut,” Leanne hollers.

“I don’t think anything’s going on,” Fiona shouts, which is unusual for her. I have to return to the back door and wrench it a few times to be sure it’s closed all the way. I don’t want it flying open if the wind comes. I had a cat a long time ago, and I still worry about the doors being open. The cat never got out, it died of cancer, but I remember worrying it would get out. I can feel Allison watching me from her seat, but I don’t care. If I don’t do it, a burning sensation pinches the back of my neck until I finally give in. Usually I make a pretense of having forgotten to get a drink so that I can check the door again.

“You have no idea what’s going on. I saw pictures of them on Facebook looking pretty comfortable. And where were you? At home with the kid?” Leanne argues.

“Her name is Dot,” Fiona returns to her normal, soft-spoken tone.

“You’re out late, Fiona,” I butt in, taking my seat.

“Yeah, my Mom’s watching Dot,” she explains. Her mom watches Dot all the time.

Fiona doesn’t seem to really understand that she has a child, but what do I know about it? She’s eight years younger than me, and she has a baby. I wouldn’t have been a good mother then either. I like to think I’d be a good one now, but I’d need to be married. I haven’t dated anyone seriously in four years. When men find out I don’t work, they think I want them to provide for me, or get married and have children right away, to give my life purpose. And maybe they’re right.

“That’s cool,” I say, “but I also like when you bring her over here. She’s fun.”

Fiona smiles and relaxes. “That’s sweet, Gable. Are you starting to want one?”

“I guess.”

“After you finish school?”

“I’m not in school, Fiona.”

“Oh yeah, I’m sorry. Neither am I,” she says sadly. She drops her little face forward until her long dark hair forms a bit of a curtain.

“I do the same thing. I assume everyone around me is, even though I haven’t been for a long time.”

“I’m not either,” Leanne says. “I was, but, I mean, what’s the fucking point? There aren’t any jobs anyway.”

“Well, I have my bachelor’s. So does Allison.”

Leanne changes the subject. “Well, Fiona, like I was saying. I know you and Tyson aren’t

married, but he is the father of your *child*. And he shouldn't be acting like that."

"Jesus, Leanne. Leave the girl alone," I say, laughing a little and setting up the marbles.

"What am I supposed to do? Stand by and watch my friend get cheated on?"

"It's not fair to make assumptions."

Leanne's eyes go wide; she pushes back her chair a little. "Fuck you, Gable. You're just a young thinker."

"What the hell is that?"

"Maybe you're the one who doesn't know anything. You don't even have a job, young thinker."

I stare at her. I want to argue. But if you're not in school, and you don't work, and you don't have a baby, what knowledge do you have to convey? If you have knowledge, how are you supposed to convince anyone that it means anything? What proof do you have that what you know actually matters, or has withstood any sort of test? How can Leanne hate me for doing exactly what she would do in my position? No one would work if they didn't have to. Would they? Finally, I start laughing and I can't stop because I realize that she's trying to call me naïve but she doesn't even know the words for it.

"Can we just fucking play?" Allison asks. She's picked out her favorite purple die.

"Sure, but I want to play something else first," Leanne says, standing up. She picks up the board, as carefully as she can after five or six beers, leaving the marbles in their place, and drops it on the concrete ground of the patio. The rough edge of the particleboard breaks one of her long, manicured fingernails. "Goddamit!"

"Don't get angry, buddy," I say.

“I want to arm wrestle Gable.”

Of all the things I thought would have come out of Leanne’s mouth, this was not one of them.

“What’s the point, Leanne?” I ask. Fiona and Allison are looking at me like they’re scared. Should I be?

“The point is you’re a little bitch and I think you’re weak and I’m going to prove it.” Leanne laughs while she says it, so that I don’t take her words too hard. “Come on, you’ve never arm wrestled before?”

I look up at the two giant oaks in our backyard. Their branches nearly intersect and are so beautifully lit underneath by our tiki torches and the floodlight. There’s a point at which everyone goes from wanting to be older to wanting to be younger. Leanne crossed that line when she turned twenty-nine. So now she wants to have six beers and arm wrestle and write about it on Facebook.

“Sure,” I concede. This fucking maniac isn’t going to let me say no. She’ll yell in my face with her beer and sour cream and onion breath until I agree. Allison and Fiona clear the glass-top table of their drinks and the ashtray.

Oh God, I hope I’m able to beat her. She has about thirty pounds on me, but I like to think I’m strong. I vacuum and mop a lot. I move pretty frequently and never have trouble carrying boxes. Neither Allison nor Fiona seems to be happy spectators. They each pull their chairs far away from the table. I stand up to find the best position for my chair.

I sit down and stare into Leanne’s dumb, breathing mouth. I understand that she hates me as much as I hate her. She hates me because she’s too stupid to even get into college. She hates

me because she's almost thirty and has no better idea than I do of what it means to be an adult. She hates me because she's sometimes had to prostitute to pay for her heroin addiction. She hates me because she has AIDS. Well, I'm just guessing about some of those, but they're all equally likely. It's absurd that we would even play the marble game together. How have I set up this life for myself? One in which I need to pretend I like someone like this? Why do I even bother?

"Hey, Leanne. I'd rather be a young thinker than a waitress," I whisper, hoping Allison doesn't hear me.

"Fuck you!" She half stands, but bounces back down into her seat in a tipsy swoon. I can tell that she tries to make it look purposeful. "Allison! Did you hear what she said? She said she's glad she's not a waitress!" Leanne leans forward and grasps my hand. Her broken middle fingernail has torn so far down that a bit of blood trickles out when she squeezes. I don't know anything about arm wrestling. Are there rules?

"Well, Leanne. I wish I *wasn't* a waitress," Allison replies. I like her more than ever.

"Allison doesn't have to be a waitress like *you* have to be a waitress, Leanne," I say, and it might be the meanest thing I've ever said to anyone. She starts trying to push my arm down. I wonder if a glass table is best for this.

Pain immediately shoots up from my elbow. We're in a stalemate for a long time. Everyone is silent. Leanne grunts until she squeezes out a tiny burp. We hear a few June bugs buzzing under the table, and it almost scares Leanne away from the match. As long as a palmetto bug doesn't appear, I won't be fazed. She is not as strong as I'd feared. We're very evenly matched. My elbow hurts, and Leanne's sweaty hand is disgusting. I stare at the thickening line

of blood under her nail. I wish Allison or Fiona would say something, either to us or to each other. Leanne's phone starts ringing out of her purse under the table. It's a song by Limp Bizkit, you know, the one that goes "rollin', rollin', rollin'," and my hatred is renewed. It's probably called "Rollin'."

I contemplate letting her win so I don't have to smell her breath anymore, and I don't want her blood to trickle down onto my hand. I turn my head away. I look toward Allison who appears bored, pinching her die between her fingers. I feel horrible and ridiculous. But I am gaining an advantage; I'm starting to feel like I can beat her. I grip the underneath of the table with my free hand. My head pulses with blood. This is pointless, I know, but what else can I do?

TASTEMAKER

Karen was always hesitant to slide her fingers under the rusted lid of the washing machine kept out on the covered back porch. Her short nails caught whole flakes of rust that burrowed into her nail beds for days. But this time, a cockroach waited on its back in the lid's depressed crevice to enclose the tip of her finger with his flailing arms. It was really an escape attempt, a ride hitched on a finger, but Karen thought that a creature so vile had calculated its final hours to terrorize her. The roach ended up, with a vigorous flick of Karen's wrist and a scream, in the bottom of the machine, getting smashed to death with the side of a box of Snuggle, its greenish gray guts oozing out onto two pennies that would never be spent again.

Karen's roommates, Hiller and Amadeus, came out without their shirts on, looking sweaty and concerned. There had been a murder around the corner a few months before, so they worried about her screaming. Karen wanted either one of them to take her virginity, but, after a month of living with them, she still couldn't tell if they were having sex with each other or limiting their endeavors to shirtless Xbox, their lean bodies tensing as they fingered the controls, balancing, in their tight jeans, on the edge of Hiller's bed, their carabineers jangling all night and into the muggy June mornings.

Sometimes they also tried to make music, discussing how to mask their obvious Animal Collective influence while making their breakfast. They wanted to be famous, but could only mimic creativity. Apparently, several other people became famous this way as well, so they were fine with that. They carried on so many conversations she felt she could never join. However they analyzed it, Karen liked the shimmering beeps and repetitive bass that shook the house on weekends.

