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TYNE DARLING: A NOVEL

by

Tommy Vollman

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

TYNE DARLING: A NOVEL

by

Tommy Vollman

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015
Under the Supervision of Professor George Clark

Tyne Darling spent most of his youth dreaming about the saints. They came 15 to a pack with a single stick of stale, pink bubble gum. Their posters hung on his walls, and their pictures—cut from the *Sports Illustrated* magazines he got from his uncle—were tacked to his cork board and taped above his desk. His saints were Hank Aaron and Oscar Gamble, Carlton Fisk and Tom Seaver. His saints had rocket arms and sweet, smooth swings. They played a game that existed out of time on a sacred square within a circle. His saints were baseball players.

Now, as he grapples with the tentacles of adulthood—what it means to be a father and a partner—he works to unravel the tangled threads of his past and come to terms with his present and future circumstances. He gazes back at mistakes and missed opportunities, cuts through a rambling lack of self-belief, and reaches deep into the marrow of his sprawling ambitions, as he attempts to destroy his *vāsanā*—inclinations that were formed from past perceptions, experiences, and impressions—and come to terms with what it might be like to actually start anew. What he finds in his rearview mirror, though, are the same kinds of things that are just beyond his windshield. Then, his friend is killed—suddenly and grotesquely—in the remote desert of Syria. Tyne Darling leans on the saints of his youth—on the stories and myths of baseball—and upon the memory and threads of connection left by his departed friend, as well as upon his fami-

ly—his partner, Emma, and son, Cass—as he discovers who he was, who he is, and possibly, who he will be.

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FAST-FORWARD
TRACK ONE: THE WEIGHT OF ENDLESS POSSIBILITY

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 2, 2016
LOCATION: NEW YORK, NEW YORK
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: MANHATTAN, MIDTOWN

Tyne Darling stood near the corner of 42nd and Sixth, his back to the park. He teetered on the edge of the curb. Water streamed through the gutter. The city was a ghost as silver sheets of rain pushed everything and anything out of Midtown, down, down, through the Sound, and farther away into the sea. He hoped, somehow, that the ghosts wouldn't find him again.

Tyne's mom had a refrain. *Things just kind of have a way of working out for this family.* It was her go-to. Over the years, that phrase rang more and more hollow. It was empty—riddled with the inconsistencies and disconnection that defined his Dad, Mom, and younger brother.

There, amongst the traffic and rain, Tyne Darling felt different. And that was what made him worry. He worried about the ghosts. He was afraid they'd come back. He was terrified by the precarious and seemingly temporary state of the present moment.

PLAY
TRACK ONE: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: AUGUST 18, 2014
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING, WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, ROOM C262, JOSH GIBSON, TED WILLIAMS

I've scaffolded my entire existence around a gaggle of ghosts. The scaffold, itself, is complicated, multi-tiered, and as deceptive as anything M.C. Escher ever dreamed up. But the scaffold isn't the problem. The problem is the ghosts. Of course, they're not real ghosts. I'm not crazy. I call them *ghosts* because nothing else quite fits. They're actually threads of generational memory. They're *vāsanā*: pieces of present consciousness formed from past experiences—experiences that I've had, as well as experiences that were modeled. They're my habits, my dispositions, my behavioral patterns. And, they're far more contrived than the scaffold ever could be.

These *vāsanā* are a problem because I'm not entirely conscious of them. They seem to come out of nowhere. But, they're not unconscious—not quite. My *vāsanā* are ghosts. I can't see them; they just seem to haunt my conscious mind. My patterns are their cassettes—outdated and clunky as hell. The choices I make trigger similar behaviors in the future. The ghosts play their cassettes endlessly—loudly—starting and stopping wherever and whenever they like. The cassettes, themselves, are static because they're already recorded, but they change according to when, where, how, and why they're played. Most of the cassettes contain similar tracks—ones with swollen choruses and overloaded verses that claim that there's something wrong with me.

As near as I can tell, the ghosts are using the cassettes to cover something. The recordings fill up space. The ghosts are always busy. They *PLAY, PAUSE, REWIND, FAST-FORWARD*, over and over and over again.

The ghosts and their cassettes have offered me—almost as far back as I can remember—a sense of safety and familiarity. They shield me from vulnerability and insecurity. But, if they stay, I'm afraid they might ruin everything. If they go, I'm afraid that I might ruin everything.

I think about this at my desk in room 262 of the C-Building on the downtown campus of Wisconsin State University. My name, *Tyne Darling*, is embossed on a blue, plastic name plate screwed partially into the painted cinderblock outside the door. The school year begins next week, officially. I'm here now for meetings and other events I can't quite describe. I'm scheduled to teach five classes this semester: a creative writing section, an American lit seminar, and three composition courses.

My mind isn't here, though. The summer's been hard for Emma, my wife. I've been particularly inclined these last few months to recycle old habits, to consent to the ghosts and their cassettes. The cost has been my relationship with Emma. It's also taken a toll on our three year-old son, Cass.

Outside my office windows, a handful of middle-school kids are playing a game of baseball. They don't have real bases, and they've only got a single, beaten, aluminum bat. They're in street clothes, and they've arranged the field around the college's landscape: the corner of the parking lot is first, an anorexic silver maple second, the bend in the concrete path third, and home is someone's faded, red backpack. They're arguing about a ground-rule double and the two tallest kids are too close to each other, one with the bat in his hand. But just as I pick up the phone to call campus police, they abandon the argument and the next batter—a short kid with a flat face—steps to the plate. Before he digs in, he yells, “Hey, Williams, Gibson, will you two pay attention? Jesus.”

I watch as two kids on the third-base side of the makeshift diamond pop their heads around to the batter. I assume they're Williams and Gibson, though I'm not sure which is which. They were watching a dump truck angle itself around a stalled sedan. The dump truck took the curb too fast and nearly lost its load.

And in that moment, the ghosts pick up, and I suddenly recall an argument—a seemingly endless argument that raged summer after summer out on our sandlot. *Who was a better natural hitter, Ted Williams or Josh Gibson?*

REWIND
TRACK ONE: PUNK ROCK DREAMS

TRACK RECORDED: AUGUST 2, 1983
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: RANDALL ALLEN, JOSH GIBSON, TED WILLIAMS

The Gibson-Williams argument was a doomed enterprise, but we kept after it, year-in, year-out, under the crushing weight of midwestern humidity. The neighborhood kids and I made a baseball field in the vacant lot next to my house. We cut the grass short, which then turned brown and grew stiff as fish bones left to dry on a dock. We turned over the dirt, made base paths, and built a sort-of pitcher's mound. Our games spanned the course of days, sometimes weeks. We chose sides in June when school was done, and those teams held until fall. Kids went on vacation, went to camp, or sometimes broke arms or ankles. We held their spaces, but never, ever reshuffled teams. Once they were picked, they stayed.

Our summer days revolved, three outs at a time, and as we played, we talked baseball. We raised questions, thought about the greats and the new moderns. Our answers were speculations, our arguments, the flawed ones of twelve year-olds. For three days, each summer, our games paused to honor the All-Star break.

One argument ruled them all, though. It was the Gibson-Williams argument. We wondered, *Who was a better natural hitter, Ted Williams or Josh Gibson?* For years, we compared stats, argued, got offended, and contradicted ourselves. Every other discussion seemed to somehow resolve itself. This one, though, never did.

"They played in two different universes," Randall Allen finally said one day. "Two different universes." He was digging in, his back hand up for time even though there were no umpires. "You can't even do it," he added as he gripped the bat with both hands and made tiny,

twisted loops with its barrel in anticipation of the pitch. “Nobody can compare two different universes,” he said and spit. “No way.”

PAUSE

I looked at them endlessly. I read them, studied them. I spent most of my time looking at their backs—stats, facts, figures, hometowns, heights and weights. Sometimes the cards—especially the late-seventies, early-eighties Topps—would have these little cartoons that gave some trivia. Those, I loved.

It wasn't like I set out to memorize them, but eventually, I would. I read them over and over, so many times. I learned their numbers and faces, positions and uniforms. Those boxes and boxes of baseball cards were my access to a world bigger than me. They proved something existed outside of me, something important.

Rainy days were the best. I'd bury myself in my stacks, sorting reading, dividing, deciding. Most nights, in bed, I'd clutch a flashlight and read them some more. I only did this with my favorites: Seaver, Fisk, Nolan Ryan, Will Clark, Oscar Gamble, Mattingly, Pena, and Daryl Strawberry. Sometimes, though, I'd just look at the commons: Brian Downing, Jeff Byrd, Hal McRae, Buck Martinez.

Maybe it was just a way to stay awake. Maybe it was a need to know—to have and hold facts and stats that had little actual value. Maybe it offered comfort. Maybe it simplified things and made it easier for me to understand the world outside versus the world inside—the one inside me, inside my head. Maybe I just looked at them because they were there. Maybe, it's not important why I did it. Maybe, it was enough to know that I did it and it made me feel better, made me feel okay. What I didn't know then was that I was okay. I was always okay.

PLAY
TRACK TWO: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: AUGUST 19, 2014
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: EMMA DARLING, PARIS, FRANCE, TROCADERO, CHRISTIAN DIOR, PARIS
FASHION WEEK, CASS DARLING, DREES LAZURE, DENIS ST. MIGUEL,
DOMINIQUE FERRER

I watch Emma now, with Cass. They're in the living room and time is not on our side. It's early—early for us—and Cass isn't quite dressed and definitely not ready. Neither am I, really.

Emma's relaxed, though, and she's talking to Cass about school. He's got another long day ahead of him at the daycare and he knows it.

“But, Mama,” he says, his voice wrenched tight with tears and protests, “it's too long at the WSU school.” He's crouched now, between the ottoman and sectional. “It's too long,” he repeats. “And I don't want to go. No, thank you. No. Please. Not to WSU school.”

He's not exactly screaming, but he's close. Emma and I have another round of meetings today, the same as the day before, so Cass will be in the daycare from 8:30 until about 5. This type of thing, though, is the new normal for most kids—for most American kids. I'm not sure how anyone manages.

Emma's voice is slow and patient as she explains to Cass that we'll come get him as soon as we can.

“It's only today,” Emma says. “Tomorrow and Friday, there's no school.”

But he's not buying it.

“But, but, no. I don't want to. Please,” he replies. Tears fall freely, now.

Emma gazes at me.

“Is there something wrong at WSU school?” I ask.

Cass nods.

“What is it, Mister?” Emma asks.

He shakes her off.

Both of us are next to him, kneeling, his t-shirt only partially on. It hangs around his neck like a cowl, the arm holes empty. His chest and belly are exposed and they heave with his breaths and sobs.

“Cass?” Emma repeats. “What’s wrong, honey? You can tell us.”

Cass, whose stare has been buried in the floor, gathers himself and looks up at us. “It’s just that,” he replies softly and with a tone that makes me think that somehow, during the night, the corners of his mouth got glued together, “I’m sad.” He wipes the tears from his cheeks. “I get sad there at WSU school without you.” His little fingers tug at the waistband of his shorts. “I wish you both could be there with me at WSU school. Can you be there, please?”

I met Emma in college, in a poetry class. It sounds trite, but it wasn’t. She was tall with straight-blond hair and legs that just kept on going, forever and ever. I think I pretty much fell for her right away. There was just something about her.

Maybe, it was the fact that she was smarter than me—by a ton. Also, she was one of those people who seemed to have had their shit together from day one. Emma worked hard at it, though. She worked hard to get her shit together and harder, still, to keep it there. We got married in 2002—in Paris.

We’d joked about our wedding for a few years. Neither she, nor I wanted the traditional thing. We contacted some planners over there and pieced the whole thing together like pros. The

morning of the wedding, we bounced around the city to take pictures. We started in the Tuileries, then headed to Invalides. After that, we made for Trocadero.

It was early March and right in the middle of Paris Fashion Week. The whole city was a patchwork of thick, rectangular blocks of sunlight. Christian Dior had a massive tent spread over the top of the Trocadero fountain. The red carpet stretched right off of the Avenue des Nations Unies. We probably weren't supposed to, but I told Drees, our driver, to pull as close to Trocadero as he could. Emma had her wedding dress on and so the closer, the better. He pulled right in front of the Dior tent. He pulled pretty much smack up to the end of the red carpet. Denis, one of the planners, was with us. He rode shotgun in the Mercedes limousine.

The front of the Dior tent was crowded with photographers who were busy snapping shots of the arriving guests, models, and VIPs—folks headed inside the Dior show—inside the giant, white tent. There had to have been about 50 or 60 of them there, and they'd grouped themselves tightly together near the top of the phalanx-part of the Trocadero fountain, at the base of the red carpet. There was a walkway behind them that led up a short flight of steps and then down a sort-of catwalk over the water, into the tent. To call it a tent isn't exactly accurate. It looked kind of like an upside-down wedding cake—one made of canvas and what reminded meow parachute streamers. I didn't have any idea what they actually were, and all I knew about them was that they danced in the light breeze and spread their amazing whiteness all over the steady, blue windshield of a sky.

I stepped out of the car on the driver's side, right into the Avenue. I was the first one out of the car. There was no traffic, so I wasn't that big of an asshole. My intention was to walk around and open Emma's door and help her out. As I strolled around the back of the car, my

steps punctuated by the snap of high-speed shutters, digital beeps, and the muted sound of film being advanced by take-up spools. I found myself thinking about magic tricks and remote-control race cars.

Denis beat me to Emma's door and opened it. She took his hand, then mine, and stepped out. Immediately—as if cued—the swarm of photographers began madly snapping photos of Emma in her dress. She played it cool and smiled. She gave them a slight wave and stood there and posed, but not too much. Nothing, with Emma, was ever over-done. She had an innate sense of balance. She always seemed to be able to feel how much was enough, and never really pushed anything past its limits.

The shutters continued to click as she and I and Denis walked away from the red carpet. Dominique—our wedding photographer—stayed a few steps behind us. It was like Emma had rehearsed the moment. But, of course, she hadn't.

And that's how she was—almost always. I envied her, too. But not in a jealous sense. I wasn't jealous of Emma. That wouldn't have worked. I envied her in the sense that I wanted to be like her. For me, being around her was like standing in the first real sun of the spring. I felt warm and loved and patiently hopeful. When I let them, most of my anxieties melted away when I was near Emma. When I let them, the ghosts and their cassettes were mostly silent around Emma. I think they were too busy studying her to carry on.

PLAY
TRACK ONE: SUMMER KISS

TRACK RECORDED: AUGUST 20-21, 2014
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: JAMES FOLEY, EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING, MICAH SCHNABEL,
HOPE, LOVE, THEODORE BLACK

The news arrived as a text message. Emma, Cass, and I were crowded together on a park bench. Cass's hair was still wet and tangled from the giant fountain and the hasty way I'd worked to dry it under the bathroom blower. Jimmy had been murdered in a desert worlds away.

Cass was lost in his first-ever root beer float, and I felt something inside me shatter. Something small but important. Something I didn't know I needed, but now could barely breathe without.

That morning—hours before I got the news about Jimmy—Cass hooked a tape measure to the waistband of his shorts and clipped a black Sharpie to his t-shirt collar, the same as me. He tucked his toy cell phone into his underpants and he and I went outside. For about 15 minutes, he helped me drill holes. Cass wrapped his tiny hand around mine as I squeezed the trigger and sent the bit into board after board.

I remember being so excited to help my dad with projects. I'd ask him, *Are we being workmen, Daddy?*

Yep, pal, we are, he'd answer.

Things never really worked out with those projects, though. I'm not exactly sure what I expected. I was only a kid. A little one.

Hey, Sport, Dad would say, *you wanna help me build Hoppy's new cage?*

Of course I did. I always did. But I was always on the outside looking in.

One time, I hit Dad in the head with a hammer. Mom tells that story all the time.

Well, your Dad was putting cement in your digging space, she says.

But that wasn't it. I hit him because he was mostly never present enough to hold onto.

That morning, before I heard about Jimmy, my son and I drilled holes and screwed boards to the front porch. Suddenly, he decided that he wanted to—needed to—write on the boards.

"You want to mark them?" I asked.

"Uh-huh," he answered.

He had on these small, orange goggles that fogged with his exhales. They made him look like an astronaut.

"Remember, though," I said, "that's a tall-person marker--" He raised his face to mine.

"So you can only mark on the boards, not on your arms or Papa's arms or the driveway or anything else, okay?"

"Okay," he replied. "I'll mark them for you, Papa, so you know where to drill."

I watched him unhitch the Sharpie from his collar, carefully uncap it, then trace short, vertical marks followed by long, horizontal lines along the freshly-painted one-by-twos. At first, I wanted to stop him—to tell him I'd just painted them and that he could mark the other ones, the scrap pieces. But I didn't. His marks were lovely.

"Papa," he said excitedly, "my marks are ready for you."

"Yes, they are," I laughed. "Thank you, mister. That's super helpful."

"Ready for the next one, Papa?" he asked.

"Most definitely," I replied.

And so it continued.

After about 20 minutes, I'd mounted 12 boards, all with squiggly, broken, black lines across their fronts. We stopped in order to bike to an appointment my wife had a few blocks away.

"But what about the project?" Cass asked as we readied ourselves for the short ride. Then, he cried. "I'm sad, Papa."

He wanted to finish—to stay at home and continue our work. I smiled. "It'll be here when we get back."

"But Papa," he countered, "I love working with you."

Finally, he agreed. "Okay," he said as I buckled him into the bike trailer's belt harness. "When we get home. After Mommy's appointment." He adjusted his Spider-Man helmet. "You promise, Papa?"

"Yes, Mister, I do."

After the appointment, the single-sentence text message arrived.

Jimmy had been missing for a couple years. He'd been abducted in Syria. We all held out hope that he'd get out. Sometimes those hopes shrank. Sometimes they almost disappeared completely. But everyone held fast to the idea that we'd see him again, have beers, talk shit, and make noise.

But that wouldn't be the case.

When we got home, I kept my promise to Cass. We worked on the project, but my head swam with the news of Jimmy, and my son was exhausted. We mounted a few boards, then stopped for dinner. Afterwards, my wife put Cass to bed, and I went back outside to finish. I plugged in a pair of flood lights, caulked and sanded the seams. My son's marks made me smile.

Then I thought about my friend; I thought about Jimmy. I couldn't even begin to imagine what he'd been through, where he'd been held, or what he'd thought about for the past two years when he closed his eyes.

When my wife and I found out we were pregnant, I didn't tell my parents right away. When I finally did, I was in the car. My mom gushed when I delivered the news. When my dad got on the line, he thanked me for believing in the future.

My son turned three six months ago. Neither one of my parents have ever met him.

That night, after the news about Jimmy, I dipped my brush into the half-empty gallon of gibraltar grey and ran a few strokes over my son's marks. They disappeared. Each of them were gone, as if they never even existed. They'd been a testimony, of sorts, to my son's joy. He'd been lost in that moment, free from any attachment except the notions he'd invented. And I painted over them.

I dropped my brush and began to sob. Our street was quiet and empty, the houses mostly dark at a quarter after ten. I cried and cried and then finally made my way inside. I left everything on the lawn just as it was. Tears and snot gathered on my cheeks and upper lip. I could barely say my wife's name as I collapsed on the couch. The TV, which timed-out on the channel guide, threw a blue glare across the room. I looked at my arms—at my tattoos—little black lines that skated across the winter white of my skin. My eyes clouded. "Jimmy," I finally spat, "so fucking sad."

My wife moved toward me. I told her how I painted over Cass' marks. I told her how happy they'd made me, how fragile they'd been. I said it was too much. I sobbed and shook, so

confused. I said I don't know how both things could be—how my son's marks and what happened to Jimmy could both exist.

"You're so brave," Emma said, "for feeling this. For holding that space." She paused. I wiped my nose. It was the first time in about a half-hour that I'd been able to pull my hands away from my eyes. "But," my wife continued, "you can't wire those things together. Go back to that bench in the park, at the mall. Feel sad for Jimmy, but don't bring this other stuff to it."

I nodded. She was right.

I cried more and we talked on. My heart hurt; it just seemed to continue to break, over and over and over again. And the tears came in waves. Somehow, though, I felt lighter. Not better, but cleaner.

"But," I stammered, "I know it sounds idealistic or trite or whatever, but I really want to live in a world where I don't have to explain this to Cass. Somewhere where it doesn't exist. Where the joy and hope and love that traced those marks never, ever goes away. Never gets tempered. I want us to be better." I was sweating pretty badly. "All of us."

Emma smiled and hugged me.

"Because I can't explain it to him," I continued. "I can't do it." I paused to wipe my face again. "There's just no explanation. None," I added.

"You're right," Emma replied, "there isn't one." She moved even closer. "That's what we carry, I guess." She paused—thought about it. "What we all carry, more or less," she added.

"I know, I know. But I wish. I just fucking wish."

Tears drowned my words again. I thought about my Dad and his idea of the future.

Back when it happened, I'd told my wife what he said about us being pregnant.

"What?" she'd puzzled. "What in the hell does that even mean?"

At the time, I shrugged.

I told my therapist about it, too. He laughed. He's a pretty slight man, but his laugh is rich. "Oh my," he said, "that's amazing. In fact," he added, "I'm going to use that, if it's okay--and I hope it is." He shifted in his wide, leather chair. "Geez. The future. Holy smoke." He shook his head and brushed the mop of shoulder-length, grayish-blond hair from his face. His laugh grabbed him again. "Who says that? I mean, come on."

I reminded my wife of what my Dad said, again, there in the living room. I tried to tell her why it echoed with me now, with Jimmy's death. "If I had a nickel," I told her, "for every time my Dad told me that Albert Einstein said the war after the next would be fought with sticks and stones--" I shook my head. "Fuck."

My wife's face crumpled. "Jesus."

"Yeah," I continued, "that's where it comes from—how it started. He told us all the time—me and my brothers—that it'd be up to us to figure things out. He said that he'd be dead and we needed to pay attention, to know what was happening."

"So how does that tie to the future thing--believing the future?" she asked.

"Because" I replied, "here I am at 12 or 14 or whatever and my dad's telling me how screwed up things are--how dangerous and hopeless the world is and then fast forward almost 30 years when things are even more fucked and I'm telling him we're having a kid—that we're bringing another soul into this mess—the one he's been obsessed and afraid of for so goddamned long. That's what he meant—thanks for believing so much in the fact that the world's not gonna

go and fuck itself to death in the next decade or so that you—that we—would feel confident enough to have a baby and be complicit in bringing him into this craziness."

That night, I slept like shit and dreamed that I kept getting punched right in the mouth. I woke up too early, shifty and in a mood. I thought about the fact that hope is a motherfucking juggernaut. And I thought about how my wife is right: it's important not to get things wired wrong. What wires together does, in fact, fire together. We are our own experience, but we are equally other peoples' experience.

My friend, Micah, has tattoos on his fingers. The ink spells out HOPE when he closes his right hand, LOVE when squeezes his left. I think about that ink a lot these days. It helps me hold a space. It hurts to keep my heart open and be honest and present for my son. Sometimes, the hurt's bigger than me, more than I can handle or even express. Jimmy was special—a bright star in the suffocating darkness of hatred and hopelessness. He embodied conviction, and he won't be lost. I'll always see him with a wide, contagious smile cracked across his face and that goddamned yellow Colorado Buffaloes knit helmet-hat on his head. He was there to make things better or at least try because that's so fucking important. Jimmy did what he needed to, the best way he could. That's hope. That's love.

PAUSE

In 1932, New York Yankees shortstop, Joe Sewell, struck-out only three times in a remarkable 503 at-bats. Two years earlier, in 1930, while Sewell was with the Cleveland Indians, he came to the plate 353 times and recorded only three strike-outs. Two of those 1930 strike-outs occurred in a single game.

PLAY
TRACK TWO: SUMMER KISS

TRACK RECORDED: AUGUST 26, 2014
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: JAMES FOLEY, EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING, MILWAUKEE ATHLETIC CLUB, MILWAUKEE BRAVES, WARREN SPAHN, BILLY SAIN, HENRY AARON, TED WILLIAMS, WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, THEODORE BLACK

A few days after Jimmy died, I went downtown for a meeting. Some publisher had flown a bunch of book reps to Milwaukee to pitch a new digital platform. I drew the short straw and had to go as the department's mouthpiece. The publishers must've thought that we'd be more inclined to purchase the product if they bought us lunch. They pulled out the stops, for some reason, and hosted the presentation/pitch at the Milwaukee Athletic Club. They tucked us all—me and the other short-straw holders from other Liberal Arts & Sciences departments into a second-floor conference room that smelled like pasta primavera.

In the conference room, on the wall opposite me was a picture of a young Henry Aaron. He was thin in the framed photo, but his muscles bulged under his button-front Milwaukee Braves jersey. They were sinewy—the kind of muscles someone gets when they're not just strong, but also agile—functional. Aaron looked young in the photo, real young. He was probably fresh from the Negro Leagues, a nobody prospect. But that wasn't how he looked in the picture. In that picture, he was already a Hall-of-Famer. It oozed from him—out of each and every pore. There was a cool, confident look in his eye. He just had that presence, the one that let everybody know that he knew that he had it all licked.

The photo was a black-and-white and Hammerin' Hank was throwing. I'd never seen a picture of him before that didn't show him hitting or rounding the bases after he'd jacked a homer. The photo must've been taken somewhere in Florida. Live oaks and cypresses filled out

the background, arm-in-arm with clogs of Spanish moss that dangled in front of strange, boxy, white-washed dormitories.

My heels sat heavy on the floor, my feet firm on parquet. The waiters wore bowties; they zipped in and out and filled coffee urns. They replenished cookie trays.

As I sat and listened, it suddenly became clear to me that I had to be more careful with my words. These people weren't careful at all. For the better part of the hour, they'd discussed how in the past they'd only had a twenty-percent success rate. But now, they said, the reports showed that the rates had doubled. I thought, *If you've been going one-for-five and then all of a sudden it's two-for-five, should you be proud?* But that was what was happening. They exuded a sort of pride—a pride from going two-for-five simply because before, they'd been only one-for-five. I listened closely to that pride as it leaked from the edges of their words. I noticed that it wasn't exactly pride. It was something else—something passed off as pride, something pitched to sound like pride. But, it wasn't pride.

