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## Standing In The Shadows

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STANDING IN THE SHADOWS

by

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B.A University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Masters of Arts  
in the department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

“Standing in the Shadows” is a collection of short stories that showcases the inner workings of the modern American family. Each of these six stories examines families, in one capacity or another, dealing with ups and downs, love and hatred, sadness and happiness, and everything in between. At the heart of these stories are the relationships between people, some affected by sadness and tragedy, others torn apart by secrets, all trying to cope and exist in a world full of conflict and difficulties. The characters in this selection deal with shortcomings—shortcomings of others and of themselves—while forced to overcome obstacles in order to find truth, meaning, and understanding within their lives.

“River Jumping” and “All the Wrong Ways to Say I Love You” involve protagonists trying to come to terms with their current situations in life while attempting to rectify the mistakes of their pasts. “Standing in the Shadows” discusses the secrets that fathers keep, and the adverse effect it can have on their children. “Stolen Summer” examines how tragedy can affect the inner workings of family and also the relationship between two friends. The story is an example of how sadness is an all consuming organism that, if not faced head on, can forever alter the futures of those involved. “Pastime” deals with the relationship between fathers and sons and how the love and desire a father has for his son impacts their relationship in negative ways. Finally, “Glass Onion” completes the collection, detailing the story of a woman who is so frustrated with her current disposition that she can no longer take it. As the years have passed and routines are formed, Tabby struggles to maintain her identity, her desire for life, and ultimately, her sanity.

In each of these stories, families are forced to deal with issues that ultimately define the characters as individuals. Whether it's a lack of communication or they are haunted by the sins of the past, these characters struggle to overcome obstacles that in the end will provide insight into who they are and where they are going.

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## RIVER JUMPING

The first thing that I should explain is why the fuck I was even there. What could possibly have gotten me to that point?

There I was, standing on the bank of the Detroit River, just under the Ambassador Bridge. I could have just walked to the middle of the bridge and thrown my ass into the water but it wasn't that easy. With all the security around our damn bridges and buildings it's no wonder suicide rates were down. Also, just because I was trying to off myself at the time didn't mean that I had spent the last five years of my life concocting some grand scheme. It was completely off the cuff. In hindsight, it would have been far more effective had I just taken a big sip of river water—all the toxins, needles, and dead-body scum definitely would have killed me.

I'd lost my job, blown any chance I had of having a relationship with my three-year-old son, and walked out on my ladyfriend. Now, I don't know if it was worth killing myself over, but it sure seemed like a nice solution at the time. I was basically at the end of a long goddam day, tanked to shit, and sick of it all.

It was a warm night sometime within the first five days of August and there wasn't a goddam star in the sky. No moon, no howling wolves, just the patter of polluted water crawling its way through the mud. The occasional car roared above me vibrating the girders holding the bridge together. I was surrounded by debris—rocks, rusted metal pilings, barrels of waste and sludge and empty pop cans tossed out the windows of cars from the bridge above. My first thought was to find a jagged rock, open a vein and sit and wait. But after a few moments, I figured it would be far better to drown. There were enough messes to clean up in my life, no reason to leave one more.

I found a cinder block in a pile of broken bricks and busted glass. I made sure that it wasn't too heavy for me to lift and, using the laces from my shoes, tied it to my right ankle.

Standing on a concrete jetty that extended four feet over the water, I saw nothing but darkness and a flicker of lights from our Canadian neighbor on the other side of the river. I took one last swig of Jack and threw the bottle into the water. The second to last thing I thought about before taking the plunge was how disappointed Tawny would be in me for doing something like this. The last thing I thought about was my son, Oliver. The fucking kid was only three. I found a bit of solace in the fact that he never really knew me. I wouldn't want him to remember me like this.

Holding the block in my hand, I raised my right leg and dangled it over the edge. I leaned forward, waiting for the moment when the weight would pull me down. Just as my other foot left the concrete, and I had started my descent into the river—I have to imagine that a lot of suiciders have a thought like this—I knew I was making a mistake. I wanted Oliver to know me. I wanted to know him. It was at that very moment as I was plunging to my supposed death that I wanted to right all the wrongs, make any concessions that I could and make sure that I had a chance to watch my boy grow. Is that too much to ask for? I guess it may be when I was only a few inches above the water with twenty pounds of weight dangling by a shoestring tied to my ankle. And, judging by the last twelve hours, I had a lot of wrongs to right.

This whole journey had started sometime before five o'clock. I knew it wasn't five because an hour before I had lost my job—fired to be exact. I drove out to Nob Hill



which is this little cookie cutter town just to the east of Romulus, right outside of Detroit. That's where my son and his mother live. About a year after he was born, I made the decision that I should *try* to be in his life. His mother, Melissa, said the only way she would consider it was if we met with a social worker so I could be 'evaluated.'

That made sense to me at the time since she didn't even really know me. Our only previous history was a weekend of sex. Melissa—and Oliver, I suppose—were both victims of a charging steed and a busted Trojan. I gave her my number at the end of the weekend because she was great in bed and I wanted more. She called me because she was pregnant and wanted more. I didn't have anything to give her. I didn't have love, I couldn't offer her stability, nor did I want to even try to give it to her. The reaction for everything in my life was to run and hide. Tuck tail.

So we met with the social worker who told me that no matter how hard I tried, how many stuffed animals I gave to Melissa to give to the kid or how many times I said I wanted to be a father, I was unfit to be in his life based on the drinking alone. I guess it was a mistake to show up to the meetings stinking like whiskey, my face shadowed and stubbled.

After, Melissa took me to court for child support where I was ordered to pay \$300 within the first five days of every month. So I paid the fucking money. It seemed like the least I could do. After the hearing I simply forced myself into believing that I had *no* desire to see him. That's the God's honest truth. I just convinced myself that by paying the money I was fulfilling my fatherly duties.

So there I was sitting in my car, down the street from Melissa's, wondering about how I was going to break it to Tawny that I'd lost my job again. It was hot as balls

outside so I had picked up a fifth of Jack and a cold coke on the way. By the time I pulled up to the curb, the coke was gone and the fifth was a tenth. It was payday, and I wasn't about to let the loss of my job get in the way of my fatherly duties.

I wrote out the check for \$300 and placed it in a pre-addressed stamped envelope. This was a monthly routine that had changed little over the past two years. I stumbled up the street about four or five houses. They all looked the same in this goddam town. The houses stood two stories tall, the roofs triangled and teepeed. Each was made of red brick, fronted with a small, submarine like window just under the point of the roof. That's not what made me nervous though. It was the long, oversized windows on the first floor that looked out into the front yard that made me sweat. It was important for her not to see me as I sneaked up and placed my obligation in the mailbox. If she saw me, I'd be screwed. She'd go and get a restraining order or some crazy shit like that. Almost running, I hurried my way back to my piece of shit pick up truck.

From here, I would wait to see if I could spot Oliver—some months with better success than others. It was great to see how much he'd grown from month to month or how long or short his hair was. I'll never forget the first time I saw him walk—he moved his little legs one in front of the other and plopped down, butt first into the snow. I remember getting so frustrated because the heat from the car was fogging up the windows and I was having a hard time seeing his face.

Only about ten minutes had passed when I saw Oliver emerge from the house. He walked onto the stoop holding his mother's hand. He was cute as hell, that's for sure. Like me, he had nice thick sandy brown hair with thin lips and satellite dish ears. Unlike me, however, he had light eyes—I think they were blue—like his mother's. One time, a

few months back, I even brought binoculars so I could see his eyes, but the little shit had sunglasses on. But that was okay because he was fucking cute.

Oliver and Melissa walked to the bottom of the steps where he broke free from her hand and ran into the front yard. He plopped his ass right there besides his toy truck and started playing. He had his little overalls on, with a green Michigan State shirt. I would have dressed him in a Michigan shirt, but he looked like a fucking bad ass anyway. His mother picked him up and walked him to her station wagon, putting him securely in the back seat. She kissed him on the forehead, smiled, and shut the door. She was a good mother. I could tell that she was taking good care of him. Whenever I saw the kid he was always smiling and laughing and having a good ol' time. I waited until their car slowly backed out of the drive and headed in the opposite direction of where I was parked.

I really liked this kid; it just took me a long time and many viewings through a car window to realize it. Every month I felt the tug more and more—the tug to make an effort to be in his life. What a mess I had gotten myself into. I was such a fuck up, and the worst part is that I knew it—even as I stopped at the QuickSam's liquor on the way to Tawny's for another bottle of whiskey. It's like she always tells me, "If you weren't so goddam scared you'd learn to grow a dick instead of tucking tail."

Tawny was my ladyfriend who I was living with, more out of laziness of having to find my own place than anything else. She cooked and cleaned and did all that lady stuff, but she worked too. She's great to be with and has a real sweet streak for me. But she's fucking clingy and gets on my ass all the time about how I never say 'I love you,' and I hate that shit. So I draw the line at ladyfriend, much to her dismay.

It took me about a half hour or so to get to the other side of town. She lives in a pretty nice condo in Grosse Pointe. It's nice territory out there, that's for sure. The houses are all immaculate and clean and the grass is always bleeding green and cut razor sharp. I smelled dinner as soon as I opened the door. She was making a nice little concoction of meat and beans and Hunts tomato sauce that she called chili.

"Ben, honey, is that you?" Tawny yelled from the kitchen.

"I'm home," I replied. But it sure as shit didn't come out as coherent as it sounded in my head. It probably came as a growl, like a bear or a Wookiee.

"What's wrong with you? You're a damn drunk, you know that?" she said. She was standing at the kitchen door, obviously pissed.

"Yeah, but I'm good at it," I said.

Tawny was straight up New Yorker, and she had the attitude to match. I think that's why I was first attracted to her. She had this flowing black hair and killer eyes, big and brown, like milk chocolate M&M's.

She kneeled down at my feet, folding her arms across my knees. She was wearing this low cut red thing, tight around her breasts.

"You paid Melissa today, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I also lost my job."

"Again?" she said, more surprised than sympathetic. "Benny, what the hell is wrong with you?"

"I need a drink. Can you go pour me a glass?" I said, handing her the Sam's bag.

"Oh no. I ain't your goddam flooze that's gonna run and get your drinks. You better think twice, sweetheart. What happened at work?"

“I was fired, I guess.” It was this nothing job—cutting meat in a market. I knew I would get over losing the job, but at the time, with all the shit I was thinking about, it felt like the weight of the world.

“What did you do? I thought you liked this job. I thought you had finally settled into it.”

“I dunno. This bitchy blue haired came in and told me that her flank steak was too thick and fatty or some shit like that. So I told her there were a lot of other things about her that were thick and fatty that she should worry about.”

That was actually a lie. I never really said that to anybody. But I felt much more comfortable telling Tawny that I got cocky rather than stupid. The real reason I was ‘let go’ was because I was fucking terrible at cutting cow. I got the job because I used to work at a Farmer Jack’s grocers in the Deli and I had lied on my application about my experience dealing with meat. I tried the best I could to carve and package the right parts, but I was always screwing up, butchering the cow in ways that a butcher wasn’t supposed to do. I was surprised I made it three months. But oh, how I tried. I really did.

“You were in one of your moods again, weren’t you?” Tawny asked, standing—no, more like hovering—over me. “I don’t understand them, these moods of yours. You’re all over the place. I’ve never understood them.”

“You don’t need to understand them,” I said as I walked into the bedroom.

“They’re my moods. If you want to understand them, have one of your own.”

“You drink too much. You need to stop.”

“Maybe you need to start. Why don’t you go fix us a drink?”

“Why don’t you go fuck yourself?”

She was pretty pissed off. Next came the yelling and the ranting and the raving about how I have no respect for her—which isn't true, because I do like her—followed by the same bullshit about how I never say 'I love you'—which was the root of most of our problems. It's not that she wasn't lovable; it just wasn't convenient for me at the time. She threw another one of her empty threats about how this relationship could end, snap of her fingers, just like that. I couldn't have cared less. I was a fucking mess.

"Why can't you ever say it?" Tawny said. "Just once, say the words."

"Not now. I don't want to deal with your shit right now."

"You don't want to deal, huh?" She said, sarcasm bouncing off the walls, hands flailing. "What a big fucking surprise. Big Ben don't want to deal with anything."

"Why the fuck do you love *me* then? Tell me that," I said, yelling now.

"Because when you're not drinking or so depressed, you're actually a pretty good guy. Do you know that? You bring me flowers every Sunday, for Christ's sake, and you always sing me those damned Beatles songs. Who does that if they're not in love?"

"Stop crying," I said. I was so fucked up in the head I couldn't even hold her when she was sad.

"Tell me," she said. "Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't love me."

I can say now, looking back on the situation, I regretted saying what I said in response. I don't think I have to say what it was. My track record speaks for itself. But I can tell you her reaction, and it wasn't pleasant.

She slapped me hard with her right hand, and before I had a chance to fall, she whacked me with a left, both slaps of equal force, enough to keep me wobbling in the middle like a jack-in-the-box. She was crying like crazy now and seeing that hurt more

than her slaps. I'd rather have my balls fed to a pack of wolves than to have her feel that way, but shit, I just didn't know what to do. I could never think of the right thing to do or say.

"Get out," she screamed. "Get the fuck out of my house, you lousy deadbeat."

So I walked out. I walked out on the one woman who would have kept me around for *almost* anything and put up with *almost* any of my shortcomings. I got in my car and drove west on the Ford Freeway. I was in rough shape. I had these crazy thoughts running through my head about how irresponsible I had been. Had I made different decisions about my son and Tawny, then things in my life sure would have turned out better. 'Having a kid in my life' and 'whole lot better' were not terms I usually put together.

It was 8:40 p.m. and I was about a half hour from Nob Hill. I wanted to straighten things out with Melissa. Being completely honest, I wasn't going over *just* to see Oliver, or to beg for her mercy and proclaim my overwhelming desire to be a father in his life—I was definitely not ready for such drastic measures. But I was ready to make this God awful feeling in the pit of my stomach—like it was at war with piranhas—and this feeling that my brain was turning into pancake batter go away. I had no idea what I was going to say, or how to say it, but I sure needed a drink first (big surprise—and big mistake). I pulled into a liquor store and bought a pint of Jack.

I cracked open the bottle as soon as I parked the truck in my customary position down the block from Melissa's. I took a long swig and felt no burn as it slid mostly down my throat, and some down my chin and onto my green Kilgore's Meat Market shirt. I gripped the steering wheel. My hands were so sweaty that little bits of leather

from the wheel stuck to my palms. My stomach knotted as I thought about what I was going to say. I got out of the car, surprised at how steady I was, and approached the house.

The only time Melissa and I had really seen each other, since Oliver, was with the social worker. Even then I was pretty drunk. After our last meeting, I stopped her in the parking lot and yelled something at her that had to do with there being a reason that abortion was legal. It was a shit thing to say. I meant it to be more directed at myself and my failures, but she took it the wrong way and threw her water bottle at me. It didn't hit me though.

I wanted to tell her the opposite. I wanted to tell her that I'd seen Oliver and that I was glad she chose to have him. It was hard to think straight with all the alcohol and adrenaline and Tawny and work shit going through my head.

I knocked. It must have been past eleven at that point. The porch light was still on and I heard a female voice through the door.

“Ben? What do you want?” It was Melissa.

It was imperative that I sound as coherent as possible if anything were to get accomplished.

“I'm sorry.”

I'm not sure if it sounded like I meant it, but I did. From the bottom of my shallow fucking heart. I was sorry about so many different things that those two words couldn't possibly contain all that I was sorry for. There was a long pause. I heard nothing from the other side of the door, just the sounds of crickets filling my ears. I



started to wonder if she even spoke to me at all or if I imagined it and just blurted out the words.

“I want you to leave.”

“I want to see Oliver.”

“You’ve been drinking. I can hear it in your voice.”

“No, I haven’t. I swear.” I’m such a fucking liar.

“I can see it in your eyes, Ben.”

“No, Melissa. I haven’t. Take a closer look.”

I stuck my face right in front of the peep hole. My nose was leaning against her red cedar door. It smelled nice. Like Pine Sol.

“You can’t see Oliver.”

“Well, I know. I’m sure he’s asleep. How about tomorrow?”

“No, not then either.”

“Well, when? You got my check today, right?”

“You don’t need to send the checks anymore.”