“Are you okay?” Amadeus asked, crossing his arms and looking down at himself, a little embarrassed. His thin waist descended into tight, low-slung jeans encircled by a white plastic belt. He felt scrawny compared to Hiller and didn’t want to be compared, even by Karen. Keeping his shirt on, however, would be too much an admission of his insecurity.

“I’m fine guys, just killing a roach.”

“Wow. You can reach down in there? I’m surprised you didn’t fall in, and come out even smaller,” Amadeus joked. He made fun of her being short because it was all he knew about her.

“Thanks for not bothering us this time,” Hiller added, looking down into the machine. Karen could smell the somehow pleasant aroma of his mop of unwashed blonde hair. She resisted the urge to ask him to clean up the twitching carcass.

“If I can learn to kill them without screaming, then maybe I’d never see you guys again.” She tried to laugh but immediately regretted saying this. Her new friendships were so tenuous. She didn’t want to call attention to that tenuousness. Her desire to be among hip people was the sole reason she took the room in the crumbling red Victorian. She knew that Lincolnville was a half black and half hipster neighborhood in St. Augustine. And she knew from her job as a Segway tour guide that the neighborhood was founded in 1866 by former slaves, and was also called Little Africa for a time. Her white tourists pretended to be interested in this while speeding up their Segways. When she called the ad and someone named Amadeus answered, she knew she’d found the right house. She considered changing her name to something less Karen but couldn’t think of anything.

Hiller, less embarrassed of his exposed torso, leaned against the washing machine next to Karen and looked down at her. He knew what she wanted, and he liked pretending he wanted to

give it to her. “You guys wanna have a bonfire tonight?” he asked, looking only at her.

“Here?” she asked, elated but pretending not to be. If she knew one hipster rule so far, it was to play it so cool that you don’t seem to enjoy anything at all.

“Yeah, we’ll call the peeps. We just need some draaank,” he joked without smiling. Hiller always looked serious and distraught, dark circles under his perfect blue eyes. Amadeus only smiled if he was making fun of something. Karen looked at Amadeus, to see if he’d offer a solution, but he only smiled at her. He loved seeing what they could get her to do. Or to buy.

“I can take care of the drinks,” she said, petrified to try the ironic slang they indulged in with seeming effortlessness. She considered asking them to chip in a few dollars, but she had plenty of money. Her rent was two hundred and fifty dollars a month and she made a decent amount since she’d begun working fulltime. She’d graduated with a degree in Psychology two months before, but she didn’t have any fun in college. She felt like she’d spent four years sitting alone in her dorm watching movies. She hadn’t become the person she’d always wanted to be. Out of the dorms now, she had to make decisions.

Amadeus laughed as Karen hurried out of the house, grabbing the Vera Bradley purse her Mom had bought her as a graduation present. “Aw. What a fucking dork,” he said.

“Maybe she’s so dorky she’s cool?” Hiller asked.

“Well, she’s buying the beer, and besides her nose and the goddamn ribbons in her curls, she’s fuckable. You should probably do it tonight as repayment.”

“Oh come on, she’s not interested in me.”

“I hate when you pretend not to know when girls want you so I have to convince you that they do. Hiller, they all want to fuck you. Who wouldn’t?” Amadeus tickled Hiller’s stomach

and laughed before walking back inside through the slanted doorway. Hiller looked down at Karen's white plastic laundry basket, overflowing with baggy white underwear and the maroon polo shirts she had to wear at work but also wore on days off. Another cockroach scurried out from under the washing machine, headed for her laundry basket, but Hiller squashed it flat with one of his red twill Toms and kicked it off into the grass.

*

Karen sat alone on a low, cloth beach chair next to the fire in the small backyard, choking down a Pabst Blue Ribbon, trying to get used to it while she had some time alone. She watched the sky behind the tall pines and shorter palms go from yellow to pink to baby blue. Within the boundaries of their chain link fence, they had a grand live oak, spreading gnarled, creaking arms over the whole yard. She was glad she didn't do the ghost tours because she never had to work at night. It grew hotter as the sun set, the cloying June night moving in to settle around her, suffocating the fire with still, wet air. The three Duraflame logs she'd set ablaze provided a nice base to the backyard brush she periodically piled on top of it.

Hiller and Amadeus weren't around. She'd realized, in a panic at ABC liquor, that she didn't have either of their numbers saved. She had to guess they all wanted Pabst Blue Ribbon, though she hoped she wasn't being stereotypical. She also got a twelve pack of Miller High Life, having remembered seeing the woman sitting in the moon looking out at her from their fridge. She'd driven over to Wal-Mart after ABC and bought ten Duraflame logs, lighter fluid, two blue cloth beach chairs, a giant yellow cooler, and five bags of ice. When she got home, she was relieved they weren't around so she could peel stickers off of the new things and hide the Wal-Mart bags. She wasn't sure if Hiller and Amadeus hated Wal-Mart or not.

She wondered who would be joining her around the fire, trying to picture them. She wasn't sure who Hiller and Amadeus' peeps were. They usually went out and played their electronic music at tiny bars around St. Augustine. The house parties Karen had imagined while moving in hadn't happened yet. Their friends were probably other strangely named, awkwardly dressed people who'd always been sitting around in the grass on her old campus, looking so confident it made her stomach hurt. Where do you even get those kinds of clothes? How do you know what kind of outfit would seem cool or which would seem ridiculous? They all looked ridiculous to her, but she wanted to look confident and ridiculous too. She wanted to traipse through the grass on campus wearing hot pink tights, a ripped up oversized blue t-shirt, some sort of kerchief around her neck, a beret, and giant yellow sunglasses. Instead, she'd watched them from classroom windows, and shuffled back up to her dorm in comfortable jeans and inoffensive polo shirts. Then she graduated, and those cool people wore their crazy kerchiefs over their gowns. It wasn't right to be twenty one years old and want to emulate other people. But they had to be emulating each other. How else could this be happening? She could do it, too.

Karen wasn't going to let herself think no one was coming back to the house. As she did when she was bored, she went through her tour's script in her head. St. Augustine felt like an important city to live in, even though nothing important happened there anymore. The tourists always hinted at being jealous that she lived here. Living in the oldest continually occupied city in the US, Karen was comforted by the fact that she wasn't the first person who had had to try to figure out how to fit in. In 1763, when the British gained control of St. Augustine and all of Florida, nearly all of the Spaniards in the city fled. She said this to her tour groups, "nearly all," and no one had any follow up questions. But nearly all means some of them didn't. Did the

Spaniards who stayed behind have to dress more British? Pretend to like British beer? Pick up British slang? She didn't know. It wasn't in her script.

Amadeus and Hiller finally emerged from the backdoor and went straight for the cooler. Hiller chose a PBR and Amadeus chose a Miller High Life.

“What up?” she said, as casually as possible.

“Not much. Not much,” Hiller offered. “Jesus, it might be too fucking hot for this tonight.”

“Did you have all this stuff already? The chairs and the cooler?” Amadeus asked, not remembering seeing any of this stuff from having helped her move in.

“Yeah, it was in my trunk. Sorry I only had two chairs.” She'd had to stop herself from buying five or ten.

“It's cool.” Amadeus sat on the ground, lighting a twig on fire and then lighting his cigarette with the twig.

“Who else is coming?” Karen asked.

“We called a few people. Do you know,” Hiller paused, counting them out on his long fingers, “Chicory, Mack, Cecil. Uhhhh, Dulcinea, Mallory, Rob, Chuck, or Frankie? Who knows. Maybe more.”

“Shit, we don't have enough beer,” Amadeus said. Karen wondered if she should do something about this, but didn't say a word. She knew he was fucking with her.

“No, I don't know them.” She couldn't even tell which were men's or women's names, and wouldn't make any presumptions.

“Why don't you invite some of your friends?” Amadeus asked.

“All of my friends moved away,” Karen said, “on to bigger and better things, I suppose.”

“Fuck that,” Hiller chuckled. “We’ve got everything we need right here. The beach, beer, regular gigs. I don’t mind being a big fish in a small pond.”

“I agree,” Karen said, smiling.