They talked a lot and I got bored, so I thought about what it meant to go two-for-five and pretend to be proud of it simply because before, it'd only been one-for-five. I thought about Ted Williams—arguably the greatest hitter of all-time—who was the last player to hit over .400 in a season. In 1941, Williams hit .406. And, though .406 is remarkable, it's just a touch better than two-for-five. In business and everything besides baseball two-for-five is failure—forty percent.

Of course, Ted Williams said that he didn't care what people thought of him because all he ever wanted was for people to say that he was the greatest hitter of all-time.

Ted Williams was a bit of an asshole. I idolized him, accidentally, as a kid. I had a flat swing. Dad told me it was almost perfect. He said it was smooth and flat like Ted Williams'. Plus, I was left-handed just like the Splendid Splinter.

When I was out of tee-ball, our uniforms finally had numbers rather than sponsors on their backs. I got to pick mine first since Dad was the coach. I struggled. I wondered about number nine, thirteen, number three. Dad told me that Ted Williams was number seven, so I chose 7. A couple years later, after I'd worn 7 several seasons in a row, I saw a clip of Ted Williams. He was at the plate at Fenway Park, no helmet, and he swatted an Eephus pitch over the right-field fence. I watched as he jogged to first, the number 9 light as a sail on his back. In the clip, Williams was butter-smooth and number 9. Flat and sweet and number 9. Dad talked a lot about things he didn't know anything about. He should have been more careful with his words.

I thought about all the lies I'd told. Little ones, big ones, lies about things that mattered and things that didn't. I lied a lot; I lied and then I defended it. But, I'd tried to take responsibility. Responsibility, though, was fucking heavy. Sometimes, I was pretty sure it would crush me.

Emma said taking responsibility should make me feel better. But it didn't. I wondered why I didn't feel better. I at least should've felt lighter.

But then I thought about how I was almost two-for-five. I used to be one-for-five and two-for-five was much better. The cassettes played and the lyrics sang, *Look at what it used to be. Now, it's so much better*. The ghosts urged me on and I pretended that two-for-five was better, because it was. It was twice as good. I pretended it was okay. And, I told myself it made me feel better. I told myself it made me feel lighter. But two-for-five was still failure unless I was Ted Williams, and Ted Williams was an asshole.

REWIND
TRACK TWO: PUNK ROCK DREAMS

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 4, 1991
LOCATION: CINCINNATI, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: BRAD AMENT, BRIAN ROLLIN, CHAD HOLZ, CHRIS ABBER, SCHNEIDER'S
INDOOR BASEBALL COMPLEX

The fall tugged at the remaining strands of summer. Outside in the parking lot, a delicate weave of sunlight loosened and gave way to the subtle pull of autumn. Inside, in the cage as well as everywhere else, the curveball was killing me. It was destroying any chance I had of being drafted.

I should have been at home, studying or something. Instead, I was at Schneider's—at the batting cages—desperately trying to figure out a way to regularly hit a fucking curveball. It just shouldn't have been this hard, I thought. People pounded the shit out of curves all the time.

Brad Ament was at the pitching machine. He tried like hell to sort the levels and get just the right snap. We had four, five-gallon buckets of rubber-coated Rawlings baseballs. It had to be a real breaker—a real curveball—not some batting cage bullshit. Bullshit wouldn't work. Bullshit wouldn't get me signed. Bullshit wouldn't get me a contract. It wouldn't get me where I needed to be. Bullshit wouldn't cut it.

"A little more, I think," I yelled to Ament. My voice arched over the tink-tink-tink of Eastons everywhere. Brian Rollin was there, a few cages away. He had an offer from the Braves at Rookie League. And Chad Holz, in the cage next to Rollin, had one, too. His was with the Tigers—single-A. Then, there was Chris Abber, who was just leaving as Brad Ament and I arrived. Abber had inked a Dodgers deal a week ago. He was headed to Vero Beach for a short layover at single-A, then on to San Antonio to run with the double-A boys, if everything worked out. Those

dudes had made it. Almost. They were big leaguers, all of them. And, they all could handle a curve. Abber was the best. His looping, lazy swing just flicked it to left almost every time.

"Just look at the fingers," Abber had said when I talked to him about it a few weeks earlier. "The spin's there even when it isn't. You'll see it," he continued, "just look." His smile was extra-large and infectious. "But," he warned, "you gotta really look. None of that Friday-Saturday night shit. You can't just settle for what's out and easy. You gotta teach yourself to look. To see it before it's there. Then," he added, his smile even wider, "just slap that fucker. Swat it and love that little pop."

Ament set the rig just right. He shook his head in the same slow manner each time I stepped away from the pitch when I should have stepped in to it. His dad had been an Astro, a Pilot, and then, after the move, a Milwaukee Brewer. Brad was a great pitcher. His curve killed power-hitters and he could throw a split-finger that went about 59 feet. When it was on, hitters would corkscrew themselves into the dirt. His eye was relentless, and I trusted him with my swing. I trusted him more than just about anyone.

He'd graduated a half-dozen years earlier and had gone on to pitch at Mississippi State before a Tommy John ended what was left of his career. I'd met him through Abber and Rollin, and Rollin had talked to him about my curveball issues. Ament called me a few days later and said he thought he could help. After this many sessions, though, I was pretty certain he thought differently. Still, we'd met at Schneider's for the past six weeks. Little, if anything, had changed. Fastballs were nothing. Change-ups, sliders, screwballs, whatever. I could go opposite field, pull, or push it middle and make the most of my speed. Curveballs, though, crushed me. Every time.

“I mean,” Ament finally sputtered as he walked toward me, “it’s better, but something still ain’t right.” The machine’s red light idled sixty feet-six inches away. Ament looked down toward Rollin, his swing platter-flat and quick as a rattlesnake. “It’s in the step, I think. You’re just pulling your front shoulder.” He opened his shoulder in a sort of mock swing. “And that’s wrecking the whole thing. Your head’s out, hips open, there’s no power there, anyway.” He spat and cleared his throat. “I mean, you gotta be able to either drive it opposite field, or,” he continued, “rock it if it hangs. That’s the money ball. Half the time, it’ll be there, and that’s where you can make it—all of it,” he smiled. “Now, c’mon,” he said and turned back toward the machine, “let’s figure this thing out, once and for all.” He moved back again behind the tripod. “Now,” he yelled, a toothpick stuck in the corner of his mouth, “just think about stepping right on the ball—step into the pitch, right on the fucker. Find the angle and pound it.”

We emptied the buckets. My arms were sore as hell and I was soaked when we finally finished. My ability to get ahold of the curve, though, was not much better than before.

“Tyne?” Ament asked, as we packed up. “How old are you, again?”

“Seventeen,” I answered, puzzled. “Why?”

“Because if anyone needs a beer, it’s you.” He shook his head in that special Ament way—the same as his brother did and the same as his dad—and smiled. “Guess we’ll have to wait.” His eyes leveled and met mine. “Sure as fuck wouldn’t help you hit that goddamned pitch, anyway,” he chided.

I laughed, but he was right. I was getting eaten up and the clock was ticking. He knew the score and the stakes better than just about anyone. If it was going to happen, it had to happen soon. Otherwise, baseball had better just be a hobby.

PAUSE

In 2003, physicist Karl Borg and a company of researchers completed a study at the Royal Institute of Technology at Stockholm that contended that if a curveball (which spins counter-clockwise when delivered on Earth) was thrown on the surface of Mars, it would move clockwise and curve to the right. Their predictions made it behave like a slider, a mirror-image of the pitch's behavior here on Earth. Borg and his colleagues studied magnus force, a notion that contends that a spinning object such as a curveball or slider creates a whirlpool of air to one side or the other as it moves through space and time. The whirlpool opposes oncoming wind, and as a result, pushes the object as it spins, one way or another. Because of Mars' relative gravity and air composition, the pitch would behave in an opposite way to the intuition of hitters on Earth. Due to Mars' thin atmosphere, the ball would actually curve *away* from its spin. Borg and company found that molecules would travel a distance that is great than the diameter of a baseball before colliding with one another. As a result, a larger number of molecules would collide with the baseball's front surface than its rear surface—an angle that complimented the spin. These colliding molecules behaved in such a manner as to ricochet off of the surface—the front surface of the ball—as it spun. Borg reported that as a result of the Law of Conservation of Momentum, this ricochet and deflection of molecules would push the ball in the opposite direction—a direction that would move away from its spin and defy the axioms of Earth-bound physics.

PLAY
TRACK THREE: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 19, 2014
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING

It's been almost a year since Emma and I sat in that room—the one with the big table and the awful chairs. I wanted to sit right next to her, but I couldn't because the table was round and it was pushed against the wall. If I'd have moved it away from the wall, then the door wouldn't have opened. I couldn't sit next to Emma, so we just kind of crowded on either side of the section that pressed into the wall and stared at the door. I held her hand. I think we both knew what was coming. I think we both knew what had already happened.

Neither one of us, though, wanted to believe it. What the fuck is a miscarriage, anyway?

I mean, I know what it is, but I'm not sure it's actually believable. I mean, how can something be there one moment, then gone the next—all traces of it erased, not even a memory to remain?

It just doesn't make any goddamned sense. I'm not sure that I'd want it to even if it could. Everyone knows what miscarriage means. But, it's one of those things that's just not safe to think about. I mean, why the hell would anyone think about it if they didn't have to? It's something that everyone knows exists and just hopes that they never have to experience or deal with since there's really no way to actually deal with it. People don't just have miscarriages, they survive them. They're never over, and they're never all right. Miscarriages can't be avoided because there's nothing really to avoid. And to think that anyone, ever, could be prepared for a miscarriage is absurd. No one wants to think about them at all. And mostly, no one does. But still, what's there to think about with a miscarriage? How does a person think about sadness? How

does a person think about the sudden, vast emptiness where something used to be—something that's now gone and won't ever be again?

It's been almost a full year, and as much as I try, there's not really a day that goes by that I don't think about what happened in that room.

I think about how I could feel my heart beat against my Adam's apple. I think about how I couldn't swallow right, and how the noises—the ones that clattered on the tile floor out in the long hallway—rattled underneath the thick, closed door.

I remember how heavy the door looked and how I wondered if it could possibly be opened. I remember how Emma's foot tapped underneath that table. I wasn't sure if it would break, or if it would break something. I remember how I wanted to sweep us away. I wanted to rewind or fast-forward or pause or anything just to get us out of that moment. I remember that I desperately wanted to take us somewhere, anywhere.

REWIND
TRACK ONE: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 21, 2013
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: EMMA DARLING, DR. MICHAEL HART, MATTIS-BETHESDA HOSPITAL, DR.
JACQUELYN WYETH

His eyes were the worst. They barely met ours. When they did, they'd tear away immediately, like we were the fire. All I did was stare at them. And even though he wasn't old—probably younger than Emma or me—they were wrapped in lines that tangled and crossed over themselves. His voice slipped and slid, and both Emma and I leaned into his words. We struggled to make sense of them. We struggled to understand how they might be believable because they weren't. They just couldn't be.

His name tag read *Dr. Mich. G. Hart*, but I don't remember him ever introducing himself. He just knocked lightly and walked in. Then, he just started talking. He started talking as if we knew exactly what he was going to say.

He never used the word *miscarriage*. Even there, in the hospital, no one thought about it. No one dared to utter that awful fucking word.

I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't do that, either. Instead, I sat there numb in that god-awful, wooden chair—the one with the fabric pad on the seat that didn't cushion a goddamned thing. My head filled with a sound that was kind of like the noise that a little kid hears when she holds a sea shell to her ear.

It wasn't the ocean, though, that filled my head. It was perfect white noise—the very absence of sound—that choked out everything and isolated Emma and me there in that room.

“So what are you saying?” Emma finally asked. The words just kind of spilled from her mouth. They weren’t lazy or accidental, but they fell hard on that table top, the way they never would have in normal conversation. “Are you saying that there’s no baby?”

He nodded. Dr. Mich. G. Hart nodded. He probably didn’t shrug, but he may as well have. His eyes were locked on his own hands, which were tightly folded in front of him. They rested gently—nervously—on the laminate table top.

“What I’m saying,” he sputtered, “is that there is no baby. These things happen.”

He said some other things about formation—things that I couldn’t pay attention to. Then, he asked us if we had any questions. Silence filled the space between us. It stretched and then pushed at the walls. I wanted to throttle him. There was no such thing as *fault* in matters like this. But, the manner in which he walked, the way he told us what he did, and then the way he asked us if we had any questions as if he’d just changed the air filter in our car or something, made me want to destroy him.

“I—I—I—need to talk to someone else,” Emma choked.

“You want to speak with someone else?” he replied. “They will tell you the same.”

I could hardly stay in my seat. I squeezed Emma’s hand across the table. “We just want to speak with someone else,” I said. “Can you get someone else—”

“The woman—” Emma said, her voice sharp and dangerous. It could have poked through the walls—clean through—if she let it. “The one we talked to last time,” Emma continued. “Dr. ___”

Emma worked through a curtain of tears to find the name, a name that ran ragged somewhere deep in her mind.

“Dr. Wyeth,” I said. “Is she available? Can you get her?”

“She is,” Dr. Chang replied. “You want to speak with her?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “We want to speak with Dr. Wyeth.”

“Well, let me just finish with what I was saying.”

I cut him off. “No.” My eyes dug into the shallows of his face, scraped the skin off his cheeks. “We need to speak with Dr. Wyeth. Please.”

“Well, she will just tell you—”

“Please,” I repeated. My voice leaked a sort of exasperation. “Please. We want to speak with Dr. Wyeth. Now.”

He stood, awkwardly, then paused. That fraction of a moment lasted forever. I stared up at him. Still, I sat. My hand tightly clutched Emma’s. He made for the door. Then, he stepped back toward us. He’d almost reached the handle when he stepped back. He reached out those same hands that had previously been folded so tightly on the laminate table top. He reached to shake my hand, his eyes locked on Emma.

I waived him off.

“Dr. Wyeth,” I said again. My tone was flat—a bulldozer over ruined earth. “Please.”

PAUSE

Tillie. That would have been her name. That should have been her name, and she'd have been almost five months-old by now. *Tillie*, that would have been her name. I'm still not sure why it isn't.

PLAY
TRACK FOUR: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 23, 2014
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING, LAKE MICHIGAN

We were at Veteran’s Park—Cass, Emma, and I—a few hundred yards from the War Memorial. The lake was a mostly-flat sheet of mercury glass. Cass ran beneath hundreds of kite shadows—dark fissures that spoiled the otherwise perfect, green grass. Cass loved the kite festival. Some girl had painted his face like a lion. The whiskers shot away from the corners of his mouth like fireworks.

"Look," Emma said. The wind played circus tricks with her hair—whipped it over her face. I got all caught up in her eyes. They were flawlessly clean sapphires. "What is it you really want?"

My first answer was bullshit. The second one wasn't half as good. To be honest, I hadn't the slightest idea. I stammered something else. The cassettes rattled; the ghosts got busy making the most of nothing. She ignored them. I wish I could've done the same.

"You can't fix everything that's broken," she continued, "because, look—here's the thing—nothing, not a goddamned thing is really, actually broken." Emma's words were daggers in the stiff wind. "They're only out-of-focus and focus can only possibly come when you're standing where you are—where you actually are."

I suppose, though, I just sort of wanted to know why—to know why doing the best I could was never quite good enough. Maybe I already knew. Maybe it was just the noise, the sound of the cassettes that the ghosts played that allowed me to continue to fool myself. Maybe I wasn't broken.

REWIND
TRACK TWO: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: APRIL 19, 2012
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN,
NOTES/TAGS: PATRICIA BLACK, THEODORE BLACK, McDONALD'S, KYLE BLACK,
ORLANDO REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER, JESSE JACKSON, TONY
FRANKLIN, EARLY VOTING LEGISLATION, WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY

There was a change in the weather and the phone calls stopped. It'd been almost five weeks since I'd talked to my mom or Dad. For awhile, there were texts, but soon those stopped, too. It didn't really matter that much; I'd managed to ignore most of their messages anyway. From the time of the accident until around St. Patrick's Day, voice mails drifted in. If I listened to them at all—and usually I didn't—it would only take about 30 seconds for the shame storm to begin. I never deleted any of the messages. For the most part, I left them untouched. Each time I opened my mailbox, the tiny blue dot mocked me.

Back when the calls did come, I'd shudder off waves of anxiety every time my mom's number flashed on the screen of my cell. Then, the calls switched their display. An *Unknown* identifier appeared, followed by a corresponding voice mail from my mother. After that, calls came from a handful of other area codes. All of them, though, showed the location tag *FL, USA*.

My mom lied all the time. As a kid, I soaked in those lies. They became normal; the truth somewhat relative. She lied at the library, the bank, even at hotels. She lied when she didn't have to, when it didn't matter.

Sometimes, for dinner, she'd cook these tiny pieces of fried chicken, dry as hell and barely two breasts for the four of us. It wasn't that we were poor or anything. We had enough money to have more than enough chicken. It was something else, though, that kept us from having enough chicken. It was something that had been confused, over the years, with control.

They were terrible—the chicken breasts—and coated with Shake ‘n Bake, so my brother and I always wanted sauce. Those afternoons—the ones when the chicken was sure to occupy the stove top by four—we’d roll through the McDonald’s drive-thru some time after 3:00. My mom would skip the speaker and pull right up to the window, which would eventually open.

It would always be some gangly, pimple-faced kid that appeared in the frame, confused and a bit flustered.

“Can I, uh, help you?” he’d choke.

“Yes,” my mom would beam. “I just came through the drive-thru and you forgot my McNugget sauce.” She spoke with the confidence of a life-insurance salesman. I’d be in the back-seat, embarrassed as hell. “It wasn’t in the bag,” she’d follow. “I need three sweet ‘n sour packets.”

She never got BBQ or hot mustard. It was always sweet ‘n sour.

When I was 15 and I worked my first job at that very same McDonald’s, I only ate hot mustard. Sometimes, I’d bring the sweet-n-sour packets home for her, but only if she asked.

I was always so aware of the tick-tick-tick of the Plymouth’s valves as we idled and waited, cutters in the drive-thru line. I’d keep my eyes down and watch the stick shift jiggle.

Each time, though, we’d get the sauce, free and clear. At home, my mom would serve it in a tiny, cut-glass bowl. The packets never came to the table, but their foil tops always seemed to stick to the side of the trashcan liner. I’d see them suspended on the white-plastic bag as I cleaned our plates. When I watched those masked calls idly shake my phone, I took a sort of solace in the fact that, apparently, some things never changed.

But others did. My brother, Kyle, got worse. His lung collapsed and he sped in and out of the intensive care wing of the Orlando Regional Medical Center. I hadn't been to see him—not since well before the accident that left him a quadriplegic, bound to a motorized wheelchair that was tongue-operated, when his tongue worked. Often it didn't.

Updates were tough to come by. My mom, when I used to speak with her, would tell me how well he was doing.

"He's just so fragile, Tyne. But strong."

Then her voice would gain momentum, as if it had the capacity to reshape reality.

"And we're behind him. We all are—your dad and I. And your uncle's been fantastic."

Most of the time, her tone would dip at that point. The words would slow just enough for me to notice. "Someone we can rely on to be there."

A good deal of what she said was hyperbole.

"We're going to talk to his teachers and see about getting him going on some graduate classes."

My brother finished college seven years ago. He spent nine years at three colleges and a technical school to earn an undergraduate degree in microbiology. Before the accident, he worked at a ski and snowboard shop.

"We're just trying to keep pace—moving him, siphoning out his lungs, monitoring the ventilator, checking his oxygen." She'd stammer a bit, at this point, perhaps afraid that with the wrong word—a jumbled phrase or misplaced modifier—her whole world would collapse. "He just needs something. Something to help pull him through."

And so quickly, her resolve would harden.

"There's a whole world out there, so many things we haven't thought of. So many things he can do."

A cool pause would descend, buckled by the weight of eternity.

"People like him do great things. It's just a matter of what he believes. He can be whatever he wants." Again, she'd pick up steam. "And it's really just about what we believe."

At that point, she'd pause. The silence was a desert, but I never filled it.

"He believes what we believe," she'd eventually continue. "And we just need to stay positive."

My dad never said anything about my brother. Not at least out loud. All of his updates arrived via email. I don't think my dad has initiated a single phone call my entire life. His emails read like police incident reports—high on technical detail, low on emotional investment. And they're always too long and ordered. There's never a single detail out of place.

A friend of mine once told me that if I lied, I should be sure to lie big.

"Go for broke, man."

I laughed.

"For real. I'm serious," he followed. "Nobody who ever tells the truth, tells the real story."

I was puzzled.

"Look, what I mean is this. When somebody tells the truth—what actually happened—shit's all jumbled and fucked up. Especially if it's something that really matters. Nobody ever knows what went down during some disaster or tragedy or shit like that."

I made to say something, but didn't.

"Seriously," he pushed. "Haven't you ever watched a fuckin' cop show? 18 witnesses and 18 different stories, all of 'em true." He stared at me and squinted. One of his eyes was green, the other, brown. "Or at least a version of the truth," he added. "But really," he continued, "the truth's messy—all over the place. It's the lies that are ordered, too perfect. If you lie, fucking go for it. Make it messy."

Later, he wrote a story about our conversation.

And stories are important. Especially when they help to get at the truth. So when Tony Franklin told me the story about how he got locked up, I did my best to listen. We were on a march with Jesse Jackson to protest the restrictions applied to Wisconsin's early-voting procedures. Jesse was headed to City Hall. Tony and I weren't.

Tony was a student in my 12:30 pre-college composition and was on parole.

"You voting early?" he asked before we began to walk.

"Nah," I replied. I liked the sound of my ballot as it's cranked through the box.

We crossed 5th Street and the bells on St. John's chimed quarter-after.

"Yeah, T," he said, "It was kinda fucked—I mean—" I shook my head. I spoke freely in class; he could certainly do the same outside of it.

He continued. "Collared for somebody else's dirt."

I pointed and signaled for us to break from the march. It was three blocks back to campus and our class was on the fifth floor of a building with only a slightly reliable set of elevators.

"But see, I had this ticket for an expired license so the cops took me in. Rodney's bag was in the trunk, a bit of weed and enough white for about a dozen eights."

"Fuck," I sighed, "and you didn't know?"

"That he dealt? Shit. That was clockwork. By the time he was 19, he was chopping rocks the size of breath mints."

We walked up a concrete ramp to the college's main building. Tony pulled open the handicapped entrance.

"But," he continued, "I didn't know my brother had put Rod's backpack in the trunk." He shook his head. "I don't think my brother knew what was in there." He paused. "Hell," he said as we climbed the first flight of stairs, "he was 12. How could he?"

I shrugged.

"And Rodney?" I regretted it the moment I asked. Maybe earlier.

Tony whistled a low, slow, single note.

"Smoked," he said and clicked his tongue. He held his hand in the shape of a pistol. His thumb, the hammer.

My dad told me once that hope was fragile. I was 14 and I'd just tried out for a traveling Babe Ruth team.

"You've got to be vigilant," he said.

My dad and I were in the Malibu—just the two of us—and outside the rain was steady. The vinyl seats felt cold with the air conditioning and the windshield fogged only at the bottom, right above the dash where the wipers couldn't reach. "They'll try to take it, crush it, anyway they can." He paused and adjusted the rearview. "It takes courage to survive out there."

We spilled off the gravel drive that led down to the park and the patchwork of baseball diamonds. The Malibu's tires grabbed the wet asphalt.

"Hope," my dad continued, "has to be defended." He gripped the steering wheel tightly as we rolled to a stop at a red light. His plain, silver wedding band whitened a small section of his ring finger. "It's the courageous that make something of themselves."

And that's probably why he never called. It was impossible. Too risky, I suppose, with something as fragile as hope. Behind the emails—the wordiness and the silence—was fear. Hope has to be defended; it can't possibly survive on its own.

Just before Tony and I split from the march, he snapped a picture of Jesse Jackson. His phone was a few generations old and Jesse was a good 20 feet away when the electronic shutter clicked.

"There," he said and slid his cell back into his front pocket, "my Grands ain't gonna believe that." He cracked a broad smile. It played a strange partner to the flat-brim Chicago Bulls cap that sat a bit too far back on his head. "She talks about him all the time. She was there in Memphis with Dr. King." He motioned toward Jesse. "So was he, I guess."

"No shit? Your grandmother marched?"

He laughed. "Yep, for real. She's why I'm here and not still locked up." He pulled his hat off and gently tucked it into his backpack. "It's funny. Before I went to jail, I was pretty straight. After, though—whewee."

Tony looked off toward the horizon and the grind of midday traffic.

"I fell in with a rough crew," he continued. "Things got raw for a minute. Then she put her foot down. Told me that there was more to it than some game. *Life*, she said, *should be full of hope and hope*, she would tell me, *isn't just something to mess with. It's strong. You gotta be re-*

sponsible with it." His eyes met mine as we approached the intersection in front of the college.

"And you can't fuck with that. No way. She was always on my ass about it. Always."

I nodded. "I feel that. Your grandma sounds like a smart woman."

"Shit. You know it," he replied. "Like a drill sergeant, too. Made sure I never forgot who I was after I came out." He rubbed his chin. "I'm just saying, though, it got me here." He paused as we waited for a walk signal. "She's got this thing in her kitchen, like a plaque or something. I read it every day. It says, *Keep hope in your heart. It's what you've got to lean on.*"

We crossed the street and I looked back as Jesse Jackson and the marchers carried forward, then disappeared onto 3rd Street. For a moment, I tried to imagine Selma or Birmingham, the bridges and busses, fire hoses and the dogs. It was impossible. I couldn't fathom that kind of strength, that level of resolve.