“I don’t mind. I want to help.” My nose was still against the door. I wondered what she was wearing. I wondered if she still had the piercing in her flat little tummy, or if having a kid ruined that look.

“I need to give you something,” she said. “My lawyer is going to mail you a copy next week. But you can read mine now.”

She didn’t even open the door. She slid the letter through the doggie door, at my knees. It said that my child support payments could stop immediately because Melissa

Gumenick was going to be married. Furthermore, her husband was going to seek adoption of Oliver, thus ceasing all my obligations to the child.

“No. I don’t want that,” I said. “I don’t know what I want, but I know I don’t want that.”

“He needs a father in his life, Ben.”

“I’m his father. I want to be his father.”

“You need to go now. I’ll call the police if you don’t.”

“I won’t fucking go. I said I was sorry, so open the door.” I kicked the door hard with my right foot. It hurt like shit. It was a dumb thing to do.

I was enraged now. I was hurt and sad and confused. I wanted to see Oliver. I wanted my son.

“Oliver,” I yelled, looking around the front porch, wondering which window was his. “Oliver, come to Daddy. Please.”

I fell to my knees, feeling the rubber from the doggie door against my face. I lifted the flap, hoping to see inside, hoping to spot Oliver. All I saw was a piece of plywood.

“Melissa. Please.” I felt dizzy, nauseated. I turned and vomited into the bushes, pushing as much shit out of me as I could, hoping that my soul would explode from my mouth.

“You’re so pathetic, Ben,” I heard Melissa say behind the door. “I’m calling the police.”

The porch light went out, and I sobbed like a pussy—on my knees against the door. I whimpered some shit about Oliver and how I didn’t deserve to live. I waited for

the police and heard nothing—no sirens in the distance. I walked off the porch, vomit staining the front of my shirt.

I found a payphone and called a cab, knowing I was in no state to drive, and got out around the Joe Louis Arena, right next to the Detroit River. I wandered around, boo-hooing some more, wondering but not really caring if I would get mugged. Detroit is a pretty desolate town—bombed out, burned out and empty unless there's a hockey game or something. I was all alone in a shit town with nothing more to lose. I'd lost the son that I never had, lost my job that I was never any good at, and lost my girlfriend that I didn't deserve. That's when I found the concrete jettison and the twenty pound cinder block and figured it would be best if I just snuffed it. So, I stepped off the jetty. It all made such good sense at the time.

I remember hearing the block break the surface of the water, and the tug on my leg. I wanted to live and knew that this was a mistake. I also knew that my method gave me a chance of survival if I could just manage to untie the laces and not drink any of the water. I yelled, 'Oliver!' as loud as I could, just as my feet made contact with the river. I closed my eyes and held my breath, ready to fight my way back to life. I felt a swell under my feet and the coolness of water against my shins, rising to my knees and up to my waist—but no farther. I had landed in a muddy embankment on the side of the river. The block had simply sunk me to my waist in muck and mud, nothing more.

I opened my eyes, pulling my shaking hands to my face, running them through my hair, checking to see if it was still dry and I wasn't really consumed by water. I was

alive. I don't know if I deserved to be, but I was really fucking happy about it. I dug through the water and the mud, searching for the laces to untie the block.

I climbed onto the jetty above and sprawled on the concrete. I looked at the stars, bright and clear above me, as one streaked across the sky. I wished that Oliver would be able to forgive me later in his life. I was his father, like it or not, which meant that he had some of me in him. I wanted to find a way to be there, in his life, to make sure that all the shit that's me didn't get the best of him.

And then I thought about Tawny. I was so happy to get a chance to hold her again, make love to her again. If she would have me back, that is.

I ran into the street. It was the early morning hours of the next day and I hailed a cab.

When I pulled up to her condo it was dark, not a single light showed through the two small windows on each side of the front door. I wanted it to be our condo again. I wanted to climb into bed and listen to her breathe while I wondered what she was dreaming, hoping that it was about me.

I opened the door as quietly as I could and went to the kitchen. This had been, without a doubt, the most fucked up day of my life. I needed to make it right. I wanted to convince Tawny that I was alive.

"You're like a little lost dog," she said. The moonlight reflecting through the kitchen window and onto her soft, tan skin, made her look beautiful, angelic. I loved the way her curls were folded and knotted.

“I’m sorry,” I said. There were those words again. I had no idea when the last time I had used them together was and I caught myself saying them over and over that night. I guess I had a lot to be sorry about.

“Oh my God,” she said, covering her nose. “You smell like a garbage can.”

“I went for a walk, to think about things, and I slipped and fell into the river.” I couldn’t possibly tell her what I did. She’d think I was such a screw up.

“Benny, that’s gross. You could get sick.” she said.

“I just wasn’t paying attention. It was some pretty heavy duty thinking I was doing.”

“You were thinking, huh?” she retorted, more out of her nose than her mouth.

“I thought about Oliver and stuff. And I thought about how, you know, I’d like to have him in my life. Even if it’s a phone call or a letter or something. It would be a nice start.”

“I agree. It would. So, what else were you thinking of?”

“I was thinking about how I wanted to come and lay down next to you and smell your hair as you slept.”

“Kind of weird,” she said, “but I get your idea. What else? Because if you’re going to want to see Oliver you got to quit drinking. And if you want to smell me or whatever, I sure as shit don’t want to smell you.” She had that pissed-off, dominating tone that she gets from time to time.

“Yeah, that too.” I said, knowing that I wouldn’t have another drink for a long time. “There’s one more thing. I thought about how I kind of dig that you love me.”

“Oh, really? You dig it, huh?” she said.

I opened the cabinet above the sink and started to pour what was left of the liquor down the drain. “I need you to help me get Oliver. I can’t do it without you.” I knew it sounded like shit, but all I needed was for her to believe me this one last time. That damn kid had changed me. She had changed me. And that fucking river changed me too. I just had to prove it to her.

She walked over to me as I leaned against the sink, the same place we argued a few hours ago. She looked at me, square in the eye, and slapped me in the face. Not all that hard this time, though.

“You deserve that. I’m glad you came back. I was worried.”

“I’m worried, also.”

“I love you,” she said.

“I know,” I said, with as much compassion as I could muster.

She looked at me, expressionless, and settled her hand into mine.

After a long hot shower, I climbed into bed where Tawny was already lying, motionless. I watched her sleep until the sun came up a few hours later.

## ALL THE WRONG WAYS TO SAY I LOVE YOU

Trisha *must* make Jerry some eggs and toast. The entire world would come to an end if Jerry wasn't able to eat his eggs and toast in the morning. Trisha pulls back her thick brown hair in a bow, wrapping it twice around and cinching it with a hair tie. She tucks the remaining stragglers behind her ears, and takes out the frying pan from under the stove. She pulls out a spatula and porcelain bowl, clanging them on the stove, making as much noise as she possibly can. Three times already has she gone into James' room, their eleven-year-old son, to get him out of bed. He has yet to appear for breakfast.

"James," Trisha yells. "Get your lazy ass out of bed." She's frustrated. It's so hard for her to get him to do anything these days.

Trisha cracks six eggs, adds a dash of milk and a pinch of salt and pepper. Jerry is useless in the kitchen. He always has been. Just after they married, about twelve years ago, Jerry made a go at spaghetti. It was a disaster. He had filled the pan full of tomato sauce. After turning the stove to high, because he "wanted it to cook quick," he took a phone call in the other room. When he returned twenty minutes later, the night's dinner was splattered all over the walls and ceilings. It cost two hundred dollars to repaint the kitchen.

The sound of the fork scraping the bottom of the bowl comforts Trisha in an odd way. The fork against the bowl, the bowl rocking against the stove, the clanging of the pan against the burner, nothing felt normal unless the house was filled with the incessant sounds of a frustrated marriage. Trisha looks out the window of her kitchen, into the backyard, and sees Jerry, head buried under the hood of the car. These days, it's under the hood of an old, beat up, Chevy Impala in which Jerry spends most of his time. It's

not even eight in the morning, and he is fast at work on that stupid car. It hasn't run in years. As Jerry likes to say, this is the day it's finally going to start.

Trisha rubs her temples with her thumb and middle finger, waiting for the pan to heat up. Already she has a headache and breakfast hasn't even been served. She goes through the motions, the same motions she's performed nearly every morning for the last decade. She pours the beaten eggs over the warm pan, running the spatula along the sides. She plops four pieces of white bread in the toaster and pours a couple of glasses of orange juice. On a smaller frying pan, she lays three strips of bacon, vertically, and waits. She gently nudges the pieces with a fork, watching them shrink and harden under the heat, grease bouncing off the pan. When the bacon turns deep red and crispy, she opens the window and calls out to Jerry.

"I'm coming," he says, not bothering to look over his shoulder as he fastens one more bolt, tightens one more belt, does whatever it is he does to get that car working.

"James," she yells to her son, gripping the spatula tight in her hand. "For the last time, get in here."

Trisha closes her eyes and takes long, deep breaths, counting as she goes. One...two...three... she gets to twenty before Jerry walks in the back door, kicking off his muddy shoes on the porch. Standing in the door, his hulking frame blocks the early morning sun. Black with grease, Jerry does his best to wipe clean his hands with his dirty, white shirt. He leans over and gives Trisha a quick peck on the cheek.

"Where's James?" he says, sitting at the table.

Before she has a chance to answer, their son enters the kitchen, his floppy brown hair folded and bent around the top of his head. He shuffles his feet, refusing to pick



them up off the ground. He sits down next to his father and, without a word, waits for breakfast.

“Good morning to you too,” Trisha says, sliding a plate of eggs and a strip of bacon in front of him. She drops a second plate in front of Jerry.

“Can I go out and play?” James asks.

“Two minutes ago you were hardly moving...” Trisha says, scraping what little egg that’s left onto a smaller dish for herself.

“Of course you can, Kiddo,” Jerry says. “Are you enjoying your summer?”

“Yes.”

“What have you been up to so far?”

“Nothing.”

“Want to help me with the car? Today is the day. I’m going to get it working.”

“I will later.”

Trisha stands at the counter, not joining her husband or son at the table, annoyed that Jerry seems to have no idea what is going on in his own son’s life. She turns to the sink and drops her plate inside. Just out the window she sees the car. The stupid car. All he ever wants to do is fix the car.

After Jerry’s last bite of breakfast, he mutters “Thanks, Love,” into his napkin. Wiping the bacon grease from his lips, he takes his plate over to the sink and then goes back outside.

“I’m going out to play,” James says, dropping his fork on the plate and making a break for the backdoor.

“Wait,” Trisha yells, but he is gone. The house is silent, which annoys her. She goes to the dishes, turns on the water, and starts her racket.

Trisha maneuvers from room to room, picking up piles of laundry, taking empty glasses to the sink, emptying ash trays full of cigarette butts into the trash. Every room she goes into, Trisha looks out the window, trying to spot James. It’s not that she worries about him being outside. They live in a nice neighborhood, middle class, good, hard-working people for neighbors. It’s just that she can’t seem to think about anything else unless she knows exactly where her son is. She has never really considered herself a “good” mother, still isn’t even used to the fact that she *is* a mother, but she knows this is the one maternal instinct she does have. If she can’t see James, or know exactly where he is, she can’t sit still for even a moment.

James, though, is nothing like his mother. Trisha admitted as much before he was even five. Thankfully, now that he’s a little older, he isn’t much like his father either. He hates working on cars, hates even being around cars. He has loads of energy and loves to explore. He has a number of hidden forts surrounding the neighborhood, buried within the under brushes of the tall elms and solid oaks that line the neighborhood of Huntington Woods. Squinting, Trisha looks deep into the trees to spot a glimpse, a glare, or even a shadow of her son, but sees nothing.

Irritated by the incessant heat wave that has baked southeast Michigan for the last two weeks, Trisha goes to the thermostat and drops the needle below 65. She wipes the sweat from her palms onto her jeans. One of the things that makes Trisha truly pleased is her physical appearance. She still looks good, feels good for a woman approaching forty.

She has never been the type of woman that has had to work overly hard, or dress overly fancy, in order to get a man's attention. In fact, men adore her style—blue jeans, nice and tight in all the right places, a comfortable tank-top, and her hair pulled back, maybe a stray strand or two dangling down her cheek.

It's important for Trisha to look good. Ever since James was born, she has been a stay at home mom while Jerry works downtown at the Ford plant. She makes sure that every day, when she looks in the mirror, she likes what she sees. Trisha isn't going to be the one who lets her body go; settling into marriage, into life, watching her breasts sag and her weight grow. In fact, despite the stale air that has settled over her marriage, she still notices Jerry catching a glimpse now and then, admiring her body, her long thin legs. It's moments like that which remind Trisha that she's still alive, and doing just fine.

From the front porch, Trisha sees James running out of the trees, up the winding road that leads to the house. His hair flips and flops as he runs as hard as he can. His shirt, clenched tight in his hand, dangles in the breeze. His chest, thin and small, even for a boy his age, is nice and tan from the summer sun. He's going to be a good looking boy when he gets older, Trisha thinks. Sweeping the leaves off the porch into the shrubs, Trisha considers how she will greet him when he gets to the door.

Maybe she will smile, ruffle his hair with her hand as he explodes past her, through the screen door and into the house. Then she will go in the kitchen and fix him his favorite lunch—a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a glass of chocolate milk. She will ask him what he has been up to, where he has been, and if later, would he maybe take her to one of his forts so she can see where he spends all of his time. All summer

long she has asked him, and all summer long the answer is the same, “Moms aren’t allowed. Boys only.”

Or maybe she will yell at him a bit. She’s told him a thousand times to keep his shirt on. How many times does this kid come home with a sunburn, or even worse, a shirt that’s dirtied and stained? Trisha’s sick and tired of the disproportion of “nice” shirts to “play” shirts that fill James’ drawers. No matter how many times she asks, or how many times she pleads, James never takes a play shirt to go play. It always has to be a nice shirt.

Jesus, she thinks, as James runs past her into the house. He’s no different than any other eleven year old. Cut him some slack.

Trisha calls for James. There is no reply, but she can hear him running back and forth upstairs, searching for a toy, a game, something to entertain him while he and his friends wallow away another blistering summer day under the shade of the trees.

James sprints down the stairs and back out the door. Trisha wants to call him, tell him to come and have lunch, but she doesn’t. She doesn’t feel that it would be right to stop him.

She knows it’s not normal, at the very least it’s not right, this uneasiness that she feels around her own son. They have a decent relationship. They talk when they need to and she enjoys when he is around. But they don’t hug each other as much as other mothers and sons hug. She never feels the need to reach down and hold his hand as they walk through the busy parking lot of a grocery store, and in the rare instances in which she does, it feels awkward and unnatural. Even when he was two years old and people would come up and admire how cute his cheeks were, how absolutely adorable his

dimples made his smile, Trisha still refused, deep down inside, to believe that she had anything to do with it, that she was even his mother. Even though she was in her late twenties, she still felt so young, so attractive, so disappointed that she was no longer the center of attention. And she felt guilty for feeling that way.

By the time James was eight, Trisha could sense that he knew. He knew that something wasn't right between him and his mother. While it may have been hard for anyone else to tell, Trisha knew that he knew. He was her son, after all, and even mothers who find it hard to believe they are mothers, know the feelings of their children.

To everyone else, he was a happy, energetic, young boy. His teacher from school last year, Mrs. Burton, told her and Jerry at a parent-teacher conference that he has the charm and charisma to be an actor. She could "see it in his eyes."

Later that night, after a tedious and rather boring love making session, Trisha and Jerry discussed their son's potential.

"He's not going to be an actor," Trisha said, covers pulled up to her chin, talking to the back of Jerry's head. "I don't know what his teacher was talking about."

"I don't know," Jerry said, a hint of annoyance in his voice mixed with the heavy weariness of sleep. "Anything is possible with that one. He's still so young."

"But do you really see him as an actor? Is that what he has in his eyes?"

"He has the eyes of a world traveler. Maybe he'll be like Forrest Gump and run across the country. He sure has the energy for it." Jerry laughed and said goodnight.

"You're impossible to talk to. Do you know that? I can't talk to you about anything," she said, taking her pillow and walking out of the room.

Actors. World wanderers. This is not what she saw in her son's eyes. He had energy yes, but he's a quiet boy. A thoughtful boy. In many ways, he seemed like a sad boy. Trisha was sure her lack of affection towards James had something to do with it, that sad look in his eyes. But it's not that Jerry was any better. He didn't have a clue what James was up to. He didn't have a clue what she was up to.