“Also, there’s the fact you haven’t graduated yet,” Amadeus said to Hiller, relighting a twig to relight his cigarette.

“You are really getting on my goddamn nerves. Go get your fucking guitar and distract yourself for a while. Make yourself useful.”

Amadeus smiled and tucked his stringy brown hair behind his big ears. Karen decided that Hiller was far more attractive. She wasn’t sure why it had taken her so long to figure that out.

“He’s kind of a dick,” she said softly, offering her first real criticism of anything since she’d moved in.

“Yeah. If we didn’t work at his uncle’s candy shop, and have this band, I don’t know if we’d still be friends.”

“Understandable. Well, sorry if I didn’t get enough beer. I think I have an old bottle of mango rum in my room.”

“Karen, Jesus. Sit back down. This is great. Thank you. Do you need another beer?”

“Sure.”

The underbelly of the green branches flickered as Karen tilted her head back. Would it be sexy or gross to wipe the wetness from the new beer on her neck and the small portion of chest revealed by her polo? It was so hot. It felt fantastic for a sexy hipster to be getting her a beer.

What she wanted was getting closer, but then two tall, lanky hipster girls jumped over the chain link fence and flapped their crazy poncho dresses as they ran up to Hiller and grabbed him all over. The three commenced some sort of ironic, beautiful tickle fight. He dropped Karen's beer in the dirt.

*

By midnight, Karen wanted to be invisible. She was ignored, but she didn't feel invisible. The two flapping girls were Mack and Frankie, of course, though she couldn't keep them straight in her head. Though they were tall and thin, their breasts were large, perfect globes, which almost hung out of their poncho shirts as they leaned toward the fire. They smiled and laughed too loud. The females of the group were, on the whole, more joyful than their male counterparts, but they were not nice, Karen decided. As each of them arrived, they cornered Hiller or Amadeus and asked about Karen, though they never spoke to her. Karen wished she were a smoker so she could look more busy and content to be sitting by herself. Hiller ran around, playing with the girls, keeping a straight face nearly the whole time. Amadeus played his guitar near the fire, sometimes singing bits of phrases, and sometimes making conversation with fawning girls while he played.

It was easier to drink the PBR now. Karen had already had three but somehow felt sober. She'd been drunk a few times, with a few of the older tour guides at work who liked taking her out, and she wanted desperately to be drunk now, though she couldn't seem to manage it. She considered getting her mango rum, but instead chugged the remainder of her fourth beer.

The people from the grass, those golden, confident, shoeless wonders she'd seen at school, surrounded her. They drank and laughed and danced awkwardly and playfully and talked

about movies she hadn't heard of, bands she couldn't even begin to pretend to like, and it was ok, because they weren't putting her on the spot.

As Karen watched the revelry, a boy rocked up next to her, cross-legged, on the ground. She heard twigs snapping and turned in her chair to see him sliding up. He was far less attractive than the other hipsters. He was a bit thicker, had black hair that was almost in a bowl cut and a moustache waxed up into curly points.

"Hiya," he said, planting his PBR into the ground in front of the fire.

"Hey," she replied. "It's going to get really hot there."

"That's what she said."

"What?"

"Nothing. So, you're the new girl living with Hiller and Amadeus?"

"I am. Not that anyone seems to care." The fire jumped up and down. The live oak's branches reached down like fingers to scoop her up, making her feel like a cockroach on her back. She tried to steady her head and finally felt the spinning she remembered from the drunken nights out.

"What do you mean?"

"No one has said a word to me," she whined.

"I'm saying words to you."

"And it only took three hours."

"I'm sorry you haven't felt welcome."

"Welcome? This is my house!"

"You know what I mean," he said quietly. He looked around. The others had grown quiet

as well, now wanting to overhear what Karen was saying. They wanted to find out about her without having to talk to her, or without having to be seen talking to her.

A homeless man came out of their backdoor into the yard. Karen shot a surprised look at Hiller, who nodded to her in reassurance.

“Hey, Spyder. You want a drink?”

“I surely do! And could I do a load?” he asked, leaning a black garbage bag against the front of their washing machine.

The beautiful girls parted to allow Spyder to sit between them in the grass. They joked with him. They asked how he was doing. They tied ribbons in his disgusting hair.

“Are you from here?” the curly mustachioed boy asked her, now that attention was drawn away from them.

“No, I went to school here though. I just graduated. You?”

“Born and raised. I’m going to the community college, but I’m not in any rush. I like it here. I’m Roland. Do you want another beer?”

“Sure.” Several of the others had brought beer, so now there was plenty. A few brought Blue Moon and Miller High Life, but the vast majority had brought more PBR.

“How do you know Amadeus and Hiller?” Roland asked.

“I just called the ad and moved in here.”

“That makes sense.”

“What do you mean by that?”

A burst of laughter erupted from the group around Spyder. The girls were making fun of his erection, and he laughed along with them. He lay on his back in the grass and rolled around.

“Come on, you know what I mean. You don’t look like their other friends.”

“I know that. How do you all do it?”

“Do what, my dear?” he twitched his mustache in a way that he must have practiced.

“Be like this, like you’re all so cool, and you’re not worried about what people think and you’re all beautiful individual flowers, but you all belong to one big group of flowers. A bouquet.”

“Do you need to lie down?”

“It just seems you were all born this way, like you never had to make the choice. I wish I could just register for Hipster 101, to make it easier for me. I’m sorry. I’m drunk.”

“It is easy. There are only a few different tastemakers you need to consult in your hipster conversion. We read Pitchfork to figure out the acceptably trendy music. We dress in weird stuff from Goodwill or Urban Outfitters and the trick is to make one look like the other.”

“Is it really that easy?”

“Shit, no. Sorry, I was kidding. We’re not hipsters anyway. That’s a stupid fucking word. Hey, do you want to go upstairs?” He fingered his mustache.

Mack, Frankie, and a few other beautiful girls lined up on the ground, lying side by side, and Spyder rolled over them. When Spyder hit the end of the line, he lay on the ground on his stomach and one of the girls began rolling over them the same way.

“Sure.”

The house was quiet and smelled like the incense Hiller always burned in the living room. Roland started to climb the dark stairs before turning around to take Karen’s hand. He practically pulled her up the stairs, and it felt good to have someone making decisions. It felt

good to have someone wanting to hang out with her. She worried the things in her room weren't cool enough, but she was too drunk to care. Roland wasn't beautiful, but he was confident.

*

Karen woke up alone the next morning, the skin around her mouth feeling waxy and stiff. She remembered everything that had happened and wished she didn't: the shock at how small a penis could be, the relief that it didn't hurt. It had been over so quickly that it barely felt like an event. In the bright morning, she stood naked in her room, her hands on her hips, feeling the crunchy dirt between her bare feet and the hardwood floor. A small dried-up blood stain at the edge of the fitted sheet burned itself into her memory. Her pile of curly ribbons on the nightstand reminded her of Roland's mustache, so she opened the drawer and shoved them in. She had to go to work in two hours and didn't have any clean work shirts. She tore the pink sheets off her bed, scooped up a small pile of clothes, and went downstairs, treading lightly with her headache. The house was quiet.

She stood up on her tiptoes to see if there was a roach in the washing machine's crevice, and there wasn't. She opened the lid to see giant pairs of white underwear wetly plastered against the sides of the machine, one of them still displaying wide brown skid marks. She remembered Spyder's request to do a load, and she did not want to have to pull them out, or do her own laundry afterward. Her pile fell from her hands onto the ground. Maybe the Laundromat isn't too far, she thought.

"Whoa, hey, sorry about that, Vera," Spyder called to her from his place in the grass. He sat rubbing at a pair of shoes with a rag. "I'll get those out."

"My name's Karen."

“Oh.”

“Why did you call me Vera?”

Spyder dug his fingers into his hair and scratched. “The boy with the mustache. He came downstairs last night and said he said ‘I fucked Vera Bradley!’” He rolled back in the grass, covering his face with the shoe rag while he laughed. “I fucked Vera Bradley!”

*

In a dirty, wrinkled shirt, Karen sat in the small tour company office on St. George Street reading a new addition to her script. The small fort south of town, Fort Matanzas, hadn't been getting many visitors lately, so they paid the tour company to include a bit about them.