"Goddamn," I said to Tony as we stepped up onto the sidewalk. "Can you imagine the courage, walking with those guys back then?"

He shook his head. "It wasn't courage, T."

"What?" I puzzled.

"It wasn't courage," he repeated. "Courage is bullshit. I saw courage in jail. People mix lies with courage all the time. Gets so you can't tell them apart. Ain't nothing but empty talk." He knocked his knuckles on the railing. "Nah, what those guys had—what he's still got—" His hand pointed to a long-gone Jesse Jackson. "—is hope. Courage ain't got nothing to do with it."

So it wasn't courage that kept me moving. I'm not sure it was hope, either. I'd like it to be, but I'm not sure I'm there yet. I still care too much about what other people think. It's hard to talk about my parents and my brother. It's even harder not to feel like an asshole when I do.

My dad emailed me a few years back to tell me he wasn't coming to my wedding. He said I was being ungrateful and hurting my mom because I was getting married in Paris and the ceremony wasn't happening in a Catholic church. I read his message three times, ate lunch, then called him. As we talked, he got angry, then angrier.

“Look,” he said, “I changed your fucking diapers.”

I didn't believe that for a second.

His emotions slipped and got the better of him. “I sacrificed for you. And so did your mother and it's killing her, simply killing her.” He paused and collected himself in the space of a single, drawn-out breath. “You're being so goddamned thankless.” I moved the phone's receiver away from my ear. I even almost hung up. He continued, “And this is how you treat her? Don't you have any shame? You're our son.”

I wondered what that even meant. My breath quickened.

“And what about you?” I said. My voice shook, but didn't break. “It's a two-way street. What's on you,” I stammered, “and her? What about you?”

I went quiet then. I wanted to say more, to yell or scream, to break my own frustration over the line—the weight of everything—but I couldn't. I guess I didn't have it in me.

At the time, I thought things were hopeless. Now, I might know better.

PAUSE

In 1957, the Brooklyn Dodgers and the Chicago Cubs traded their entire farm clubs—25 men for 25 men—to each other, and established a sort-of template for trading—swapping—one system for another, whole-scale and for keeps.

REWIND
TRACK THREE: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: JANUARY 22, 2012
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: LAKE PARK, WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, KYLE BLACK, PATRICIA
BLACK, HOLDEN CAULFIELD

She told me he'd been hurt bad in an accident. My mom choked those words out between sobs and attempts to remain something like professional. The emotional current she pushed through the phone stood almost completely at odds with what streamed from her mouth. She tried to tell me about Kyle. She was so many miles away and seemed farther still.

I was in a meeting, a sort of in-service, non-contact thing two days before the semester started. I ducked out when I saw her name pop up on the screen of my phone. I walked out in the hallway, and as she spoke, I kept walking. Soon, I was in the car, and then I was headed toward the park.

I drove slowly, the snow wicked, and felt a shiver, a break, of some sort. I never really wanted to imagine what would eventually happen to Kyle. I just hoped he hadn't hurt anyone else. I knew in an instant, though, that he'd finally done it—he'd finally helped to codify all the myths and family stories. He'd helped to turn them into reality. His accident—whatever it was—had locked into place all of the self-effacing tales that had orbited around my mom and dad and my brother for the entirety of their lives.

And there, in the same park where I'd come apart at the fear of being a father, I saw in a flash how just about anything could be justified, how just about any fate could be made permanently, irrevocably manifest. I saw what it looked like to once-and-for all consent to the ghosts, their cassettes, and the endless stream of tracks they spilled every chance they got.

It was horrible. Snow gathered on the windshield. I kept the phone tight to my ear as I detached further and further from what it meant to be a Black—what it meant to be part of them and what they consented to—what I was expected to concede to, to consent to, and resign myself to. The scaffold shook and the ghosts shivered. They'd regroup and grow stronger because they knew, finally, what I was capable of.

I sat in the car and watched the big, cotton flakes gather at the bottom of the windshield. With the engine off, I rested my head on the steering wheel, my face inches from the darkened instrument panel.

Holden Caulfield had it wrong. There was no catching. Not even with the biggest hands and the quickest feet. People eventually went over the edge.

Everything was silent except for the wind. Its aggressive gusts paraded against the driver's-side door. Outside, Lake Park was deserted and almost sterile white. The cold advanced further and revealed my breaths in silver streams.

The last time I spoke with him was on Christmas. Kyle had been in Florida for seven years. For the past two, he'd lived in an apartment subsidized by my parents. Before that, he'd lived at their house. He never answered when I called him direct and texts were like paper planes tossed into a vast, dark canyon. My only contact with him—virtual or otherwise—was when I called my parents on birthdays or holidays.

My brother's temperament was always pretty volatile, a chip off the old block.

Sometimes, he was a plain dick—snarky, jaded, bent on proselytizing. These traits intensified as he got older. What I saw in the glimmer glances I was afforded was dark, deep, and fair-

ly awful. I'd also witnessed him care so fully and purely it made me hurt. But, I hadn't seen that side of him for a long, long time.

On Christmas, I called my mom's phone from Emma's parent's bedroom. I worked my way around the horn and ended with Kyle. He made some off-color comment about me enjoying my holiday with *that* family. Two weeks later, he was a quadriplegic.

It was a bike accident, Mom told me. Kyle basically became a human missile. He slammed his bike into a parked car and hurled himself, headlong, into the back of a construction van. A cop watched the whole thing unfold—said it was *Unbelievable. Just unbelievable.*

Kyle had always been wild. He pushed reckless to a point. But there was always—or at least seemed to be—a fail-safe. There was a threshold that he wouldn't cross, a moment he wouldn't consent to. But, he worked to steadily ratchet up self-destructive tendencies over the course of the last few years.

I shivered, my hands cold, as I walked away from the car. My phone was inside on the dashboard. Mom promised to call again. But I knew it didn't much matter. Everything outside seemed so vacant, drowned-out by the white noise of winter.

Over course of the next few days, she called and spoke of my brother and the wreck and the series of quick, desperate operations the doctors performed to try first to fuse his back, then his neck. She told me how they inserted, then removed and reinserted drains and tubes and internal monitoring devices. My brother, she said, was still unable to respond to pain or stimulus tests. It was hard for me to listen to her, to even hear her talk. Whenever her voice gathered any momentum, she just sounded like the ghosts.

PAUSE

After that, whenever my mom called, I found it harder and harder to call her back. I couldn't pick up when she called, so I was always fielding voicemails. Her calls always seemed to set the ghosts in motion. Her messages were a continuous farce. Their tone never matched, never gave anything away. There was no feeling in any of them. They were all affect. When I did talk to her, she'd tell me about Kyle and I'd try to ask questions. There weren't any answers, though—not to the questions I asked.

When I'd hang up, the cassettes would be loaded, tracks cued. I told myself I had a hard time because of the ghosts, but maybe it was hard for me because I needed to keep some distance between me and them. Orlando was 1,250 miles away, but even that felt too close.

I suppose I might have been scared of undoing what I'd done. I'd gotten away from them. I'd gotten away from the mess, and that mess now swallowed them whole. I felt like the lucky one and I was guilty, as a result.

Maybe, though, I couldn't handle what had happened to my brother. Maybe I was scared. Maybe I was doing what I'd always done. Maybe I was shitty and maybe I didn't care. Maybe I was just continuing to run away, just like I always had. Maybe, I was no different than them.

FAST-FORWARD
TRACK TWO: THE WEIGHT OF ENDLESS POSSIBILITY

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 2, 2016
LOCATION: NEW YORK, NEW YORK
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: MANHATTAN, MIDTOWN, BROADWAY, EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING,
RENAISSANCE TIMES SQUARE, CARNEGIE HALL, JOHN
VARVATOS, HOPE PARADE, CAMPBELL APTS.

Tyne Darling adjusted his hood and pulled the zipper of his jacket higher. He felt the collar tighten around his neck. He had just left a John Varvatos shoot in the Campbell Apartments at Grand Central Station. The shoot was part of a series that Varvatos had been doing, periodically, for the past half-dozen years. The series featured a musician or a series of musicians—sometimes a band—in tandem with the line's new collection. This spring, Tyne would join Elliot Gable, the lead singer of Hope Parade, Ghostpoet, Angus Stone, and Alex Niemer, better-known as the rapper, Antix, as the faces of the Varvatos collection.

Tyne had been excited for the shoot and the exposure the feature would surely afford. Still, most of Tyne's thoughts strayed toward the following night. He was scheduled to take the stage at Carnegie Hall as support for Hope Parade, an L.A.-based band. It was almost all he could think about. He'd played it out a hundred-thousand times since he'd gotten word that he'd be on the bill. He'd thought about the lights, the boxes, the ringed forum, and the way the stage seemed to nestle itself against the orchestra as if it were in mid-hibernation. The entire notion of Carnegie Hall seemed quite surreal, yet playing there—simultaneously—felt completely normal.

He quickened his pace through Midtown and turned his attention to Emma and Cass. They were only a few blocks away in the suite at the Renaissance Times Square. Tyne couldn't wait to tell them about the shoot. They'd been there for a bit, but left before the shutters began to snap. Tyne played the shoot—the wardrobe changes, the instructions from the photographers and

their assistants and stylists, the bright, bright white of the lights—back through his mind as he cut up Broadway.

The neon reflections exploded on the wet pavement. They sent waves of pink, yellow, red, blue, and white careening up, up into the sky and, Tyne imagined, to the very hems of outer space.

It was nearly Cass's bedtime and Tyne looked forward to their routine: a book or two and a story about something of Cass's choosing. It was a routine they'd had for years. It was funny, Tyne thought—and a little strange—to replicate it in New York, right in the heart of Manhattan. But it seemed right—normal and okay.

Everything else was mostly the same, too. Tyne Darling didn't look any different, but he felt worlds move under his feet. A rush of feelings swelled inside his skin, feelings that were as new as the two week-old tattoo that spread its black script across his right forearm. It read: *Bright eyes. Open heart.* Even though he felt the same, he knew everything was different. He knew everything had changed. And that scared the hell out of him.

The past few months had seen Tyne Darling cut a path through several continents. He'd ventured into some of the largest cities on the planet, and filled up their theaters, halls, and auditoriums with his voice and heavy guitar strums. Cass and Emma were there, too, for most of it.

Tyne had balanced a whirlwind of endorsements and PR angles. Everything from fashion, to hotels, to film and TV syncs popped and bloomed over the past few months. In January, the late-night shows called. The *Times* did a segment on the new record—an EP recorded just across the river in Williamsburg. After this run, Tyne would return to Cowboy Technical Studios to craft

those six songs into a proper, full-length. *The New Yorker*, *Village Voice*, *Uncut*, and *Austin Chronicle* all glowed over the EP. Even that jaded, snark-monster *Pitchfork* gave it a 6.8.

PAUSE

It's funny and somewhat paradoxical how things just kind of opened up for Tyne once he got out of the way. For so long, Tyne Darling wouldn't even entertain the fact that he was the one who stood in the way of his own desires. He'd effectively tangled himself in the tracks the ghosts played.

Tyne finally understood that everything did indeed hinge on him getting out of his own way. He knew he needed to finally unwind his threads of experience and generational memory. But, Tyne Darling was scared of the ghosts. He was scared of the cassettes and their tracks. He was scared of what he might hear—what he might find when they stopped playing. But, when he really got into it, what he found was a great, empty space. At first, that space seemed much worse than anything the cassettes played. With a great, empty space at the center of his being, Tyne wondered how he'd even survive.

But there lay perhaps the biggest irony of his life—that great, empty space wasn't something to fear, it was something to embrace. It was possibility. But still, it felt like the hole in his swing—the one that let the curveballs slip and fall through. The hole in his swing had sunk his chances with the scouts, with a big-league career. Nothing amplified the cassettes and their tracks quite like fear.

At some point, though, Tyne realized that to make a change, he didn't really need to do much of anything. He only needed to see the great, empty space for what it was—possibility—and then choose not fill it up with the tracks. But, for Tyne, this seemed a little too trite and disconnected. It seemed like the same bullshit his mom and dad and Kyle shoveled. But then he realized that it wasn't trite at all. Tyne Darling realized that to recognize the great, empty space at

the center of his being as endless possibility was actually vulnerable. It was insecure. And, he realized that this vulnerability and insecurity stood in the face of seemingly overwhelming fear.

To recognize the great, empty space at the center of his being as endless possibility demanded of him the very things that his mom's mantra—*things just have a way of working out for this family*—never had. To really make a change in his *vāsanā*, Tyne Darling had to be vulnerable. He had to be honest and take responsibility for his consent and his choices. He also had to confront his own insecurities, which were as vast and treacherous as the sea. But, like the sea, his insecurities worked to nurture, guide, and cultivate. His insecurities were, themselves, honest. And that honesty was something Tyne Darling couldn't resist. He couldn't argue with what was right in front of his face. Not, at least, if he wanted a life filled with any sort of possibility.

With this realization, Tyne Darling shifted. He understood what it meant to be vulnerable. He understood that insecurity had nothing to do with being compromised or weak. He finally understood that being vulnerable and insecure had everything to do with taking a chance.

FAST-FORWARD
TRACK THREE: THE WEIGHT OF ENDLESS POSSIBILITY

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 2, 2016
LOCATION: NEW YORK, NEW YORK
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: MANHATTAN, MIDTOWN, EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING,
RENAISSANCE TIMES SQUARE, BRYANT PARK, CARNEGIE HALL, JOHN
VARVATOS, HOPE PARADE, CAMPBELL APTS.

He shifted with the flow of traffic and worked to cross Times Square. Manhattan's steely grey canyons collapsed on one another and dissolved flat like a Rothko painting. The rain, so strong moments ago, was suddenly gone. The pigeons were boxing gloves tied to high wires, and Tyne saw that they mostly sat in pairs. Occasionally, though, he observed a lonely right or left.

New York was honest, and that was something Tyne Darling held dear. It was something he knew had gone missing from him. It was something that had stayed missing from him for too long. It was that honesty that chased trains to and from stations overpacked and suffocated with twisted knots of people. It was that honesty that gave the city and all of its inhabitants a sort of impenetrable veneer. It was that honesty that wasn't a veneer at all, but rather a comfort with—an acknowledgment of—of one's own vulnerability, one's own insecurity. It was that honesty that welcomed him, each and every time he arrived.

New York had worked hard for its honesty. Simply keeping it and honoring it wasn't enough. New York rewarded people with its honesty. Sometimes, that reward appeared in the form of crushing, seemingly disheartening reality. But that, too, was possibility. Most of the time, though, New York's reward came dressed in the form of opportunity. The endless possibility—the vast, great space—that occupied the center of New York's being was the opportunity to confront and untangle one's insecurities, to become just a little more vulnerable. It was an opportuni-

ty for Tyne Darling to embrace the endless possibility of his own vulnerability, of his own insecurities. Tyne Darling was glad to be home.

He gazed at the city's wild, unnerving pace. He stood at the corner—a host of traffic lights red in his periphery—and watched everything, everything that would fit within the frame of his understanding. Something crept inside him. It was something like happiness—a sort of connection to this place, to himself, to Cass and Emma back at the Renaissance. Tyne was sure they'd be eager to hear what happened after they left. Cass had stared at the enormity of the Campbell Apartments, his mouth wide-open. He asked over and over about the flashes.

“Why are those lights, Papa,” he'd pointed to the white umbrellas, “upside-down and,” he'd laughed, “why are they inside?” He'd giggled harder and harder. “Umbrellas inside, Papa. That's crazy.”

Tyne thought about the following night. He thought again about Carnegie and the lights there in the Stern-Perelman auditorium—the ones that would toss their insides down upon him and the audience—on Emma and Cass. He thought about his voice and that very first strum. He thought about how his voice would start off by itself with the lyric, *I got lucky, then. On the hems of the present tense*. He thought about the manner in which those words would assemble, then balance in the air in front of him. He thought about how he'd be able to hear them rattle and shiver in the corners of that gorgeous, massive place. He thought about how that would sound, so rich and hopeful. After all, it was Carnegie Hall.

As he edged closer and closer to the Renaissance, he thought about how he might have looked, in that moment, from outer space. He thought about how small he'd seem, how remotely

impossible he'd appear. Then, he thought about how this entire enterprise should have seemed impossible, but how it never really did.

It wasn't impossible in those lonely clubs in Germany or Los Angeles, or on the road somewhere between Vancouver and Denver. It never seemed impossible. Hard, yes, but never impossible. Every aspect of playing at Carnegie Hall always seemed tangible. It was there through his drive to madden himself and everyone around him with that furious, violent quest to extract possibility from the space of misery. It was there as the cassettes filled the great, empty space at the center of his being with their awful tracks. It was there in the fabric of his fear—in his fear's very construction.

And now, despite all of that, the possibility of playing Carnegie Hall was a reality. But not, of course, on account of his madness or the ghosts or their cassettes and those rotten tracks. It was a reality because Tyne Darling made a choice to finally stop choosing the mechanisms of his madness. It was a reality because Tyne had told the ghosts that they were no longer welcome. It was a reality because Tyne Darling had taken the ghost's cassette tapes and smashed them to bits in the best, possible manner. Tyne Darling smashed them by not choosing them. He smashed them by not consenting to their fear and misery. They were there, still, but they had been rendered useless.

Carnegie Hall, he thought. *Carnegie Hall*.

It was hardly evening as he made his way up Broadway to 7th. The soiled, early February sky continued to go about its flirtatious business, and Tyne breathed deeply as he stepped under the heated awning of the Renaissance Time Square. He took one final glance at the pasty, grey sky now dusted with violet hues. It hung high above the buildings with their flat tops and pointy,

poking spires. It hung above the antenna that reached and reached for something Tyne couldn't see. It hung high above the city, so at peace with its own, endless possibility. The sky was a perfect sheet of amethyst. Soon, Tyne thought, it would be dark.

PAUSE

Up until he was ten or so, Tyne Black—he was called that then, *Black*, back before he changed his last name to *Darling*—had no idea what it was his father did for a living. He had no idea what data processing was. Computers and tape machines were all he knew of his dad's work. Dad ran computers, loaded tape drives. Tyne knew that Theodore, his father, constantly input information—numbers and code—then watched as it regurgitated green and orange letters on his blackish-brown computer screen. At the office and at home, there were always green and orange letters, always green and orange numbers. These letters and numbers changed and then they disappeared, only to reappear in a different spot, sometimes in a different order.

Tyne knew that Theodore wore oxford shirts made from cotton that shimmered, especially the ones with the contoured stripes and the wide collars. These were the ones his dad liked most—the ones that always seemed to not quite hide his badly-knotted tie. Tyne's dad never cared much for ties and in protest, knotted them carelessly. There were always colored pens in his pockets, too. Tyne loved those pens. As a kid, he'd sit on his dad's lap and lean into his chest, Theodore's shallow, hot breaths moved Tyne like a gentle tide. Tyne would pull the colored pens from his dad's pocket and balance them between his little fingers. His dad would take them away after a few minutes and place them on a nearby table or TV stand worried that Tyne would somehow manage to open them and ruin his shirt. Tyne especially liked the purple, flair-tip markers. The plastic caps sparkled and had bright yellow tops that fit onto Tyne's pinkies perfectly.

Sometimes, Tyne would find data punch cards tucked in with the pens—cards from the massive System 38—the one with the tape drives that ran the company's backups. The tapes

moved awkwardly and Tyne thought that the drives looked like monsters sucking down black spaghetti.

These same computers spoiled so many of Tyne's weekends with their critical log errors or unintended boot failures. The company gave these computers their own rooms with halon fire-suppression mechanisms and warning placards pressed in thick, black letters. At first, Theodore shared an office with two other people. Then, he had his own small one, followed by a big one at the end of the hall.

Through all of that, there was a crate of records, under the basement stairs. It belonged to Theodore, though until he was 13, Tyne never saw his dad play a single one. Tyne's mom, Patricia, put them there because she was into to hiding things. It was her form of organization. There was a place for everything and that was out-of-sight. The record player was in the end table that sat in the far corner of the family room. It didn't have a needle until Tyne, who at the time was in fifth grade, got one from Raymond Holloman, a seventh-grader who lived down the street.

Tyne would look at the records sometimes when his dad would have to go into Patton on weekends to deal with *The System*, as he called it. In that huge crate was King Crimson's *In the Court of the Crimson King*. The front cover was a copy of an oil painting of someone close-up, screaming. To Tyne, the man on the cover was terrifying, his nostrils flared and huge. They were black hollows that seemed like they could swallow Tyne whole. It was the man's uvula, though, that scared Tyne most. He didn't know what it was at first and would stare at it, then put the record away. Later, he'd get it out again and look some more at the swollen, red drop that hung at the back of the strange man's throat. It was weird. Tyne would go into the bathroom and shut the door and get as close to the mirror as he could. He'd open up his mouth really big and look at his

own uvula hanging there. He'd hum, lightly at first then louder; his mouth was still open to watch it move, shiny with spit and redder than any apple he'd ever seen. Tyne's uvula never really did anything. It just hung there and rattled. But, he was glad it wasn't as big and scary as the man's on the record cover was.

FAST-FORWARD
TRACK THREE: THE WEIGHT OF ENDLESS POSSIBILITY

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 2, 2016
LOCATION: NEW YORK, NEW YORK
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: MANHATTAN, MIDTOWN, EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING, RENAISSANCE
TIMES SQUARE

Tyne arrived back at the Renaissance and rode the elevator to the 16th floor. He hugged Cass and Emma and told them about the shoot. Cass's eyes fixed themselves on Tyne's face.

Tyne worked to reimagine the scene.

Tyne gave Cass a bath, then helped him brush his teeth. Together, they settled in with a book about an entire construction site going to sleep. Before they read, Cass's eyes looped around the high, shadowy ceiling. He threw out questions about Star Wars and the Empire. He asked why Luke Skywalker had to destroy the Big Star's imperial weapon. Emma and Tyne had renamed it the *Big Star* in an effort to keep things a bit more simple for him. They figured the clock was ticking as it was and a little simplicity couldn't hurt.

In the faded light of room 1608 at the Renaissance Times Square, Tyne watched Cass's mouth—his lips drawn gently between two, soft cheeks—carefully carve words out of thin air. There was no place Tyne Darling would have rather have been than right there, in that room next to his son.

After Cass finally fell asleep, Tyne pushed himself up off the floor and crouched next to the flattened, makeshift bed. He kissed his son goodnight and lay the top of his index finger under Cass's chin in the soft spot just beneath his son's jaw bone.

PLAY
TRACK THREE: SUMMER KISS

TRACK RECORDED: AUGUST 30, 2014
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: HOPE, COURAGE, JAMES FOLEY, ALEPPO, VASANA, CHURCH OF THE
GESU, TOMMY FAULKS, 7 SECONDS, DEAN MORIARTY, AFTER-HOURS,
WISCONSIN STATE COLLEGE, RICK HUTCHENCE, HILLSIDE BOYS & GIRLS
CLUB

It's hard to hold onto hope (even the invented kind) when so many have so little and so few have so much. My dreams had always been filled with thoughts of resilience and rebellion. But in my waking hours, I'd barely managed to muster the slightest amount of courage. I had a hard time sticking up for myself and a harder time not giving my power away to the first person that asked for it.

I often think of Jimmy crouched amongst the rubble of Aleppo, his helmet buckled, eyes focused, careful and mindful of the moment and everything around him.

At the memorial service, the Marquette folks gave everyone who entered Gesu an Order of Service. Tucked inside the Order was a single sheet of paper emblazoned with *#rememberingjim*. Nobody, of course, who knew him—even for a second—could ever have forgotten James Foley.

Tommy Faulks, a southside Chicago native who'd been Foley's best friend since their first week on campus, gave an incredible eulogy and mentioned, as we walked to the bar across campus, that it was important to remember Jimmy with intent. He said we'd naturally think about him, every now and then, but he urged us to do it with intent. "Concentrate like you did during your first kiss", he said. A smile—sharp and full of all the pain and love a single person could manage broke between his neatly trimmed goatee.

What he meant, I think, was that it was important to think about Jimmy and mean it. Faulks was right; we should remember Jimmy with intent. We should remember him ruthlessly and with the kind of vigor that flows through those early 7Seconds songs.

Tommy knew it better than anyone. He told me, a few weeks later, how when Jimmy had been missing for a few weeks the first time—in Libya—he'd rolled through clip after clip on YouTube scouring videos that showed the awful sequences of Gadaffi's mercenaries shooting civilians, journalists, foreign aid workers and the like.

"I was just looking for Jimmy's face," he said, his voice pitched just above a sanded whisper. "And there were so fucking many." The lids of his eyes flickered. They warded off tears and probably memories—images—he'd never, ever have the ability to erase. "It was god-awful. Just god-awful."

I've always believed in the power of numbers. People, when bound together and unified in any cause or interest have power. That's why Jimmy was there in Libya in the first place. It was the power of numbers that essentially spawned the Arab Spring. And Jimmy's reporting added to the numbers—it let the globe feel the awakening and the tremors.

By itself, a single voice might not do a lot, but in chorus, it can raze temples and then build them back up. I've always thought that hope can be magnified just by virtue of being alive and being hopeful. In such a case, nobody has to really do anything—all anybody ever has to do is just show up and hold hope—foster it. Hope is easier to hold—easier to foster—when a person is not alone. People have power, and that power is magnified in their numbers.

Sometimes, though, I doubt that people have any power—in number or otherwise. When I doubt that power, I remember that I have a body, hands, feet, and a face. I can feel them; I am

aware of them and I am aware of controlling them, at least most of the time. It's only natural, then, to conclude that I am something other than my body. I am certain of my existence because I can feel it, I can imagine it. I know I'm in this body—my body—because I can imagine controlling it. I can imagine moving my hand or riding a surfboard or singing, and then I can make my body do it, at least to the extent that the act is possible given my physical, mental, or energetic state. Therefore, it stands to reason, that if something is perfectly imaginable, it is also wholly possible, in principle.