Trisha sat on the couch, an old afghan pulled over her slender legs, her chin resting against her knees. Jerry sauntered down the stairs one thumping step at a time and sat on the couch, his hands folded in his lap.

"I was only saying," he said.

"I know what you were saying. It's just not what I see."

"So what is it?" Jerry said, looking over at the clock. "What is that you see about our son at 12:30 in the morning?"

"I don't think he'll be an actor or a wanderer. I think he'll be normal. He'll be as normal as us. Just a little better. A lot better." Trisha felt her mood lighten as she spoke, happy that she could be completely content for a son who lived a normal life. It was odd to her how parents always projected huge, overblown dreams on the shoulders of their children. What a weight it must be to carry around. It seemed wrong for parents to encourage their children to be baseball players, doctors and lawyers, or firemen. It's never the parents that have to live up to those expectations. It's the children who have to deal with letting their parents down when they don't become the *ideal*. Trisha didn't ever want James to feel as if he let her down. She just wasn't sure how to tell him.

"I think he'll be a good looking boy who will spend time in the bars picking up women," she said, pausing for an instant. "He'll even take them to bed, on occasion."

Trisha laughed. She slapped Jerry on the leg, as if to say, won't that make you so proud of your son. "He's going to have a normal job doing whatever it takes to get by and live a modest life. But he'll be a looker."

She laughed even harder, thoroughly enjoying the prospects of her son's future, happy that he'll grow up doing whatever he wants to, without the pressures of pleasing his parents, or the fear of letting them down.

Jerry looked at his wife, confused at this sudden outburst. But he left her to her laughing, left her to her thoughts. At moments like these, Trisha was grateful to Jerry, though she would never directly admit it to him. She knew that her husband was a good father and wanted the best for their son, but he was also kind enough to allow Trisha to have her little dreams and not poke fun at her.

James deserved better than his mother mocking him, laughing at his future, and Trisha knew this. But she enjoyed the release. She enjoyed the opportunity to sit on the couch and laugh with her husband, even if she was the only one laughing.

James sprints through the door, minutes before the sun disappears for the day, finally cooling the ground around them. Before he walks ten feet into the house, Trisha feels the need to unleash her anger.

"Where the hell have you been, young man? I've told you a thousand times to be home *before* the sun goes down."

"I know," he says, running past his mother into the kitchen. Always running. He can never walk anywhere.

“You’ve been gone for three hours. Not once did you check in. How do I know that you’re safe? That you’re not at the bottom of a creek somewhere?”

“Mom,” James says, smiling. “I know how to swim.”

“One of these days, Kiddo. You’re not going to come back. I can just see it. I’ll never know if you just ran away or if you went to sleep under some tree.”

James turns on the faucet and pours himself a glass of water. He chugs it down in one long, continuous gulp. Trisha stubs her toe on the leg of a chair. A sharp pain rockets up her leg and she cuts loose a loud “shit.” She hobbles over to another chair and sits down, rubbing her foot. James drinks his second glass of water, looking at his mother.

“My God, James. Look at these feet. They aren’t what they used to be. So rough and hard. You know, I’m going to wake up one day and I’m going to be an old woman, all wrinkled up. Will you still love me when I’m old and wrinkled? You going to take care of me? That’s not too much to ask, is it?” Trisha smiles.

James puts the empty glass on the counter and tries to catch his breath. With all the running this one does, it’s hard to imagine that he ever has a hold of his breath. “You’re my mom,” he says.

Trisha feels the tightening in her throat. She wants to tell James that she loves him, but doesn’t. She doesn’t want to embarrass him. He just turns and looks into the backyard, through the window above the sink.

What are you looking at? Trisha thinks. There’s nothing out there. Hasn’t been in a long time. Just some old beat up car that hasn’t run in years and will probably never run again. James refills his glass and walks past his mother towards the stairs.



“James,” she yells from the kitchen. But he doesn’t stop. He just walks up the stairs, closing his bedroom door behind him.

Trisha takes out a pot and fills it with water. She turns the stove to high and puts the pot on the burner. She takes out a cutting board, dropping it on the counter, making more noise than she needs too. She opens a drawer filled with silverware, removes a knife, and slams the door with a clang. She chops an onion twice in half, feeling the slow burn sting her eyes. In the backyard, Jerry is wiping off a wrench with a red cloth. He stands in front of the broken old car and scratches himself. Leaning over the grill, he extends himself once again over the engine. My God, Trisha thinks. This is the man who I couldn’t keep my hands off of?

Jerry made love to Trisha for the first time on the hood of a car. They had met that night at a bar in Royal Oak. She was with a number of her girlfriends from work and he was watching the Pistons game all by himself. His size was the first thing that drew her to him. He sat on the stool, both hands cupped around his mug. His arms were huge, muscles pressing tight against his black shirt. His hair was longer then. Much longer and thicker then it is today. And it was dark, jet black. He sat and drank his beer while Trisha and her friends, sitting at the other end of the bar, made quite a scene. They laughed and giggled with each other, barked orders at the bartender, made crude jokes that got cruder with every drink. All the while, Trisha sneaked glimpses over her shoulder at the large, muscular man who was doing a bad job trying to ignore the women.

The first thing Trisha could remember her future husband saying was “Keep it down, huh? I’m trying to watch the game here.” Trisha took this as an invitation to talk.

She walked over towards him, hiking up her black skirt just a little higher than it should have been, and sat down next to him.

“I don’t know much about basketball,” she said. “Do you have a smoke?”

He reached into the breast pocket of his flannel and removed a cigarette, putting it between her lips, and then gave her a light. His face was smooth and his eyes were dark. He had a nice smile, comforting. He may have really wanted to watch the game, but now that Trisha was on the stool next to him, he made a good effort to talk with Trisha.

“Can I buy you a beer?” he said, wiping peanut dust off of the bar in front of her, clearing a space.

So sweet, Trisha thought, graciously accepting his offer with a wide smile.

Many beers and a few hours later, she was in the arms of a man she had only just met. They were parked next to a baseball field at Randall Park, alone, in the middle of the night. Jerry kissed her hard, his lips pressing against her mouth, his tongue tasting like stale, cheap beer. His hands groped up and down her slender body, cupping her breasts. He lifted her in his arms and sat her on the hood of his car. He never removed his shirt, never even lifted her skirt. He simply unzipped his jeans and thrust himself between her legs.

She enjoyed the excitement of the experience, more so than the experience itself. She wrapped her legs around his waist and put her arms around his neck. She loved the feeling of being wanted, loved the feeling of being needed.

When he was finished, leaning over her and trying to catch his breath, he kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear, “Your hair smells wonderful. Like a cherry orchard.”

And that was it. That's what got her. A sappy, stupid post-coital line from a man who knew how lucky he was to do what he had just done. It was the first time, Trisha thought, she had met a man who paid her that much attention.

But that night still remains the most passionate of their ten years together. He isn't a bad husband, he isn't a bad person. Not even close. But it was a relationship birthed out of lust that has now evolved into something else, a life of silent nods, and little eye contact. A life in which two people pass by each other with barely a smile, or at best, a small wave of the hand as a gesture of recognition. Trisha noticed it. Jerry noticed it. And worst of all, James noticed it.

"James," Trisha yells, putting the finishing touches on another simple dinner—hot dogs and onions and macaroni and cheese. "Dinner."

Trisha opens the kitchen window. Jerry is sitting in the front seat of the Impala. The engine turns, struggles, sputters, and then roars to life. Jerry gets out of the car and jumps up and down, waving his hands in the air as the car, although loud and squealing, is alive for the first time in years.

"James," Jerry yells from the backyard, up to his son's window. "James, I got it. I did it. Let's go for a ride."

Trisha turns to the stairs, following the loud thump of footsteps pounding their way down. James runs right past his mother and into the backyard. Trisha thinks about grabbing his arm, telling him no. Telling him that he needs to eat his dinner first, that she wants to hear about his day with his friends. But she doesn't. He just sprints right past, outside.

Jerry is running around the car, pumping his arms in the air. It's odd for him to express this much emotion over anything. Not once can Trisha remember Jerry being this happy, this energized. It's amazing to Trisha how one man can love a car so much, but can't even take the time to hug his son, or his wife.

Jerry gets in the car, James in the passenger seat, and for the first time in years, the car lurches forward, rolling over the deadened grass of the backyard and then down the driveway.

Trisha slumps to the floor, back against the sink cabinet. The sound of the car, the whining of a rusted engine, fades in the distance. The house is completely silent, heavy on her shoulders.

She wishes James hadn't run outside. She wishes he would have stayed with her so she could have told him that that's not love. Nobody in this family has any idea what love is. Never has. What kind of a relationship begins with sex on the hood of a car next to a beat up baseball field in the middle of the night? One-night-stands begin that way. Not marriages. If James could only know how they met. If he were only old enough, and willing enough to hear. Then he would know. Then he would know why his parents walked through life like zombies. Then he would understand why his mother had such a difficult time reaching down and giving him a hug, why his father is more concerned about getting a car to run than knowing what his son is doing with his summer vacation. If there was only a way to make her son understand, make herself understand before it's too late...

"I love you, James," Trisha says to an empty kitchen.

...before he leaves the house and wanders off forever.

## STANDING IN THE SHADOWS

The attic that was now an office smelled of cigarettes and stale whiskey. It wasn't a very big house and it was the third one they'd lived in during the past five years. Each house seemed to get smaller, each neighborhood darker than the last.

Michael, crouched outside the door at the top of the stairs, tried his best to listen for any words he could, gather any information possible. He pulled his composition notebook—a present he received a few years ago from his father for his tenth birthday—out of his back pocket and flipped through the pages. He passed the one describing the first house they lived in, the first he could remember anyway, out in Windmill Pointe, a suburb of East Detroit. He liked that house—its spacious yard, sweeping awnings and alcoves, and an attic used every Friday to host his father's card games. It was sitting outside the door of those card games, crouched on the steps listening to the muffled sounds of men's voices, that Michael first became familiar with the smell of smoke and whiskey and all the words a six-year-old boy should never repeat.

“He's a fucking cocksucker if he thinks I can get him the money by next week,” Michael heard his father say. “What am I supposed to do?” His father had been in the room with Michael's older brother, Felix, for over an hour.

There was no reply from Felix—there was never a reply from Felix—who was twelve years older than Michael. Felix rarely spoke to Michael, never really bothered himself with anything Michael did. As far as Michael was concerned, Felix was not a brother at all, just another adult bent on keeping him in the dark.

“I need to go see Jack Tocco. Tonight,” Michael's father, Harvey said. “I'll give him what I have. It'll have to be enough.”

As Michael scribbled the name ‘Tocco’ into his notebook, he heard the click-clopping of boots on wood approach the door. Michael’s first instinct was to run, not let them know he was listening, but he dropped his notebook as he stood and bent over to pick it up when the door to the attic swung open.

A Marlboro cloud filled the hallway and Michael squinted against the slight burn. Behind his father was Felix, putting on his brown leather jacket, pulling his long black hair into a pony-tail. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he was armed, shoving a small black pistol into his boot.

“I thought I told you to get your ass to bed,” Harvey said, taking Michael by the arm—not painfully, but forcefully. Michael tried to resist at first, dragging his bare feet against the rough wood, but gave up—his father was too strong.

“Get in there,” Harvey said, thrusting Michael towards his small twin bed. Felix walked past the room, stuffing a wad of tobacco in his cheek.

“You need to stop sneaking around, you hear?” Harvey said. “If this was any of your business, I’d make it your business.” He wasn’t mad, he wasn’t yelling, but he was stern. He had grey eyes and a pale wrinkled face. His hair, which had been brown, was now silver and thin. He looked more like a grandfather than a father. “We have to go out for a while tonight.”

“Where are you going?”

“We have work to do.”

“People buy seat covers this late at night?” Michael asked, trying to catch his father in a lie.

Harvey straightened the army men action figures on Michael's dresser. "People do a lot of things late at night."

Michael sat on his bed as his father approached, helping him under the covers. The room was big enough for a twin bed, but not much else. His *Return of the Jedi* poster hung on the wall above his bed next to his "Dynamic Duo" poster of Alan Trammell and Lou Whitaker—his favorite Detroit Tigers.

Michael felt comfortable in his bed, his face pressed against his soft, flannel pillow case. It made him feel safe and secure. Michael had no recollection of his mother he was too young when she passed. But it was while he was in bed, in the few moments he had before drifting off to sleep, that he thought about her. What it would be like to have her there, kiss his forehead, tell him everything will be all right. His father was not nearly as gentle, but he tried.

"What's under your jacket?" Michael asked, pointing at the bulge in the breast pocket of the beige tweed sport coat.

"Felix and I are going to drop some money off at a friend's house and then we'll be back." Michael knew that any further questions would be pointless—answered with a silent stare.

Harvey leaned over Michael and kissed him gently on the head. His breath smelled stale and musty, like cheap liquor and Marlboro Reds. He walked out of the room, closing the door as he left.

Michael grabbed his flashlight and held it under his chin as he opened his notebook and flipped through the pages. He made sure that his notebook was always with him. In it, he drew pictures of everything that he wanted to remember and wrote

down notes of everything that he wanted to find out. The notebook contained everything important. It was his life on a page.

On the second page was a hand drawn picture of what Michael imagined his mother looked like when she was alive. He'd drawn long brown hair, diamond shaped blue eyes and thick red lips—the Crayola bleeding over the thin streaks of pencil. Her hair curled like a hook on each side of her cheeks and her dress was purple and down to her ankles. Underneath Michael had written *Momma—Annie Hill—killed by cancer when I was 2*. On the next page was an address for *Aunt Sherry Blake—2621 Orange Grove Hill, Pasadena, California 90341*. Michael had never met his mother's sister, but his father had always told him that in case of an emergency he was to go to her. He liked the idea of California. He knew very little about the place but had to assume that it smelled nicer than the exhaust and pollution of Detroit. Sometimes it was hard to find quiet. There was always someone at the house, there was always something happening in the street. Just before sleep, Michael imagined California, the rows of orange trees, and the thought of peace and quiet.

The front door slammed shut. Michael sat up in bed, not breathing, half-panicked, half-asleep and listened for a sound—any sound that would assure him that he was safe. He checked his clock: *6:37am*. Pop should be home by now, he thought. His room was grey in the early morning sun and small octagons of light appeared on his floor under his window sill. Michael lifted a corner of the blind, looking into the empty back yard—surrounded on three sides by thick trees that eventually led to the main road. The view was ugly in the March morning. The green had yet to return to the trees. A rusted



and toppled shed lay in the western corner of the yard—creaking as the early morning wind crept in and out of the ruined mangled mess—and the grass was a mix of black and brown, trampled, dead and cold.

To the left of the shed, Michael saw Felix digging a hole. He moved with a fluid smoothness that set off no hint of panic. He calmly stuck the shovel in the ground, lifted the earth, and tossed it over his shoulder. It was as if Felix was digging a hole in the ground because he had nothing better to do at the time. On the ground, to the right of Felix's foot was what looked like a small garbage bag.

Michael grabbed his notebook, folded it in half and slid it in the back pocket of his jeans and went downstairs. “Pop,” he yelled, hoping he had come home. The house was three stories with the attic taking up the entire top floor. The bottom floor consisted of two rooms—the kitchen and a living room. All of the furniture that Michael remembered from his childhood—the first house he lived in—was gone. The leather couches had been replaced by stained cloth and smelly mildew. His father had told him that it was all they could afford. He promised that better times were ahead. That was five years ago. The color television had been replaced with a black and white that never worked, and the record player and speakers were long gone. Even the Cadillac was gone, replaced by a rusted Dodge hatchback.

Michael heard a low moan coming from the living room. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, and saw his father slumped on the couch, his right hand pressed tightly against his chest, held by his left. All he could see was the dark outline of his father, slowly rocking. He looked hulking and massive, far larger in the shadows of the dark than he did in the light of the day.

“Pop, what’s wrong?”

“They broke my fucking hand, that’s what’s wrong,” he said in an angry grumble.

Michael didn’t move. “Who did?”

His father looked up at him, turning on the lamp. Beads of sweat cascaded across his forehead and his right hand was clumsily bandaged. “Nobody did, Michael. I did. I slipped getting out of the car and landed on my hand.”