When she had the tourists at the top of a sloping hill near the giant, star-shaped fort, the Castillo de San Marcos, she was to point down the Intracoastal Waterway and talk about the little fort built to protect the mouth of the inlet. Only one interesting thing had ever happened on that site, and it actually happened before the little fort was constructed. It concerned how the fort received its name, which means “slaughters” in Spanish.

In 1565, French ships that had been on their way to attack St. Augustine were blown off course by a hurricane, and they wrecked. One hundred and eleven men made it to shore, and were captured by the Spanish. They would have been spared if they had converted from Protestantism to Catholicism. Most had immediately refused, and they were gutted with Spanish swords, their carcasses left piled on the sandy shore of the inlet. But sixteen of them were fine with converting, or at least pretending, and were allowed to live.

THE ONES AROUND HIM

Marcus walked into his front door after work. The living room of his rented Spanish revival bungalow smelled worse than usual. He sloughed his laptop bag and keys right onto the beige carpet and rubbed at his nose with an open palm. He was always pulling a gossamer network of cat hair off of his face, though he didn't have a cat. The people who rented the house before him must have had one. Fur rained down and gathered in corners no matter how many times he vacuumed and lint rolled.

But the smell this time wasn't just beer cans, half glasses of curdled milk, invisible mold, and piling guinea pig shit. He assumed the oncoming summer baked the house and all its contents. Loosening his tie, he walked over to Gerry's tank on the table behind the sofa and saw that he was dead. Gerry's coarse brown hair fell out in tiny patches under Marcus' breath, and he was swollen in a way that made him appear sturdy rather than sick, his rectum turned inside out as though someone had done it by hand. Marcus was startled to realize he'd need to dispose of the body himself.

He went to the kitchen, got a can of Yuengling, and collapsed onto his damp mauve futon on the front porch. This was progress: to let his former Goodwill bed get shitty on the porch while he folded himself into Ikea finery each night. His phone was on silent but he saw it lighting up through the light khaki fabric of his new Target dress pants. His boss at the small accounting firm told him that he didn't need to dress that way. "It's one of the benefits of being a businessman in St. Augustine," Mr. Dumekis had said and slapped Marcus' shirtsleeved arm. Mr. Dumekis' short, gaping Hawaiian sleeves flapped in the breeze of the old Victorian's extremely powerful air conditioning. This was yet another benefit to seeking employment in St.

Augustine after college was one that Marcus didn't even want. So he dressed up anyway. He wanted the job to feel more real. He was early. He didn't take cigarette breaks.

His cell phone screen flashed "The Debtor," and he answered.

"Hey, what's up?" His real name was Donovan, but Marcus always thought of him as the Debtor. Sometimes he worried he would call him that in the break room, or some amalgamation like Debtorvan. Donovan spent all day on the phone at work attempting to settle debts, avoid bank fees, and extend his X-Box Live subscription. He showed Marcus pictures on his iPhone of his flat-screen TV.

"I was gonna go to the YPO thing tonight at Sangria's. You want in?"

"Oh, no thanks man. Have fun."

"Why not?"

He wasn't expecting to have to explain. He'd gone to a Young Professionals' Organization meeting a few months before, but it was only a lot of people who already knew each other laughing while they shook hands and pretended to meet for the first time. They wanted his membership fee but they didn't want to talk to him. A few cute x ray technicians milled around grasping Blue Moons, but they were all married. He was surprised he'd already gotten used to looking for wedding and engagement rings. Maybe he should have warned the Debtor, but maybe he didn't care about rings or actual professionalism if it was an event at a bar with free hors d'oeuvres.

"Just have something I need to take care of. Thanks for asking, though. Heads up: they only let you show up and eat for free once. Then you gotta pay a fee and join. So enjoy it."

"Alright. See you Monday."

Before he'd gotten the phone shoved back into his pocket, it lit up again. He didn't recognize the number, though the area code was recognizably Sarasota, where he'd grown up. He laid down before answering, the dampness of the futon cushion slowly blotting the back of his new short haircut.

"Hello?"

"Marcus! Can you see me? It's Ernie."

"See you? Ernie?" Marcus sat up, shaking off the nap tugging at his eyes. "Ernie who?" A battered red pickup truck bumped a tire over the curb and onto his rented lawn as a small figure inside waved, steered, smoked a cigarette, and talked on a cell phone.

Ernie kept talking as he parked, and the words arrived in Marcus' phone a second after his lips moved in the shadow of the truck. "Ernie! I hope you don't mind, I thought I'd look you up 'cause I heard you lived around here. I really like your little house. Great time to buy. Man! It's been fucking" he hung up the phone "forever." He stood at the foot of the three steps up into Marcus' house. "You look great!" Ernie, however, did not look great. His eyes were red. His longish black hair was somehow slicked back and tangled at the same time. His tank top hung loose on his meager yet lumpy frame. He'd been a ropey guy in high school too, so maybe he wasn't actually in decline.

Marcus didn't know if he was supposed to stand up and hug him, one of those half-assed, one-armed bro hugs, but instead he offered him a beer. One of the few things he remembered about him from high school was that he liked beer. Soon they both sat on the damp futon, uncomfortably close, watching an early evening storm roll in, and dropping a perpetual stream of cigarette butts into a blue glass cereal bowl full of dead June bugs. The storm brought with it the

smell of salt water.

“Man, you must have a nice job. I like your clothes. And your little house, all set up cute and shit. You even have a coffee table!” Ernie drank twice as fast as Marcus, the alcohol almost oozing out of his greasy pores. Leaning forward, Ernie had a small gut, though his collarbones were visible.

“How’d you find me, Ernie?” Marcus wasn’t annoyed by this visit, but he wasn’t thrilled either. He had nothing planned. Literally nothing. It was as perplexing to Marcus to fill his days as it was his new pantry. So a lot of weekends resulted in Marie Callender dinners and getting used to the idea that he was one of those people who was always bored, and how sad that realization is. He couldn’t interest himself.

“I called Kayla.” Marcus shivered. He hadn’t spoken to her since the breakup.

“Ah.”

“Sorry to hear about the ol’ break up, by the way.” Thunder caused a periodic pause in the conversation. Neither of them trembled when the lightning’s flash and the sound of the crack became increasingly simultaneous.

“It was a long time ago. And, anyway, we’re pretty good friends now,” Marcus said, waiting to see if Ernie knew that was a lie.

“Well, after her, I bet you hooked up a lot in college!” Ernie winked and smiled. Marcus entertained the idea of showing him a night on the town in St. Augustine, which wasn’t much, but maybe Ernie could make it fun. He’d probably do karaoke or hit on girls or do other funny things Marcus wouldn’t.

“Well, I did ok!” Marcus tried to wake up, be more jovial. They laughed for a minute

while more thunder rolled over the Intracoastal, which Marcus could see at the end of the block if he stood in the street in front of his house. He tried to think of a way to brag about this but then didn't. The storm was moving away already. "What brings you through, Ernie?"

"Well, not really through. I came here on purpose. There's a good outpatient rehab center here I want to go to. I was wondering if I could stay with you a few days while I did it. I know I haven't seen you in a long time, and I could pay a little. But if not, I can totally get a hotel room. I saw a Ramada just a block away."

"Days? You can finish rehab in a few days?"

"A long weekend, really. And it's gonna be a *long* weekend, that's for fucking sure."

"Well, my parents were expecting me this weekend for my Mom's birthday," he lied.

"But maybe I could—"

"How's work? What do you do?" Ernie changed the subject.

"I'm an accountant for a firm here in town."

"Do you like it?" Ernie asked, packing his cigarettes with force. What Marcus had thought were muscles jiggled around under the skin of Ernie's arms.

"It's ok. I mean, I'm new. But I always have that feeling that I've just sealed ten addressed envelopes without making sure the right letters were inside. You know?"

"Not really. You have some friends around here? Maybe want to go out a bit tonight?"

"Not really. I mean, maybe."

"What?"

"I mean, most of my friends left after we graduated." Marcus didn't know what else to say. He didn't know how he felt about taking someone out for drinks before they entered rehab,

but he didn't know what else to do. In high school, he'd spoken to Ernie perhaps four times, keeping his jealous distance from the male "best friend" of his girlfriend. In the meantime, they hadn't even become Facebook friends. "What's the rehab for?"

"Opioids."