I got home after the memorial service late and more than a little bit drunk. In the kitchen, I fished the now folded *#rememberingjim* flyer from the front pocket of my pants. It came out with a few dollars and some change, a business card from the first person I'd ever met on campus my freshman year, a guitar pick, and a drink token from a club in Los Angeles that I'd played a few weeks earlier. I set it all down on the counter. My pants carried stories, apparently.

I went to the living room and sat down on the couch. The near silence of our house was punctuated by the faint sound of Cass snoring a few rooms away. I heard traffic, blocks off, scattered and sparse, as it hustled along Capitol. Emma got up and joined me. Together, we sat and listened. We stayed quiet for some time. I broke the silence with the weight of the stories of the night and thoughts about how Jimmy would have loved it. I told Emma how he would've urged us all to keep it going. *Tuesdays, Dahh-ling*, he'd have said, the coarseness of his New England accent showing its full contours on account of his drunkenness, *Tuesdays are made for after hours. Who's got 'em. We got lots—loads to talk about. Loads. And there's no better time. C'mon, whose got 'em?* He would have riled us all up and we'd have gone somewhere, I was sure of it. *C'mon, Dahh-ling*, he'd have said, *Where we goin', anyways?* Sometimes—and only just some-

times—he reminded me of Dean Moriarty, but unlike Moriarty, Jimmy wasn't an asshole. He wasn't selfish or deceitful. He always seemed to be aware, even if he didn't fully understand it, of the score. Sometimes, though, he reminded me of Dean Moriarty because of his need—his desire—to go and go some more and not stop, ever, until we all got there. And, of course, we could never really get there because there was always somewhere else to go, something else to read, something else to talk about, something more to wrap our heads around. *It's a windfall, Dahh-ling*, he'd have said. *One of the great by-products and conciliatory aspects of an ever-expanding universe*. And then, when I'd somehow consented to his beautiful, delicate madness without really consenting at all, he'd level me. *Now*, he'd say, his eyes like emeralds on onyx, *just what, exactly, are we gonna to do about it?*

Emma and I talked and talked, more than either one of us thought possible. There were memories and conjecture, moments framed and cropped a little off-center. I had class the next day at 8:00 a.m. on the South Campus, but neither of us seemed to care; the words and sentences, the feelings and thoughts, just kept coming. We were a couple of backyard spigots left open to run in the heat of the summer. We were lost in it, Emma and I, until our eyelids started to tug at our racing thoughts.

“We should sleep,” she said.

I nodded in agreement.

“What time is it, anyway?”

“A little after four,” I replied. My sheepish smile betrayed an exhausted mind, a mind spiked with the desire to go and keep going.

“Jesus,” she said. “Are you gonna be all right for tomorrow?”

I nodded. “The steep price of a good, old-fashioned Irish wake,” I laughed. “I think Jimmy would have approved.”

“Most definitely,” she echoed. “But, I have to get to bed. Tomorrow, it seems, is already here.”

She was lovely—delicate and so incredibly strong. I watched as she moved gracefully across the living room, through the dining room and kitchen, only to disappear around the hallway’s arch to, presumably, our bedroom. In that moment—the moment she crossed that threshold and disappeared—the love we had and had nourished for so long that I could hardly remember a time without it, pooled and gathered. I felt it expand into something different, something stronger, shinier, and lighter. I slouched down against the soft, leather upholstery and let it wash over me like the tide.

Her voice trailed. “Don’t be too much later. You do have to make sure you’re safe driving.”

“I will,” I answered. And I meant it.

I grabbed the *#rememberingjim* flyer. It looked like a paper crane cast-off, lines ran through it this way and that. They threatened to ruin its once-bright whiteness. I held it in my hands and stared at the plain font. It was nothing special, a copy of a copy of something printed inside an office in the Memorial Union a few hours before the service started. But maybe its simplicity allowed it to speak so loudly. I got up and lumbered through the dining room to the kitchen. I opened the sink-cabinet door, intent to recycle the single sheet. But something stopped me. It wasn’t a cosmic push or any great energetic shift. It was nothing so grand or trite. It was subtle force, an inability to part ways with this delicate, thoughtful simplicity. I walked down-

stairs, the flyer in my hand and wondered what the hell I was doing. I wondered why I was so keen to keep such a silly sheet of paper.

When I got to the basement, an antique, metal toy train that Emma and I had purchased a few years before, caught my eye. As a kid, I loved trains—N gauge, HO, Lionel. This train, though, wasn't any of those. This train was metal. We bought it simply because it was awesome. The passenger cars were stamped *Baltimore, Ohio, St. Louis*. It was heavy as fuck and I'd put it up on top of one of our basement bookshelves.

I took the flyer and folded back down to the front pocket-sized rectangle it had been a little over an hour ago and stuck it in the engine's tinder. There was no special significance in this. There was no deeper, inherent meaning. I simply had a need for it to be somewhere—somewhere permanent. In my mind, I guess maybe I was thinking that it could lend me some power, now and again, because things are messy and pretty scary out there. Keeping that flyer—knowing it was there—gave me a sense of real security. I didn't care if it was real or not. I felt like having that flyer and knowing where it was would help me remember that we're all in this together.

The next day, shortly after class ended, I got a text from Rick Hutchence. I'd been his advisor a half-decade ago. It took him six years to graduate, but he got his paper—the first one in his family, ever, on both sides, cousins and shit included. Rick had been raised mostly by his grandmother. His dad shot his mom in the back when he was drunk and strung out. Then, he crawled into the bathtub and shot himself. Rick was five, at the time.

In the text, Rick asked if I'd come up to the Boys & Girls Club. He was set to give a speech.

Yo, T, he texted, I'm nervous as hell.

I dialed his number.

"The director said there was gonna be like three or four hundred," he stammered.

Rick's voice was usually silk, laced with an ever-so-slight Tennessee drawl. He got it from his grandmother, I guess.

"You're on it, though," I replied. "You got this, brother."

"You comin?" he asked.

"For sure," I answered. "I'm a few blocks away right now, walking. Wouldn't miss it."

In the hot, crowded auditorium, I watched Rick slide gracefully onto the stage. Behind him, banners of Jesse Owens, Ralph Metcalf, and Golda Meir hung loosely from the rafters. Rick was about six-seven and built like a boxer. I'd never seen him in a suit before. He wore it well and looked comfortable, but not cocky as he talked about his life—about how he got to and graduated from college.

He spoke about his mom and dad and how his uncle came and got him from the police station. "They had me in a holding cell 'cuz I guess they didn't know what else to do."

He paused.

It was so quiet in that gym that I wanted to scream just to be sure I hadn't gone deaf.

"But then this female cop—she was a parking checker, I guess—gave me a Hot Wheels car and a sucker. She sat there and held my hand. I remember her just whispering, *I'm sorry. I'm so sorry*, over and over."

He talked about how things weren't much better with his uncle and auntie; about how they were poor as hell and lived out of a car for a while. He told us about his auntie and the

drugs, then about the prostitution and how he had to finally ride the Greyhound to Memphis all by himself in the middle of the night just to get away, to have half a chance. He talked about how his granny saved his life and how we are our own experience. He said we're also each other's experience. Hope was his spirit animal, ferocious, bold as fuck, and unapologetic. I was pretty certain that after he was done and all 400 of us were standing and clapping that I would have followed him anywhere.

As I left the auditorium and went back to my office, I thought about the students I'd had—the ones who came to class right out of their cars, who came to school every single day from shelters, who came to the building on holidays because there was nowhere else for them to go, who were on paper or had been up north and were just out. I couldn't imagine the collective weight of all the things each of them carried. I didn't want to. It seemed to me that it would be enough to sink an entire city.

REWIND
TRACK ONE: LOVED BY WOLVES

TRACK RECORDED: DECEMBER 19, 1982
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: HALLUCINATIONS, OVERHEATING, DMT, HYPNOGOGIC SLEEP,
ALICE-IN-WONDERLAND SYNDROME, MACHINE ELVES, DR. LOUIS
DUPLANT

The first time it happened, I was in bed. I remember my screams. I remember the shivers and the shakes.

They called them hallucinations, and they told me they weren't real.

"It's okay," Dad said, over and over. His voice stayed distant and cool. I wrestled, wriggled, and writhed. I tried my best to edge out of his grasp. Usually, I was wet and by then, scared. I was an eel, slippery and shiny. My hair was always matted—a scrap of cool velvet.

Mom always flittered in and out. Her hazel eyes stayed fixed and wide. "Tyne, you're here."

I just screamed. Always. Constantly.

"They're not real," she always followed. "They're not real."

Then came the clatter of ice cubes against the sides of the plastic bathtub. They plunged me, mad with protest, into the freezing cold and the cubes floated by and stung my flailing feet and legs.

The ice-water bath was the recommendation of the pediatrician.

"It'll work to break the fever," Dr. DuPlant said. "To pitch his temperature lower and bring him back down to Earth."

His voice, which streamed mostly from his hooked nose, was tinted with the unmistakable edge of Upper East Side Manhattan. It rose a half-octave at the end of each and every

phrase. His close-cropped grey hair was a carpet of straightened steel wool and the green, leather satchel that he strapped bandolier-style over his thin, Gatsby ties made him look like he was about to embark on some African safari. When his stethoscope wasn't in use, it wrapped itself tightly around his neck—a grey, metallic constrictor. I always wondered if it was hard for him to breathe.

Of course, it was hard for me to breathe between sobs and screams. I always imagined—felt—tentacles wrapping themselves around my body. They were so thick, so tight. The squids of my dreams always, without fail, pulled me deeper and deeper under the AstroTurf of Seattle's now-demolished Kingdome. I felt myself slip, time and time again, further into the vast, worn, green space of my unfettered imagination. The squids—purple, blue, green, and orange—dragged me under. They tried to suffocate me. My parents' muted refrain—*It's not real. It's not real*—was never enough to bring me back. It was never enough, I feared, to save my life. For me, it was all-too real. I slid around in that goddamned tub. I splashed and splashed and desperately tried to break free from the tentacles' tight tangle. Sometimes, I confused those squids for Dad's forearms and hands. His grip always stayed strong. It always seemed certain of all the wrong things.

In the end, I always stopped screaming once the peacocks swooped in and chased the squids back out to sea. They pulled me away, each time, with soft, tender talons. They took me well beyond the walls of the Kingdome and its turf. They took me to a place where I was safe. The Kingdome always vanished. It was gone, then, entirely. My fears—everything I struggled against—always just disappeared. Then, it was just me, my mom and dad, and the icy, bath water. Every time, it was the same with my mom. *He's back. He's back*, she said, like I was on vaca-

tion. Dad just repeated, *It's okay. They're not real.* But for me, those hallucinations were everything. They were more than real. They were so much more than real. They were incredibly terrifying.

My parents pulled me out of the tub, each time, and wrapped me in towels. I shivered and gasped, out-of-breath. The warehouse of my subconscious was empty. My parents stood, then, and silently watched me. I, too, was finally silent, I was always broken, by then, and felt completely alone. Later, in bed, when I was tucked tight under my comforter with its Yankees logos, my head pressed wet and deep into the messy pillow, I always whispered to myself, *It's okay. It's okay. They're gone. We're okay.*

Usually, I heard my mom's and dad's voice from the hallway outside. Their words of concern filled the sharp spaces and seemingly perfect 90s where the ceiling met the walls. Their words cut across the angles where the shadows always got caught in the early evening, during late summer. Usually, I heard them and it was always the same. *It's just not working. We have to talk again to Dr. DuPlant. Something must be wrong. Something's gotta be wrong.* And the cassettes—so small—their tracks so short and very soft back then, would start. Their rhythms were protracted, their lyrics dangerously simple. *There's something wrong. There's gotta be something wrong with you.*

Eventually, sleep came. It sailed over my refrains—*It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. It's okay*—and pushed me off to some safe-space deep in one of the corners of my mind. And there I stayed, hopefully, undisturbed until morning. I always hoped that those squids didn't return. I hoped that they didn't kick again. Sometimes, though, they did. Sometimes, it came right away. Other times, they came later—a few hours, a day, a week, a month. They came, though. Always.

PAUSE

Most—if not all—medical and self-help literature on the matter reads the same. In the case of an overheating child, the experts run pretty much lock-step: *Do not use ice or cold water, as these tend to cool the skin, initially, but then often make the situation worse because they cause shivering, which will, in turn, raise the core body temperature thereby only serve to further exacerbate the situation.*

PLAY
TRACK ONE: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 12, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACKNOTES/TAGS: CASS DARLING, HALLUCINATIONS, OVERHEATING, HYPNOGOGIC SLEEP

Cass Darling couldn't—or maybe, wouldn't—wake up. He shook and shivered as words and disjointed phrases spilled from his tiny, pink lips. His mouth trembled, upturned and troubled. None of his words, though, made much sense. Tyne and Emma attempted to sooth and comfort him, their voices slow and smooth.

“Cass. Cass,” Tyne whispered. “It's okay. You're sleeping. Wake up, sweetie. Wake up. Come on. It's okay.”

Tyne watched as his own hand ran circles, then looped ovals across and around his son's back. Cass's sobs were plentiful, his breaths labored. His voice was disconnected and it cut through the dark.

Once again, Tyne became aware of the stray sweeps of his own memories. He thought about ice baths and flailing arms. He recalled screams and the thoughts of sinking, of falling and never being able to stop. He recalled the sound and tone his own parents' voices as they lightly persuaded him that nothing at all was wrong.

Those memories had razor claws connected to gnarled hands. They were fangs in a rancid mouth with stale breath. They came from bitter lips set under ugly, broken eyes. As he comforted Cass, Tyne Darling heard the cassettes click on. Their tracks began much like they always did, soft and slow. The ghosts worked to remind Tyne that something was wrong. Something was definitely wrong.

Cass shivered and Tyne held his hand. He held Emma's, too. They were all there, together. Strangely, Tyne Darling smiled. He considered his thoughts—the memories of ice cubes and squids, the bathtub and the screams. *They won't ever get me, again*, he thought. *And, they won't get Cass. Ever.* The cassettes sputtered. Their tracks softened. Then, they stopped. Their sounds vanished.

Tyne watched Cass's chest heave. He watched it slow, then finally settle. Tyne Darling looked down at his own hands, at his arms and troubled fingers. They were so much bigger than Cass's, so much heavier. They'd been polluted by time and experience, and they were so tired and anxious. They were defensive and afraid. Tyne pulled Cass tight and closed his eyes. With each exhale, Tyne pushed his own memories just a bit farther away. He moved closer and closer to Emma, Cass tight to his chest.

There, between the pulse and push of blood and air he began to envision that great, empty space at the center of his being. It was, he thought, a sort-of samsara. That great, empty space had no scaffold, and it was free of ghosts. It was absent the tilted, stereo sound of the cassettes and their tracks. That space seemed fragile and new. Tyne stayed in touch with it—in touch with its openness, its possibility. Cass drifted back into peaceful, distant sleep.

Tyne sat up, the darkness of the room wholly and tacitly visible. Tyne had barely noticed that he had begun to shiver. Emma wrapped her arm around him. All he needed was a little room to breathe. All he needed was right there. It had been, all along.

PLAY
TRACK FIVE: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 3-4, 2014
LOCATION: DENVER, COLORADO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: LARIMER FESTIVAL, ALL SAINTS MOTEL, JAMES FOLEY, FLOYD
BERANGER, MATT HUTTON

September got up too early and very nearly ruined me. I was reeling, but had a quick turn in Denver—a slot at the Laramie Festival. I almost bailed, but then reconsidered. My mind was snow-capped with thoughts of how I somehow owed it to something to go. The ghosts had been working the cassettes overtime, and I'd burned quickly through what cushion I'd built with Emma.

My plan was measured: a direct flight from ORD, the festival bit, a run to Ft. Collins the following night, then everything bookended by a set in Cheyenne at a place called The All Saints. The talent buyer there used to run a club in Salt Lake City—The Saltair. I loved the Saltair.

She put together a Sunday night at The All Saints with a fat guarantee and more than 50 pre-sales. It promised, alone, to pay for the whole trip. That, plus some merch and the festival pay-out, would put me way ahead and in good shape for working the single before CMJ.

The plane landed a half-hour early and I set to work on a rental and a place to stay that wasn't the backseat of that same rental. It was a little too early for the airport to be as empty as it was. The vacant space reflected the tracks that rolled on repeat inside my head. The melody was one of longing, of desperation.

Despite those incongruences, my set at Larimer Fest cooked. I was on a side stage across from the main, and the crowd was killer. I ripped through my songs. The whole deal was a giant basket of fun.

Afterwards, I hung out next to the merch table while some girl the festival hired sold my records and t-shirts.

“That was nice,” she said as I walked up. “Real nice.”

I smiled and thanked her and then drifted in and out of a dozen or so conversations about my set, the short run of shows, and, of course, the new record. I talked about who was going to be on it and answered questions about whether or not I’d had any bites from any labels. It was hard for me to tell the truth, but I did my best and in an hour, I was three beers deep with, Matt Hutton, a friend from college that I hadn’t seen in over a decade. We’d both played rugby with Jimmy and ran our heavy plows through the hardened soil of his name and what had happened only a few weeks earlier.

I shook my head. “I mean, it’s fucked up, really, to think about it. The last time he and I and you were together, “ I said, “we were drinking Brass Monkey on Wells, right in front of The Annex. Remember?”

“I do,” he said, eyebrows perched, a slight swagger to his nod. “I do.” His tone dipped and he drifted silent. The sounds of the festival exploded everywhere around us. We were in our own, little, carved-out space. “I loved that guy. Big time.”

“I know,” I followed. “And remember how we polished that bottle that Floyd had and then for a moment I thought we were out until Jimmy pulled another bottle out of the back of his pants?”

He laughed.

“And,” I added, “it was only when he was drunk that I would remember that he lived in New Hampshire. I mean, his accent was nowhere until he got a bit shined. Then,” I continued, “it was thick as syrup. *Blahh-ak,*” I mocked, “*I gawwt yah. I got yah.*”

And he did, always.

REWIND
TRACK FOUR: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 3, 1983
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: ST. ELIZABETH ANN SETON, PATRICIA BLACK, THEODORE BLACK,
GOSHEN TOWNSHIP, GARRETT EVANS, AMBER MCKAY, CHILD
ABDUCTIONS, SNUFF FLIMS, JASON BELLAN, MATT BELLAN, GMC
VANDURA, CHARLIE SIEPELT, JOEL MUSKOVICH, ST. XAVIER HIGH
SCHOOL FOOTBALL, JASON MUSKOVICH, TERRACE PARK POLICE, GMC
SAFARI, COACH STEVE SALVO

Tyne Black had barely even started fourth grade—barely climbed to the top of the mole hill that was St. Elizabeth Ann Seton—when his mom and dad sat him down in the living room. They were in the upstairs living room, which was usually reserved for punishment. Being in that room meant confinement to the beige chair—the only piece of furniture in the entire room—for 15, 20, 30 minutes, sometimes an hour, until the oven timer let off its buzzy, broken chime and gave me, or Kyle, our freedom. At least until the next fuck-up.

But today was no punishment. Patricia and Theodore were both there in the living room, as well, kitchen chairs in tow. Tyne's brother, Kyle, was downstairs busy with Lincoln Logs and army men. Even at 10, Tyne knew something was up.

They told him about vans and strangers and the bad, bad things that had happened in Goshen Township. Tyne worried. Garrett Evans lived in Goshen. So did Amber McKay.

“Some people—” his Dad fumbled, “bad people—have been doing things, taking kids.”

“Taking them where?” I asked.

“Not like a vacation, Tyne,” Mom chimed. “They take them and hold them in basements or rooms or vans. These are bad people,” she added. “They’re—well, they’re sick. Really sick and—”

His dad cut her off. “They’re kidnapping kids and taking them places, awful places,” he said. His words were like those boulders on Looney Tunes—they were heavy, big, and always reddish-brown. “And then,” he continued, every syllable a tractor trailer, “they’re making movies—making kids do things, doing things to kids.”

Tyne didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t even sure he understood what they were talking about.

“What we’re trying to say, Tyne—” Theodore glanced at Patricia, furtively, “is that kids are disappearing. People are stealing them and these sick, sick people are making movies with these kids where they torture them—kill them—and then they’re selling them.” He paused. “Now,” he continued, “we don’t want to scare you, but we love you and we don’t want anything to happen to you.” He paused, again, but his breath betrayed his calm, strapped-down tone. “We just want you to be safe—to stay safe when you’re at school or playing with your friends or coming home in the neighborhood. We just want you to stay safe.”

Patricia picked up and told me about strangers, about people offering me things or telling me they’d take me home or that they had to give me a message from my parents about an emergency or something. Mom said that’s what they did. That’s how they got the kids—the kids who’d been killed.

“They used tricks like that, Tyne,” she stammered, her voice and the phrases she spoke nearly frozen solid. Tyne imagined that penguins lived inside her mouth. “The police,” she added, “they just caught some of the people—the sick people—up in Goshen. But ,they think there are others.”

“And,” his dad followed, “there probably are. Plus, it’s happened elsewhere. Not just there.”

The beige chair pressed into Tyne’s lower back. It threatened to buck him to the floor. It threatened to drown him in the awful, brown carpet piles.

Tyne had bad dreams for the next two weeks. He dreamed about the walk home from where the school bus dropped him and Scooter and Matt off up on Buckwheat Road.

For years after that conversation, he checked every room and closet, the garage, the bathtubs, showers, and under each of the beds. He did this every day after school, a kitchen knife in tow. Tyne would get home a good hour before his mom.

Tyne Black would keep that kitchen knife in the couch cushions, tucked between the seat and the back, as he watched cartoons. He’d press his back sideways into the couch and listen to the noises that came from around the house. He’d glance toward the front door as *G.I. Joe* or *Transformers* played out a different, less anxious drama on the TV screen.

Every day, first through fourth grade, Tyne Black and the two Bellan kids—Scooter and Matt—walked from Buckwheat Road all the way home through the entire neighborhood. They had to make that walk because Charlie Siepelt—the Milford Exempted school board president—wouldn’t allow the bus to drop them off at their houses. There were schedules to keep, he’d said, and he couldn’t have the village school busses arriving late at the elementary school just so he could do door-to-door service for some Catholic school kids.

So, Tyne and the Bellans walked. Patricia Black wrestled with Charlie Siepelt over the phone. The bus dropped Tyne, Scooter, and Matt Bellan off at the corner of Buckwheat and Blue Ridge, right next to the *Shenandoah Trace* sign.

Buckwheat was a rural route—a highway—and most days, even though Tyne and the Bellan kids weren't supposed to, they'd sneak across to the Carry-Out and buy baseball cards, Sweet Tart lollies, or Fun Dip. Their moms weren't around and wouldn't know. Sometimes, they'd have to walk a half-block down Blue Ridge—sometimes almost all the way to Mt. Vernon—then turn around to get to the carry-out since Tyne's mom had told the bus driver not to let them cross Buckwheat to go to the Carry-Out.

The walk from Buckwheat to their houses—Scooter and Matt lived on Patrick Henry and Tyne lived one street farther away on Manassas Run—took about a half-hour. Scooter was a year older than Tyne, but he'd been held back, and Matt—whose real name was Curtis—was a year younger than Tyne. Scooter's real name was Jason, but nobody really called him that. Neither one of the Bellans played sports, but they were Tyne's neighborhood friends ever since the Blacks had moved in four years earlier.

The three of them always walked together—mornings and afternoons—unless Scooter's and Matt's mom picked them up at school in the Econoline. Tyne never rode with them, never got to sit in the custom captain's chairs. Most days, though, the three of them paraded down Blue Ridge together. Tyne would talk baseball and they'd tell him about trips to their grandmother's in Mississippi or what it was like when they lived in Virginia.

That day started the same as any afternoon: the bus stopped and Matt, Scooter, and Tyne piled out at Buckwheat and Blue Ridge. It was hot. October hadn't quite yet worn down the strains of summer. It was lucky that they were all together. It was lucky that Mrs. Bellan hadn't picked up Matt and Scooter in the Econoline. Then, Tyne would have been alone. It was lucky that they didn't go to the Carry-Out that day. Or, maybe they should have gone to the Carry-Out

and then they'd have missed them—missed the van and the sick. But, maybe they wouldn't have. Maybe they wouldn't have been paying as much attention if they had gone to the Carry-Out. Maybe they'd have been talking about cards or looking at what they just got. Maybe they'd have been contemplating trades or doubles or the ruthless torture of pack full of commons.

Tyne, Scooter, and Matt were just south of Mt. Vernon, coming up on Jeb Stuart, when a rusty, white panel van—a GMC Vandura pulled up. Both hubcaps were missing on the sidewalk side and it bumped the curb as it pulled up in front of Farfsing's. Tyne stopped; they all did. They watched as the van's sliding door opened. The driver was messy and greasy and none of them really looked at him even though the passenger window was about three-quarters of the way open. The back of the van was mostly bare and the now-open door revealed stray carpet remnants rolled and frayed, baby-shit green and burnt umber. Perched between the door frames was the single scariest man any of them had ever seen. His face was framed by uneven curtains of stringy black hair, his chin ripe with acne and stubble. His eyes were wild and his teeth seemed to have been filed to thin points.

“Hey kids,” he yelled, his voice hoarse, tongue sandpaper rough, “want some candy?”

It wasn't a question, but Tyne didn't pause to give an answer. He saw the man's black, Reebok high-tops step from the van. His laces were long and united, and the tongues of those high-tops slapped against his shins. He wore stained jean shorts and the wiry, dark hairs on his legs stopped at his knobby, skinned knees.

Tyne grabbed the top strap of Matt's backpack and yanked. Scooter screamed. Tyne barked for Scooter to follow him and Matt as they broke through Farfsing's backyard. They ran

under the swing set—the one with the missing slide and the rusty, sharp metal trapeze bar that stayed put even though no one was ever allowed to go on it.