“Why is Felix outside?”

“I think it’s time we moved again.”

“We just got here a few months ago.”

“I know. I have some things lined up. Maybe make us some money.” Harvey winced in pain. “I’m trying, kid.”

“What do you do, Pop?” Michael asked.

“I sell seat covers. You know that.” Harvey stood and sauntered up the stairs, his shoulders hunched, slightly bent at the waist, like a boxer who had just been defeated. He held his damaged hand tight against his body, taking each step slowly and methodically. He looks so old, Michael thought.

Felix walked in through the front door, a sharp bite of cold air following behind him. He leaned the shovel against the wall. His gloves were as dirty as his pants and white flecks of ice covered his dark hair. It felt too cold to even snow.

“Isn’t the ground frozen? Was it hard to dig?” Michael asked.

“No,” was all Felix said as he passed Michael, chewing his tobacco in long round motions. He walked into the kitchen, dark eyes never leaving the floor, and spit into the sink—a thick, brown line of juice slithered down his cracked lips and dangled from his

chin. Without wiping his face, Felix walked upstairs and into his room. Michael considered going out to the backyard and digging up the hole himself, but feared getting caught. Michael also knew that asking his father would do no good.

The lack of communication between Michael and his father had been growing for some time. Michael knew it, and he suspected his father knew it also. It had been a while since Harvey had sat down with his boy to talk about the baseball game, or help him with his homework. Every night, after he got home, Harvey would go up into the attic and make phone calls, one after another. Eventually, he would come down and prepare dinner—Macaroni and cheese or a sandwich and chips, always with a glass of orange Faygo pop—and then head up into the attic once again. Every time Michael asked what he was doing upstairs, his father would reply “I’m trying to make ends meet” or “Times are tough right now.” On occasion, as Michael lay in bed at night, thinking about the warmth of California and the smell of oranges, he would hear the door from downstairs shut, the ragged sputter of an old dying engine, the car driving off, and then silence. Michael knew he was alone and he felt it.

Two days later, as Michael sat in the kitchen, eating a burnt grilled cheese, the phone rang. As usual, his father answered it on the first ring. Michael quietly snuck up the winding wood stairs, and pushed his ear against the attic door. He could smell the smoke that was trapped within the yellowing wood.

“I want twenty-two hundred on the third heat, and five hundred on the sixth,” he heard his father say. He heard Felix spitting his tobacco inside. “Yeah, I know the odds

are long but I got an insider,” Harvey continued. “It’s gotta be tonight. We’re out of time, all of us. I gotta bring the money to Tocco tomorrow.”

Why is Pop gambling? Who is Tocco? Michael thought. He had heard the name before. He went to his room and flipped through the worn pages of his journal. *Jack Tocco* on one page...*Black Jack Tocco* on another...all random mentions of a man that he’d heard through the space of a door.

Felix and Harvey walked out of the attic and down the hallway. His father looked tired. A cigarette hung lazily in between his lips. Felix looked the exact opposite. His shirt was tucked nicely into his pants and his hair was flat and pony tailed. He had his usual look of calm disinterest. Felix continued down the stairs to the ground floor and Harvey approached Michael.

“We have to go out. Stay here.”

“I always stay here.”

“Don’t get smart,” Harvey said quietly.

“What’s going on?”

“I have to go to work. I’m closing a big deal that’s going to take care of all of us.” Harvey turned, heading down the stairs. His hand, in a solid cast, hung gingerly from his side.

“Why did Mom die?”

“What?” Harvey asked, facing his son.

“I know she had cancer,” Michael said, choosing his words carefully. “But did she really get the help she needed?”

“Of course.” Harvey’s face stiffened. “I know I haven’t been the best father to you, kid.”

“That’s not what I’m saying…” Michael said, searching for the right words. “Did we really lose all the money after she got sick or was it gone before?”

“Nothing could have saved her.” Harvey looked over his son’s shoulder, his eyes grey with age, tired with mileage. “I’ve always done my best to provide for you. To give you a decent life. And I did the same for your mother.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“That’s your problem, I guess.”

“Then tell me who Jack Tocco is. Why are you gambling?” Michael asked, trying to meet his father’s gaze.

“Always listening in, aren’t you?” Harvey asked.

“How much money do you owe him?”

Harvey stepped close to Michael, slow and deliberate, his eyes stone cold, his face expressionless. Michael felt the heat click on behind him. Soft wisps of warm air fluttered past the back of his neck. And his arms began to sweat.

“I think you’re a little out of your league here, son. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know you need to pay him money,” Michael said, keeping his voice as even as possible, belying the fear throbbing in his chest. “And that you’re scared of him because he got your hand broke. And I know that for a while before Mom was sick we had money and now we don’t have shit because you and Felix have pissed it away to some asshole bookie.”

Michael heard the slap his father gave him before he actually felt the burn in his cheek. He gripped the rough carpet under his hands and knees as he tried to balance himself. He stiffened as he felt his father's arms reach around his torso, lifting him off his feet.

The soft warmth of his bed comforted Michael and he heard his father's voice. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have...I'll be in the office."

The voice was distant, far off, a signal that barely registered. Harvey walked away from the bed and up the stairs. The pain of the slap was gone and all Michael could feel on his cheeks was the cooling of his own tears. There was so much to cry about, so much to be afraid of. Despite everything, Michael loved his father—whether it was unconditional or because he was supposed to he didn't know—but he wanted to be near him. Closer to him.

He righted himself in bed and wiped the streaking tears away with the sleeve of his shirt. He took his journal to the top of the stairs and sat outside the door of the attic. Listening for his father, hearing nothing, Michael proceeded to draw a new picture of his father with dollar bills falling out of his pockets behind him.

Harvey, who was supposed to have gone out, had not left the office in over an hour. Although the pain was gone, Michael kept running his fingers over the cheek his father had smacked. His father had never hit him before. Even when he was seven, and he stole a pack of gum from the A&P, his father had responded with nothing more than a stern lecture about growing up and being more responsible. There's a price to pay for everything, he had said. There was a time in the not so distant past that he loved being

near his father. Lately, though, things had changed. He feared his father. He feared the repercussions of his father's actions. He only felt comfortable being near him if they were separated by the door of the attic.

The phone rang—loud and piercing in the silence of the dim, still house. Michael stopped drawing in his book, waiting for his father's voice. The phone rang again—sounding even louder than before. Felix walked up the stairs, stepped over Michael without paying notice that he was even there, and went into the office—closing the door behind him. It wasn't until the fifth ring that Michael heard his father answer the phone.

Silence. He pressed his ear against the door, holding his breath. Still nothing. He heard the dull hum of a faint ring as the phone was forcefully slammed back onto the receiver.

“Not good?” Felix asked.

No reply. An eerie sense of panic filled the quiet.

The ringing phone once again vibrated through the floor. Michael heard his father answer it on the first ring. Silence. He heard the beating of his heart, increasing in power, loud in his ears. Sweat in his palms, Michael dropped his pencil in between his folded legs.

“They're coming,” Harvey said, flat and monotone. “They're coming for all of it.”

Although he didn't know all of the details, who exactly was coming or how many, Michael could sense the fear. He could sense the fear in his father's voice when he repeated, even quieter than before...“They're coming for all of it.”

The door swung open. Harvey's face was panic stricken, desperate. He looked down at Michael as if he had expected—known that he would be sitting there.

“We have to get you out of here,” Harvey said.

Michael looked past his father into the room. Felix stood, facing the window, peering out into the distance. His hands were clasped behind his back and his right leg quivered slightly. He looked to the left and the right, and he looked straight ahead. He looked like a soldier, devoid of all fear.

Harvey picked up the phone and dialed fast. Michael's stomach tightened and turned as his father waited for an answer on the other end.

“I need a cab. At the A&P on the corner of Eleven Mile and Nadine. Have him wait until somebody gets there.” Harvey hung up the phone. “Michael, follow me, now.”

“Pop?” Michael asked, wanting to know everything, wanting to know nothing, desperately trying to slow down the situation. He folded his notebook and put it in his back pocket. He followed his dad out of the attic and down into his room. His feet felt light, his body felt as if it was getting away from him. Sweat formed under his arms and his ears burned with fear.

Harvey grabbed a blue duffel bag out of the hall closet and sprinted down the stairs. Michael made every effort to stay behind his father, struggling to keep up as they hurried through the living room and out into the back yard.

“*Dad*, what the fuck is going on?” Michael yelled, his voice shaking, fear finally taking over.



Harvey stopped. Michael was surprised at his own forcefulness. Harvey seemed surprised, also.

“All the money I have is buried here in the ground,” Harvey said. “Ten thousand. It’s not Tocco’s, it’s yours.”

“Pop, just give it to him so he’ll leave us alone.”

“Michael, we don’t have a lot of time. It’s not enough money. Not even close.” Harvey took the shovel that was lying in the grass and rammed it into the ground. The night was cold and there was a sharp breeze in the air. Michael’s stomach tightened and he felt like he was going to vomit.

“Pop, just stop. What am I supposed to do?” Michael asked, his breath filling the air.

Harvey dug fast, flinging grass and weed, dirt and muck over his shoulder. Long dark shadows checker-boarded the ground, as the small porch light flickered from dim to bright. “Go to the A&P up the road. A cab will be waiting. Have him take you to the Greyhound Station on Woodward and Fourteen. Buy a ticket to Los Angeles.”

“Los Angeles?” Michael asked, lost and confused.

Harvey’s breathing was short and heavy. He slowed his digging motions, getting on his hands and feet, scraping around the edges of the ruined earth like a dog desperate to find his bone.

“Do you still have the address of your Aunt Sherry?” Harvey asked, fanatically digging around the edges.

Michael nodded, saying nothing. Tears warmed his eyes.

“Go to her. You will have plenty of money to get to her. Give her what’s left over when you get there.”

“I don’t know her, Pop. She doesn’t even know me.”

“She knows you. She’ll take you in, I promise. I’ll call her and let her know you’re coming.”

Harvey lifted a brown plastic bag out of the hole and dropped it at his side. He was covered in mud, his cast black with dirt. Michael dropped to his knees in front of his father. Other than the narrow stream of tears that ran from Harvey’s left eye down his cheek, his face appeared lifeless. His brow was furrowed, eyes narrowed. His cheeks were ashen and gray.

“Just come with me,” Michael pleaded, crying now.

“I’ll meet you in California. Felix and I both. I’ll be right behind you. I just have to buy a little more time.”

Michael’s head felt heavy and he lowered it to his chest. He felt his father’s arms wrap around his body. Soft and warm, a hand ran over the back of his head, through his hair. The scratch of the rough cast brushed against the back of his neck. Harvey smelled different. Better than he had in a long time. Gone was the smell of cigarettes—replaced by the sweet smell of grass.

“I love you, kid. With everything I got,” Harvey said, looking Michael directly in the eyes. “Now go. Hit the road. I’ll catch up with you soon.”

The screeching sound of tires and the low rumble of powerful automobiles sounded from the front of the house. The back door was wide open and Michael saw the inside of the kitchen for what he knew was the last time.

“Get out of here,” Harvey yelled, running into the house.

Michael stiffened as he heard the splintering of wood and the angry sound of voices yelling for his father. The third floor window opened, and Felix, one leg after another, squeezed his large frame through the tiny circular hole. He stood on the small roof that jutted out under the attic and over the back porch. Grabbing the gutter, he slid down the side of the house with the grace and quickness of a firefighter. He sprinted over to Michael and grabbed the bag of money from his hands.

“What about Pop? You can’t just leave him in there,” Michael said.

Felix opened the duffel bag and ripped a hole in the plastic bag. He took a small stack of bills, replaced the rest in the bag, and handed it back to Michael.

“Keep the bag strapped to you at all times,” Felix said, calm—as if he had just awoken from sleep. “And don’t flash the money around. It’s not normal for a kid your age to have this much.” He spit a glob of tobacco juice into the grass.

“What about Pop?” Michael yelled.

“I’ll be seeing you,” Felix said as he sprinted towards the shed and disappeared into the bushes.

The crashes increased within the house along with the muffled voices of angry men. Michael was unable to tell which one, if any, belonged to his father. He dropped the bag at his feet, desperate to run inside, stand by his father and tell him that he loved him. Michael took one step towards the house when he heard the gun shot. The echo rippled through the air and was followed by silence.

Gone were the yells and the crashes. The house looked no different from the outside than it always had—grey, shadowed and small. Michael’s adrenaline pumped wildly. He lifted the bag and sprinted for the trees in the opposite direction of the shed.

He ran as fast as he could, searching for the road that led to the A&P. He heard the sound of traffic, but saw very little as the moon struggled to shed light through the thick redwoods and pines that towered high above.

He reached the street, out of breath, flinging the duffel bag over his shoulder. The A&P sign flashed its bright orange and yellow lights ahead. In the parking lot was a white cab, its driver leaning against the door, smoking a cigarette.

“I’m going to the Greyhound station,” Michael said ten feet before even reaching the cab. The driver, an old man with white hair, wrinkled skin, and thick glasses opened the back door, guiding Michael into the safety of the dark cab, the unknown of the future.

“You running away from home or something?” the cabbie asked as he started the engine and lit another cigarette.

“Something like that. Can you put your cigarette out? I don’t like the smell of it,” Michael said, flat and monotone.

“Sure thing, kid. You’re the boss.”

“And don’t call me kid either.” Michael sat back in the seat, clutching the duffel bag tightly to his chest. For the first ten miles of the ride, Michael looked out the back window, hoping to spot his father’s dying Dodge following from behind, unsure of exactly what happened in the house, but certain that he no longer had a father. He took his notebook and slid it inside the bag, making sure he didn’t lose his childhood in the backseat of a sticky cab. He thought about the future, his Aunt that he’d never met—and

who probably *didn't* know that he was coming—his mother, his father and the smell of oranges. He swallowed his tears into the pit of his stomach as the streets of Detroit passed him by—one, final time.

## STOLEN SUMMER

It was early evening but it was still hot and humid, even by Florida's standards. Conrad and his best friend, Vince, met up on the corner of Dixon Avenue and made their way through the still sleeping town into the dense woods. Even though their days were filled with swimming in the warm stream, eating cheese sandwiches and hiking through grassy green underbrush, summer had lost its luster. What used to represent freedom and fun now held the painful memories of loss and hardship. Gone were the days of carefree adventures and exploring. Gone were the days of empty months with nothing to worry about. Summer just wasn't the same. It felt processed and forced, like there was something terrible sitting in the corner waiting to be acknowledged, continuing to be ignored.

As they walked, Conrad, fourteen, swung his stick back and forth, clipping the tops of bushes and knocking the leaves off of lazy branches. Vince lingered behind. Conrad was worried about his friend.

It was only last summer when Vince's brother, while away at school, was killed by a drunk driver. It wasn't Dean's fault. He had been driving home from work one night when somebody swerved into his lane and hit him head-on. The doctors said he died instantly, that there was no pain. All the pain had been left for the family—for Vince and his parents.

"You okay?" Conrad asked. Vince said nothing. His blond hair had grown long and ragged. It hung in his eyes like vines and draped over his ears. It had that greasy, shiny look to it like it was always wet. Conrad didn't move until Vince had caught up.

"I don't want to go home," Vince said, his voice quiet.

“We can go to my place.”

“Eventually I’ll have to go back home.”

Conrad didn’t want to go to Vince’s either. He had seen what life had become inside his house, what life had become for Vince. Long gone and far away was the kid that gained a reputation around town for pulling pranks. Long gone were the dirty jokes and his high pitched squeal of a laugh, his smile so wide it looked as if it would never end. The good life that had once been was now replaced by a sense of terrible melancholy. Vincent’s parents had lost a son, Vince lost a brother and now Conrad felt as if he was losing his friend.

Conrad and Vince were only a block away from their street when Billy Lefton’s black ’65 Mustang pulled up next to them. Sitting next to Billy in the passenger seat was Charlie Batch. Both boys, about seventeen or eighteen, were wearing tight undershirts. Billy’s hair was dark and shaved close to his scalp. His face was big and powerful with a square jaw. In the rare instances that he smiled, his teeth were ivory white but crooked and misshaped. Charlie was just as big as Billy, but not nearly as menacing. He acted tough, especially around Billy, but his eyes were soft and his voice quiet.