"I'm not sure—"

"Oxys? Roxies? They're pain pills."

"Oxy and Roxie sounds like a kid's show." They both laughed.

"Yeah, it's stupid shit. But they're so relaxing. I got into them after the baby. Maybe you saw Pam's Facebook. She had all of our personal business posted to that damn site. No privacy settings at all. Anyone could Google her and find out everything about us."

"Pam? Wow, she was fucking hot."

"Yeah, and I wanted to marry her but she said no, because she's smart, but we were still dating when the baby was born. This was only a year after high school. You guys were up here. Kayla knew all about it. I thought she was keeping you up to date."

Marcus went inside to get two more beers and the fifth of Jager out of his freezer. He didn't want to go out. He wanted to stay here, where everything was calm, even Gerry.

"Anyway, I didn't like Pam putting everything on Facebook. Nobody wants to hear about that shit," Ernie said, meticulously lining up their empty beer cans on the railing of the porch before sitting back down.

"That's what it's for. It's all about people having babies. I can't go on it anymore. I can't stand it."

"Oh, well, I mean," Ernie scratched at the scruff appearing on his face, still doing a good

job of smiling while he said, “because it was mostly the medical stuff I didn’t like her sharing. Because the baby was born without a brain, but she didn’t die right away, like they said she would. She lived for three weeks and we had to take her home, and home was my Mom’s house at the time. We just kind of had to wait.”

The futon sagged as Marcus settled back down with the new beers. The rusted metal bars underneath creaked and shuddered.

“That happens?”

“It happened. She could breathe and everything because—because she had a brain stem, but she didn’t cry. I didn’t want to name her. But Pam did. Anyway, then Pam left. She went to college in Boston, and I stayed at home and worked in a few restaurants. The cooks there were doing these things like candy, except it’s really expensive. I would probably want to do it forever if I could afford it. But I can’t.”

“I can’t imagine. I mean, Jesus.”

Ernie laughed. “It’s ok.” Marcus contemplated explaining Gerry, but he didn’t. He felt like he couldn’t say anything else. Ernie wins. Marcus sometimes thought that other people’s misery made him feel better. It made him realize that his situation wasn’t so bad. But watching Ernie smile through that story made him feel much worse. Marcus wondered briefly if he should try opioids. He could probably afford them. But he had told himself he was done with drugs after he had dropped acid and watched *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*.

Marcus pretended he was interested in the way the sunset looked after the brief storm was over: the pink and gold clouds piling up like rich mountains, violet shadows defining their depth and illusory texture. It was staying light so late. The days seemed interminably long. Marcus

wanted to go to bed and stay there for days.

“You can stay here. Don’t get a hotel. There’s an extra key under the flower pot out front.”

Ernie didn’t thank him out loud but he gave Marcus a look that he’d never seen on anyone before. It meant *you are my very last chance*. Marcus couldn’t handle it and stumbled through the screen door and fell onto his fluffy bed to wonder why Kayla never told him about her high school friends giving birth to a brainless baby. Marcus quietly cried into his plush comforter because he thought it might be nice to be born without a brain, and he knew, he knew, that was wrong.

*

An hour later, Marcus heard scratching on his door that picked up momentum into a knock. He pulled his green-striped comforter over his head, his air conditioning so cold that his nose and ears were almost numb.

“Hey, buddy. I know you worked all day, but I’ve gotta go out or something. I’m kind of losing it out here. It’s just me and this dead hamster. Did you know your hamster died? I’m sorry about that.” He paused for a moment. “But I’ll be back if you don’t want to come.”

Marcus jumped up and wobbled to the door. “Ok. I’ll take you out. You don’t know where to go.” He figured Ernie wouldn’t have had that hard a time finding bars in St. Augustine, but he wanted to accompany him anyway. Ernie had put a green flannel shirt over his tank top and buttoned the bottom half.

Marcus chuckled when he saw that Ernie had unrolled several paper towels on top of Gerry’s tank. “Sorry I left him out here. It just happened today. I’m not that gross.”

“Should we take care of him before we go?”

“I don’t really have a shovel or anything to bury him with.”

“What about the swamp right there? Let’s chuck him, mafia-style.”

“It’s not a swamp. It’s the Intracoastal.” Marcus went to the kitchen and returned with a plastic Publix bag. He stopped by the front door, putting his keys and wallet in his wrinkled pants before heading to the tank. He picked Gerry up like a dog turd, the bag inside out.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

The moon, only half full, still shone brightly on the tiny waves in the water, emanating from rocking boats and the occasional back of a dolphin. Marcus was proud to show Ernie how close his bungalow was to the water, and that it certainly wasn’t a swamp. Million-dollar homes radiated yellow across the water in their various styles: tiki huts, sprawling Spanish-revival, the boxy metal ultra-moderns, all the whims of the often tastelessly rich. A cool salty breeze drifting from the water competed with the heat still wafting up from the baking road, an hour after sunset and that good little storm. The water and the weather were things that Marcus hadn’t wanted to leave, not because he particularly loved them but because he was used to them. His friends set out for Chicago and Seattle and St. Louis after graduating. But the heat and June bugs and ocean were still here.

They went as far as they could from the dead-end street up into the saw grass. Marcus threw the bag with a small grunt. The black dot plunked into the water near a sailboat with no lights on. Ernie winced. “Ooh, ok.”

“What?”

“That bag’s not going to dissolve or anything. I’m no environmentalist but... shit.” He laughed.

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“Did you want to say a few words?”

“Not really,” Marcus replied as they turned to lead them back to the house.

*

He took Ernie to the American Legion because it was downtown and right on the water, cheap, and full of waitresses. Marcus really appreciated a good, cheap view. Looking at the ocean while drinking made him feel a little less horrible. They each ordered a Yuengling, on special that night. A few of the waitresses from the seafood restaurant next door glanced over at Marcus the moment he walked in, and he felt it. The two sat down at the bar in the tall bucket-seated stools. Ernie swiveled from side to side. Marcus couldn’t think what to ask or say. He worried that the Legion wasn’t fun enough. Was there anywhere else to go? Would Ernie appreciate the upscale sophistication of Cellar 6 or Sangria’s or even the Taberna? Stogies? He realized that he was embarrassed to take Ernie to any of those places.

“The girls in here really seem to like you,” Ernie said in a deep voice.

“It’s not hard to get their attention when you’re up against these assholes,” he gestured an eyebrow toward a short, skinny fifty-something redneck bouncing on his heels, leaning on a pool cue. He had a gray-blond bowl cut and several missing teeth. He didn’t seem to think this should impede his talking to women. The good-natured, heavier waitresses, the ones he probably didn’t even want anyway, joked around with him and let him buy their beer.

“Well, you’re up against me, too. Don’t you forget it, Casanova,” Ernie grumbled in an

even deeper voice. He seemed upset, but not about the competition for women. His eyes grew dark and his shoulders hunched.

“You ok, man? We can head home whenever you want.”

“No! I’m fine. I’m sorry.” He stretched his torso up, unbuttoned his plaid shirt, tried to wake himself. “Marcus, I know you’re a count, and you have a cute house, and you had a pet, but what else do you like to do?”

Marcus heard Ernie refer to him as a count, but he was scared it wasn’t a joke. Was he on drugs? He wondered. Did he need drugs? He probably always needed drugs. Marcus tried to think of a way to answer Ernie’s question while catching the bartender’s eye and pointing to his beer. What else do I like to do? Someone hadn’t asked him that in a while, though he’d been contemplating the response for some time.

What Marcus thought, what he really thought, was that whatever it is you do, there are ways to do it better, people to tell you how to do it better or faster or longer or slower or how to quit doing it or get it cheaper and websites and books with tips and tricks and methods and herbs that can help you learn more about what you’re doing, its history and origins and recipes, how not to overextend your knees and elbows in its doing, how to build or repair or buy vintage things for its doing, how to get over it, complete it, or remember it forever. He was exhausted by the thought of discovering even natural talents or interests. He thought each one came with a to-do list for which he could never be prepared. He was even afraid to read, to look for good reading, afraid to be found in a section of a bookstore with nothing but a blank stare and a printout of recommendations from his senile aunt. He was wearied by the thought of his weariness. He was uninterested in his own lack of interests. To Ernie, he said, “I like video

games.”