They hit the woods in a dead sprint. Tyne pushed both of the Bellans and glanced over his shoulder to see the sick jump back in the Vandura. The sliding door was still half-open and its hinge pin slapped against the frame. The sound ricocheted in a hollow, heavy manner. It was a sound Tyne Black would never quite be able to forget. From the edge of the woods, he could see the Vandura duck into cul-de-sac after cul-de-sac—Jeb Stuart, Stonewall Jackson, then Patrick Henry—searching, scouting for them. Tyne pushed Scooter and Matt deeper and deeper into the thrush. The sound of the Chevy’s motor and its knock-knock-kick disappeared as he and the Bellans got closer and closer to the corn field.

“We can’t,” Matt huffed, his voice sharp with the push of fear and the sprint. “Not in the corn field. My mom—,” he stuttered, “she won’t—she says never—”

Scooter stood frozen, too, the same way his brother had on the sidewalk moments ago.

“It’s a fucking kidnapper van, Matt,” Tyne railed. His voice was a straight 50/50 mix of fear and venom, and he wouldn’t let it go for fear that somehow that Vandura would explode through the brush and swipe them up and off to Goshen.

“We gotta go. Now,” Tyne said. He tempered his voice, but not the tone or the desperation.

Tyne’s aunt lived on Jeb Stuart, in the cul-de-sac, but the Vandura had already gone there. They’d seen it and could still go there again; it might have been there at that very moment. Tyne knew where his aunt’s spare key was, but they couldn’t risk it. His own key lay cold against the

hot space of his chest. It was the spot where his heart beat a out-of-time like the drums in those songs Jason Litmer played—the ones he called *punk*.

“Scooter,” Tyne yelled, “c’mon. Fucking say something. We gotta go.”

Tyne stared at both of them. His gaze cut through them. “You know what those guys wanna do? What they’ll do if they catch us?”

Tyne could tell they didn't and he couldn't be the one to spoil them. He wouldn't be the one to ruin what was left of the innocence in their world. It'd been lost for Tyne, and for some reason he couldn't understand, he needed both them to keep it. Tyne knew that once it was lost, it couldn't ever be put back.

Of course, Tyne knew that they'd all been through that field before and Matt was right, they shouldn't go in there. It wasn't safe, but for different reasons. Tyne decided that they'd be all right as long as they didn't hear the clack and chug of the farmer's tractor. That tractor, of course, brought the farmer and his salt gun. That salt gun always ended in welts and stumbles and the sting of arms or legs or necks. It had happened, many times. There were times when Tyne and his friends would tempt it for fun or foolishness or a mix of both. This time, things were different. This time cutting through that field was a necessity. So, they pushed forward, ears pitched for the rumble, noses keen for the smell of diesel exhaust. Their feet worked to find the furrows and to stay low. This proved difficult, though. The corn stalks were mostly broken and yellow-brown.

Tyne went first, then Matt, then Scooter. The Vandura and the sick were never far from their minds. Their steps were careful, but hurried. They rushed to get home, but not for snacks or

shows. They rushed for something different. They rushed for the silence. They rushed for safety and locked doors.

It should have been so easy, so quick. Tyne plan to take them through the corner of the field and then they'd nearly be at his house. From there, Scooter and Matt would be able to cut through Tyne's backyard to theirs. Tyne could almost imagine burying himself in the silent depths of the downstairs couch. But then Matt fell and tumbled down against the rough chunks of dirt.

They heard it all at once: The rumble of the tractor. They imagined the angry tires as they gripped the earth around the perimeter of the field and closed in on them. The farmer had groomed a track about ten-feet wide around the field. He'd use that to get to them. Tyne and the Bellans had to cross that track to get back to the woods.

Tyne looked up and saw the track. It was twenty feet away. Thirty feet separated them from the shelter of the woods and brush that would eventually empty the three of them onto Tyne's street, onto Manassas Run. Thirty feet separated them from relative safety, but each of them froze and listened to the rattle of that old John Deere. The rumble grew louder and louder and Tyne knew the farmer was close. Tyne shook his head as Scooter angled to bolt. Matt was wholly unsure.

Before they could adjust, before any of them could calculate, he was upon them. The rattle and fumes were so strong now that even their voices disappeared. They got swallowed by the stir of silk and tassels and stalks that were, by then, mostly meaningless.

The salt gun snapped across everything; its pellets and spray ripped through the remnants of that summer's crop. Without a plan, the three of them ran for the woods. It was only thirty feet

away, but the salt pellets came from everywhere. They came over shoulders and heads, across bent backs and scrambled legs. The pellets chased feet twisted and dirty in navy-blue school pants. The pellets pumped out of the farmer's air rifle toward light-blue oxfords that rushed and raced away. At least the farmer's aim was for shit. Maybe, the farmer never actually intended to hit them. Maybe the times he did were by accident. Maybe his aim was perfect.

In his backpack, Tyne had a baseball. It was a Rawlings from Riverfront—a foul ball gathered almost accidentally from the ramp that led up to the terrace level. It was a foul ball that had caromed away from outstretched arms and hands. That ball was a wild card. Tyne thought that if he needed to, he could use it against the sick. He tried not to think of them. He tried not to consider what would, what could happen if they were out there by Caudell's on the other side of the woods. Tyne tried not to think about them in front of Patrick's old house, across the street from his own. Tyne thought, though, that he could throw it, throw it as hard as Nolan Ryan and hit them in the head. That would, he thought, buy them some time. It would give them some space. Tyne thought that if it had to, that baseball could save them. If they needed it to, that baseball would save them from the sick.

Tyne Black had read, just a few weeks ago, that every single Major League baseball, before it was packaged and shipped for use in a big league game, was rubbed in Lena Blackburn Baseball Rubbing Mud. The mud was obtained from a secret location somewhere close to Palmyra, New Jersey. That "magic mud" helped to remove the sheen from a baseball. It also helped to protect and strengthen it, as well as make it tamper-proof. The mud was valued so much, Tyne read, because it didn't compromise the softness of the leather cover, the integrity of the stitching, or the essential whiteness of the ball, itself.

They made it. Made it before they even knew it. Matt, Scooter and Tyne ran at full speed. They ran over stumbles and trips. They ran straight through the woods, past the Caudell's house. Their shoes cut across the grass Mr. Caudell cut so carefully, on an angle. Their gym shoe soles slapped on the pavement. Their soles raced across the bleached asphalt towards Tyne's house.

The van and the sick were nowhere to be seen. It had vanished to the space of bad dreams and nightmares. But, Tyne didn't go inside right away. His eyes darted up and down Manassas Run as he told Scooter and Matt how they couldn't ever tell their parents what had happened—what they'd done. Scooter and Matt nodded silently. Their gazes plowed the sod beneath their feet and Tyne repeated himself.

“We can't ever tell,” Tyne said. His eyes were narrow like he imagined a hawk's to be shortly before a kill. “We can't ever tell them about any of this.”

“We won't,” Scooter finally answered, his eyes first on Tyne, then on his brother's washed-out face. “We can't. They wouldn't understand.”

Tyne knew Scooter and Matt were more concerned about the farmer and our forced trespass than the van and the sick. He let them stay there, in that space. Tyne knew that if he said anything to his parents, he might not ever be able to go outside again. At least not the way he'd grown used to. He knew he'd have to wait at the school until somebody could pick him up. He knew he'd have to bear the weight of the sick. Tyne knew that he didn't want anything to do that.

A few weeks after he and the Bellans ran from the van, Tyne's mom found the knife he'd tucked between the couch cushions when he was home alone. Tyne must have forgotten to put it away, to put it back behind the juicer and the spatulas, behind the SuperShooter attachments.

“What the hell are you doing with this knife?” Patricia charged. “And why is it in the couch, Tyne?” Her tone leaked exasperation. “I found it in the couch. The. couch.”

Tyne told her about the possibility of break-ins. He told her how kids got kidnapped straight from their houses, sometimes. Tyne Black watched his mom’s eyes cut perforations around his arms and shoulders. He watched as her lips pursed and then loosened only to purse again. Tyne watched as she crossed and uncrossed her arms and then told him that if I didn’t feel comfortable enough to stay at home by himself without a kitchen knife that she wouldn’t be able to work anymore. She told him she’d have stay home.

“Because,” she added, “we just can’t afford to have a babysitter here all afternoon. Plus,” she pushed, “you’re too old for a babysitter. You’re a sixth grader, Tyne. A sixth grader.”

Tyne nodded, silently.

“And if I can’t work—if I have to stay home with you because you can’t be here alone without a knife in the couch or whatever—then we’ll have to sacrifice the vacations. We’ll have to cut the presents and the special things, the things we do that I know you enjoy.” She angled her chin lower, her eyes meeting Tyne’s just above the crests of her thick frames. “If you can’t do it, Tyne, we’ll have to make adjustments. You can’t be worrying. You can’t be putting knives in the couch. Someone could get hurt.”

REWIND
TRACK FIVE: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: AUGUST 9, 1989
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: JOEL MUSKOVICH, ST. XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL, JASON
MUSKOVICH, TERRACE PARK POLICE, GMC SAFARI, COACH STEVE
SALVO, PATRICIA BLACK

Joel Muskovich lived somewhere in Sycamore. Tyne kind of knew the street, but not really the neighborhood. Joel lived the closest to Tyne of anybody who played football on the reserve side. His house, though, was still about 15 minutes from Tyne's. As a result, to get to Tyne's house, Joel had to drive right past his own house for about 15 minutes, each way. It was a half-hour, roundtrip.

Still, Patricia Black convinced his mom to have Joel come and pick Tyne up, as well as drop him off everyday during two-a-days. Tyne payed Joel for gas from the checks he got working at McDonald's.

Somehow, and Tyne not sure exactly how the math worked out, Joel had turned 16 in early-July and could drive. He had a Hyundai Excel hatchback and dated a girl he worked with at Kings Island. She was a college girl from UC. She gave him a Violent Femmes tape—the one with “Blister in the Sun” and “Add It Up”—and Tyne and Joel wore that thing out driving back and forth to St. Xavier—Clermont to Hamilton County and back again—five, sometimes six, days a week.

Joel played on the line and started; Tyne didn't do either. Joel was tall and lanky and had already begun shaving by the time August rolled around. Joel's brother had played at X, too, and then had gone on to Notre Dame. Jason, Joel's brother, graduated four years earlier and was a lawyer or something—a broker, maybe—in Chicago.

Even though Joel and Tyne were reserve and only sophomores, during two-a-days they ran with the varsity. Coach Salvo had lit into Joel that day over something stupid. Joel had blown an assignment on a hot read.

“Joel,” Salvo spat. His east coast, Italian accent rang off the corrugated steel walls of the natatorium, which butted against the lower practice fields. “What the fuck? Is there a goddamned brain in there or what?” Salvo tapped out sixteenth notes on Joel’s helmet with his wedding band. “It’s a hot read and you’ve got the linebacker—the blitzing linebacker.” Salvo motioned to Shawn Page, the back-up quarterback, who stood a few feet behind Joel. Page spun the football on his index finger. “Right now, Page is in the goddamned hospital because of your blown assignment.” Salvo pulled Joel close, his gnarled hands tightly threaded through Joel’s blue, plastic face mask. “The hospital,” Salvo repeated, “because of you,” he pointed. “Get the reads together, Muskovich. Now.”

The rest of the day, Salvo mostly left Joel alone.

On the way home, the Femmes blew out of the speakers. *When I’m out walking*. Suddenly, Joel stopped the tape.

“That guy hates me. Absolutely fucking hates me.”

“Who?” Tyne asked.

“Salvo, man,” he replied. “Who else?”

Tyne nodded. The Excel clattered across the railroad tracks that ran along 126. “Yeah,” Tyne said. “He laid into you pretty fucking bad today.” Tyne’s finger absently picked at the weather stripping that ran down the window toward the passenger-side mirror. “What was that all about?”

“I dunno,” Joel answered. He paused and seemed to reconsider. “I guess it’s probably on account of my brother.”

“Your brother?”

“Yeah,” he continued, “Salvo hated Jason, too.” He turned onto Ibold and maneuvered the car up the winding hill. Stray leaves and sunlight attacked the windshield. “I don’t even know why, either. Jason was a stud for him.” Joel turned onto Price and the car skated over 275. “I think it might go back to my brother’s junior year when he got fucking kidnapped.”

“What?” Tyne exclaimed. “Kidnapped?”

“Yeah,” Joel laughed. “Jason got kidnapped by these dudes who must not have known what they were doing. Plus,” he added, “my brother was—is—a bad-ass. They fucked with the wrong dude. Anyway,” Joel continued, “they tried to grab my brother while he was out running, down there, down Loveland-Maderia.” He motioned behind them to the long gone highway. “They grabbed him off the road outside of Miamiville where there’s nothing and they pushed him in the back of their van.”

“They fucking got him inside the van?”

“Exactly. But check this out,” Joel said. “They were driving this fucked-up GMC Safari. You know, those mini-vans—the ones with the little ladder on the back and the fucking skylight for whatever reason.”

Tyne smiled and nodded. The Sponsels, his neighbors across the street, had one.

“So they get him inside and Jason’s trying to fight and stuff and there’s only two of these idiots. One guy’s in the back with Jason and the other dude is driving. Anyway, Jason somehow manages to kick the fucking skylight off of the van.”

“The skylight?” Tyne asked. “Like out of the van? Through the roof?”

“Yep,” Joel said, “Out of the van, through the roof.” He turned onto Bramblewood. “And so the skylight flies up and explodes on the road in front of the van. Somehow it went forward or whatever—the wind, I guess. But then the dude driving freaks out and swerves, which causes the other guy that my brother was wrestling with in the back to fall over. So, Jason just starts pounding on this fucker. He smashed the guy’s head against the door panel until the dude was a bloody mess.”

Tyne stared at Joel, his mouth open.

“Right,” he pointed. “So then, the other guy—the driver—pulls over and tries to come at Jason with a knife, but Jason just clocks that asshole and boom, he’s out cold. One fucking punch.”

“What did he do?”

“Well, then he sees these rolls of duct tape sitting on the passenger seat in the front. I guess these guys were going to tape Jason up or something. So, he decides to use it on them. He fucking tapes ‘em all up and drives their van to the Sycamore cop shop and turns these assholes in.”

“What the fuck?” Tyne stammered.

“Right? it’s fucking crazy,” he followed. “So, anyway, after that Jason sat out for awhile. I guess because it was his senior year, Salvo thought he was begin a pussy or something. X lost like three of their first five games.”

Tyne shook his head.

“So then Jason comes back and X wins out, but Salvo never really forgave him. Thought he sandbagged it.” Joel slid the Excel into Tyne’s driveway. His hand tapped nervously on the top of the steering wheel. “Fucking guy gets kidnapped right before the season when he’s out training on his own—on his own—then the coach thinks he’s a pussy for sitting out a few games after he beats up his own kidnappers.”

“Salvo’s a fucking asshole,” Tyne charged. “A total dick.”

“I know,” Joel echoed. “I know.” He stared out the driver’s-side window for a minute and silently contemplated the side of Cashman’s house—the brick and fireplace, the long, lazy, split-rail fence. “I just wish he’d leave me the fuck alone. I mean, it was my fucking brother almost eight goddamned years ago.” He shook his head. His lips snarled. “Fuck that guy.”

Tyne tried to say something. He probably should have, but just left it, instead.

“All right, well,” Joel said, finally. “I’ll catch you tomorrow. Six right?”

“Fuck,” Tyne answered, suddenly aware of the obnoxiously early call. It was the tenth in a row. “Yeah, six. Okay, I’ll see ya then. Thanks again, man.”

Joel shifted into reverse, let out the clutch, and slipped down the driveway. Tyne watched him as he drifted out onto North Shadow Hill Way. Joel pulled away and the Femmes spit, *Day after day, I get angry.*

FAST-FORWARD
TRACK FOUR: THE WEIGHT OF ENDLESS POSSIBILITY

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 2, 2016
LOCATION: NEW YORK, NEW YORK
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: MANHATTAN, MIDTOWN, EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING, RENAISSANCE
TIMES SQUARE,

As Tyne turned and looked once more at Cass, asleep on the massive roll-away in the dark suite, he wondered about the things that drifted around inside his son's head—the things that Cass didn't talk about. These unspoken things were the things that most likely would leave pock marks on the face of Cass's experience, things that would undermine his sense of safety, his ability to trust and be happy. Tyne hoped that he was making too much of it. He hoped that Cass would fear that great, empty space that would certainly develop within him. Tyne hoped that Cass would be more like Emma. He hoped Cass would be easy with words and a sense of who he was, of where he was. Tyne hoped that Cass, unlike himself, would more easily concede to Emma's observations. He hoped Cass would allow space for the threads Emma worked so hard to sew within herself and to cultivate in others.

Tyne smiled as he entered the other room, its walls populated by the sounds of Emma typing. The hen-peck of her nails rattled on the tiny, island keys. He watched as she worked quickly and patiently. He watched as she steadily strung together thoughts and universes both broad and deep. He couldn't wait to read them.

PLAY
TRACK ONE: ECHO/GOLD

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 19, 2014
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: JARED KOLBY, WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, HAZELDEN

He was in my class: *ENG 207, Creative Writing*. We met on Wednesday mornings. His name was Jared Kolby and he'd registered early, but always came late. At the seven-week point, he hadn't turned much in. What he had submitted burned me like a fire. His words were loaded and they screamed from the page.

He said he'd smoke primos. *Roll 'em the fuck out* was how he put it, then hop on his bike and cruise city's elevated highways. He start on the Marquette—north, south, west, whatever—and then hit 794 to the Hoan. He said he'd cut through the Port's half-clover, then get back to the Hoan and retrace his tracks back over 794. The city, he said, would whirl like Ferris wheel. His told me how his eyes would break in and out of focus. His fingers gripped the handlebars tight. Most of the time, he said he rode without a helmet. He said that most of the time he didn't wear a jacket, either. He told me this one time he rode with no shoes. Always, he said, he kept the throttle jacked on his matte-black Ducati.

“I was always looking for more.”

“One night,” he told me, “I bailed. I hit a seam in the pavement. One of the rubber accordion things between the bridge sections. You don't really notice those in a car at 60. They're deadly, though, on a bike at 90 or 115.” He shook his head and stared out the windows at the gravel roof of the H-Building. “I went cock-eyed,” he continued. “Locked it up and skidded. I slid all the way across traffic. Four lanes. It was late, luckily, and there wasn't much traffic.” His voice shook. “I hit the wall—one of those concrete barriers—and my bike blew up. I shot over

the side—the side of the high-rise. I would've fallen about six or seven stories except for that they were painting the bridge and had strung these nets underneath. The fucking net caught me. Saved my life. Somebody must've seen my wrecked bike—or what was left of it—because they called the cops and a gang of EMTs came and fished me off that thing. All I remember was the wind. It was fierce—cold and merciless. The buildings and smokestacks looked like arms, too. I thought for a moment that they might grab me.” He paused and pulled off his glasses. “I watched,” he continued, “the EMTs come down, over the side. I think, then I must’ve passed out. Four months in the hospital, plus another six weeks in court-ordered rehab and I could walk, talk, and remember most things.”

"Jesus," I said. "I'm, I'm glad—"

"Yeah. Thanks," he replied.

I got it, kind of.

"But here's the fucked-up thing," he added.

I squinted at him, trying to size up the transition, not sure exactly what to expect. He said that when his bike exploded, pieces went everywhere.

“They went all over the road. Into the oncoming lanes, everywhere.”

"Fucking hell." The words came mostly on reflex. "Jesus," I added. "Well, good thing it was so late."

“Yeah, right.” His voice was as calm as cup of tea. “There wasn’t much traffic, but there was some.” He stopped, exhaled, and continued. “A rented mini-van,” he said, “coming the other way, heading south. They left home early, trying to chop up their trip to Disney World. They were looking to make the 1,300 miles manageable.”

I stood there awestruck.

"They had two kids in the back. A boy and a girl. The boy was four, the girl, six. Abbey was her name and I guess her dad called her *Abbey Blue* or something."

"Oh, God,"

He nodded, paused, and took a series of deep breaths. The room we were in was otherwise empty and silent, save for the sound of the wind outside, mostly muted through the thick, closed windows. The fan in the ceiling-mounted projector hummed, now and again, as it worked to cool its bulb.

"My rear wheel—" he continued, "the chain drive and brake rod—they somehow broke clear in almost a single piece. The force of the impact against the concrete barrier, which sent me flying off the high-rise, caused that chunk of machinery to ricochet back the other way, into the oncoming lanes. That hunk of metal cut right through the back panel door of that mini-van. It got that little girl's legs." He started to cry, sobs choked and smothered with an awareness of where he was. He swallowed them and continued. "I saw pictures. A detective showed me them three weeks into my stint at Hazelden. I've never wanted to melt away, to disappear so badly."

He took another minute to gather himself. I placed my hand on his arm and nodded. Tears swelled in my eyes, too.

"She survived, I guess. Rolls around in a wheelchair, mostly. Sometimes, a walker. But, they don't think she'll ever be able to move on her own—ever be able to run or climb or any of that shit that kids do." His words were rushed now and as if to gather their reins, he scanned the ceiling. He had a bike messenger's bag strapped across his chest. He adjusted its strap and the way it weighed on his shoulder. There were massive, black *Xs* tattooed on both of his dorsa.

“She’ll never be free.” He pulled his glasses off again and wiped his eyes and cheeks. The tears gathered, again, and fell quickly. “Because of me, she’ll never know what it’s like to be free.”

I was speechless. My eyes flooded. Out in the hallway, people shuffled, their conversations muted by the closed door.

“And so here I am,” he continued. “Fucking trying to do something, something with this class and these stories—with my own stories. But it’s hard. It’s so goddamned hard and that’s my fault, I know. I feel like a total piece of shit complaining about what I got—about my deal—when that fucking kid is in that chair, day-in, day-out, just trying to make a go of it.” He cried again, this time without temperance.

I hugged him because that’s all I could do. I hugged him because it was what I thought he needed. It was what I needed. I hugged him because there’s more than enough to go around.

He choked out what remained inside him. “I just wanted you,” he said, “to know where I was at because—well, I think it’s important. It’s important for this class and what I might write.” He stopped short. “And, to give you a heads up why I haven’t turned much in—only those few assignments. Every time I sit down to do anything, this stuff comes up and I basically go to pieces.”

I nodded. “Thanks,” I said. “Look,” I continued, trying my best not to lose control of myself. “You’re incredibly brave and I can’t imagine what carrying that load is like. I just can’t. But,” I added, “you’re here and facing it. I mean, to even talk like this about what happened, about how you feel and what you’ve been through—it’s not perfect, but it’s a hell of a start. Healing isn’t instantaneous and, sometimes, it never comes at all. But,” I said, softly, “it’s got to

be a process, something to build on. It's fucking brave, man. So fucking brave. And," I added, "I think writing about it can help. Help to heal it." I shrugged. "If there is such a thing."

I saw him for the next two weeks, predictably late to class, yet always with sharp things to say. His comments cut to the core of matters. They always worked to paint other interpretations in a somewhat different light. But after those two solid weeks, he disappeared. I worked hard to track him down: Student Services, Admissions, the Bursar, even the Registration folks, but he was nowhere to be found.

The last thing he turned in arrived in late October, just as the weather made what would be its final charge. A string of 70-degree days lined itself up nicely amidst the turning leaves. The last assignment Jared submitted was a short story about freezing to death in Antarctica after hang-gliding over the Shackleton Ice Shelf. He put the words together just right. The picture he painted was painful and tender. He described his hands frozen tight to the lower trapezium, his body trapped in the harness after the crash. Then, he wrote about laying there and watching his last silver streams of breath cascade across the naked, blue, polar sky. He wrote about the lack of clouds, and about how his breath grew thinner and thinner until it finally disappeared.

I searched for him, as best as I could. I tried to find him, to call him, and make him come back. But, I couldn't.

These days, I mostly hope he can still follow his breath. I hope that he can still hear it in his chest. I hope, too, that I'll still follow mine. I hope that I'll be able to follow my breath and make some of these things I've seen and heard make sense.

PLAY
TRACK TWO: ECHO/GOLD

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 25, 2014
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: TRUTH, CURVEBALL, HITCH, CASS DARLING, EMMA DARLING, THEODORE BLACK, DISCONNECTION, EXPERIENCE, DESIRE, DESPERATION

I had a hitch in my swing. It was a sort-of hole that curveballs slid right through. It didn't happen every time, but it happened enough to make the Dodgers scout think twice. The Reds, too. And then there was Boston, San Diego, and Cleveland. I'm not entirely sure about Cleveland. He might not really have been interested, but just curious to see what I could do with the bat and find out if my speed and range in center was everything they talked about. Either way, he found out. Fastballs, change-ups, sliders: *Hits well. Good bat speed. Solid control. Rarely breaks wrists. Pushes ball mostly. Less pull, but tailing, consistent, opposite-field balls. Stride good. Fielding range more than adequate. Explosive speed defensively, base-stealing threat. Great awareness of pitcher's delivery and jump. Throwing arm adequate, trouble with cut-off. Major issues with curveball. Has a hitch. Hole in swing a serious problem. Probable pass.*

I've got a new hitch, now. It's opposite, though. Opposite of how it worked with the curveball. Nothing fits through this new hitch. With my swing, the curveball fell through—disappeared—as I swung over it. This thing, this new hitch is different. It doesn't let me feel. The cassettes are on. They're loud. There's no learning. The one about being a fuck-up is the one that gets played most. It stays pretty much on repeat these days, and those sounds—those tracks—work to fill up the great, empty space at my core. They work to stifle and choke possibility.

I try to tell myself there's no hitch, that it's something else. I tried the same thing with the curveball hitch. I loaded up on excuses. Then, I couldn't anymore. I had to talk to Chris Abber, call Brad Ament. But I don't know who to talk to now, who to call. All I know is that I don't

want to pass this along to Cass. He doesn't have a hitch. He's not afraid of the space inside him. He's vulnerable. But, in watching me—watching me do what I do over and over again—he'll develop that fear—that hitch, too. I'm sure of it.