“I thought I told you faggots to stay off my street,” Billy yelled from the window as Charlie laughed, winking at Conrad and blowing him a kiss.

Conrad and Vince kept walking, trying to ignore the calls from the car. Unfortunately, this had become a common occurrence—the bullying, the harassment, the empty beer cans thrown in their direction. Rumor had it that Dean had slept with Billy’s girlfriend a few years back. Rumor also had it that upon hearing of Dean’s death, Billy was happy, figuring that justice had been served. Dean used to be the one who kept

Billy and his friends off of Conrad and Vince's ass. But now that Dean was gone things had gotten increasingly more difficult when it came to Billy.

"Hey, I'm talking to you," Billy said, pulling the Mustang to a stop. "If you're going to walk my street, then you got to pay the toll."

"We have no other way of getting home," Conrad said, his blue eyes narrow with anger, his voice flat and controlled.

Vince said nothing, moving to the other side of Conrad. Vince had always been the tougher of the two, never afraid of Billy or any of his goons. But now it seemed as if he always kept his head down and stayed clear.

"How about we send you home in a body-bag?" Billy said, laughing. "Something your mother should be used to by now, Vince."

Conrad felt Vince press close to him. His breathing became heavy, almost as if he'd been running, and when Conrad looked at him, he could see the red in his ears.

"Let it go," Conrad said to Vince. It was one thing to defend the memory of a brother, it was another to put yourself in a position to join him.

Billy and Charlie laughed, their foreheads creased with wrinkles. Billy revved his engine in mock antagonism, the sharp smell of gasoline exhausting itself from the muffler.

"I better not catch you fairies out here again," Billy said, driving away.

Conrad put his hand on his friend's shoulder. Vince was motionless, glaring at the back of the car as it drove down the road.

"Just ignore him," Conrad said. "He barely even knew your brother."



“I told my dad about Billy,” Vince said. “About all the things he does to us, the comments that he makes. He tells me the same thing. Just ignore him.”

“Billy’s an asshole,” Conrad said.

“That’s not the point, Connie. I want my dad to do something. Anything.”

“I know. He will soon. He’ll snap out of it.”

“I’m not sure,” Vince said, looking at the ground, dragging his feet in the dust.

Thankfully, there were no more run-ins with Billy or any of his friends the rest of the way home. Unlike Conrad, who had never known his father, Vince came from what seemed like the normal All-American family. Vince’s parents had always been happily married, hugging and kissing and never afraid to show affection in public. Dean was the perfect big brother. Whenever Conrad or Vince would get picked on, Dean was there to lend his muscle. For much of Conrad’s life, he felt comfort and solace in the Jarrett’s home. With his mom working the evening shift at the diner, Conrad would go to Vince’s house for dinner. After dinner the whole family would play Monopoly or Dominoes. For a long time, life in Beckersville wasn’t bad for Conrad or Vincent. Conrad longed for the days of old. Everything seemed normal. Friendly. Sheltered. Until the accident. Until Dean died.

By the time the two boys reached their street, the sun had set. The temperature had hardly cooled and the thick air stuck in Conrad’s lungs. He took off his hat and ran his hands through his cropped brown hair.

Conrad’s house was dark. He assumed his mother had taken the second shift at the diner and wouldn’t be home until late. Vince crossed the street, without saying a

word, and Conrad followed. Vince's house, although on the same block, looked very different from Conrad's. The lawn, which had once been manicured, had grown long.

"I'm home," Vince said, not all that loud, as they walked into the house. The home, normally clean and organized, was a mess. Newspapers piled up in the front foyer along with weeks of unopened mail. The kitchen was dark and empty. No longer did it smell alive with baked cookies and roasted chicken. Instead, it smelled musty and felt static.

Conrad followed Vince into the backyard. The grass was as long and unkempt as the front yard. A large thick tree stood in the center of the yard. At its base, plywood of all sizes was strewn about.

"Dad, Connie's here."

"Hello Conrad," Vince's father said, flat and emotionless. Conrad looked up through the fading light of day and saw Mr. Jarrett in the tree, extending a tape measure over the branch that he was straddling. Mr. Jarrett's hair was a disheveled mess and sweat rings circled the collar and armpits of his dark button-down shirt. "Can you hand me that notepad at your feet, Conrad?"

Conrad tossed the notepad up to Mr. Jarrett who took a pencil from behind his ear and marked down his measurements.

"What are you doing up there?" Conrad asked.

"I'm finally building that tree house that Vince and Dean have wanted for so long."

Conrad glanced over at Vince who was looking at the ground, expressionless.

“I should have done this years ago. The three of you would have had such fun up here.” Mr. Jarrett stood on the branch, gave it a shake with his feet to make sure it was steady, and climbed the trunk to the next branch. Leaves and loose bark tumbled from above, landing in Conrad’s hair.

“Dad, Connie and I want to go to the movies. Can you take us?”

“Afraid not, son. If I’m going to get this done by the weekend I need to keep working.”

“I’d rather go to the movies than have a tree house. I’m a little old for one now.”

Mr. Jarrett stopped measuring. He looked down at his son, took a deep breath and let it out slow. “But this is what you and Dean have always wanted.”

“Shit,” Vince yelled, kicking the stump of the tree. “When I was seven, Dad. I wanted one when I was seven.”

“Listen, Vince. I know you’re too old. I just regret not building it. It’s...symbolic.”

Vince turned and walked towards the house, muttering to himself. Conrad followed halfway before looking back at Mr. Jarrett. He was measuring another branch, his brow furrowed and his eyes narrow.

“What about your mom? Can she take us?” Conrad asked Vince.

They walked back into the house and around to the bedroom. Vince opened the door and Conrad could see Mrs. Jarrett, in her pink nightgown, crocheting on the edge of the bed. Her hair was pulled back in a tight pony tail and her face was long and wrinkled. The bedroom was dark except for the small glow of a desk lamp sitting on the nightstand off to the right. The room smelled like wet moldy towels.

“Hi, Connie. Hi, Vince,” Mrs. Jarrett said. On the bed next to her were three giant balls of yarn—red, white, and blue. “I’m making a blanket. It’s going to look like the American Flag.”

Vince closed the door. He looked angry. “Fuck it, man. It’s not even worth asking her. You’d think it was us that died instead of Dean.”

“I don’t think that,” Conrad said.

“Let’s go fishing. I’ll grab the rod and some bait,” Vince said.

Conrad and Vince headed towards the fishing gulch. It had been a while since the two had gone down there. It was great for fishing at night and was secluded from the other houses. Vince walked ahead of Conrad, a quick step in his pace. He held his rod in one hand, and a small bag in the other.

“What’s in the bag, Vince?”

“I managed to keep a small bag of Dean’s things.” Vince stopped on the side of the road, slinging the bag to the ground. He pulled out an old, Davey Crockett style coonskin cap and put it on his head. “It’s all stuff that my parents tried to throw out. I found this hat. Remember this? The one he got at Disney World when we were kids.”

“Yeah. I remember that,” Conrad said.

“You know what? Follow me,” Vince said, turning off of the path that led to the gulch.

“I thought we were going fishing,” Conrad said.

“I have a better idea,” Vince said, a hint of energy returning to his face. “Billy.”

“Billy what?” Conrad asked, his hands glossing with sweat.

Conrad looked Vince in the eyes, noticing a distinct sign of eagerness and excitement. Vince took the cap off of his head and turned it over in his hand, examining it closely.

“What are you thinking?” Conrad asked.

“Well, Dean once told me that when he was younger he would take his coonskin hat and hook it to his fishing line. He would wait for it to get dark and cast it to the other side of the road.”

Conrad was happy that some energy had returned to Vince, even if it was most likely temporary. Still, Conrad worried where this was going to lead.

“As soon as a car would drive up the road, he would reel the cap across, right in front of the car. The driver would freak out and jerk out of the way. It sounded hilarious.”

“Are you kidding me?” Conrad said, his nerves easing back. “You want to do that to Billy? That’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah, what’s wrong with it? It’ll be funny. We’ll scare the piss out of him.”

“He won’t even stop. He’s just going to run over Dean’s hat, ruin it, and keep on going. It’ll never work.”

“Dean said it worked like a charm. Said he scared Mr. Harris so bad that he crapped his pants.” Vince grunted a small laugh, little to Conrad’s amusement. “I don’t know if it’ll work, but it’ll give us something to do. And if it does work...”

“Fine,” Conrad said, cutting his friend off with a wave of his hand. He liked the idea of fishing for bass more than fishing for Billy. But at the same time, Conrad wanted to help bring the old Vince back, even if meant doing something stupid.

The moon was full and bright, hanging to the south like a spotlight. To the north, Conrad could make out a few of the constellations. He saw Orion the Hunter, low in the sky. High above Orion's head, he spotted the Big Dipper, the North Star shimmering like a diamond. Conrad enjoyed looking at the night sky. A few years ago, Mr. Jarrett had taken Conrad and Vince to the beach to look at the stars. Mr. Jarrett had taught them about the constellations and the importance of space travel. After Dean had died, Vince had brought over a shoe box filled with collectable *Life* magazines featuring all of the famous astronauts—John Glenn, Alan Sheppard, Neal Armstrong. He had asked Conrad if he would keep them safe under his bed. He said he was having trouble saving Dean's stuff.

Shortly after the funeral, Mr. and Mrs. Jarrett went through all the belongings of their oldest son and threw everything away. Vince tried his best to convince his parents that they should keep his stuff, but they wouldn't listen. They had already changed. They tried to bury, along with Dean, everything that signified their previous life. And now that everything was gone, all Mr. Jarrett wanted to do was build a tree-house. Weird, Conrad thought.

“Let's go to Charlie's. Billy will be over there.”

Conrad nodded, leading the way through the moonlight. They made their way over to Dixon Street, a dirt road about a half mile long that ran parallel to Sharkey's canal. Sharkey's was another fishing pond, about a quarter of a mile around. Charlie lived on the other side of the canal.

Despite the darkness, Conrad knew exactly where he was going. He knew every path, every tree, and every bush in a two mile radius of his home. He could hear the faint buzz of the crickets and the occasional patter of a startled bird flying from one tree branch to the next. His heart beat faster and faster. Vince followed close behind, carrying a fishing rod in his right hand with a green backpack slung over his left shoulder.

The two boys emerged from the trees and climbed the slope of grass that separated the dirt road from the brush. To Conrad's left he could see a Red Ford pickup truck parked next to the Mustang. The two boys walked the final quarter mile up the road. This was the only road that led to Charlie's, but there were a number of houses that lined the street. It was probably pushing half past nine so most of the houses were closed up and dark.

"Come over here, behind the embankment." Vince whispered. His enthusiasm had waned into a look of seriousness.

Conrad followed Vince just off the road. They took a few steps down the grassy hill leaning their shoulders against the incline, out of sight. Vince kept looking to his right. From this angle, Charlie's house was no longer visible.

"What if he doesn't leave?" Conrad whispered.

"He'll leave."

Vince took the fishing rod from Conrad and grabbed the coon skin hat off his head. He went into his bag and took out a hook, attaching the cap to the end of the fishing line.

“Put this on,” Vince said, tossing a canister of camouflage to Conrad. “Do it quick. He could leave at any moment.”

“Where did you get this?” Conrad asked, examining the brown tin canister filled with goo.

“It’s one of the few things I kept,” Vince said, as he worked the hook through the cap. “I found a box hidden in the back of his closet. It had this, a dirty magazine, and some hats. That was it.”

“You never told me,” Conrad said, looking at his friend working the cap.

“I think he used this stuff when he paint-balled. I’m not really sure.”

Conrad opened the case. The camouflage was half empty. He could see finger streaks across the paint. “I think Dean used this.”

“He did. Now we can. He’d be proud of us for fucking with Billy. The guy’s a pussy. He’s all talk. You know that.”

Conrad wasn’t quite sure if that was true. It just felt nice to have his old friend back. Connie didn’t want to do anything that would jeopardize losing that feeling. He rubbed the camouflage over his face. The thick paint smelled like rotten bananas, bitter and processed. His skin felt heavy and awkward. “Do we really need this?”

“He’s going to have his headlights on when he drives by,” Vince said, taking the canister from Conrad and filling his fingers with paint. “And this way a part of Dean can be here with us.”

“What’ll our parents say if they find out? Are you sure about this?” Conrad said, hoping the words would stick to Vincent enough to call off this crazy plan.



“Fuck my parents. They don’t even know I’m alive anymore. My dad’s too busy building a ghost house in a tree and all my mom does is act like a zombie. I’m sick of it.”

Vince’s face, covered in camouflage, was dark and shiny. The whites of his eyes glistened like a wet, hardboiled egg. He looked like he had just crawled out of a swamp.

“You look tough. Real tough,” Vince said.

“Look,” Conrad said as Vince worked the hook through the coon skin cap. “I’m all about fucking with Billy. I just don’t think it stands a chance in hell of working.”

“It’s not about working. It’s about getting back to the way things used to be. Doing something Dean would have liked.”

The powerful roar of the Mustang’s engine cut through the still night, sending a jolt of adrenaline through Conrad’s body.

“Get to the other side.”

Conrad bolted across the road, running like a soldier, low to the ground. He dropped to his stomach, adjusting his body so he could spot the car as it came up the road. He heard the pat of the coonskin hat land on the grass next to him. Conrad straightened the cap and the fishing line, making sure it was lined up even across the road. He could just make out the top of the fishing pole, waiting to pull the cap across the road.

The car turned away from Charlie’s house, revving its engine as it powered its way forward. Conrad lifted his head, stretching his neck to spot the headlights. The car moved closer as Conrad’s heart beat faster.

“Ready?” Vince yelled across the road.

Conrad watched, waiting for the moment, wondering if he should even give the signal. His palms were sweaty, his head throbbed and his throat felt tight and constricted.

“Reel her in!” Conrad yelled.

The hat jerked out into the street as Billy approached. Conrad climbed to his feet and took a step back, watching the cap scuttle across the road. Just as Billy’s car neared, and Conrad thought that he would miss the trap, the lights of his Mustang flickered and moved. The screeching sound of locked tires against a dirt road startled Conrad. It was louder and more piercing than he thought it would be. The back of the Mustang spun around, kicking sand and dust into the air. The red tail-lights disappeared on the other side of the road as the Mustang fish-tailed down the grass slope.

Conrad fell to his stomach, the crab-grass sharp against his forehead. His hands covered his ears and his eyes were shut tight. He was afraid to open them. Afraid that Billy was dead, afraid of going to jail. He brought himself to his knees, enough to see smoke rising from the other side of the road.

Conrad walked up the grass incline, hoping to see Vince. Hoping to see Billy. The car’s engine was still running. Smoke danced through the glow of the headlights, looking alive, ghost-like. The driver’s side door opened and Billy stepped out. His first step was wobbly, but he managed to balance himself against the roof of his now totaled Mustang.

“Oh, God. My fucking car,” Billy moaned.

He walked around the hood, looking under the wheels. Conrad thought, for a split second, that maybe they would get away with it. He thought maybe Billy figured he had hit a real animal. He hoped that Vince had taken the evidence.

Vince. Where's Vince? Conrad thought.

“What the fuck,” Billy yelled, taking hold of a broken piece of fishing line, examining the coon skin hat attached to the end. He unhooked the line, squinting through the dark at the hat in his hand.

About fifteen feet to the side of Billy, Conrad spotted Vince in the underbrush. He was crawling on his stomach, beside the smoking car. Billy stood, holding the cap with one hand, his other hand running through his hair. Conrad held his breath as he watched Vince creep closer and closer to Billy.

Vince lifted himself into a crouched position, just behind Billy. Conrad's hands gripped the grass and his muscles tensed. Vince snatched his hat, Dean's hat, from Billy's hand.

“Hey,” Billy yelled. Vince sprinted across the road, the coonskin hat dangling from his hand.

“Run,” Vince yelled, grabbing Conrad by the shirt as he sprinted past him.

The two boys darted through the trees, twisting between bark and vines, taking every step as fast as they could, yet at the same time, careful not to catch a root. They could hear Billy's yelling getting more and more distant.

“Vince,” he screamed, “I know it was you, Vincent.”

Conrad and Vince kept running. They ran past Boggy Creek and alongside the lettuce field. They darted across Coleman's Ranch, avoiding the cows with more success than their piles of shit. It didn't matter. They kept running.