Ernie laughed and laughed, burning his index finger while putting out a cigarette and laughing still. “Fuck off. But all you have in there is a Game Cube! Nintendo is for girls, anyway.”

“Whatever,” Marcus tried to laugh as well, his face turning red. He could feel it. His whole chest turned red. Ernie had called him on the bullshit interest. It didn’t check out. “I like computer games a lot, too. World of Warcraft. That kind of stuff.”

“Yeah, I’ve never been too into that.”

“Well, it’s cool.”

“I’m sure it is,” Ernie mumbled, his eyes following an older woman who ambled about, buzzing up to the bar and away again. The bartender had stopped trying to get her drink order. Maybe she didn’t have any money. She was short with a long mass of gray-brown curly hair which were becoming incidental dreadlocks. Every time Marcus saw her around town, she wore the same peach tank top, with very loose arm holes, and a pair of jeans with a tear at the knee. She had caught Ernie’s eye, which Marcus did not understand. He looked on in wonder as Ernie seemed to take her in, leaning away from Marcus and slowly sucking his cigarette, squinting his eyes and nodding. She was not attractive. She could have been sixty or a hard fifty and not well kept. No one would have called her fat, but lumpy patches of fat and skin dangled off of strange parts of her arms. Her smile was intact, but very yellow, which Marcus noted as she talked to every man in the bar. No one seemed to want to talk to her for too long. When her back was turned, Marcus recognized that one leg of her jeans was wet in a dribbling pattern down the center, which was most likely urine.

“Hard up?” Marcus joked, remembering how beautiful Pam was. He had only known her, as he knew everyone in high school, peripherally. She was a cheerleader, and Ernie played baseball. Marcus didn’t even know if there were cheerleaders at baseball games. Now certainly wasn’t the time to ask.

“I really am,” Ernie responded, and shocked Marcus by standing up and walking toward the weathered woman so urgently that he bumped into the scrawny redneck trying to sink the eight ball. The redneck laughed it off and played on.

Ernie grabbed the back of her arm above the elbow and spun her around. She spun too quickly, too dramatically. They talked. Ernie rubbed the back of his neck. The woman smiled and nodded, fingered his chest lightly. Did they know each other somehow? Ernie grabbed his wallet through the back pocket of his loose jeans. The two of them walked down a dark hallway toward the bathrooms and the big empty room that people could rent out for parties or banquets, though Marcus had never witnessed one. He sipped his Yuengling and felt it moving in his stomach. He frowned and remembered throwing Gerry into the water, and though he hadn’t actually seen him bobbing, the little shadow of a sailboat near where he landed had been straining against its anchor, tossing in the Intracoastal’s usually calm waters. The guinea pig would be missed. It was wonderful, he realized, to have a thing that looked at you when you got home every day.

When Ernie returned, his smile looked painfully large.

“We should go. Go! We need to go somewhere else! I liked this place a lot, but is there somewhere we can dance?”

“Not really. I’m sorry. Well, maybe. You have to be a member, but I can sign you in.”

“So you’re a member?”

“Yes.”

“And you can sign me in?” Ernie asked.

“Sure.”

“Then why did you even bother to say it like it was a problem? Did you just want to sound exclusive? Is this some ritzy place because I think I’m getting too hot for two shirts.” Ernie chuckled.

The Nest was not ritzy at all. It was also not exclusive. To be a member, all Marcus had had to do was pay ten dollars for a lifetime membership. Several people would have friends sign them in for months rather than pay the ten dollars themselves. It was the favorite local hipster hangout, probably because of the arbitrary membership ordeal. The drinks were cheap, however, and sometimes they had DJs and girls would kick off their shoes and dance around in what was clearly once the living room of an old house. It was a tiny, low-ceilinged place which was more appealing when they opened the back wall garage-door style.

Ernie loved it. He practically ran to the foosball table as Marcus signed him in on the dingy clipboard. Two tall, beautiful girls at the bar laughed into their scarves. Seeing someone sign in let the regulars know that they weren’t really a part of the club.

Ernie played foosball with a silent six-foot-tall black man for two hours. Marcus perched himself on a low wooden stool, the only one available, so the bar was just about at chin-level. He pretended to be interested in a local publication about upcoming events and he read every single one of the personals. The tall, beautiful girls at the bar were now dancing to their friend’s mash-ups all of which included a Beatles song. They were nice to look at, definitely. But this wasn’t

the Legion. These girls were on a different plane and, unfortunately, they knew it. Marcus wasn't having the best time, and Ernie seemed to sense it, so he took a short break from his game, slouched over to Marcus, put a pill in Marcus' hand, and walked away.

Of course Marcus knew that it was illegal, and that was scary enough. He didn't know what to do with it. He clasped the small white tablet in his palm until he nearly crushed it. He knew he could get rid of it if he just swallowed it. There was no reason not to.

So he tried it. He gulped it down with his Yuengling and waited for the mystery to unravel. Was *Aqua Teen Hunger Force* still on the air? He was angry for subjecting himself to such a night out. They never amounted to anything. He did this to himself sometimes and it was still unbearable with another person. He and Ernie should have just stayed home and enjoyed a few more drinks and gone to bed. Finally he knew it was time to tell Ernie that they had to leave. He found Ernie half asleep with a burning cigarette hanging out of his mouth on a stool by the foosball table. They had parked just a block away, on the bay front, and were home in less than five minutes.

"Feeling good?" Ernie asked as they walked in the front door. "I am a generous man, you know. That shit was expensive."

"I'm just tired. I'm so tired."

"Yes, but a good tired?"

"Just tired," Marcus insisted. He knew it was a different kind of tired but there were no words for it. It was almost like an intense, ongoing nicotine buzz coupled with being incredibly tired. He was so tired. He was usually so tired, and now it was just compounded.

Ernie followed Marcus toward the bathroom. "Hey."

“What is it? I need to brush my teeth and lay down.” Marcus was short with him for the first time.

“I really appreciate you letting me stay here but I have one more question.”

“What is it?” he asked, wetting his toothbrush.

“This program is really great. I read all about it online, on this message board. And they have their own site and I saw a lot of good reviews.”

“Ok.”

“I’m a little short of the fee.”

“How short?”

“About eighty dollars,” Ernie said like he was saying eight hundred. Marcus, mouth foaming, laughed at Ernie. He was so tired and dizzy. He laughed in his face, opened his wallet, the toothbrush hanging out of the side of his mouth, took out a hundred dollar bill and nearly threw it at him. If Ernie hadn’t snatched it up so quickly, it would have fallen to the floor. Ernie disappeared into the living room and Marcus was glad. He only wanted to sleep. And he did. In fact, he slept through Saturday. At five a.m. on Sunday, he woke up to drink a bottled protein shake, urinate, and accidentally try to feed Gerry. Ernie was asleep on the sofa. Marcus went back to bed.

*

It rained early on Sunday morning. Marcus was happy to feel the thunder shaking the house. He felt like he had even more of an excuse to stay in his bed. But then he heard a light tapping at his bedroom door.

“Ernie?” he asked without getting up.

“Hey man.”

“What’s up? It’s so early.”

“It’s ten,” Ernie said. “I think you should get up.”

Marcus was about to ask why, but decided to get up anyway. It seemed ridiculous to argue about what time it was and what early meant to them. Ernie would be gone soon anyway. He could go back to bed when Ernie went back to rehab that day.

The TV in the living room had *Boy Meets World* playing on mute. Ernie sat on an ottoman with his fingers crossed. He got up then sat back down. Marcus pretended not to notice Ernie’s nervousness and went to the kitchen to get a bowl of cereal. He returned with his Cinnamon Toast Crunch and sat on the couch.

“Do you like this show?” Marcus asked.

“Not really, I just had it on. I’ve been up for a few hours, waiting for you.”

“I’ve been here.”

“I mean, waiting for you to get up.”

“How’s the program going?” Marcus asked.

Ernie ignored the question. He got up again and walked to the window. He put his hands on his hips. “I’ve never had to do this before, dude.” He turned around to face Marcus.

“Do what?”

“An intervention.”

“In the program? How can they do an intervention on you if you volunteered for treatment?”

“I mean for you. I called Kayla and told her all about it, and she’s hoping to be able to be

here this afternoon.”