My dad was disconnected. Not always, but even in his connection, there was something that squirmed, something unsettled and desperate. I knew it. I saw it. I felt it for years and years. And, it wasn't that bad. He coached, he played catch, we painted and built trains, blasted model rockets that we sometimes lost in trees or to the flat plateau of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton's gravel-covered roof. I don't have any real scars to show or speak of.

But still, I want a different experience. I want a different experience for Cass than the one I had with my dad. I'm desperate to give it to him. I lay awake and wonder, *But what about me? I don't want to be a father like my father. I don't want to have to work myself to exhaustion, to be annoyed and short and over-tired and lost within the frames of what I should've, could've, might've done, if only. I want that possibility. I want to model that it's okay to be vulnerable, that it's okay to be insecure. No one has it all figured out, and that's okay.*

What about that?

I don't want to fall asleep during the evening news. I don't want to drift in and out. I don't want to be connected only when it's convenient. I don't want this hitch. I don't want these cassettes and their noise, their clunky weight. And, fuck these ghosts, too.

I wonder, *Where is the template? How do I resign experience with desire without killing myself and everyone else with desperation? How can I learn to be comfortable with the great, empty space of possibility at my center? How can I reprogram what I've mis-wired, what I've mis-learned?*

PAUSE

Since Cass was born, I've become an outlier at just about every playground we've visited. At nearly each and every one, morning, afternoon, I'm the only man. And, I'm mostly surrounded by female caregivers—mothers, sisters, nannies. Sometimes, I'm judged: *jobless, stay-at-home, divorced*. But, I'm none of those things.

Cass calls me *Papa*. I wanted to be something different. And, I am. I wanted to tug at the thread of *fatherhood*, of *Dad*, and yank it clean out. And, I have. I didn't want to replace it with anything, either. I just wanted to be something of my own. Something Cass and Emma are part of, too.

But still, I want more. I want to clear out more—to pull thread after thread. I want to stop these cassettes and their maddening tracks. I want to find the balance—a comfort with this great, empty space of possibility. I want to learn to do by not doing—not assembling, collecting, forcing, constructing scaffolds and threading tapes. I'm afraid, though, and anxious. I'm looking for a new sound, one I haven't heard before. I'm searching for a new feeling, one that's always been here, but one I've always worked to drown out, to cover up, rather than just letting it be.

REWIND
TRACK ONE: HOPE

TRACK RECORDED: MAY 4, 1986
LOCATION: LOVELAND, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CADILLACS, PAUL MESSER, IGA, PARIS, WORLD WAR II, KYLE BLACK,
THEODORE BLACK, VIRGINIA MESSER, ORLANDO REGIONAL MEDICAL
CENTER

My grandfather always had a whip; it was never just a car. At worst, he drove an automobile—Fleetwoods, Coupe de Villes. They were mostly Fleetwoods, and only once, by mistake, an El Dorado. They were always black, too. Maybe a couple, though, might have been midnight blue. Grandpa's Cadillacs had vogues, too. And that was way before anybody talked about vogues. I loved those cars. The backseat stretched forever like an Airstream or something. They had velour door panels and long, diamond-shaped lights on the truss between the frame and rear windshield. Every single one of them smelled the same. They all smelled like the VFW: cigarettes, Pabst, and wedding cake.

Sometimes, I'd slip off my seatbelt and sink low. I'd sink so low I'd disappear into the wells on the way to IGA. The massive V8 guided us on a drift down Ridge toward Highland, then bucked lightly over the railroad tracks. Its tires cut sideways into the parking lot, fangs in loose gravel. I looked forward to the crunch of that gravel through the closed doors, and I always tried to replicate it at home with my Matchbox cars. Grandpa would slide us into a parking space and a half, careful not to let the fins hang out. *Because somebody'll take 'em and that ain't right*, he'd say. *Jane Mansfield didn't die for nothing*.

There was always a toothpick in his mouth, pinched between his teeth. His thick, calloused fingers would pull them from a holder—a metal tube-thing he'd fashion—as he gazed at me through big frames and bigger lenses, cut with bifocal stripes. I held tight to his pinky finger

as we walked inside. Our pace was always measured by the steady shuffle of his wallet chain against his Dickies. Grandpa never wore jeans.

His name was Paul Messer and he'd married his high school sweetheart, Virginia, right after the war. He had a gnarly tattoo on his left forearm that I always thought was a spider. When I was really little, it scared the hell out of me. Mom told me that it wasn't a spider, but a rose and that grandpa got it in Paris, in the wake of the Liberation. I wondered about the Liberation and about Paris. Years later, though, I heard Mom and my uncle joke about the tattoo. They said that the rose was a cover-up; that's why the ink bled into a rotten mess. They said he drunkenly got some other woman's name tattooed on his arm after he marched down the Champs-Élysées behind General Patton. The rose paid off, though. He and Virginia were married for 64 years. The rose, I suppose, was subtle reminder of just how close he came to fucking it all up.

At their house in Pleasant Ridge—the one the church owned on the corner of Pandora and Woodford—everything smelled like rosewood. I loved to sit on his lap and listen to his choppy breath soaked in Pabst Blue Ribbon, spoiled by Camel extra wides. Golf was usually on the TV and if it wasn't, his friends were at the table with stories about their kids and nephews, about the colored kids they'd seen on the bus or up at the playground, about the price of gasoline, the Reds, or the weather.

My grandpa's hands were massive and not just because I was a little kid. They'd worked on pipes and wood crafts, on tanks and troop transports. They'd assembled and fixed weapons whose oiled steel I knew nothing about and whose devastation he hoped I'd never understand. His fingers were saplings that grew right out of from underneath of his boulder-like dorsa. His nails had been ruined by cleaner and age, by oil and sludge. The callouses on his palms and at the

bends of his fingers were thick and scratchy, but when they touched my arms or legs, I felt safe and protected.

When I was in sixth grade, I accidentally wished Grandpa dead. He had leukemia, and it must have been festering for some time, because shit went from bad to worse with him in a heartbeat. Either that or he just gave up; his big body so worn and tired from all he'd done that it just collapsed. He'd grown frail. His skin was a faded sort-of paste. His once massive body, an empty shell of his former self.

I didn't mean to do it. I didn't mean to kill him—to wish him dead. If I'd have known what I was doing, then I wouldn't have.

In our kitchen, after dinner one night, Dad painted a picture of what things would be like with him at our house. Dad talked about Grandpa's condition, the hospital instrumentation, the bed and tubes, the monitors and supplies. My grandmother, he said, would be there, too. Kyle would move to into my room. Grandpa would go upstairs into Kyle's room with all the equipment and things that had scared me to death when I saw them at the medical center in Florida. That equipment had scared the hell out of me, so I wished it away. I wished it far, far away. Maybe, I wished it to far.

We visited grandpa right after he got admitted. Everything in that room was white and loud as fuck. It all seemed so heavy but so white. It made me think of what might happen if two planets were to collide. Everything in and around me hurt.

I couldn't even look grandpa in the eye. The breathing tube in his nose was the worst, but I'm not really sure why. There was so much else in that room that was so much more disturbing. For the first time in my life, as I stood there in that room, Grandpa seemed small. And old, too.

But it was his fragility that cinched my fears tight, cinched them deep inside my darkest place. It balled them up tight and shoved them into a tiny compartment behind my belly near the small of my back. Grandpa had never seemed fragile before. In fact, he'd always been fragile's opposite. I watched him and knew he wanted out.

PAUSE

On September 25, 1965, Satchel Paige was called out of the Kansas City Athletics' bullpen late in the game. He came in and faced three Boston Red Sox batters. Paige was 59 years, 2 months, and 18 days old. He sat down two of the three batters he faced before Carl Yastrzemski smashed a double and Paige was yanked.

Before the game started, Paige sat in a rocking chair just inside the left-field foul line, as a nurse rubbed his pitching elbow with liniment. The shade of the Green Monster loomed large behind him and just barely touched his chair's motionless runners.

REWIND
TRACK TWO: HOPE

TRACK RECORDED: MAY 4, 1986
LOCATION: LOVELAND, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: PAUL MESSER, KYLE BLACK, THEODORE BLACK, VIRGINIA MESSER,
PATRICK MESSER, ROSARY, WORLD WAR II

Dad said Grandma would be downstairs in dining room. All of our stuff—the furniture and things that were there now—would be moved into the garage. The picture he painted was one of pure misery. There would be equipment everywhere, and I would be bunked up with Kyle when we'd finally just moved into a house where we could each have our own rooms.

Dad talked about how eventually Grandma's emphysema would confine her to a wheelchair. Then, he said that we'd need ramps and an extension on the back of the house. He said some other things, too. It was endless and it all seemed so horrible. I didn't want any of it to happen. So, I wished it wouldn't.

I left out the details. If I would have known it would happened just from wishing, I wouldn't have. I would've been more specific. I'd have wished Grandpa better. I didn't want him to die. I didn't expect him to die. All I wanted was to make the misery go away. Nobody needed to suffer like that. Nobody.

The phone rang late. A little chirp in the wilderness of our house, a house that hugged a lazy, sweeping street that ended, far away, in a cul-de-sac.

The phone never rang after nine. Not even for something at Dad's work. The emergencies there always happened on the weekends or right before we left for vacation. They never happened after nine.

My mom picked up. I'm not sure why I was in their room, but I was. The ring was amusing—a cricket with chest cold. The phone was brown and round, more like a football than a tele-

phone. When Mom said *Hello*, I was laughing, but her face told me I'd better shut up and immediately. Her eyes squinted, her lips pursed, and behind her glasses, I saw tears. I was pretty sure that was something I'd never seen.

My dad was there, too. He was messing with Kyle. They were playing some tickling game we'd made up. It was called *Wisconsin*. I'd played that same game when I was Kyle's age and had loved it as much as he did now. *Wisconsin*, apparently, was hidden underneath each of our chins, in the soft spot below the jaw line, but above our Adam's apples. Squirming and loads of laughter were always a by-product of a trip to *Wisconsin*.

Dad saw mom's face shortly after I did and the trip to *Wisconsin* halted. Kyle yelled and giggled for more, but Dad ignored him. I watched as Dad moved closer and closer to the bed, closer and closer to Mom, closer and closer to whatever was on the other end of that phone line. Whatever it was had a tight hold on Mom. It grabbed Dad, too. Soon, it would grab me, as well, but for different reasons.

I sat there while Mom nodded to Dad. Her eyes had been completely swallowed by tears. Somehow, they didn't fall but just gathered and gathered. They seemed so goddamned pointless. Suddenly, and without much warning, Dad broke down. I didn't really know what it was at first. I'd never seen someone break like that. The closest I'd seen was with my action figures or a paper plane. Dad just folded and then collapsed, his head on Mom's lap, his glasses off. Those thick, black frames surfed the folds of the quilt that always topped their bed, the one that was mostly white with a patterned stitch and the occasional flower bud. I stared as Dad shivered and shook, his hands tightly over his face. He pressed them deep into the spaces where I knew his eyes were or at least used to be. I stared as they each tried to untangle the news. Instead, they

tripped on words that wouldn't come easily, words that came slowly like water through a rusty, clogged, city park spigot.

I watched silently—Kyle, too—as Dad cried, too. I didn't know that that could even happen. I stared and watched. And waited.

Mom looked at me, then at Kyle, tears still gathered on her eyelashes. Her cheeks were dry. “Your dad's sad,” mom finally sputtered, “because now he doesn't have a dad.” She sniffled. “Grandpa was all he had.”

My face must've told her something I didn't intend. “Think about it,” she said, calmer than should have been possible, “how you'd feel with no dad, with no—”

Kyle cut her short. He was bounced high on their bed. He scattered pillows and bolsters. He even managed to work the fitted sheet away from the mattress corner.

Dad still cried. He was a muted shiver and shake. I looked at him again. For some reason, he seemed more confusing than sad.

Mom never finished, though, and those words just hung in the space between the blank beige walls, walls that traced the perimeter of every room of our house. They should have exploded—those words. I would have liked that. If I could have, I would have wished that they'd explode. But they didn't. They didn't explode. Instead, they just hung there and gathered weight.

I never told my mom or dad about the wish. I never told them what I'd done. I wished I hadn't. I prayed I hadn't, but it didn't help. I prayed *Hail Marys* and *Our Fathers* and now and then, *Glory Bes* or *The Prayer of St. Francis Xavier* just because I knew it and loved the way it sounded when I said *To fight and not heed the wounds*. I said them each on the beads of Grandpa's rosary—the one Grandma right after the funeral.

“He had that with him all through the war,” she’d said. I had no idea. The faded emerald beads dangled, frozen on the tarnished silver chain. “He carried that in his pocket,” Grandma said. “The one nearest his heart. He carried that through five countries, into Paris, and then back across the ocean into New York harbor.

I stared at it and nodded. She asked me if I’d like it. “But,” she cautioned, “it’s rosary, so you don’t wear it. Not like a necklace.” Grandma’s smile was thin and always seemed a bit sucked-in. “It’s for prayers,” she added. “For hope and comfort whenever you need it.”

REWIND
TRACK ONE: THE DELICATE ACT OF LOSING

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 11, 1985
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: D.J. LATTNER, MARC SPENCE, ST. BARBARA MIDDLE SCHOOL, TONY DEPRADA, IOWA BASIC SKILLS TEST, MILFORD MAIN, MS. BETH DOLSEN, OLLIE JONES

They beat the hell out of me. D.J. Lattner and those guys. Mostly, it was in the morning, before school even started. They'd get ahold of me throughout the day, too. After gym class, in the downstairs locker room at Milford Main. On the playground, under the basketball hoop in the corner. Sometimes, on the bus, though that was mostly just Tony DePrada and the kids from Main. But, I'd mouth off to them. I thought I might be able to push DePrada when he was alone. I'm not sure why; he was about a foot taller than me and dumber as hell. He cheated off me during the Iowa Basics. Made me move my arm and keep my paper so far forward that Ms. Dolsen had to have known what was up. I felt bad about it and pulled it back whenever Dolsen lingered. After she left, DePrada kicked me under the table. At first, it was kind of light and I ignored it. Then, he did it harder and harder until I slid the paper forward. His size 11 Air Revolutions—the ones he laced straight and never ties—fucking hurt. He was an awful cheat, too. He would put his hand above his eyes like he was shielding the sun or something and lean forward. We took the Iowa Basics in the church basement there at St. Barb's. Sometimes, he'd lean too far forward and his metal folding chair would slide out from under him. Nothing is less conspicuous than a metal folding chair as it slides across a formica-tile, laminate floor.

For his all his annoyance, DePrada was pretty harmless. He got bored quick and eventually left me alone. D.J. Lattner was the worst, by far. He had a spike and a rat tail and wore this studded, leather bracelet he got from Marc Spence. It was too big for him, but so was Marc.

Marc had been in juvie four different times and skated a Christian Hosoi. Nobody else had a Hosoi. It was cut weird and the tail was wide as fuck. Marc was a bad ass, though, so no one said shit to him. He wore an army jacket with an Exploited back patch—the one with the skull and spikes and stuff.

D.J. got pretty tight with Marc after D.J.'s mom kicked D.J.'s dad out when she caught him fucking his secretary on the hood of her Audi Quattro wagon. After that, D.J. lived mostly with his dad. Right after it happened—right after the fight that sent D.J.'s dad packing for Houghton Glen, the new condos off of 28 behind the McDonald's and Thriftway— D.J. told us about it at recess. D.J. said he came out to the garage when he heard screaming and yelling. He saw his mom swinging one-handed at some woman—a woman who only wore a bra. D.J. said she didn't have on any underwear. “No skirt, no blouse, no nothing,” he added. His smile was machete-sharp.

“Was she hot?” DePrada asked.

D.J. whistled. His eyebrows arched and his eyes gleamed. “Smokin’.”

“But I don’t understand,” I puzzled. “Why was she swinging one-handed?”

D.J. laughed. That sharp smile cut between his cheeks. “Because she had dad’s dick in her other hand.”

D.J.'s dad called himself *Spud*. He was an asshole and he'd always try to coach us from the opposite side of the basketball court. The fan's side. He showed up to about every third game, always dressed in some brightly-colored, rayon sweat suit.

“What?” I fumbled.

“Yeah,” he laughed, “one-handed.”

Ollie Jones had already heard the story. He just stood there behind D.J. and shook his head.

“She had ahold of his fucking dick and was just trying to wail on this other bitch.” D.J. snorted. “She was fucking yanking him around by his cock. I could tell he wanted to clock her, but he couldn’t—his cock was still sorta hard and she was just squeezed it like a halftime orange and pulled him around.” D.J. gathered himself, slightly, then continued, “I gotta give it to her. It was fucking funny as shit.”

“Did she get the other girl?” I asked.

D.J. shrugged. “Who the fuck knows?” he spat. “I suppose the other bitch kinda got Mom, in the end.” His laugh was shrill and too violent. “But,” he added, “Mom got Dad’s dick. Just not in the way he wanted, but still, dick’s dick, right?” Everyone laughed. I wasn’t sure I got it, but I laughed anyway. It didn’t seem right to laugh. The whole situation was kind of sad and pretty fucked-up.

PAUSE

The theory—and I'm not exactly sure where it comes from, or worse, whether I actually fully understand it—is that consciousness creates the material universe, not the reverse. On the surface, that seems relatively simple, but in practice, it's a mind-fuck to the *Nth* degree. How can something non-physical give rise to and/or create something physical?

REWIND
TRACK TWO: THE DELICATE ACT OF LOSING

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 11, 1985
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: D.J. LATTNER, ST. BARBARA MIDDLE SCHOOL, OLLIE JONES, JASON FARMER, MATTY PAYNE

It was a Friday and a church day, so I didn't see it coming. They really got me good. Every other time, D.J., Ollie, Jason Farmer, and Matty Payne pushed me into the bathroom—the basement bathroom at St. Barbara's, the patron saint of land mines—and they just kind of pushed and punched me. Sometimes, they pulled at my coat or slammed me against the wall. That Friday was different. That Friday was one of those hitch points in a movie—a moment where everyone gasps, then nods silently in collective recognition concerning whatever's taken place.

We all gathered in the cafeteria before first bell. All of us would be down there: fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. It wouldn't take long before D.J. would rile the others up. That Friday, he cut straight to the chase.

“Come on,” he said. He always popped his knuckles or shook his hands out or something. Some days, they'd threaten me with a swirly. They never did it, though. Still, every time they grabbed me and dragged me into that stall and Ollie—because he was the tallest— cinched my neck with his meathook paws and pushed me down toward that rotten, porcelain bowl, I'd loose my shit. I'd almost cry. Every time it happened like that. Four or five times a week for months and months. I never did let myself cry. Not at school. I couldn't. Those assholes would have eaten me alive. Or, maybe they would've stopped and that would have been worse, somehow. At least when they did it, I had something. Even D.J. said one time, “Tyne can fucking take it.” His eyes were sharp, all his features jumpy. “He's a tough motherfucker. He can take it, but he just can't dish it out.”

REWIND
TRACK THREE: THE DELICATE ACT OF LOSING

RECORDED: OCTOBER 23, 1986
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
NOTES/TAGS: MR. NOAH HOWARD, ROBERT CORMIER, *THE CHOCOLATE WAR*, ST. BARBARA MIDDLE SCHOOL, MS. AMY LAUCH

It was Thursday, like a week before Halloween, and Mr. Howard called me in. He was the new fifth grade teacher who replaced Mrs. Ohun when she moved to California or Oregon or wherever.

I never had Howard—none of us did since we were already in seventh—but all the girls loved him. Something about his hair and his pants, I guess. I didn't really get it, but he did smell really good.

I sat there in the off-kilter, green plastic chair he'd set up next to his desk and rocked back and forth on a diagonal. I thought about what it must be like to be a teacher. I wondered if he had any idea what the girls said about him. I wondered if he'd be embarrassed if he did know. Maybe, I thought, he'd like it.

"Tyne," he said when I first walked in. "Thanks for coming by. I know you want to get out and play and that this is the last thing anybody wants to do during recess, but Ms. Lauch wanted me—mentioned to me—that she noticed some bruises on your arms and shoulders during gym last week."

"Bruises?" I replied sheepishly.

"Yeah," he said. "Is there anything you want to tell me?" He paused, but not nearly long enough for me to answer. I wasn't planning on it anyway, but still, if he expected an answer, he should have waited a little longer. But he didn't and I was glad because I had nothing to say. "Is there anything to want to say—about that or anything else?"

I shrugged.

“Look,” he continued, his voice rich and tender, despite the fact that about every other word or so seemed to get stuck in his mouth where it slowly, methodically wrapped around his tongue and then stretched so that his *Rs* and *As* and *Es*—only the short ones, though—sounded so strange that I found myself listening twice, maybe three-times as hard to him as I’d ever listened to anyone else before. “Things can be tough—” he swept the curtain of his perfect, jet-black hair away from his forehead and tucked his long, stray bangs behind his right ear. They stayed but everything else fell right back in nearly the same, exact place. “I know you don’t know me from anyone,” he continued, “but you can talk to me. You can talk to me and trust me.”

He leaned back in his chair and looked me over. His eyes moved slowly and I felt them scrape against me. I felt them strip off my clothes and pull back my skin. I stared down at my pants, into my lap and let my eyes fall in and out of focus amongst the tiny corduroy stripes. I didn’t like it. I didn’t like the way he looked at me, up and down. I didn’t like it at all. Still, I sat there silently and waited for him to say or do something, to stop staring at me. I wanted to tell him. I wanted to tell him how it made me feel, but I didn’t. I couldn’t.

“I’d like you to read something for me,” he said, finally.

“What?” I replied, unable to temper my surprise. I was mostly ready for anything, but being asked to *read* something was pretty unexpected. It was strange as hell, to be honest.

“Yeah,” he followed. “It’s this book—an essay of sorts and I think it might help you. Maybe give you something to talk to me about.” He smiled wide. His teeth were so perfect and white and straight. I suddenly became self-conscious of my own and touched them. As quickly as I touched them, I pulled my hand back under my leg and pressed it tightly between my school

pants and the seat of the chair. “And,” he added, “I’d like it if we could talk some more, okay? Would that be all right?”

Honestly, I didn’t care. I just wanted him to ask one question at a time, and if he cared—really cared—I wanted him to maybe, just maybe, give me like half a second to answer. Either way, I thought the whole thing was pretty weird. It was almost like he had some sort of agenda or something. Really, I guess, I just wanted to tell him to *fuck off* or something. Maybe, just not ever go back in there with him. But still, he was pretty nice. Actually, he seemed really nice. And, he smelled great. I suppose he must’ve cared a lot about me or something because he’d gone to all this trouble. He was even going to give me some book to read.

“Sure,” I said. I kept my eyes low and away from his. For whatever reason, I wanted—needed—to keep him at a distance. I could feel him, though. I could feel the weight of stare. It waited for me. It baited me.

When I finally did look up, he had it in his hand and he held it out. It was a book, a sort-of thin one with a cover that showed a kid with a huge shadow. I took it slowly and turned it over once, then again, before I opened it. I paged about a third of the way through and closed it up.

“Mr. Howard,” I fumbled, handing the small book back to him. “What’s this?”

He smiled. “It’s called *The Chocolate War*, Tyne. I think it might be able to help you, kind of.” He was a bit unsteady with his words and I wondered what he was up to. He seemed legit, but I wasn’t sure about him. He did seem to care a lot. I liked him if only just for that.

“Thanks,” My eyes returned to the book.

“Will you come back and see me next week—next Thursday—before you go out for recess?”

“Sure, Mr. Howard. I will.”

“And do you think—but only if you're comfortable with it—we could talk a little bit about that book and what you thought, what you feel about it?”

“I guess,” I answered. My voice was scarcely whisper. I shuffled to the door.

“And Tyne,” he said.

“Yeah?” I turned on the balls of my feet to face him.

“Just be honest and trust it, okay?”

“Trust what, Mr. Howard?” I asked.

“The book,” he said. “*The Chocolate War*. Don’t give up on it, okay? Don’t give up on the words, the ideas in there, okay?”

“Okay, Mr. Howard,” I replied. “I will.”

I pulled open the door to the sound of the entire school out on the playground. It was like a riot the way it caromed through the windows, open just a bit at their tops.

“And Tyne?” Mr. Howard’s voice startled me. I thought the door had closed. “One last thing.”

I turned, again. His face was rich and swollen with a wide, honest smile.

“Thanks.”

PAUSE

At some point, maybe around seventh grade, Tyne Black became obsessed with prime numbers: a number divisible only by itself and 1. The concept seemed so lonely, so hopeless. For Tyne, it was like never knowing another. Maybe, never knowing love. *But could numbers love?* he wondered. *And what about batting averages?* he thought. They were fractions of numbers, percentages based upon plate appearances, hits, errors, and chances. Certain things were exempt; sacrifices and walks didn't count. Fielder's choices counted, but they counted against. They were a negative.

It was a long year, followed by another and then another. To say he felt stuck between stations would be as much of an understatement as it would be accurate. Everything seemed to explode before his eager eyes. The cassettes kicked on and off. Tyne got used to them. He anticipated them and learned to compensate.

PLAY
TRACK TWO: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 15, 2014
LOCATION: QUEENS, NEW YORK
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: LAGUARDIA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, 2A, THE LIBRARY, LOWER EAST SIDE, JON ADAM, STAR WARS, ALLIANCE STARBIRD, GALEN MAREK, LEIA ORGANA, THE LUDOW, HBO, KEVIN MYLAND, NEIL'S

They kept the airport open past curfew. Beneath us, the runway was wild darkness. It stood in stark contrast to the burgeoning riot of lights and glass to the right. Up ahead, the diamond sky framed the gloss and polish of New York.

The gear dropped and we touched down smoothly. I made my way through eerily vacant maze of LGA. I had a rental waiting and nothing to retrieve from the carousel. My merch and guitar were strapped tight to my back. I texted Jonny and hatched a plan to meet at The Hammerstein.

By the time I hit the Queensboro Bridge, the plan had changed. Another text came and after that, a phone call. The plans reformed and took shape.

I slid the rented, black Ford right into the dirty bucket of the Lower East Side. My boot strides sounded clever as they made their way to the corner of 2nd and A.