Conrad's heart raced. He felt exhilarated. He ran side by side with his best friend, his legs pumping.

“We sure got him, didn’t we, Connie?” Vince yelled as he ran. He jumped as he ran, spinning in the air, whooping and hollering as loud as he could, flailing his arms about. He put the coonskin hat on his head and sprinted in front of Conrad, the brown tail dancing from left to right.

They rounded the bend. Conrad’s legs tightened beneath him. Vince charged ahead, fists and legs pumping. He stopped at a boulder that was nestled between two trees that looked out into the dark of the woods. Conrad caught up and stopped, also. He was out of breath, his lungs burning with fire, his hair drenched in sweat.

Vince, bending over the rock, laughed, high pitched and giddy, like a little boy getting the gift he always wanted on Christmas. Conrad laughed also. Vince smiled as he adjusted the hat on his head and Conrad smiled because he felt normal again.

“Vince, he knew it was you. Did you hear him? He yelled your name.”

“Yeah, I heard him. It was great.”

“Our parents are going to kill us,” Conrad said, smiling.

“No,” Vince said still laughing, “my parents are going to kill me. You’re mom will never even know. He didn’t see you. He just saw me.”

“Okay, well, your parents are going to explode.”

“They better. I could have killed a man tonight. I deserve a skinning and a half if you ask me. And I hope I get it.”

Conrad and Vince walked the final couple of blocks in silence. Conrad replayed the events over and over again in his head, smiling every time he got to the part where Billy stepped out of his car and saw his front end smashed.

“Just remember,” Conrad said as Vince walked up the porch of his house, “No matter what your parents do, it won’t be half as bad as when Billy gets to you.”

Vince smiled at Conrad, nodding his head in agreement. “We’ll be ready for him.”

“See you tomorrow,” Conrad said.

“Hopefully I’ll be grounded tomorrow. No friends allowed.”

Vince opened the door and walked into his house. Conrad saw his mother’s car in the driveway and a light on in the kitchen. As he walked home, he decided that he would tell his mom everything that happened. He figured that if Vince was going to be grounded, he might as well be, too.

## PASTIME

### I.

Mickey Riley catches the baseball from the umpire and steps onto the pitcher's mound to warm up. It's the first game of the season for the Tidewater Creek Eagles and Mickey's first opening day start, this his senior year in high school. The late afternoon sun hangs high and heavy just over Mickey's left shoulder. He can already feel the heat on his neck, the sweat trapped under the lid of his cap, lungs filled with thick, humid, Florida air. The grass is finely cut, beautifully green, and soft to the touch. The ivory white baselines, chalked and powdery, run in straight lines from home plate to first base and home to third. Even on the mound, in the middle of the field, Mickey can smell dollar hot dogs and warm pretzels as the fans shuffle through the bleachers.

Tall and right-handed, Mickey has a strong fastball with a biting curve and a heavy change-up. As he throws to Sully, his catcher, Mickey works through his mechanics, making sure they're tight and sound. Mickey drops back his left heel, just behind the pitching rubber and rotates his hips and legs. He lifts his left leg, high and tight to his chest, making sure that Sully gets a good look at his back pocket. He "explodes" off the rubber, as his dad likes to say, arm whipping forward. Like a comet rocketing toward the plate for 60 feet 6 inches, the ball smacks the catcher's glove which pops like a firecracker.

"You're feeling it today, Mick," Sully yells.

The umpire settles behind Sully and motions for the lead-off hitter to get in the box. Mickey steps off the mound, rubbing the baseball with both of his hands. He takes a deep breath, calming the opening day jitters fluttering in his stomach. He's worked hard

for this moment and Mickey wants to make sure that he takes it all in, enjoys it for all it's worth. Only recently has he started to wonder how much longer this can go on. How much longer he will play baseball.

Mickey's father sits in the first row, just to the left of home plate. Max is a large, hulking man, tall and husky, but still in good shape for his late forties. He looks a bit out of place in his dark green Tidewater Creek baseball hat and powder blue U.S. Postal delivery uniform. Mickey knew his father wouldn't miss the game. His father never missed a game. In fact, he makes sure that on game days he finishes his routes an hour or two early just so he can make it to the high school on time. It's a proud moment for Max. Mickey also. It represents everything they have been working towards. With a pound of his mitt, Mickey takes the mound. The catcher drops the sign between his legs, a lazy, dangling index finger signaling for the fastball. With a nod of his head, Mickey winds up and delivers the first pitch of his senior season.

## II.

Mickey climbed into bed, wearing his pinstriped New York Yankees pajamas. Just like every night, Mickey's father was there to tuck him in. This was one of Mickey's favorite moments. He loved being tucked in by his father and he loved when his dad told him bedtime stories. Max ran his hand through Mickey's dark brown hair. Mickey was six, and already his bedroom looked like a wing of the Baseball Hall of Fame. His walls were covered with posters of Cal Ripken, Jr. and Roger Clemens. Old baseballs, some signed, some just rusted brown, rested on the dresser. Old pennants signifying the championships of the New York Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers complemented the

posters. Although Mickey was born and raised in Tidewater, Florida, his father still carried New York in his back pocket.

“Tell me a story, Pop,” Mickey said, not yet ready to sleep.

Max smiled and looked around the room. “Do you want to hear about the Mick tonight?”

Mickey always knew that when he asked his dad to tell him a bedtime story that it would be about the Great Mickey Mantle.

“He was the greatest ballplayer of all time...” Max began. It was the same story every time. How Mantle had a bat the size of a fallen oak tree and how his hands and arms were the size of jackhammers. Mickey followed along with the story, hanging on every word, even though he knew exactly where it was going.

“In the 1959 World Series, Mick hit the longest home run in history,” Max continued, standing in the middle of his boy’s bedroom, swinging his arms back and forth with the Mick’s invisible bat in his hands. “It was a pitch low and inside, right in his wheel house, and bang! 600 feet. Out of Yankee Stadium and right into the street.”

Max lowered his voice. He knelt down at the edge of the bed, narrowing his steely blue-grey eyes. “The ball was hit so hard that when it landed on the hood of a taxi-cab, it went right through the sheet metal and destroyed the engine underneath. Busted it into a million pieces.”

Mickey smiled and laughed as Max trotted around the bedroom, just like The Mick after a home run. “Is that why I’m named after him? Because he was the best ever?”



Max smiled and sat back down on the bed. He handed Mickey a baseball that he had just taken off the dresser. "I named you after him so you could be the best ever. Keep this ball in bed while you sleep, and you'll have sweet dreams of Mickey Mantle."

After Max had left the room, Mickey tried to sleep but couldn't. All he could think about was how he wanted to grow up to be the best baseball player ever.

### III.

The first two batters of the game go down swinging. Mickey strikes out the lead-off hitter on three pitches, all fastballs. The home crowd erupts in cheers after the third strike. Fathers yell at the tops of their lungs "Way to get 'em, Kid," while mothers shake tin cans filled with pennies. The noise is loud and it feels good. But Mickey keeps his focus. The third batter of the inning is George Pickett, Southfield High's most dangerous hitter. Big George stands over 6'5" and has a brick wall for a chest. Mickey steps off the mound and gives his right arm a shake. He can feel himself tightening up a bit, tensing in the muscles. He needs the blood to flow hot if he's going to get this guy out.

"Stay focused, Mickey," Max yells, standing behind the fence, looking too nervous to sit. "Go after him."

Mickey digs his right cleat into the front of the mound, kicking away clumps of dirt. He needs as much leverage as possible against the bottom of his shoe so he can push off hard and strong, driving the ball towards home plate.

Mickey shakes off the curve, looking for the heater. When he gets his sign, he nods and throws. The ball snaps off of Mickey's fingers, hurtling towards the plate. George's bat meets the ball with a deadened thud, launching a rocket right back towards the mound. Mickey gets his glove in front of his face just as the ball arrives, knocking him

off balance. He falls to the ground as the ball bounces through the grass a couple of feet in front. On his hands and knees, like a baby after a new toy, he scurries for the ball. George plods and pounds his way up the line towards first base. Mickey grabs the ball, and throws George out by two full steps.

“Hell of a play, Mick,” Max yells from the stands, clapping his hands. “That was a heat-seeking ugly finder, that’s for sure.” All of the players laugh at Max’s joke as they slap Mickey five as he runs off the field. He takes his seat on the bench and closes his eyes, heart still beating wildly.

#### IV.

The backyard was filled with kids, some from school, some from baseball, all there to celebrate Mickey’s eighth birthday. Some were hiding behind the small bushes that lined the side of the house while others chased after one another in a heart-stopping game of tag.

“Mickey. Get over here,” Max yelled from the side of the porch. “Go get your new glove. Let’s try it out.”

Mickey ran up to his dad, his face red and sweaty, shirt soaking wet. “Come on, Pop,” Mickey said, between breaths. “I don’t want to play catch.”

“It’s a brand new glove. You should be excited to use it.”

“But it’s so stiff. I can’t even close it.”

“That’s why we have to break it in. Go get it.”

Mickey kicked the dirt with his shoe. His friends called for him to come back but he did as his father said and went and got his glove and a ball. Max was already waiting for

him when he came back. All the kids gathered around and listened to Max tell one of his stories about Whitey Ford, the best Yankee pitcher ever.

“Throw me the ball,” Max yelled to Mickey.

The new glove, a gift from Max, felt stiff around Mickey’s hand. He tried to open and close the mitt but couldn’t. Max threw the ball back to Mickey, showing all the kids how Whitey Ford used to do it. Mickey followed the ball with his eyes and put up his glove. It hit the inside of the pocket and popped right out, falling to the ground. His face burned red with embarrassment at his inability to make easy catches in front of his friends.

“I can’t get it to close,” Mickey said, taking the glove off his hand and slapping it against his thigh.

“You need to break it in. That’s all.”

Mickey picked up the ball and threw back to his dad, halfheartedly.

“Dammit, Kid,” Max roared. “What have I told you about flinging? You don’t fling the ball. You throw it.” The chatter and laughter of Mickey’s friends stopped. They watched in silence as Max threw Mickey ball after ball, and Mickey picked up dropped ball after dropped ball off the ground.

“Can I go play now, Pop?”

“Fine. We’ll work at it more tomorrow,” Max said, throwing the ball back to Mickey.

The ball caught the top of the webbing and ricocheted towards his face. Mickey turned his head just enough to not catch the ball off the tip of his nose. Instead, it slammed into its side, sending a shock of pain through him. Mickey collapsed to ground

and covered his face with his new glove. Blood gushed out of his nose and dripped into his mouth. Mickey leaned into Max who helped him stand, an arm secured around his waist.

“Put your head back,” Max said, gently.

The salty blood dripped down Mickey’s throat and he coughed and cried. He knew his friends were watching even though he couldn’t see them.

“Are you okay, Mickey?” one of his friends asked.

“That’s gross.”

“It’s like a puddle in the grass,” another one said.

“I got you, kid,” Max said. Mickey sank into his father’s arms, letting himself be guided inside. For the next forty-five minutes, Mickey kept a bag of ice on his swelling nose while Max called all the parents to get their kids. By the time the last of his friends had left, Mickey’s nose had stopped bleeding. But it was twice its normal size.

“It doesn’t look good, Mick. I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“I got blood on the new glove.”

“It’s okay. It doesn’t matter.”

On the way to the hospital, Mickey closed his eyes and listened to Max tell him of how in Mickey Mantle’s second season, he tore up his knee slipping on a drain pipe during practice. “Everyone gets hurt, son. But the great one’s bounce right back.”

## V.

It’s the fourth inning and Tidewater leads 2-0. Despite the thick humidity of a late Florida afternoon, Mickey is hardly tiring. He steps off the rubber and wipes the sweat from his fingers. Max paces nervously in front of the bleachers. Off to the right, sitting

nice and calm, is Sully's father. As usual, he is wearing his University of Michigan hat. Mickey thinks about the letter he just got in the mail. An acceptance letter to the University of Michigan. An academic acceptance. If Mickey wants to go to Michigan, he won't be able to play ball—an idea that is actually pretty appealing. He's been playing ball for most of his life and this would be a good chance to find his own place in the world. Having to tell his father, though, is a completely different story.

Mickey delivers a pitch high, off the corner. The next pitch is a fastball in the dirt, followed by a curve that is nowhere near the zone. Three balls and no strikes. Mickey spits in frustration before throwing a fastball just off the outside corner for ball four. Sully takes a few steps towards the mound before tossing the ball back to Mickey.

“Settle down, kid. Hit me in the chest.”

Mickey rubs the ball fast and hard. The rough seams dig into his hand, burning his palm. Big George steps up to the plate, kicking dirt from the front of the batter's box to the back. He spits over his front shoulder and dangles his bat, loosy-goosy, front to back, just over his shoe tops. Mickey gets the sign from Sully, nods his head, and sets to throw. He should be thinking about how to pitch to George, but all Mickey can think about is how disappointed his father would be if Mickey decided not to play ball in college.

With a pulverizing crack of the bat, George rips a shot high and deep to left-center. The centerfielder sprints towards the wall, head up, searching for the ball. The distance between the wall and the centerfielder closes to nothing and the ball sails a good 40-feet over the fence for a game tying, two-run blast. Mickey kicks the dirt in front of him, sending a cloud of dust and pieces of dirt into the air.

“What the hell kind of pitch was that?” Max yells.

Sully walks up to the mound, new ball in hand. Max kicks the fence with such force that his hat falls off of his head.

“Forget it, man. Shake it off,” Sully says. Sully slams the new ball in the pocket of Mickey’s glove as George finishes his high fives and walks back into his own dugout.

“Are you paying any attention? What the hell is wrong with you?” Sully asks.

“Nothing. I’m good.”

“Get tough.”

“What?” Mickey asks, knowing exactly what Sully had said.

“I said, if you want to win this game, get tough.” Sully slaps him from behind and jogs back to the plate. Yeah, Mickey thinks. Get tough.

## VI.

Mickey opened his eyes to the dark of his room, wondering if the bang he heard was real or if he had dreamt it. The loud knock came again, followed by Max yelling that it was time to get up. It was only 4:30 a.m, late June before the start of his freshman year in high school.

“Come on, Pop. I want to sleep.”

“It’s time to work out. We talked about this last night,” Max said, tossing the blankets off of Mickey.

“I wasn’t as tired last night.”

“You know,” Max said, “Mantle used to wake up every morning...”

“Oh, Jesus,” Mickey said, tossing the covers off in frustration. “If I have to listen to one more Mantle story I swear...”

Just outside the house, the sun had yet to rise but the air was thick and hot. The crickets were busy finishing their all night symphony as Mickey stretched his legs.

“Today we run laps,” Max said.

“We?”

“Don’t be a smart ass. Just run.”

With two beeps of Max’s stop-watch Mickey took off, running the giant circle of his neighborhood. It wasn’t long before his lungs burned and his legs ached. The more tired he got, the harder he pushed himself. Forcing his legs to pump, refusing to stop and catch his breath. He wanted to finish the run for himself, but more for his father. He hated his look of disappointment and would do anything to avoid it. A mile or so later, he made it back to Max, who stood in the driveway, arms crossed against his chest.

“Ten minutes, eight seconds. I said run not walk.” Disappointment. Never good enough.

Mickey gripped his knees, trying to catch his breath.

“We got a lot of work to do.”

“We?” Mickey said, frustrated that his father kept trying to include himself in the morning workout.

“I’m going to work early today. After school I’m taking you to the field and *you* are going to hit off the tee.”

“I’m going skating after school. I told you yesterday.”

“You’re coming home and doing your homework. Then you’re going to hit a bucket of balls off the tee and then you’re going to run some more. Believe me, you can use it.”

“I don’t want to run,” Mickey said, anger in his voice, annoyed by the sweat dripping down his hair and into his eyes.

“What do you want, Mick? You have to decide. Do you want to play ball in high school? Do you want to be great?” Max waited for an answer.

Mickey nodded his head knowing it was the answer that would end the discussion.

“If you want to be great then you have to get tough because right now you’re acting like a cream puff. Cream puffs wash uniforms and fill water bottles. Tough guys hit home runs and are starting pitchers on their high school varsity squad. What do you want to be?”

“Tough,” Mickey said, barely audible.