Marcus put his bowl on the coffee table and stood up. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“You have a very serious problem. I think you’re depressed and I’m worried about leaving you alone here when I go.”

“You called Kayla? You have no right to do that! Jesus!”

“Calm down, man,” Ernie said, backing up, heading toward the front door. Marcus wasn’t sure if he’d taken a threatening stance. He stood up straight, put his arms at his side. “I know the pills can make you sleepy, but not that sleepy.”

“You have no idea what my life is like. I work all week. I’m not allowed to rest on the weekend? Call Kayla right now and tell her not to come. I mean it.”

Ernie stood still, his face blank.

“Fucking do it!”

“Alright, I will. And treatment’s going great, by the way.”

“Asshole,” Marcus sighed to himself, getting back to his cereal. Ernie stepped out onto the front porch and dialed Kayla. Marcus could hear him through the window.

“Hey.”

A pause. A last bit of thunder. Marcus left the TV on mute.

“Actually, that’s fine. He said he didn’t want you to come anyway.”

*

On Monday evening, Marcus drove up to the rehab center at Ernie’s request. Ernie and four other addicts stood in an oval just out front smoking. The building sat alone in the clear pink

dusk, a shining white block against an expanse of marshland leading out to the Intracoastal and the 312 bridge arcing high over it. Marcus arrived early, and they waved him through their gathering, past twenty or so empty bottles of beer lining the front of the building, motioning through bulletproof glass for the nurse or receptionist to buzz him.

“Thanks for coming, man,” Ernie said. He touched Marcus’ back on his way in.

Marcus sat alone on a taped-up red leather chair in a disturbingly oval, windowless room. It was freezing. Finally a woman came into the room where he sat alone, tucking her frizzy gray-blond bob behind her ears. She smiled at him for a while without looking away. He didn’t want to look back but there really was nowhere else to look: maybe at the giant framed prints of bad paintings of palm trees or the racks of brochures on medications designed to help you become less addicted to other medications. “They should be in in a minute,” she cooed.

“Sure. No rush.”

“I did want to say that it was remarkably generous, what you did for Ernie. He’s been telling me all about it.”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. And on top of all that, coming here to support him. It’s meant a lot to him.”

“He had a problem. I was happy to help. Especially when it was so clear to me why he felt like he had to... *use*.” Marcus was petrified of using the wrong terminology. In this room, even just in front of her, he felt so naïve.

“Nothing’s ever that clear. He might have become an addict without any prior trauma or hardship. We have to remember that.”

“Oh,” Marcus said. Ernie and three shaky men and a ponderous woman came back into the room, carrying an almost visible cloud of cheap smoke.

“Welcome, everybody. We do have a guest this time. This is Marcus.” No further explanation was necessary. No one really looked interested, except Ernie beside him, patting his knee. He’d certainly told the others about the free stay and the hundred dollars in what Ernie kept calling Financial Aid, like rehab was a school and he was about to graduate, but they didn’t look at Marcus like a savior. They were bored, they were here in the middle of solving real problems, and Marcus knew he was interrupting.

“Who would like to get started this week?”

The heavy white woman raised her arm from her slouched position. She looked like she was volunteering in spite of herself.

“Go ahead Carly.”

“I almost relapsed yesterday. My kids were watching *SpongeBob* and running around and screaming and I almost couldn’t take it,” she said in a monotone southern accent.

“Almost is the key word there, Carly. How did you handle it?”

“Well, all the money I used to spend on pills I spend here now, so there was that. And I just sat down in my room and closed the door, which is what I used to do when the kids drove me crazy before. I’d sit in there and crush up my pills. It was a great ritual.”

“Well, ‘great’ isn’t the best word, is it, Carly?”

“It made me feel so much better. But I realized I can still get away. I can still close the door and smoke cigarettes and calm down rather than using the pills too.”

Marcus realized his mouth was open and he closed it. Carly leaned her thick face into one

of her hands, looking through her fingers. She looked tired and irritated.

“That’s progress, Carly.”

“It is. I know. But things are getting worse with my husband. Ever since you guys had me talk about my rape, I realized how much my husband looks like my rapist, and it’s sort of hurt our relationship, you know?”

The counselor shifted in her seat a bit. “Well, there’s couples counseling as well, Carly, that you can seek either here or through another agency. Maybe you’d benefit from being there with Reginald.”

“Sure,” Carly said, rolling her eyes.

“Anyone else?” the counselor asked. The room sat silent. “Well, for a moment then I’d like to turn to our guest. Marcus, it’s really quite amazing what you’ve done for your friend. But Ernie was talking to me yesterday about how you might want to share as well?”

“Share? Well, I’m just here because Ernie asked me to this morning. I know he’s almost done, and I’m proud of him.”

“That’s very nice. But Ernie came up to me and said specifically that he really thought you’d also need to share,” she put her Styrofoam coffee cup right on the thinly carpeted peach floor, talking continually as though Ernie wasn’t in the room. As if no one was in the room.

“Addiction affects everyone around the addict. What have Ernie’s struggles meant to you? How have you been affected?”

“I don’t know,” he trailed off. He didn’t want to say that he barely knew Ernie. He wanted to lie and say that he knew how horrible addiction was. He wanted to say that he’d confronted Ernie and told him that the addiction was getting out of hand. But he wasn’t that

person for Ernie, or for anyone.

“Personally, then,” the counselor said, almost sounding irritated, “what struggles have you been going through? This is a great place to share.”

Marcus sat far back to look at Ernie, but Ernie rocked forward, resting his elbows on his knees, kneading his hands. Ernie shook his head slowly and said without looking back, “Sorry, man. I’ve just been really worried about you. You know? I hope you get better once I’m gone.” Ernie looked to the counselor, as though he’d practiced saying that to Marcus. Like he needed reassurance. Like it really meant something.

The sympathy in the counselor’s sagging gray eyes tried to pull a story out of Marcus, but he didn’t have one, and he couldn’t match the ones of those in the room, he was sure. These people didn’t want to hear that he never wanted to stop sleeping or that he hated his job or didn’t even care that his parents were even less interested in his life than he was.

The counselor looked around the room at all the addicts, who were not crying but were compulsively sniffing and jiggling at least one leg. Carly’s jiggling leg was perilously close to the uncovered Styrofoam coffee cup and Marcus stared at the cup, trying to avoid the counselor’s gaze. But he really couldn’t avoid it. He tried to stare back at her, wondering if his face looked normal. She looked up at the textured pastel walls as if to say that Marcus could let it out here. This is a comfortable place. For a second, her eyes said, this could be about *you*.

APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE

I sat in the front seat of my parents' white Saturn sedan, trying not to throw up on the brief drive to my middle school. The stench of the spilled milk we could never get out of the trunk didn't help. My mom, driving, was the only other person in the car. We were going at 6:00 p.m. on a Wednesday because I'd signed up to read a story at a writer's showcase. My picture was on a poster all over school, my hair pulled back taut in a ponytail. I looked like I had almost no hair, which horrified me.

About twenty people milled about in Neptune Middle School's courtyard, and they were mostly other kids who'd signed up to read, as well as their families. My name was called as soon as we walked up and I went to the microphone positioned in front of the flagpole. I don't remember the name of the story I read, but I do remember that it was about a man who'd been hired to restore an old house. Of course he discovers that it's haunted. He confronts the female ghost and they have some sort of conversation. I mostly only read Goosebumps books at the time, and that was what I tried to write. The wind whistled into the microphone and the sound of my own wavering voice, so young, so thin, was terrible. I realized while I was reading that my story was terrible. I couldn't wait to grow up and feel like I had something important to contribute.

*

In high school I started volunteering at the local hospital. I wrote about it, fiction in which I embellished having witnessed injuries and deaths. An English teacher told me I wrote a little like Hemingway. I hadn't read him, but I knew he was important! He was famous! I devoured Hemingway and still consider him a huge inspiration. He wrote from experience but

the problem was, he *had* experiences. I wrote from experience and I didn't. I was a middle class white kid who got good grades and didn't get into trouble.