There was an after-party for Joan Jett that doubled as a birthday party for a guy who shot pictures for Spin. I met some idols. The 16 year-old me was in heaven.

I thought about what I should say to people. I considered this chance and who these people were. The cassettes blasted. The ghosts prodded, too. Luckily, the LES was in full-swing and louder and wilder than they could manage. I loved the City. Without even trying, it drained out the cassettes. It suffocated all the nonsense. Muted mostly, the ghosts still carried on, but I chose the City. I chose the moment. In the end, I told them all I was *Tyne*.

I was exhausted and had two sets tomorrow, both unofficial, and a third on Saturday. The obvious and important realities were always the ones seemed the hardest ones to admit, much less talk about.

It was late—and early. I made my way out of 2A and down to The Library. For a moment, before I went in, I just stood there on Avenue A and stared south. Jonny called my name through the open windows and I went inside. At the bar, I ordered drinks from a woman in a crop-top. Both of her wrists were tattooed with the Alliance Starbird—the orange symbol of Galen Marek, Leia, and the other Rebels. It was meant to be a rising phoenix, a symbol of hope.

So, there I was, in the arms of a city manageably wide, but unfathomably big. It was a city whose sole function may have been to make me just a little more certain of the fact that it was me who locked me up.

The next morning, everything seemed too early. My eyes felt hemmed in like a hornet in a gauzy drape.

I walked down to The Ludlow with Jonny and we snuck some coffee and a pastry each. We weren't guests and we wouldn't be. Going there was my idea. I'd rationalized it, but didn't bother sharing those twists with Jonny. When we got inside, he sat down in front of the fireplace and checked his phone. I grabbed the goods from the bar. He looked up as I tipped the barman. His smile spanned the five boroughs.

The coffee was from Bowery and about as hot as I could stand. Jonny and I sat there on the red and black leather couches for about an hour and shot the shit. I had a meeting uptown with a music supervisor at HBO at 11.

Jonny and I split, and I rode a train uptown to Columbus Circle. As I entered the HBO offices, my head spun itself dizzy with the excitement and the weight of what might be—what could be. Upstairs, in an office nearly the size of the first-floor of my house, I talked to Kevin Lyman about syncs, about the new record, and about the licensing agreements he was sending to my agent later that afternoon.

I saw what could be. It was there, tacked up on boards in his office, in the other offices all over that building. It was written in dry-erase marker in the conference rooms perched high above the city. It was there on tablets and legal pads at their coffee bars. It was there on the phones of executives in tiled-wall bathrooms with Edison lights. It was in the conversations that happened on the way up and on the way down in the elevators with their touch-screens. I wanted it. I could taste it. I could feel it course in and around me. It was all I could do to stay on the ground for the showcase that evening and the late one after that.

After HBO, I went to Neil's at 70th & Lex. I ate and texted and talked to my agent. I called Emma and talked to her and Cass. They were raking leaves and Cass's voice bellowed in the background as he jumped in the piles. After I hung up, Emma texted me a few pictures. One particular photo caught me just right. Like the others, it was of Cass. He lay, face-up, in the massive leaf pile, his body, arms, and legs covered by the orange, yellow, red, and brown scraps. They were leaves, but in the picture, they looked like something else. I had to work to find it, but there, in the middle of the frame, poking through the leaves, was his bright, shiny, smiling face. I put my phone down and watched as the waitress, her skin pulled tight over a thin arm and a sharpened jaw, scribbled orders on a notepad. Between runs, she sat at the counter, a small stack of books in front of her.

I paid and glanced at what it was she was reading. It was D.H. Lawrence, “Escape”. The notes she’d written looked furious. The letters she formed ran quickly into one another. Written in pencil, they carved tiny, silver tracks all over the looseleaf page.

I watched as she grabbed a piece of pie from the cooler and maneuvered it amongst and over the other desserts, then out, into the air—the warm air—of the restaurant. It was apple. The crust looked thin and just the right amount of crispy. The filling was packed nice and tight. I watched that piece of pie as it sat on her serving tray, outside of the glass cooler. I felt a strange shiver of fright. I felt the unknown. I knew more than anything that things would happen. They already had. I knew that things would continue to happen. I knew it when I stepped outside of Neil’s and the breath of this violent, lovely city cut in and cleaved what was mine from what was not that I’d let it. These ghosts and the cassette were my institution. They weren’t real; they just occupied space. I would kick them out, one-by-one or all together. Then, I’d burn the whole fucking scaffold to the goddamned ground.

PAUSE

On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson played his first game as a Brooklyn Dodger. Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson and so many others played in the Negroes, but Jackie was the first Black big-leaguer. Branch Rickey signed him and put the fire, once inside, outside.

Three years earlier, Jackie Robinson, a commissioned Army Lieutenant, refused orders to sit at the back of a military bus at Fort Hood, Texas. Robinson was seated next to a fellow Black officer's light-skinned wife. The driver, who mistook the woman for white, demanded Robinson vacate his seat. Robinson refused and was arrested and court-martialed. The court-martial proceedings prevented him from being deployed in active combat.

PLAY
TRACK THREE: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

RECORDED: OCTOBER 18, 2014

TIME: 1:43 P.M.-2:14 P.M.

LOCATION: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

NOTES/TAGS: ATLANTIC AVENUE CENTER, JESSICA RAMIEREZ, THE BROOKLYN FLEA, PAULINE BARNES, HAMILTON COUNTY DETENTION CENTER, ALECIA LAWRENCE, WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, MARCUS JOHNSON, "KETCHUP SANDWICHES", CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, SCOUT FINCH, *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

She came at me like a spider monkey, all fists and angry teeth. Only moments earlier, she carried a yellow comforter in both arms. I barely noticed her. The comforter hit the floor a few seconds before she hit me with the force of generations.

"Muthafuckas," she screamed. "I'm sicka all ya goddamn people."

Her voice shrieked, violent with strain. Her punches pounded my head.

"Fuck all y'all," she railed.

Outside, the fall pushed hard, but the Brooklyn air hadn't quite conceded its lazy warmth. It was Saturday and the Atlantic Avenue Target was packed.

I moved mostly out of shock and tried to shield my companion, Jessica, who was nearly six-months pregnant. She needed new tights. Afterwards, we were going to go to the Flea.

I could taste the blood where I bit my tongue. It pooled against my gums and tasted sour and tinny. It was just like that copper penny I sucked when I was 19 and tried to flip a drunk check in Terrace Park when I was driving Pauline Barnes' car. She was giving a handy to some guy named Bruce in the backseat. The penny was her idea; she said it would throw off the breathalyzer. She was full of shit. I got arrested and spent the night at the Hamilton County Detention Center. I was too scared to close my eyes. I just stared into the blackness and touched my eyeball every now and again just to make sure it was still open. In the morning, I cried as I col-

lected my wallet, a couple guitar picks, and my keys. The guards laughed and said it was a good thing I didn't have to stay any longer or I'd surely become someone's bitch.

There, at the Target as the blood pooled in my mouth, I pulled my arms over my head. I didn't want to hit back. I'd been in fights before and I'd been sucker punched a few times, but never by a woman. Her hands were clasped so tight and they moved faster than I would've thought possible.

She was 5'5" at the most. I moved away and could see her ballerina flats raise up on tiptoes with almost each and every swing. It was like she was stabbing me in the head with an invisible knife. I backed into a rack of children's windbreakers. Somehow, I caught her right wrist, then her left hand. She wrenched and twisted and kicked at my shins.

"Bitch-ass honky. I swear I'll kill ya."

A crowd had gathered. I could hear Jessica scream, her voice as sharp as a bee sting. I looked up and caught the flash of Alecia's haymaker fists. I stumbled and she covered me like a wet blanket. Her fingernails scraped across my face before someone finally managed to pull her away. Then, everything slowed down.

I found out, minutes later, that her name was Alecia and that she was bipolar. Her sister, who came to meet her, told the cops she was off her meds.

The cops asked me more questions than they did her.

"Why?" one of the cops asked.

His partner frowned at the question.

I didn't have an answer. Perhaps I had it coming. Maybe it was for the lies I'd told. Maybe I deserved it.

One of the cops snapped his fingers in front of my face. I was back.

“You okay?” he asked.

My face was flavored with the buzz of a slow swell, but I said didn’t want to press charges.

“You sure?” the fatter of the two piped.

“Yeah.”

I paused, my stare fixed on the table top.

“I’m sure.”

Reluctantly, as if operating on their own volition, my eyes moved upward to catch one of their faces. The fatter one. Immediately, like it was on fire, I tore my gaze away.

As Jessica and I silently made our way toward the Q platform, my mind drifted to the college and a conversation I had a few days ago with one of my composition students. His name was Marcus Johnson and he always sat in the back corner of the classroom, his body turned sideway in the desk chair so he could face forward. Every now and again, he participate, but mostly he just uttered *Uh-huhs* and *Yeps* and the sort of sort affirmatives that made me feel more like a Baptist minister than an English teacher.

“Yo, T,” he said just before I left the classroom.

T. That’s what they call me.

“Whatchu know bout publishin.”

I was puzzled.

“Like books and stuff,” he followed.

“A little bit,” I answered. “Why?”

“Cuz I got this book, ya know, that I been writin--”

“Like a novel?” I queried. Then, without stopping, “One you wrote?”

“Yup,” he replied. His front teeth, at least the ones that were visible when he spoke his slurred south side drawl, were capped in gold. “I write a lotta books. Stuff from what I been through.”

I nodded.

“Like bout me and my momma back in Chicago, before we done come out here.”

“Right on,” I said.

Marcus wore a leather jacket that was about a size-and-a-half too big for him. Both sleeves were stitched with gold thread. On the right was *Chicago’s*, the left, *Finest*.

“There’s some stuff in there bout Da Mil, though, too,” he added.

His hair was like hundreds of burned cotton balls that had been lumped together and glued to his scalp. Portions of it crawled out from beneath a flat-brimmed Yankees cap.

We talked for a while about his book. The editors he’d been speaking with worked for self-publishers.

“They told me I could pay to have it put out,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s what they do.”

“But the lady told me it’d be up in Barnes & Noble and stuff like that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I told ‘em I wanted to just sell it. I told her I’d sell it to them, but then she said they don’t do nothin’ like that.”

I nodded. “That’s their game. The money out of your pocket.”

“Yeah, but that ain’t what I’m after.” His tongue tapped against his front teeth as he spoke and created a sort of lisp. “I just wanna sell it, ya know. Make some scratch off it. I ain’t really care how much. I got more books,” he tapped his index finger against the brim of his hat. “In here.”

I smiled and gave him a list of some websites that detailed traditional publishers and agents, and explained, as best I could, what they did and how they operated.

“Ah, I see. It’s a hustle, then.” His teeth gleamed behind a broad smile. “Aw, man, that ain’t nothin. I done been hustling all my life. Shit.”

“It’s a hustle, that’s for sure,” I sighed.

“Well,” he replied, wrapped in a long breath, “I sure do appreciate it, ya know, you tellin’ me ‘bout this.”

“Yeah, no worries. Let me know if I can help or whatever.” I paused. “I’d love to read it.”

“For reals?”

“Definitely.”

“Cool,” he said and moved toward the door. “I’ll bring you a copy, then. I gotta a bunch of ‘em all run off, too.”

And he did. The very next class.

The book was 134 pages long. It was typed in a singled-spaced, italicized font. There was no title, but the first chapter was called “Ketchup Sandwiches.” The grammar and mechanics were pretty awful, but I read all 134 pages in a day. The stories melted off the page. There were chapters about the time he did in Joliet, bits about living out of a car, and one insane section about how he and his mom escaped from one of her boyfriends with only the things they could

shove into a duffel bag and his backpack. That section talked about how his mom had been beaten by her boyfriend. Marcus wrote about how she planned the escape on a Tuesday night. He was 12.

She woke him up in the middle of the night. He was wearing his '85 Bears Championship sweatpants and a white t-shirt.

“But why we gotta go, momma?” he asked.

His momma was searching frantically for his socks. When she found them, she told him to put them on and grab his coat.

“But what about school?”

She smiled as best she could. A fresh bruise formed a tight *C* around one side of her mouth like smeared jelly. She was quiet.

Marcus knew it was no use to argue with her. He moved faster than he thought he could. He grabbed his school bag and began to slide his books inside.

“No baby, not your books,” his momma said. “You gotta leave them.”

He looked up at her. His big eyes caught the glare from one of the lights in the hallway outside. The hallways—open to the elements—and the fenced-in balconies that connected them, parsed the front of the Robert Taylor Homes. Marcus hated that project and the men who ran the corridors.

“We’ll get new ones, I promise,” she sniffled. “We’ll get new ones when we get where we going.”

“Where is we goin?” he asked.

“I don’t know just right now,” she answered. Her hair was pulled back and tucked up under a dirty knit hat.

Marcus dumped out his books, but stood and held *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

“I gotta bring this one, Momma,” he pled.

She looked at him and continued to shove clothes into her duffel bag.

“Because of Scout,” he pressed. “She brave. She can help us.”

His momma stood there silently, a sweater in her hands.

“Okay, honey,” she nodded, then returned to the packing. “Okay.”

He wrote about how for the next few days, he and his mom ate ketchup sandwiches in the car as they drove. She only had money for gas. They ran most of the tolls. The money was just enough to get them to her sister’s house in Cleveland, 350 miles away.

I was never unhappy, though, he wrote. There with momma, in the Buick, on the road. Whenever I see ketchup now or have a hamburger or anything, I think about it. It wasn’t nothing, really, though.

PAUSE

I was born in the caul in the upstairs apartment at Vernon and Broadway. Not long after that, my parents and I moved 655 miles cross-country to the barely beating heart of the midwest. I don't remember much of anything about Queens. I wasn't really even there.

In Cincinnati, we settled at 5984 Lester Road—a massive Victorian farmhouse—that I remember only in little clips. Those glances sometimes seem more like stories I was told than things that actually happened.

I remember burying Star Wars figures in the side yard, the smell of the light grey oil paint my dad carefully applied to the front porch stairs. I remember Hazel, our downstairs neighbor, and the fact that her lacrimal caruncle was missing from her left eye. I thought the part that was missing was her tear duct, and I wondered how she cried. I remember getting attacked by a blue jay. I remember my dad and uncles blowing up all of my mom's wooden salad bowls with cheery bombs one Fourth of July. I remember lowering Hoppy over the side of the upstairs porch because he was too big to stay inside with us, and how my dad built an elevated cage for him near where I'd once buried my Star Wars figures. When I asked Dad why the cage was high like that—on stilts—he told me it was so that Hoppy wouldn't get eaten by a fox or a dog or anything. I remember praying so hard every night for Hoppy. I prayed that he wouldn't get killed because I loved him so much. His tail was so soft and he was so cute and quiet. I remember that I wondered why would anything ever want to hurt Hoppy.

I also remember when Hoppy had to go to my Aunt Jane's parent's farm because he got too big for the even the elevated cage my dad had built. My parents said he'd be happy out at the farm because then he'd have room to run and play and do what rabbits do. I remember worrying

more about Hoppy at the farm than I did at Lester Road in his elevated cage because there were way more foxes and dogs and stuff in the country than there were there in Pleasant Ridge.

I remember going to see my kindergarten, but then only going there for a week because we moved. I also remember that my dad came home most days for lunch. Me and my mom would eat with him at the kitchen table. He always sat with his back to the windows and the big glass doors that led out onto the second floor porch—the same porch we lowered Hoppy over. I remember that if I stared at Dad long enough, he'd get really small. I told him that once and he squinted. Then, he flexed his muscles to show me how big he was. I never told him, though, that when I stared and let things get small that sometimes my hearing would go away, too. It was like I didn't have any ears at all. I didn't do that too much, though, because I'd get scared. I worried that maybe everything would get so small and so quiet that it would just disappear and then I'd be left all alone. I remember that I never told him or my mom any of that.

I remember when I left my toy Corvette—a convertible, 1960 Roadster that was red with the white intakes on the side—on the skinny, twisty attic stairs and my mom tripped on it and fell down. I remember that she was pregnant with Kyle and so we had to rush her to the hospital. I remember thinking about the mice in that same attic and wondering if I could eat the gumdrops that the exterminator put on their traps. I remember I asked my dad and he got mad and my mom told me *Never ever. Never.* So I didn't ask about it anymore.

I remember when Mr. Hook and Mrs. Hook—who owned the building before my mom and dad bought it—died and everyone who came to the house was so quiet. I remember their faces and eyes looked angry. I remember that I wondered why they were quiet and looked angry because if someone I knew died I would have cried and would have been sad. Like if Hoppy had

gotten killed by a dog or a fox out there alone in his elevated cage. That would have made me cry. Unless, of course, I was like Hazel and couldn't cry because I'd lost one of my tear ducts.

I remember, too, that in the winter I would have to take my boots off in the entry way. I remember how we left them down there when we went upstairs to our apartment and how the following morning they were always freezing cold because they'd been down in the entry way all night.

I remember that I always drank water at night from a skinny, white-plastic Cincinnati Reds tumbler. I remember how much I liked seeing Mr. Red on it. On the cup, he was running through the pointy C, his big baseball head and cool black cleats looked fast. I remember how I didn't want my mom to wash that tumbler because I was afraid Mr. Red would come off. I thought that if Mr. Red came off, then I'd have nothing to look at at night. I'd have nothing to calm me down or make me smile after I'd had a bad dream.

I remember how the moon always shone in through my bedroom window, the window opposite the door that led to my mom's and dad's room. I remember how it painted black claws on the wall. I remember how those worried me because when I stared at them, they didn't get smaller. Also, when I closed my eyes for a little while and then looked at them again, they moved, always in the same direction, closer to my bed. I remember that my dad told me those were just the shadows from the trees. But, I told him *no* that the trees were outside and that I knew what trees were and those weren't them. I told him they were claws. I remember that he laughed and told me to go back to sleep, that there was nothing to be afraid of.

I remember that I didn't sleep much at 5983 Lester Road because it seemed to me that there was a lot to be afraid of. I remember that the more I thought about it, the more afraid I got.

PLAY
TRACK FOUR: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

RECORDED: OCTOBER 18, 2014
LOCATION: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
NOTES/TAGS: ATLANTIC AVENUE, BROADWAY EXPRESS, JESSICA RAMIEREZ, CAKE SHOP,
MARCUS JOHNSON

My focus returned as a Manhattan-bound, Broadway Express rattled into the station. I had a show later that night at Cake Shop. When I hopped on stage, my eye was swollen, but not as bad as it was earlier while Jessica and I waited for the cops to take our statements in the Atlantic Center’s security office. There were so many video screens in that office.

Someone in the Cake Shop crowd asked, after my second song, what had happened to my face. I smiled, as best I could, and squinted into the stage lights.

“Nothing,” I replied, sheepishly. I really should have said *everything*.

I’m not sure it was my fault—the attack in the Target—but I’m not sure it wasn’t, either. I’m not even sure it matters. Marcus had his ketchup sandwiches because that’s the way it was. I had a black eye and a scratched face because that’s the way it is. And I don’t have any answers for my parents or my brother. I’m starting to feel like maybe that’s just the way it is, too. It’s not my fault, entirely, but I’m not innocent, either. Maybe the secret is to accept the possibility of being licked from the very beginning. The redemption lies in doing whatever anyway, despite the consequences.

REWIND
TRACK FOUR: THE DELICATE ACT OF LOSING

TRACK RECORDED: MAY 27, 1987
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: FIELD DAY, RIVERSIDE PARK, ST. BARBARA MIDDLE SCHOOL, VANCE HUNTER, MS. AMY LAUCH

Every year, St. Barb's had a field day. It was a chance at the end of the school year for us to piss away a day and run ragged through a series of pretty well-organized events that stretched from runs and dashes, to disc toss, to softball throw, and, of course, a tug-of-war that pitted one grade's class versus the other. We were 7B. And, we were cocky about our ability to beat 7A. After all, we had Vance Hunter and all the other big boys.

On field day, all the classes at St. Barb's got split up pretty evenly and then sprinkled across color teams. The color teams worked to rack up points by having their members finish first, second, or third (and sometimes, fourth) in the individual events. Just about everyone thought Field Day was the best day of the year.

Ms. Lauch, the gym teacher, always lay out the track, set up the long jump, and the disc and softball throw at Riverside Park, just a few blocks from St. Barb's. Riverside was down the hill, nestled in a whip-curve of the Little Miami.

I ran sprints, every year. I was fast and did best at the short ones: the 50, 100. I could hang in the 200, too, but after that—in the 400, 800, 1600—I had trouble because I was so much smaller than all the other boys. My speed would hold, early, but their size, stride, and pace would usually get me.

PAUSE

Hans Lobert, of the Pittsburgh Pirates, was so fast that promoters had him race a horse around the bases during an exhibition game in the spring of 1913 in Oxnard, California. Lobert led the horse by five feet upon rounding first base and then increased that lead to almost 10 feet by the time he rounded second. Witnesses say Lobert might have won the race except for the fact that the horse cut him off between second and third base and edged him out by a nose at home plate.

REWIND
TRACK FIVE: THE DELICATE ACT OF LOSING

TRACK RECORDED: MAY 27, 1987
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: FIELD DAY, TONY DEPRADA, OLLIE JONES, BRIAN HARPER, RIVERSIDE PARK, ST. BARBARA MIDDLE SCHOOL, MS. AMY LAUCH, 200M DASH, D.J. LATTNER, STEVE MERCER, BLUE RIBBON

I stepped to the line for the 200-meter dash and positioned myself between Tony DePrada and Ollie Jones. The grass was still a bit wet. It had rained overnight. The sun pushed its way through the clouds at a about a quart-after-seven, and so Field Day was a go.

I got a good start, as usual. I flew out front during the first 50 meters and rounded the slick, first turn. I opened up through the curve, in anticipation of the back straightaway. The rest of the field gained on me as we headed into the second turn—a sharp one because of the layout. By that moment, I was in fourth. I sat about mid-pack out of nine. Tony DePrada was first, followed by Ollie, Brian, then me. Tony hit the corner well. Maybe he was a little fast, but not bad. They were crowded, those three. Still, Tony hit the corner well. Ollie Jones, though, was way too fast, his shoes too slick. He spilled sideways and cleared out Brian Harper, who reached for his balance and somehow tangled with Tony. They all tumbled, hard. I hit the corner better than any of them. I was just behind the mess and maybe a half-dozen strides ahead of the rest of the pack. I hurdled Brian as he fell in slow motion. The three of them slid farther than they'd anticipated. The mud and grass bit at their shorts and knees and thighs. As it did, I accelerated down the backstretch and broke the tape well ahead of the field.

I took first. It was a blue ribbon that maybe I didn't earn. Maybe it wasn't fair, but Ms. Lauch let it ride.

“It was fair,” she countered, her whistle somehow perched between gritted teeth. “Part of the course, fellas.” She shrugged and scrunched up her mouth and the bridge of her nose. “You can’t expect to come into a corner that fast and out-of-control, Brian, and exit it cleanly.” She shook her head and turned to call the 400. “No way.” The whistle piped and I took the line for the 400. “You wanna complain?” she said mostly to Tony and Ollie. “Talk to him.” Her index finger, gnarled knuckles from too much basketball, pointed to a muddy Brian Harper.

We got our ribbons at the end of the day; the ceremony presentation was in the church. Ice cream was in the basement. It was cold with air conditioning. D.J. corralled me into the bathroom—the one behind the fake brick wall that served as a backdrop for the stage.

The door wiped itself closed and Ollie Jones positioned himself in front of it. The heels of his Reebok Pumps held it mostly tight. D.J. pulled my collar. I had on my Lance Mountain T, the one with the skeletons and the volcano. I was worried that they might tear it, so I didn’t fight. I’d paid half for it with my paper-route money; Mom said twenty-four bucks was too much for any sort of t-shirt.

“What the fuck, Black?” D.J. charged. Our gym shoes shuffled across the grey, painted bathroom floor. The ceiling tiles hung low and pressed all of us in closer than we really were. Besides Ollie and D.J., Harper, DePrada, and Mercer were there, too.

“Why didn’t you wait for Tony?” D.J. continued. He and Harper pushed me closer and closer to the handicapped stall. I didn’t like that, but its door frame was too wide to offer me a chance to hang on, to protest. Mercer pushed me full into the stall. My neck bent under the weight—the force—of his sweaty palm. “You should’ve waited,” Tony echoed. “Such a bitch.”

“Where is it?” Ollie asked.

“What?”

I knew what he was talking about; I knew what they wanted.

“The ribbon, asshole,” said Mercer. His voice had started to change. It was a cocktail of hoarse and hollow. Every now and then, it cracked and the scared, confused thirteen year-old that hid behind his burly frame poked his head out.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. Mercer sounded ridiculous.

Lattner cracked me in the ribs. His two fists came hard, a sort of kangaroo punch. I folded, my breath gone in an instant.

“Check his fucking pockets,” Lattner ordered.

Tony's and Steve's hands fumbled around my waistband, then poked through my pockets.

“It not here,” Mercer replied.

“Turn him over,” Lattner countered. “On his stomach.”

I struggled, the ribbon zipped in my single, back pocket. Mercer and Tony pulled and tugged at me. I kicked and Ollie fended off my feet. They grabbed at my forearms and hands.

“Motherfucker,” Ollie said. Lattner helped him seize-up my spastic legs.

“Get in there, Tony,” Lattner ordered.

DeParada unzipped my back pocket and Mercer pushed me flat, flat, and flatter against the cold, grey floor. It smelled of beer and piss and my face was inches from the base of the toilet.

“Ah, got it,” DeParada exclaimed. Mercer let me up, just a bit, so that I could see the ribbon in DePrada's long, skinny fingers. It was folded on an angle.

“Fucking flush it,” Lattner barked.

I said nothing.

Mercer laughed.

I turned my head again to watch Tony. He studied the ribbon, glared down at me, then back at D.J. For a second, I thought he was going to say something.

“Fucking flush it, pussy,” D.J. repeated.