“Then you come home, do your homework, and hit off the tee. You shouldn’t skate anyway. All it takes is one slip and you’ll break your goddamn wrist.”

Mickey nodded and went inside to get ready for school. The sun had just begun to peek over the horizon.

## VII.

Heading into the fifth inning, the score is tied at two. Mickey is pleased with the way he’s pitching. After giving up the homerun to Big George, Mickey struck out the next two hitters to end the fourth.

In between batters, Mickey walks around the mound, making sure his legs stay loose. All of a pitcher’s power, all of a pitcher’s velocity, all of a pitcher’s ability to “sting the radar” comes from the legs. The arm has to be strong, yes, but the legs supply all of the power needed to put the velocity of a pitcher’s weight entirely behind a five and a quarter



ounce baseball. All the years of running, all the years of working out the leg muscles are to ensure that Mickey's velocity is the same in the seventh inning as it is in the first.

With one out, Mickey waits for the batter to get set in the box. The sun slowly dips behind the tall trees beyond the center field fence. Streaks of burnt orange mix with a light yellow giving the sky a calm, gentle look. Mickey takes a deep breath and burns this moment into his heart. The moment in which he is the opening day starter for his Varsity high school team. This is it, he thinks to himself. This is going to be my last year playing ball.

"Stay focused, kid," Max yells from behind the fence. "Tighten up your mechanics."

Mickey delivers the pitch and just as the ball crosses the plate, the hitter lowers his bat and bunts the ball slowly towards first base. Mickey twists and heads towards the ball, watching the runner at the same time. He scoops the ball into his glove in one motion and breaks towards the bag. There isn't enough time to toss the ball to the first baseman so Mickey lunges, head first, his glove landing on top of the bag just as the runner's spikes land on his glove. The umpire yells "Ouuuut!"

A sharp pain shoots through Mickey's left hand and wrist, up to his elbow, and into his arm pit. He feels like yelling, but doesn't. He feels like crying and kicking his feet and throwing his glove off of his hand and walking off the field, but doesn't. He just kneels in the dirt, eyes closed. Sully puts his hands under Mickey's right arm, helping him to his feet.

"You okay?" Sully asks.

"I'm good," Mickey says, knowing he's not.

He walks back over to the mound, slightly bent over at the waist. Coach Mehan comes out of the dugout, hat in hand, looking concerned. Mickey waves him off, telling him he's fine. It's just a stinger.

"Hell of a play, Mick. Hell of a play," Max screams over the still cheering crowd. "Shake it off. Get back on that rubber and shake it off."

Mickey does the best he can to right himself. The pain is sharp. He can't move his wrist and it hurts to open and close his glove. He steps back on the mound and delivers a fastball in the dirt, five feet short of the plate. Sully throws the ball back to Mickey who does the best he can to catch the ball with the web of his glove and not the palm. Streaks of pain shoot through his hand. Sweat collects under his arms and behind his knees. He feels sick to his stomach.

With a quick walk around the mound Mickey steadies himself on the rubber. He can't show that he's hurt, he can't quit. There isn't supposed to be such a thing as 'quit.'

"A couple more innings, Mick and it's over," Max yells.

Mickey nods, swallowing the pain. It's almost over, he thinks to himself as he delivers the next pitch. It couldn't end soon enough.

## VIII.

Max was only getting warmed up and Mickey was absolutely exhausted. Dirt covered the front of Mickey's shirt and his forearms were scratched and bruised. It was just before his sophomore year of high school and Mickey was working on his infield work. He had plans of being a starting pitcher, it was what he loved most and what he was best at, but like Max had told him, the more positions you can play the more time on

the field you'll get. With the crack of a bat, Mickey broke to his left, backhanding a hot groundball just before it got past him.

Another ball cracked off the end of his father's bat. Mickey did the best he could to get his glove in front, but the ball short-hopped directly into the middle of his chest, knocking him to his knees. He immediately felt the tightening of his skin, the blood rushing to the center of his chest forming yet another purple bruise.

"Way to get in front of it, Mick. Nothing gets through."

Mickey wrung his arm, trying to quiet the pain in his chest. He threw the ball away in disgust. It wasn't disgust of not catching it, or even disgust of the pain, but disgust of the game. The game of baseball that had dominated his life ever since he was a boy.

"I'm done, Pop. No more," Mickey said, walking off the field.

"Like hell you are."

Mickey opened the door to his father's beat up Toyota. There was still a dent in the center of the hood from three years ago when Mickey hit a home run into the parking lot that landed smack in the middle of the hood. On the way home, when he apologized for the dent, Max laughed and said "No worries. That was one hell of a shot." Mickey wondered if the dent in his chest was just as big.

"What's going on with you? You've been acting like this for weeks."

"I'm done. I just don't want to play."

"How can you not want to play?"

Mickey didn't answer.

"You're right. Enough practice for today."

Max walked to the driver's side, and stared at Mickey who did the best he could to hold his father's glare.

"Maybe I'm done for good. Maybe I just don't want to do this anymore," Mickey said.

"No way," Max said, pointing a stiff finger. "Don't you fucking think about it."

Mickey had heard his dad swear plenty of times, but never could he remember it directed at him.

"You've worked too hard," Max said. "All these years, it's all you've ever wanted to do. Play baseball. That's it. And now you just want to walk away?"

"I don't know, Pop," Mickey said. The shame of disappointing his father who worked so hard over the years to make sure that no matter what, he could play ball. The shame of all those days that Max would go to work hours early and work twice as fast to empty his mail bag just so he could make it to the park on time. So many fathers never made it to their son's game. Max wasn't one of those fathers. He pushed hard, but Mickey knew he loved him. Mickey knew this man would do anything for him.

Mickey swallowed hard as Max did his best to compose himself. "Look, if you ever want to hang 'em up and not play, all you have to do is say the word. I just want to make sure it's because you have nothing left."

Max stepped away and turned towards the baseball field which was bathed bright and beautiful in a cascade of high-powered light towers. "There's a difference between leaving it all on that field and quitting. I didn't raise you to be a quitter. I raised you to be a fighter. A scrapper. If you have nothing left, then so be it. Just...don't...quit. That's all I ask."

Mickey nodded. His father was right. He wasn't a quitter. He'd never quit anything in his life and he sure as hell didn't want to start now. He tossed his glove into the back seat and took off his spikes, knocking them together. Red clay sprinkled to the ground like cinnamon, collecting in a pile. "I'm just done for today. That last shot to the chest hurt like hell."

"Yeah. It sounded like it did. Sorry about that," Max said, laughing.

Mickey pushed out a laugh also, called his dad an asshole and gave him a hug. Max's big bear arms pulled Mickey in close.

"Anything you want to do in life is fine," Max whispered. "Just don't ever quit on me."

## IX.

Mickey walks to the mound for the sixth inning. In the bottom of the fifth, his team had pushed across a run on an RBI double by Sully. The one run lead isn't much, but it helps. Mickey tosses his warm up pitches, trying his best to ignore the pain in his wrist which has actually subsided considerably. It's now more of an achy, intense throb. With his hand still tightly swollen in the mitt, Mickey makes sure to catch the ball in the web. It hurts far less then if he catches it in the pocket of the glove.

His pitching hand feeling great, Mickey strikes out the leadoff hitter on four pitches, the last, a nasty breaking ball that fools the hitter so bad that when he swings and misses he spins like a corkscrew.

Max cheers with the rest of the crowd. He is sitting in the front row of the bleachers talking to an older, heavy set man with a stop watch around his neck and a clipboard in his lap. Mickey calls time out.

Sully trots out to the mound, removing his mask. Sweat dots his upper lip and his face is red. “You got this guy last time on three straight curves. I think we should do the same this time.”

“Who is that? Talking to my Pop?”

Sully turns to the stands, trying to be discreet. “Looks like a scout. He’s from Tidewater Community College. Maybe he’s scouting you.”

“Great. That’s all I need.”

“Don’t let him throw you off your game. Try and relax. You’re doing great.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Mickey says. “I’m not concerned about the scout.”

Sully smiles, slaps Mickey on the ass with his glove and trots back to the plate. Mickey ignores the pain in his wrist and finishes the inning on a ground out and a pop out, both to the second baseman.

Once again, the crowd stands and cheers as Mickey trots off the field, stamping their feet against the metal in a thunderous cacophony of sound and power. Normally, the loud cheers of the crowd fuel Mickey’s adrenaline. Today, it just sounds like a tired act. Leave it on the field and then walk away, he thinks. It’s not quitting if you have nothing left to give.

## X.

Mickey arrived home, as usual, before his father. He thumbed through the day’s mail as he walked into his room and stopped at the envelope addressed to him. In the corner was a Maize and Blue blocked ‘M’ that read ‘Admissions’ underneath. He read the letter over and over, feeling the ping of excitement every time he read the word ‘Congratulations.’ He wondered what Max would think. He knew he’d be proud, getting

into such a good school. But the letter was an acceptance based on academics, not baseball. Mickey folded the letter and slid it under his mattress.

Later that night, sitting at the dinner table, Mickey talked with his father, unsure of how he would react. He talked about college, the future, but never mentioned his acceptance specifically.

“The scouts aren’t exactly knocking down the door, Pop”

“I know, kid. But don’t let it get you down. Lots of options out there.”

“I’ll just go to school and not play ball if I have to,” Mickey said, stepping into the hot water one foot at a time. He wasn’t even sure if that was what he really wanted to do. There wasn’t a lot of time in which Mickey thought about *not* playing ball. But now that he knew he could go to Michigan...

“Your grades are great. But I still think there’s a school out there that will allow you to do both. If you can’t get a scholarship, you can always go to Junior College and play there.”

There it was. He knew Max had been thinking about it for a while; he was only waiting to hear him say it out loud. JuCo, without a doubt, was a great option for someone determined to play ball in college. It provides a good start academically while allowing players to play against solid competition. The bleachers at a Junior College baseball game are generally packed with scouts from four year colleges looking to find the next “stud.” With thousands of high school players playing across the country, it’s easy for the scouts to miss one. Junior College is where the good players who fall through the cracks turn up. Junior College, though, is not where a kid goes who has a shot at an academic scholarship to the University of Michigan.

“I’ve thought about Junior College, also. But my grades are good, Pop. Really good.”

“Well, you still have one more year to go,” Max said, spinning spaghetti noodles onto his fork. “I just know how much you want to play ball. I’m looking for options.”

Max always tried so hard and Mickey was grateful. It would be tough telling his dad he wanted to go to school for academics and not for baseball, he thought. He loved the idea of going away for college, starting a life on his own, making his own decisions. He also liked the idea of *having* a life. Finally having the time to go to the movies with a girl or a party with friends and not feel guilty. Not feel like he was neglecting his “talent for the game.” But it would be tough not playing the game he had played since he was five, also. Mickey still loved it, the smell of the grass, the sound of the ball smacking leather gloves on a quiet Sunday afternoon. Max was right, though. Mickey still had one more year to go. Plenty of time to decide.

## XI.

In the top of the seventh, Mickey takes the mound for what he hopes is the final inning. Tidewater clings to a 3-2 lead. He takes his warm up pitches, feeling strong in his right arm. His left arm aches more persistently than it did last inning. After the final warm-up toss, Mickey catches the throw from Sully in the palm of his hand. He grunts with pain and doubles over.

Sully comes trotting out to the mound.

“What are you hiding, Mick?” Sully asks, one hand resting on Mickey’s shoulder.

“I’m fine. I just stung my wrist.”

“It doesn’t look stung to me,” Sully says.



Mickey takes his glove hand and rests it just behind his hip. “We got three outs to go. Why don’t we worry about getting them? Then we can talk about my hand.”

Sully is tired and sweaty. A ring of dirt circles his face where the padding of his mask rests. Mickey pats him in the chest and tells him to get back behind the dish.

The first hitter grounds out weakly to third base on a slow curve. One out. The pain in Mickey’s wrist intensifies. The thick throb won’t go away and his hand feels as if it’s permanently swollen inside his glove.

After two balls in the dirt, Mickey rears back for a cutting, two-seam fastball which the hitter barely contacts. The ball is popped straight up in the air. Sully turns his back to the infield, tosses his mask aside, plants himself under the ball, and makes the catch for the second out.

“One more, baby,” Max yells from the stands. All the fans are on their feet. The scout from before is nowhere around. “Suck it up, Mick. Rear back and fire that shit across.”

Big George fixes the velcro on his batting gloves, tightening and adjusting them as he steps to the plate. Mickey steadies his breathing, through the nose and out the mouth, just like his father taught him, as he concentrates on how he wants to pitch to George. He needs to get him out, bad. The last thing he wants is to extend the game into extra innings by throwing George a pitch he can clobber.

He delivers a fastball for a first pitch strike. The next pitch is a curveball that hangs a little too much over the middle of the plate. Big George grunts as he uncorks a massive swing. With a loud pop, he drives the ball to deep right field. Mickey swings around,

clutching his left hand against his chest. The right fielder takes three steps back, plants, and makes the catch for the final out of the game.

The crowd erupts as Sully rushes the mound. With a small pump of his fist, Mickey sprints off the field, evading cheering and ecstatic teammates.

“Way to go, Mick,” Coach Mehan says.

“I broke my wrist,” Mickey says, showing his coach for the first time the severity of his injury. His wrist is completely discolored, purple, blue and black.

“Trainer!” Coach Mehan yells.

Max stands just on the other side of the fence. His face is white and he says nothing.

“Can you take off your glove?” Terry, the school’s trainer, asks.

“No. Too swollen.”

“Jesus Christ, Mick,” Sully says. “That’s disgusting.”

The whole team gathers around to see the discolored left wrist.

“Get him to the emergency room, Max. It’s safe to say it’s broken.”

Without a word, Max goes and gets the car. It isn’t until he pulls out onto the main road that he says anything.

“What were you thinking?”

“I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“You’re not an idiot, Mick. You knew. What the fuck were you doing going out there pitching with your wrist like that?”

“I wanted to win. It was a big game,” Mick says, immediately regretting his actions. It was *just* a game, nothing more, he thinks. It has never been anything more.

“A big game? Look at your goddam hand. No game is worth that.”

“Was that scout here to see me pitch?”

“Yeah,” Max says, watching the road in front. “He wants you to play at the community school. Thinks you’d have good shot of being picked up.”

“I don’t want to be picked up. I want to go to college, Pop. But not to play ball. I just don’t want to do this anymore,” Mick says. It had been a long time coming, but Mick started to feel better, despite the pain in his hand. He could feel his chest lighten just by saying the words.

“So you go out and ruin your hand. Good way to tell me,” Max says, sarcastically.

“I did this to my hand because I wanted to win. For me and the team. Just because I don’t want to play ball in college doesn’t mean I would give up.”

“You could have called it quits. Everyone would have understood.”

“I left it out on the field, Pop. Just like you taught me. I left it all out there and then some. Just to make sure there really wasn’t anything left.”

The words seem as if they hit Max like a fastball right between the eyes. He clenches the steering wheel, shaking his head back and forth, looking as if he finally accepts what Mickey is trying to say. His eyes darken and he reaches out and puts his hand on Mickey’s leg, squeezing his knee.

“Does it hurt?”

“Like hell,” Mickey says, smiling.

“I just want the best for you, Mick. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“Pop, you wanted me to *be* the best. And I will. But maybe in something else.”

Max pulls the car into the hospital parking lot. He comes around and opens the door for Mickey, takes him by his pitching arm and swings it over his own neck. “Keep your wrist elevated.”

Mickey wraps his hand around his father’s shoulder and hugs him close as the two walk into the Emergency Room.

Mickey drops his medical papers onto his dresser. His wrist is wrapped tight in a soft air cast. Final diagnosis: Two broken bones, one in the thumb and one in the wrist, and a torn tendon. In a few days, when the swelling goes down, the doctor wants to operate and insert two small screws into the breaks to make sure the bone heals clean. Prognosis: Disabled List. Season over. And, as of tonight, career over.

“It was one hell of a game to call your last,” Max had said, just before going to bed. “I’m sorry you went through all that.”

“I’m sorry, Pop,” Mick said, struggling to find the right words, wanting to tell his dad he loved him, that he was grateful to have been a ballplayer—a great ballplayer.

“You have nothing to be sorry about, Mick,” Max said, smiling. “I’m just glad you’re okay. You scared me there, kid.”

“Yeah. Scared myself too. But it felt good to get that fat ass Pickett to fly out at the end of the game.”