In college I took up smoking and drinking. I cut my hair short and dyed it bright red. I started waiting tables and even dating an addict. He was a poet and a painter too, and I would go with him on trips to Jacksonville to buy pills out of peoples' suburban garages in bad neighborhoods. I was too scared to try anything harder than weed, but I was finally living! I was able to sit in the back of my American Lit or Creative Writing classes with a world-weary glaze over my eyes. Sure, I had three beers before class. What's wrong with that? On New Year's Day 2008, I went around collecting last minute letters of recommendation from my professors, throwing up in the bushes outside of all of their houses. I was applying to the Iowa Writer's Workshop on a last-minute whim. I did not get in.

*

I've always felt like a writer. My parents read to me as a kid but weren't readers themselves. Instead of being a rebellious teen, my way of saying "fuck you, Mom and Dad" was to read and write and walk around feeling smarter than them. I was particularly insufferable after I read *The Stranger* and decided I wasn't Catholic anymore. And no, I can't do the dishes, I'm working on a *novel*.

More than a way to distinguish myself from my parents, though, it was the best way I could think of to process the world. I kept dozens of diaries and journals filled with updates on crushes, bad romantic poetry, and ghost stories. I had a high-tech Brother typewriter with built-in corrective tape. I wrote two novel-length manuscripts before I finished high school. Only one survives on my external hard drive. I wrote because I loved to read. I wanted to add my voice

and my experiences to the canon. I don't believe in life after death, and I wanted to be remembered. But the more I read, the more insecure I became about my voice and my experiences. In high school and college, it was easy to recognize that I wasn't as good as Hemingway, and I began to feel I wouldn't write anything worth reading for nearly a decade, probably two. The insecurity of youth is the theme that I explore most throughout *Young Thinkers*. I wonder if now, in particular, it's very difficult to know when you've grown up. I feel that it must have been a little easier to make this distinction in the past. My parents were married and had me before they were twenty-five. Marriage and a child must have made them feel more adult. But now, when so many young people can't find jobs and have to live with their parents, and it's more common to delay getting married and having children, Americans have this prolonged adolescence. We have longer to party, which is great, but we also aren't quite sure when we matter. What have we learned? What do we have to give back? What are we going to do with ourselves?

Alexander Nazaryan recently wrote an essay for Salon.com on why Americans don't deserve the Nobel Prize for Literature. NPR then did an interview with him in which he says that the hordes of American MFA students just don't have enough experience. He said that Hemingway could write from experience because he had gone to war. I'm paraphrasing here, but kids who went to college and moved to Brooklyn didn't have anything interesting to say. Nazaryan, by the way, lives in Brooklyn and is writing a novel about Russian immigrants who live in Brooklyn. But there he is, voicing my great fear on the radio. I was petrified that he may be right. In the essay, though, he lambasts writers that I really admire, like John Updike, for being too interior, too narcissistic. He says that they don't achieve the universal. What I suspect

Nazaryan is saying is that we're not writing about the things that really matter, and he seems to believe that the things that matter aren't happening in the United States. He asks what the relevance of American fiction will be to readers in India. While the qualifications for the Nobel Prize may tend toward writing of vast, global issues, I refuse to accept that Updike does not explore universal emotions. While I cannot yet afford to travel the world, those kinds of experiences would absolutely be good for a writer, though I don't think that the writing of someone a little less traveled, someone like Flannery O'Connor for example, was overly interior or narcissistic.

My own characters feel insecure about their lives and experiences. In "Vigil," Bradley works at a gas station despite holding a bachelor's degree. He witnesses the hit and run death of a high school student. He struggles to fit in at the vigil. He doesn't feel like he belongs there but he longs to impart wisdom to the teenagers who show up. Bradley aches for the wisdom to help others through their grief, but he ultimately doesn't feel like he can.

In "The Ones Around Him," Marcus has graduated college and holds a steady job as an accountant but still feels lost. When an old high school acquaintance arrives and asks for help kicking a drug habit, Marcus acquiesces, but cannot see outside of himself or his crippling depression. Others at the rehab center finally turn their attention toward Marcus, rather than Ernie and his addiction. Marcus demonstrates that even those who appear to have found a place can still feel useless and unwanted. In "Young Thinker," Gable feels so much aggression from her peers over the fact that she has wealthy parents and doesn't have to work. The realization that working would give her more experience doesn't convince her to get a job. She's achieved a false sense of independence, living on her own but receiving money from parents. Her laziness is

pitted against the fear that no one will ever take her seriously. How can we earn wisdom? When will anyone care what we have to say? This theme runs through nearly every story of my collection. As writers, all we have are our observations, and I never wanted mine to seem naive. Reading is always good for writers, but it's also difficult not to constantly compare yourself to the great ones and feel inferior.

*

Ernest Hemingway will likely always be my favorite writer. His descriptions and dialog are so alive. His characters are so vibrant and natural. My favorite work of his is *The Sun Also Rises*, and I'm encouraged that he was so young (twenty-six) when he completed the novel. But my devotion to Hemingway has held me back a bit. I thought I had to experience everything I was going to write about so I limited myself to thinly-veiled autobiography through even my undergraduate days. This eventually became boring. Nazaryan does say that the adage "write what you know" has crippled a generation (or two or three) of American writers, but his support of imaginative fiction feels undercut by his advice to go out and garner more experience.

My thesis adviser Darlin' Neal had us, in one of her workshop classes, read a book by Ron Currie Jr. called *Everything Matters!* It became my favorite book with its surreal plot involving a comet crashing into the Earth and the main character, Junior, being told everything about the future by a voice in his head. While I have always loved Vonnegut as well, this contemporary work by Currie reminded me that it was OK to make stuff up. *Everything Matters!* is as ridiculously compelling as it is because of the natural development and interactions of the very realistic characters. I also read his short story cycle which came out shortly before his novel entitled *God is Dead*, which explores how several different people live their lives after God is

declared dead. The plots that Currie employs function almost as a wonderful distraction. They're interesting but they certainly aren't the core of his work. In fact, while I'm trying to figure out the war between the philosophical factions which assemble after God's death, a description of a young boy's simple crush comes along, and it feels that much more powerful because of the disarming plot. The emotional punches are even stronger, and characters themselves are more fascinating against such a backdrop. Before reading Currie, I realized that what I'd been trying to do with my writing was to explore fascinating people in mundane situations. Currie does the opposite: mundane people in fascinating situations. I had been trying to write those austere, interior modern stories wherein the plot isn't very interesting or important but the inner turmoil, or inner lives of the characters, are. Currie's able to present the emotional lives of his characters while providing an interesting, but not intrusively distracting plot. I see through Currie's work (and the work of others, like Chabon and Eugenides) that a bizarre plot is not, as I may have thought before, a crutch. If the writer uses this tool as a backdrop to emotions and characters, plot acts as a revealing palette.

This realization helped me to craft stories like "Telling Computers and Humans Apart" and "Glass Cutter" in which bizarre, if not completely unrealistic, things happen. Characters will always be at the heart of my fiction, but other craft elements such as plot have become more important as I have developed as a writer. If there's something I most need to continue to do, it's to push myself in this direction.

On the other hand, the work of authors like John Updike, Joy Williams and Joshua Ferris demonstrate how extraordinary fiction can be even if inner turmoil is in the foreground and plot in the background. A few months ago, at the recommendation of some friends, I read *Then We*

Came to the End by Joshua Ferris. I wish I had written this book. It's about office life. I had those experiences! I recognized those characters and their dilemmas! The plot remains remarkably mundane but the work is wholly enthralling. John Updike's *Rabbit* books are also an excellent example of works where character and setting overshadow plot as the writer explores the meaning of ordinary lives. Joy Williams' details alone drive her stories. They shimmer against the backdrop of the inner turmoil of her characters. Again I am torn on the function of plot, but inspired to vacillate between the mundane and the extraordinary in a constant attempt to explore the world around me. I want to write a book my parents would enjoy reading (or that would make a good movie) because of its zany, interesting plot, but I also want it to impress my literary friends and those critics that I fantasize will one day analyze the multiple levels of my work.

I have to try to remember that Hemingway lost all the carbon copies of several of his earliest stories. He didn't become the writer he was by waiting to have experiences and writing about them through the lens of wisdom. I wouldn't have written the stories I have here if I was fifty. I'm writing about the people I know right now, the problems and experiences we are having. Maybe much of those problems will one day seem trivial, but the stories I write when I'm fifty wouldn't be as good if I weren't writing now. So if these just end up being practice for something to come, then at least I'm wiser for it, and I'll have documentation of my own shifting insights.

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