Max laughed. “That was one hell of a pitch. Get some sleep. We’ll talk about college in the morning.”

In his room, Mickey pulls out his acceptance letter from the University of Michigan. It’s a good school, he thinks to himself. Pop will be proud. He takes the letter and sets it

down next to his father's keys. Mickey knows that for the first time in years, he won't have to wake up in the morning thinking about baseball.

## GLASS ONION

Even before Tabby opened her eyes, she felt the cold seep into her skin. The sharp chill that invaded the frame of the modest two-story house penetrated the aging comforter and settled into her bones. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. The early morning grey shined through the slits of the blinds forming octagons of light on the floor of her bedroom.

Tabby wrapped herself in the blanket, desperately trying to fight off the shiver that was commonplace in an early February, Michigan morning. She waited for the moment of impending doom. The moment in which the alarm sounded and she would endure yet another day of the same routine. Her husband of fourteen years, sound asleep on his back, snored long and rhythmically.

Only a few minutes to go, Tabby thought. She looked over at Howard, wondering how he looked so warm in the cold bedroom. Tabby loved her husband, but not in the same way that she had when they first met, before marriage, before kids. Middle of the night love-making was nonexistent, as was early evening love-making for that matter. Long gone was the spark that seemed to always warm Tabby's life. Howard's middle aged gut seemed much larger in Tabby's mind than it really was, but the fact remained, the attraction was gone. His stomach rolled over his belt, bending the waist of his pants, as if it were desperately reaching for the ground below. But he did work hard to support Tabby and their two children, and they still had moments in between the raising of their kids and the paying of the bills where it seemed as if everything could...

The alarm sounded like a foghorn, cutting through the still bedroom. Tabby closed her eyes in anticipation of the same vision that she got every other morning. She

heard it coming, the train, rumbling down the tracks, shaking the foundation of the house. No longer did she fight these visions. They were dependable. They were welcomed. They couldn't be stopped.

The train rumbled past her bedroom window. The screeching of iron wheels on rusted tracks. The deafening wail of the horn. Every morning the force of the locomotive broke lamps, shards of broken bulbs fell to the floor and chairs flipped on their sides. The pictures that hung on the walls vibrated until they fell into a busted pile of plastic and wood. Every morning, the train rolled through. And every morning, the train failed to stop.

Tabby fumbled with the alarm in her looking for the off switch. Off went the morning locomotive, away into the distance, until tomorrow. Tabby rubbed her ears and examined the bedroom. The pictures hung on the wall, unmoved. The lamps were undamaged, and the chairs, although covered with clothes and old newspapers, were upright and still.

“Honey, wake up,” Tabby said. Howard grunted, rubbed his nose, and continued to sleep.

Tabby opened the window shades, a last ditch effort to awaken her husband from his nightly hibernation. She stared at the bleakness that was her backyard. A rusted tool shed sat abandoned in the corner of the fenced in yard. The grass was black and dead, covered in a late winter slush. Two massive oak trees hovered and swayed, naked of all color.

“Howard, can you get the kids up today?”

Howard replied with another grunt that sounded more like a burp. He sat up in bed and swung his legs over the side. His dark hair, what was left of it, was sticking straight up. It was in need of a serious comb over, Tabby thought.

“Howard, please. Can you get the kids up and take care of breakfast?” How nice it would be to have one morning off, Tabby thought. To sip coffee in bed while watching *Good Morning, America*.

“Christ, Tab. Give me five goddamned minutes.”

“I’ll take that as your usual no,” Tabby said, more to herself than to her husband.

Their house wasn’t big. In fact, as the kids continued to grow, it felt tighter and more cramped. They lived in Royal Oak, a large suburb of Detroit. But it felt like anything but royalty. The house was old, maybe even fifty years, and creaked ghoulish sounds late at night. If they could get hot water for more than ten minutes, she considered it a lucky day.

For the last four years, Tabby had worked as a night time cashier at Killman’s Grocery Store. The late hours and early mornings had taken their toll, as had the constant housework that was required to keep the house in living order. She wanted to find a better job, maybe one during the day in an office, but it was hard for a woman in her thirties with only a high school diploma in her pocket to find better work.

Tabby opened the door to her kids’ bedroom. There were two twin beds on opposite ends, tucked into a corner. At the far wall in between the two beds was an old wooden dresser that belonged to Tabby when she was a child. Clothes, video games, and crumpled pieces of paper littered the floor.



“Danny, Paul. It’s time to get up. Get ready for school,” Tabby said as she pulled the covers off of their sleeping bodies.

At 13, Danny was the oldest. His dark hair was a matted mess and his round face was creased with pillow wrinkles. Paul was eleven but often acted as if he were six. His round pudgy face, much like his father’s, was contorted and anguished.

“Mom, I don’t want to go to school today,” Paul whined. “I don’t feel like it.”

“Oh, you’re going to school. Get out of bed and get dressed.” Tabby handed Paul his blue-jeans and a dark blue University of Michigan sweater. “Do you want to wear this? I just cleaned it yesterday.”

Paul took the sweater and flung it down on his bed. Tabby loved her children with all of her heart. There wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do to make their lives a little better. But, like her husband, they did drive her crazy.

“Why can’t you guys keep this room clean? I’m sick of cleaning it every day. Get it picked up before you come down for breakfast,” Tabby said.

Tabby stopped at the bottom of the stairs. She had gotten off work later than usual the night before and never even looked into the kitchen when she got home. Very rarely was the kitchen clean. Judging by the sharp smell of rotting cheese from last night’s Alfredo tortellini, Tabby could tell the sink wasn’t empty this time either.

Tabby drew a deep breath and flicked on the light to the kitchen. A pile of dishes filled the sink and overflowed onto the counter. In fact, they were stacked all the way to the ceiling. The dishes creaked and cracked under the weight of one another. Tabby was shocked by the vision of a porcelain skyscraper, hundreds of scum-ridden dishes piled on top of each other. Muck and slime seeped down the side of the massive mound of plates

and saucers. Tabby felt cold all through her body as she approached the wobbling spectacle of dirty dishes. With a dishtowel in her back pocket and a sponge tucked in her belt, she took a deep breath and climbed up the side of the dishes. Very carefully, she scaled the porcelain wall, deliberately placing one hand in front of the other, trying not to slip on the slime that had overtaking her kitchen.

When she reached the top she started on each plate and every cup, cleaning them individually, one by one. She held her breath when she had to, breathed through her mouth other times, accepting the sour flavor of rot over the wicked smell of filth. She was careful as she balanced herself on the dishes; careful not to topple the tower. No matter how many times she asked her husband to do the dishes, they were always stacked to the ceiling when she got up in the morning. It would not surprise her in the least if he came downstairs and found her buried under a pile of broken dishes. She wondered if he would even take the time to dig her out.

After Tabby had cleaned the dishes and wiped down the counters, she prepared a breakfast of Rice Crispies and orange juice for Danny and Paul.

“Guys! Breakfast is ready,” Tabby yelled.

“Mom, we’re sitting right here,” Danny said.

Tabby hadn’t even heard them come downstairs. Danny was in front of the television playing his Playstation and Paul was next to him playing his Gameboy.

“Come and eat. Turn those things off for five minutes. Did you clean your room like I asked?”

“Morning, Tab,” Howard said as he walked down the stairs in his khaki pants and blue dress shirt. His red tie was shorter than it should have been, resting high on his

stomach. His hair was brushed to the side and his face was shaved, a vast improvement from his earlier look. "Can you go to the bank today and deposit my check?"

"Can you please clean the kitchen before I get home at night?" Tabby asked.

"I need you to write checks for these credit cards today, also," Howard said, thumbing through the stack of bills on the counter. "They're due in a week. Listen, I have to go, I'm going to be late."

"Maybe if you got up a little earlier you'd have time to help me out," Tabby said, the running water in the sink drowning out her soft voice.

"What?"

"Nothing. Have a nice day at work," Tabby said.

"Did you make my lunch by any chance?"

"When, Howard? In between getting the kids up and cleaning every dish that we own?" Tabby said, throwing the dishtowel onto the counter.

"I'm sorry. I'll go out for lunch today. It's no big deal," Howard said. "Danny, Paul, Don't forget, big hockey game on T.V. tonight. Tabby, I love you. I'll see you tonight."

Howard was out the door before Tabby had the chance to tell him that she loved him back. Danny and Paul were still playing their video games.

"Get up. Right Now," Tabby said to her kids. "Turn those things off and eat. You have to go to school soon."

Danny ate his breakfast slow and deliberate. Much like his father, everything had a system. He ate his bowl of cereal first and then drank his entire glass of juice in one

gulp. Paul, on the other hand, ate with wild abandonment. Cereal tumbled out of his mouth, down his chin, and onto the table.

The school bus pulled up outside. Both kids leapt from their seats, sprinting towards the door. Paul knocked over his orange juice trying to get to the bus first.

“I love you,” Tabby said, no reply in return. Now that the kids had left for school, the only sound in the entire house was the drips of orange juice falling from the table, congregating in a sticky puddle on the linoleum. Tabby sighed and sat down in a chair—tired, exhausted, and bored. It was supposed to be her day off and the house was a mess. No rest for the weary, she thought to herself, as a slight burn grew in the pit of her stomach.

After a long morning of cleaning the downstairs, Tabby went upstairs to clean the boys’ bathroom. The house still felt cold, although not nearly as cold as it had in the early morning hours. It was impossible to warm up with the drafts of cold air penetrating the windows, sharing possession of the house with Tabby and her family.

Tabby didn’t mind cleaning the sink. The mildew stains were easily removed with Orange Blast, and the drain was just as easily unclogged of wads of paper and crusty toothpaste. The toilet was another story. Tabby detested cleaning the toilet. She stood in front of the white porcelain, bucket in hand. The toilet was a mildew infested waste bucket. Growths of black slime that circled the inside of the rim squished and squirmed. She cleaned the toilet with her mouth closed, turning her head into her shoulder to breathe, trying to ignore and avoid the pungent, sharp smell of fermented urine that stained the base and floor.

If they won't clean the darn thing, the least they can do is make it inside the toilet, Tabby thought. The burn in Tabby's stomach worsened. She wondered if there was any Tagamet in the cupboards.

When she finished cleaning the bathroom, Tabby washed, covering her hands in soap three times, desperately trying to wash away the filth that stained her skin. The vision that reflected back at Tabby from the mirror jarred her. She looked at her hair, her thinning auburn hair that was pulled back and pinned above her neck, as it instantaneously turned ragged and white. Her skin, once ivory and wrinkle free began to loosen and crease. Her green eyes, still young and vibrant, her favorite feature, turned grey. They seemed to sink within the canvass of wrinkles that were fast overtaking her skin. Tabby turned away from the mirror, fearful of what the future held, afraid of what the present was doing.

It was almost time for Danny and Paul to get home from school. As Tabby left the bathroom, she glanced in the mirror one last time. She was relieved to find that the old woman she had just seen was gone, and that her current looks had returned, if only temporarily.

In the kitchen, Tabby cut the boys slices of cheese to go with Ritz crackers for their afternoon snack. She kept looking at her hands, making sure they were free of those horrible wrinkles, making sure blue veins weren't coursing her skin like rivers on a map. The burn in Tabby's stomach increased, marching northward, into her chest.

Tabby sat at the dinner table across from Howard while the kids were in the other room playing video games. Each bleep and squeak pierced deeper under Tabby's skin.

Howard was telling her of a great new project he was assigned at work and how excited he was to help manage and oversee the making of a brand new brake pad for next year's Taurus.

Tabby cleared the table as Howard talked with enthusiasm about his work and the excitement of the days to come. "It really is something. To help build an automobile from the ground up," Howard said.

Tabby enjoyed Howard's enthusiasm for work, his constant positive outlook on life. He never drank, never hit her or the kids, never even yelled all that much. It just seemed that somewhere within the last fourteen years the spark of life was somehow replaced by a suffocating routine of just getting by. The bitter cold crawled back under Tabby's skin as she placed the dishes in the sink and she rubbed her arms.

"Honey," Tabby said, "I'm going to go get some rest. It's been a long day." She walked past Howard, squeezing his shoulder. He craned his neck and gave her a fast kiss on the hand.

"Would you mind cleaning the kitchen for me tonight?" Tabby asked.

"Sure," Howard said. "Go get some sleep. The game is starting, I'll do it after."

Howard went to the couch and turned on the television. Tabby knew she was immediately tuned out and anything she said would be ignored. She stood in the kitchen, feeling the icy chill of anger swell within her. Howard made some grunting sounds that were directed towards the game. Danny laughed and grunted just like his father. Paul, on the other hand, was completely disinterested in the hockey game. He sat on the floor, playing his Gameboy, face frozen and oblivious to anything going on around him. Every time Tabby asked for help around the house it seemed as if she was always overruled by

the video system or some important game that Howard just had to watch. They always said they would clean later. Tabby knew that if she didn't clean the dishes before bed, she would have to scale the porcelain tower once again in the morning. There was only so much climbing one woman could take.

Empty the trash. No reply. Wash the dishes. Nothing. Clean your room. In a minute, Mom. Sweep the floor. When the game is over. It was the same thing every day. The same vicious cycle that Tabby felt was driving her out of her mind.

“Will somebody get in here and do something? Anything!” Tabby yelled.

“Jesus, Tab. Take it easy,” Howard said, as he glanced over his shoulder, careful not to miss a play. “Go upstairs. I'll take care of things at intermission.”

Howard turned his attention back to the game. Paul's gaze never altered or moved off of the Gameboy during the entire conversation and Danny acted as if he hadn't heard a single word.

Enough. Tabby stood in the middle of her kitchen, closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and released the burn in her stomach that had been growing inside of her all day, all month, all fourteen years.

Her scream, like a low howl, increased in pitch. It became painful to her own ears. Like a grenade, the television exploded in front of Howard as he dove behind the couch and covered his head. Danny ducked under the cushions as sparks filled the living room like a Fourth of July fireworks show. The Gameboy melted in Paul's hand. The melted plastic dripped in between his fingers. He dropped it immediately and covered his ears. The scream got louder and more destructive. The roof of the house shook violently as cracks snaked down the ceiling, along the walls, and into the ground. The floor in the

middle of the house split in two as the carpeting and concrete frayed apart like the skin of an onion. The foundation split in half as Tabby released her Banshee yell. She was on one side of the broken foundation, dirty dishes crashing around her, while her husband and kids were on the other, huddled together, stunned by their mother's outburst.

And then it was quiet. Tabby heard nothing but the soft hum of the hockey announcer over the television saying *what a play. I don't think I've seen anything like that in a long time, Ken*. She sat cross-legged, in the middle of her kitchen, head down. The scream had felt good. Real good. Her arms were still shaking, but the burn in her chest was finally receding back into the pit of her stomach.

"Boys, go upstairs and clean your room," Howard said, his voice flat and nervous.

"Mom, are you okay?" Danny asked.

"She'll be fine," Howard said. "Just go clean your room."

Tabby let out a small laugh. "I already cleaned their room today, Howard."

Danny and Paul walked up the stairs. "Are you okay?" Howard asked. "I don't really know what to say."

Tabby walked past Howard to the stairs. "How about cleaning the kitchen? It would be a nice start."

Without a word, Howard picked up a plate and took it to the sink.

"I'm going to bed," Tabby said. "Before you come up you may want to think about what you're going to fix the kids for breakfast tomorrow morning."

Tabby waited for a an argument. She received none. All she heard from the top of the stairs was the sound of running water and the clanking of dishes, content that for once she didn't have to do them. Outside her bedroom window, Tabby looked into the



backyard. The ragged tree branches swayed and she wondered if they were as desperate as she was for the cold to snap and warmth and color to return to the world.

The train was on its way, Tabby thought. She knew the powerful locomotive had already left the station, destination: her backyard. Only this time, she wondered if it would finally stop. She wondered if it would at least slow down, give her a chance to catch up, give her a chance to hop into an empty car and see where it would take her. Or better yet, maybe it would bypass her house all together and she could enjoy the silence of an early morning.

Tabby got into bed, feeling a little warmer than usual under her thick comforter. She leaned over and turned the alarm clock to 'off.' I'm going to sleep in tomorrow, Tabby thought. Howard can get himself off to work for a change. It was the most comforting thought that she'd had all day.

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