DeParada squinted and then dropped the ribbon into the toilet. My head was just high enough to see it flap and fall. It crashed silently, helplessly, into the cold, still water.

“You want it, Black?” Lattner prodded.

I stayed quiet.

He and Mercer—and probably DePrada, too—picked me up. Lattner’s face was too close to mine and Mercer held my arms tight. “I said,” D.J. charged, his teeth like needles, “do you want it, Black, you fucking pussy motherfucker?”

I looked at the ribbon—my blue ribbon—as it just barely floated on the surface of the toilet bowl. The gold lettering was face-up. The five Olympic rings stared at me. They mocked me.

I nodded.

“You gotta speak up, bitch,” Lattner said and hammered my stomach. Mercer and DePrada pushed me from either side and my head caromed off the stall divider. “You want it, or not?”

I nodded again and offered a whispered, *Yes*.

Mercer shoved me down hard, head first. He pushed probably harder than he meant to. Lattner laughed. DePrada pushed, too, and my hands, usually steady and surprisingly strong, slipped on the bowl’s rim. My face crashed through the water. It was cold, colder than I anticipated. My upper lip exploded against the porcelain and turned the once clear water, red. My

mouth filled with the metallic, tinny taste. They pulled me back up when they saw the blood. Ten eyes wide gazed wide.

“Fuck,” Mercer said.

I patted at my face. My mouth was wet and full of blood. I could feel my lip swell.

“Fuck you, Black,” Lattner charged. “Fuck you.” He climbed back in my face. “Fuck you, pussy. You say shit, you fucker,” he growled, “and we’ll—” He paused and gathered himself, gathered what momentum he could. “We’ll fuck you up bad.” A smile blossomed on his face. Behind him, Mercer smiled, too. “This,” D.J. said as he drilled his index and middle fingers into my chest, “will seem like a play date.”

I collapsed back down to the floor. I was still in the stall. My hair and head were wet, and drips of cold toilet water tapped on my shoulders, back, and chest. The tinny taste was gone. Something else replaced it.

I sat there and listened to the door swing open, then gently fall closed as they all left. There were no words from the rest of them. There were no more from D.J.

I sat there for what seemed like days.

I thought the tears would come, but they didn’t. I thought I’d cry, but I couldn’t.

None of the teachers asked what happened. I stayed in the bathroom until the bleeding stopped. When I finally came out, I sat down next to Gretchen Fulton. She transferred to St. Barb’s from some place in Virginia halfway through the third quarter.

The teachers called us for the bus. Our bags were outside, ready. On the way home, I slept. I put my head against the glass and didn’t worry about the rattle along Route 126. My rib-

bon was there in my front pocket, wrapped in paper towels. It was still a little wet, but it wasn't folded.

PAUSE

"Just remember," Dad said. "Remember that you're always in control of what you think and what you do. Nobody—nobody else is to blame. It's on you. And," he pushed, "remember that you and I share a name. What somebody thinks of you, they'll think of me." He was like a broken screen door caught in a hurricane.

I wanted to tell him we didn't really share a name. I wanted to tell him that nobody—not even him—had called me *Theodore* since I was four. It was Tyne, now, and it always would be.

My little clementine, Mom would say.

Nicknames are mostly bullshit, but every now and then, they're an escape hatch. Mine was. I was *Tyne*, not *Theodore*.

REWIND
TRACK TWO: LOVED BY WOLVES

TRACK RECORDED: APRIL 14, 1980
LOCATION: CINCINNATI, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: KINDERGARTEN, OAKDALE ELEMENTARY, MS. MARY ELIZABETH
DUNKELBURG

Of all the kindergartens I went to Oakdale was the worst, hands down. We were living with my grandmother for a few months while our new house was being built in out Milford. My grandmother—my dad’s mom who we called *Grandma B.*—lived up in Bridgetown in a two-story Cape Cod. Her house was dressed in sharp, red brick and too many junipers. Shiny, white quartz anchored the narrow, rectangle beds.

The interior of the house was so crowded that it folded over upon itself. The layout found its axis in the narrow hallway that connected the small, central living space at the westerly end to two, smaller bedrooms at the easterly end.

Grandma B.’s always smelled a little like molasses. The scent was, thankfully, more endearing than off-putting. My uncle’s old dog, Ghost, roamed the backyard and lived in a sort-of dog house under the back porch. I always imagined the interior of that dog house as posh, stuffed with comfortable sofas and ottomans and thick-pile rugs. One day, I finally looked in there and saw nothing but jagged concrete and dirt. I almost cried. Ghost had it pretty good, though, his fat tummy forced him to do this little waddle as he patrolled the yard via a thin path he’d worn along the chainlink. The fence, itself, squared the yard almost perfectly. Fences, all painted a bright silver and some with jagged, twisted metal tops that would cut a kid’s hand if they weren’t careful when they jumped them to get a baseball or something stretched up and down the block without a single exceptions.

I loved my Grandma, but hated living at her house. I could barely sleep there, and the neighborhood kids weren't my friends. The school, Oakdale, was just a quick stop on the way to another school where the kids wouldn't be my friends, either.

I slept upstairs at Grandma B.'s, under the steep-sloped ceiling, and across the hall from my youngest uncle's room. My mom and dad slept downstairs, so I was left to think about the bizarre shapes—each one illuminated by the streetlight outside—that populated the room. Before I got there, that room was a storage space—a sort of hold-over, waiting area for things my grandmother either couldn't or wouldn't throw away. Those shapes kept me awake at night. I wondered as I stared at the blank, light-blue ceiling, when we'd go home and where that home would finally be.

I went to three different kindergartens, which was a hell of a thing for a five year-old. And, I pissed my pants at every one. Sometimes, they'd dry on their own. Other times, nobody would notice the spot, especially if my pants were dark. Sometimes, nobody would mention the smell. But, sometimes they would. I was embarrassed as hell of myself almost all the time.

A few times, I made puddles and those puddles always got me in trouble.

One of those puddles happened at Oakdale. Ms. Dunkelberg found it. She wasn't our real teacher. She was a sub and her voice sounded like a wire brush on concrete.

“What happened here?” she said.

“A spill,” I stammered.

Five year-olds shouldn't lie. They shouldn't have to.

“A spill?” the substitute pressed. “From what?” She was fat and crusty and her grey hair was swept like a grease mop from one side of her head to the other.

“I dunno,” I replied, my eyes buried in the formica floor. “Someone had some water or something, I guess.” I watched her feet shift, back and forth, back and forth. Her chunky brown heels clicked a little each time her weight moved forward onto her toes. I stared at the tiles. They were beige, orange and green. Twelve-inch tiles. All of them were white-splattered.

“Really?” the Ms. Dunkelberg pushed. She was relentless, and I hated her. “Water? From where?”

“I dunno. Someone brought it, I think. Maybe from home.” I paused and glanced up at her stern, set face. She wasn’t Mrs. Cassidy. She was someone different. Someone named Ms. Dunkelberg. Someone whose jumper was darkened at the armpits and whose dress bunched at the hips. She smelled of coffee and mothballs, and at the corners of her mouth, tiny, white bits of spit gathered and stretched each time she spoke. She wasn’t our real teacher; she couldn’t do anything to me.

“Yeah,” I repeated. “It’s water that somebody spilled over here.”

“Who?” she pushed again.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I didn’t see anything.”

“And your pants?” she added.

“My pants?” I fumbled. “What about them?”

PAUSE

Josh Gibson died quietly, silently in suburban Pittsburgh in 1947, three months before Jackie Robinson took the field in a Brooklyn Dodger uniform. Gibson, who during his playing days measured a little more than 6'1" and weighed 185 pounds, was crushed under the stiff thumb of a cerebrovascular accident—a common stroke. When news of his death reached Larry Doby, the Cleveland Indians centerfielder who in July of 1947 joined Jackie Robinson as the only other Black player in Major League Baseball, commented that Gibson had probably died of a broken heart.

REWIND
TRACK THREE: LOVED BY WOLVES

TRACK RECORDED: APRIL 14, 1980
LOCATION: CINCINNATI, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: KINDERGARTEN, OAKDALE ELEMENTARY, MS. MARY ELIZABETH
DUNKELBERG, PATRICIA DARLING

I made up like four different stories.

With the first, I held fast against the entreats of Ms. Dunkelburg and her mothball scent.

Later, during afternoon recess, as well as before it, when we were all in the bathroom, I lied to my friends.

No, it was when we were painting. Yeah, just the water. I tipped it and some fell on my pants.

No. Washing my hands. Yeah, that big sink with the metal thing you press with your foot. Yep, all over.

I tried it with my mom, too. I told her she was wrong when she picked me up and gave me a hug before we walked back to Grandma B.'s.

“Tyne,” Mom asked. “Did you have an accident today?”

“No.”

“Tyne?” Her voice sometimes worked to elongate words to let me know she was serious.

To let me know that she meant it. “You have to tell the truth.”

“I am,” I pushed. “It’s just the water from art—”

She cut me off. “Tyne,” she said. The letters lingered even longer on and around her tongue. “Tell the truth.” Her eyes held fast and stern. I tore my gaze from the topography of her face.

I nodded.

“C’mon,” she said and tugged my hand as we made our way across Bridgetown and up Moonridge. Traffic, it seemed, had taken a vacation. “Let’s get home and get you changed.”

I didn’t correct her. I didn’t tell her she was wrong. We weren’t going home. Home had gone missing. I’d seen pictures of the lot, of the mud and 2x4s, and the poured concrete foundation. I tried to get excited. I tried to look forward to my room, but it seemed impossible. The next day, I’d go to Oakdale, again. I’d skip my way home past that house where those kids stole my Star Wars toys. I’d cut down the shortcut, past the house with the teal eagles and the weird-shaped garage door. I’d sleep in that room with the shadows and the strange angles. Home had gone missing and there was nothing I could do about it.

PLAY
TRACK ONE: ONE NIGHT

TRACK RECORDED: NOVEMBER 7, 2014
LOCATION: LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: WILSHIRE BLVD., BUSBY'S, BAR MARMONT, BOARDNER'S, HOLLYWOOD,

It was up on Wilshire, in an old, converted theatre. The club was called Busby's, and I entered through the front door and climbed the massive, oak staircase. Upstairs, inside the venue, the ceiling yawned and in the booths and tables that lined the walls, everyone was someone and anyone could have been everything, for me or somebody else.

I was first on the bill, and played for a little over thirty minutes. Seven songs. I could see Wilshire through the big windows at the end of the hall. I sang through the lights and felt my boots on the stage. I soaked in that electric magic that spilled down from Laurel Canyon. That magic came from legends.

There were some A&R folks who came and said they dug my set. They were fast-talking dudes with tight pants and brogues. Their hair was pitch black and looked wet, but it never dried and they never touched it. They both wore the tortoise-shell rims and tweed jackets. If I wouldn't have known better—if I hadn't had been in LA—I might have thought they were history professors. But they weren't. They were—and they knew it, as much as I did—mostly hollow, but they held access to everything. They had access to things I didn't even know I could have. They wanted to talk about what I was planning with the new record. They wanted to hear about what I'd already recorded. Two reps—one from Manhattan, the other from Boston—we're going to join us, they said.

“Where?” I asked.

“Where?” one of them, the fatter, shorter one, named Nic, echoed.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Where are they joining us?”

“At Marmont,” he answered, as if he’d mentioned it before or maybe as if I should have just known. “You know it?”

I did, indeed, know it.

When I was 20, I posted-up in LA for a few months one summer. I fell in with some girls who had a standing party at the Chateau every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. I used to call them *The Horse Girls* because of their penchant for riding pants and the fact that each of them had a ranch up in Agoura Hills. They bled money and drugs and trouble.

“Well,” Nic continued, “let me introduce you.” He craned his neck around the club, and settled, eventually on a pair of fit, tight-jawed women near the soundboard. He waived and they approached. “They dug your set,” he added. “You’ll want to know them, and they’re interested to talk to you.” He swallowed the rest of his drink, the ice cubes in the wide tumbler slid against his teeth. “We’ll head up there in a bit.” His eyes were shifty and they made a quick map of the room behind his thick frames. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s crack the ice.”

We met the two women he’d waived to at the bar, which stretched across the back of the club. It was cantilevered out over Wilshire. Traffic hustled below us, as I settled into a hustle of my own.

"I hadn't heard of you before," the taller, blonder one said. She was from Manhattan. Her voice was razor-sharp under the high, arched ceiling of the club. "But I really liked it." She flipped her hair and adjusted her purse. "Really enjoyed what I heard," she added. Her eyes squinted, then fluttered over me like a pair of drunken butterflies. "Where, exactly, are you from?"

"Milwaukee," I smiled.

"Milwaukee?" She puzzled. "Are you sure?"

She might have been serious. I don't know, but I laughed anyway and told her about the Marmont meeting.

"Oh," she smiled. Her teeth flashed bright beneath the pretty, blue lights, "I'll be over." She ran her slender fingers through perfectly unkempt bangs. "That'll be nice. I wanna hear more about you."

I spilled out the back of the club and loaded my rig. I moved carefully, freely up toward the Bar Marmont, with a quick stop at Boardners. I promised an agent that I'd met a few years back that I'd have a drink with her. She texted me just before my set. *Boardners. Come by when you're done. XO.* So, that's where I went.

Over the course of an hour, I flew from one side of Hollywood to the other. I left Boardners and headed down Laurel, over to Sunset. The wide boulevard stared empty, it's gaping mouth hungry and warm.

Bar Marmont was crowded and one round quickly turned to four. My tongue was swollen and syrupy with Hendricks and cucumber water. I said *Goodbye* and *Thank you* and *See you soon* and all the other things I was supposed to say, and then made my way outside, along the hedges to my rental, which I parked a few blocks away on Sunset. The air was pure oleander, and the sea stood as a concrete conclusion to not only the Boulevard, but the entire continent. My dad said that someday, all of this would simply tumble in. He said it would slide, crack apart, and submerge. At the time, that worried me. It no longer worried me, but I did wonder, if that happened, where we'd all go to dream?

I pulled out onto Sunset and headed to LaCienega. At a red light, I watched as all of LA lay below me. It, of course, wasn't actually everything, but it seemed that way. Out there, in the otherwise blackness swam a seemingly endless tangle of tiny lights. Behind me and above me were the hills and their pin-pricks. This was a city that didn't care much for geometry. Los Angeles was a city with a firm sense of self, and I appreciated that. It made for good leaning. Tonight, I'd leaned hard.

REWIND
TRACK ONE: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: JULY 5, 1974
LOCATION: QUEENS, NEW YORK
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: ASTORIA, PATRICIA BLACK, THEODORE BLACK,

I was born in Astoria, the mother of all Queens, right smack in the middle of one of the hottest, most swollen summers on record. My mom told me I came out in the caul—a human photon torpedo. She said the doctor fumbled me because I shot out so fast. She said that a nurse grabbed me as I slipped to the floor. Even then, she said, I fought the urge to stop. I was sealed up in a sort of alien cocoon.

I was born, Tyne Black, the son of Theodore and Patricia, the brother of Kyle. I quit, though, and took Emma's name. *Darling*. It was a sort of second chance.

REWIND
TRACK TWO: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: JUNE 29, 1981
LOCATION: MONROE, OH
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: LESOURDESVILLE LAKE, AMERICANA, THEODORE BLACK, PATRICIA BLACK, PATTON INDUSTRIES, KING'S ISLAND,

Tyne Black thought that it felt good to be seven. He thought that it felt much better than six. Seven was his favorite number. He and his family went up to LeSourdesville for his birthday. His uncles, aunts and grandma came, too. Grandpa Paul and Grandma Ginny didn't, though. His mom had said that they'd see them the following week.

Patricia made Tyne a Darth Vader cake. It was brown, though, not black. Tyne asked her about it, and she said she couldn't make the icing black. She said she just made it brown. They rode the rides at Americana. Tyne thought Americana was fun, but it wasn't King's Island.

Theodore told Tyne that LeSourdesville Lake was where his dad taught him to swim. Tyne never had a chance to meet his dad's dad. His dad's dad was dead by the time Tyne was born.

Theodore told Tyne they'd go swimming there, too, after cake. Theodore told Tyne he'd teach him how to swim. Now that Tyne was seven, Theodore thought he should be able to swim.

Tyne was terrified. Theodore tried to reassure him. He told Tyne people had evolved from fish, and that swimming was perfectly natural. He told Tyne it was no big deal. Theodore said that there was nothing to be afraid of. Tyne told him that he was scared and that he didn't want to drown because the lake was deep. The water was black and kind of cold and it smelled a little bit. Theodore told Tyne that it didn't matter how deep the lake was. Theodore said that a person could drown in a teaspoon of water if it got into their lungs.

There was no lake at King's Island. Patricia and Theodore Black had told Tyne they'd go to King's Island for his seventh birthday. They told him that they'd ride the Fantastic Voyage and see Scooby-Doo. Instead, they ended-up at Americana. They couldn't go to King's Island because of work, Theodore said.

"It's the system and Pfaltz," Tyne heard his dad say to his mom. "I gotta get in there this weekend." Quickly, he added, "Just a little while. Don't worry, I'll be back in plenty of time."

"But," Patricia countered, "with the day and the money at King's Island, it just doesn't make much sense."

Theodore sighed. "I know," he answered. He paused, shook the coins in his pocket and cleared his throat. Tyne liked the sound of the change in his dad's pockets. It was funny, the clink-clink-ting that happened when Theodore ran or jumped or anything. His dad always seemed to wear work pants.

"Look," Theodore continued, "I'll talk to Michael and my mom. Maybe we can just do LeSouresville. Then, we can swim, too." His words gathered momentum. It was as if he was talking someone into something. "And, we can do Americana—the rides and stuff. Tyne will love it."

He was right. Tyne did love it. But, he also knew that Tyne knew that Americana wasn't King's Island. Theodore knew that King's Island was what Tyne had been thinking about, looking forward to. But, Theodore also knew that there was nothing he could do about. Things sometimes happened this way. Someday, Tyne would understand. Things happened because of the system and Pfaltz and the fact that Theodore had to go in and get things running before the backups failed and everything shut down.

Tyne knew when he heard his dad talking that he and his mom would go in, too. They'd probably stop at Patton on the way. He hoped he'd get to color with the bright ink pens that the lady who sat in the office next to his dad kept in her Snoopy cup.

LeSourdesville Lake had dark sand, almost black, which made no sense for southern Ohio. The lake's water, too, was blacker than jet. It looked inky and deep as forever. Tyne didn't learn to swim there. His dad had, though, because Theodore's father had dragged him out to the swimming platform and left him there. Theodore's only choice was to jump in and learn. Theodore told Tyne that he cried at first—for almost an hour—as he shivered up on the rotting platform's planks, their greenish, splintered boards tied together with thick, manila climbing rope. All around him older kids jumped and dove. All of that must have worked to drown out Theodore's screams.

Tyne screamed now, louder than his dad had. On his seventh birthday, Tyne screamed murderous screams. He screamed because of the lake and his dad and the fact that seven meant swimming.

"You're old enough now to know how to swim," Theodore said as he bobbed through the shallows, Tyne in his arms. "You're halfway—beyond halfway," he corrected, "to being a man."

Farther out in the lake, the platform Theodore learned on was long gone, but the water was the same dark, cold, choppy as it had been back then.

Beyond the beach, the sounds of the amusement park flaunted a spinning tilt-a-whirl and a Ferris wheel whose every girder was lit by large bulbs that burst first white, then yellow, then orange as they appeared to move, synchronistically, from the inner pinion to the outer arc. A host of clattered couplings rattled as the tiny roller coaster careened over matchstick stanchions. The

smell of oil, cedar, and funnel cake was everywhere. Lights of all sizes and colors—not just the ones from the Ferris wheel—blinked on everything, even in the mid-afternoon. Their reflections made the lake electric.

Tyne perched himself high on his dad's chest, as they waded deeper and deeper. Tyne fought to keep his legs above water. He lost the battle twenty or thirty feet from shore. When the water finally crested over Tyne's belly button, he stopped screaming. Flooded with tears and panic and snot, every single bit of trust in his body seemed to break.

Theodore calmly and softly told Tyne that their hands used to be webbed and that they'd evolved to only have the little bit of skin between each finger, down at the bottom. He showed him first on his own hand, then on Tyne's. Then he touched behind Tyne's ear, his fingers wet and cold with what was once the blackness. Theodore's touch made Tyne gasp. "And these," Theodore said, "were gills. You used to be able to breathe underwater, just like a fish." Theodore spun Tyne around, away from the shore, away from the ruckus of Americana. "So you don't have anything to be afraid of."

But Tyne begged his dad not to let go of him. He clawed at Theodore's bare chest, and his knees dug into the small, paunch belly that fell over his dad's swim trunks. Tyne felt his own fingers, slippery and shriveled, as they tried desperately to grasp the matted bits of brown hair that poked-out from the area around his dad's tiny, pink nipples. He buried his head in the nape of his Theodore's neck and sobbed.

"Please, Daddy, no. I want to go in," he bawled. "I want to go home."

PAUSE

On July 27, 1930, Cincinnati Reds pitcher, Ken Ash, won a big league game with a single pitch. Ash came into the game and sized up any middle-reliever's worst nightmare: the opposing team—the Chicago Cubs—had two runners aboard with no outs, the score knotted at 5.

Ash took a few warm up tosses, then reared back and delivered his only pitch of the day—a curveball that hung just enough, but not too much. The ball was smacked into the infield and the Reds managed to turn a triple play, which ended the inning. Ash, who was due up to bat second in the bottom of that same inning, had a pinch hitter. The Reds rallied and won the game 6-5, and Ash miraculously earned the win while throwing only a single pitch.

REWIND
TRACK THREE: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 12, 1981
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: TARA BLACK, PATRICIA BLACK, MICKEY MOUSE, MISCARRIAGE

It was a pink, felt, Mickey Mouse hat. It was the kind with the big, round plastic ears on the sides. It was for my sister—a sister who died before I was born. A sister who died before she was born. It was the only thing, besides my bear—Tawny—that I worried about when I was away from the house. It was the only thing, besides Tawny that I wanted to save if there was a fire.

Some nights, I'd get it out and look at it. I'd think what it would have been like to have had an older sister, to have had a sister at all. I couldn't imagine it.

It was crinkled and tiny with her name, *Tara*, embroidered in dirty, gold thread. The cur-sive lines were perfect and I ran my fingers across the stitches so many times that the *T* and *r* had frayed to the point that their ends resembled a pony's mane—a tiny, golden pony's mane.

Tara was miscarried and I knew that well before I knew what it actually meant. Sometimes, I'd swear I heard my mom talking to her, mostly during the day when she was cooking or washing dishes. I never could make out the conversation. It mostly just seemed like words. But still, I swore I heard it happen.

REWIND
TRACK THREE: PUNK ROCK DREAMS

TRACK RECORDED: APRIL 13, 1985
LOCATION: LOVELAND, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: METALLICA, KILL 'EM ALL, BRIAN ALEXANDER, THEODORE BLACK,
PATRICIA BLACK

We used to trade t-shirts all the time. I loved it, It was really the only way I could get ones from the bands I liked. Misfits were out—Mom had vetoed the Crimson Ghost. Black Flag was Dad's. *Empty teenage rebellion*, he said. They both were against the Dead Kennedys stuff—at least the shirts—since neither one of them were sure of the reference. I didn't even try Minor Threat, Circle Jerks, or 7Seconds. 7Seconds, though, probably would have cleared. Maybe.

I got *Kill 'Em All* from Brian Alexander. Metallica wasn't my favorite, but there was something about that metal shit and the thrashing or whatever that got me going. Their shirts were hardcore, so even I knew better than to try anything. *Kill 'Em All* wasn't that bad. I mean, the hammer and blood was, but it was all kind of washed out.

I must've had a premonition, though, because I didn't get it out of my bag right away. In fact, I left it in there until right before we were going to leave for the mixer

I'm not sure why I chose to put it on in the house. I could have snuck it out and changed at the dance. Or, I could have put it on under the shirt I was wearing. Both might have worked. Instead, I fished it out of my school bag as Dad and I were headed to the car, and then changed into it in the downstairs bathroom.

“What the hell is that?” he asked as I paraded through the family room toward the garage.

“What?”

“That shirt.” His tone lifted, and his face reddened. “Where in the hell did you get something like that?” Mom came out of the kitchen.

“Oh,” I stammered, “it’s not mine.” Both of their eyes dug into me. It was as if they had found a way to crawl around beneath my skin. I pulled at the lower hem of the shirt. The undeniably red *Metallica* logo—the one with the lightning hook-things on the *M* and *A*—hung across my chest like Pennant banner. “It’s Brian’s,” I said. “I just traded—borrowed it. For tonight. For the mixer.”

“You know what that means?” Dad charged. Disappointment leaked from the corners of my mom’s mouth, but she remained wordless.

I shook my head. “It’s a Metallica record,” I answered. Heat rose, softly and slowly, from underneath the loose, black shirt collar.

“No,” Dad countered. “It’s not.”

I thought about arguing. I thought about showing him the tape I had upstairs—the one with the same name and cover art—the same logo. I thought better, though.

“It’s what the Green Berets used to say,” Dad pushed. “In Vietnam. *Kill ‘em all, and let God sort ‘em out,*” he continued. “That’s bullshit and no goddamned son of mine is going to parade around with some shirt that glorifies that kind of shit.”

I didn’t know what to say. I wondered who the Green Berets were.

“War is hell,” Dad sputtered.

PAUSE

It wasn't ever really what he said as much as it was the self-righteousness and indignation that accompanied it. It's tough to distinguish between the two at 11, though. It was even tougher not to replicate that same self-righteousness in my own voice as I grew.

REWIND
TRACK FOUR: PUNK ROCK DREAMS

TRACK RECORDED: APRIL 13, 1985
LOCATION: LOVELAND, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: THEODORE BLACK, PATRICIA BLACK, *LIFE GOES TO WAR*,
GRANDMASTER FLASH, WHITE LINES, MILFORD MAIN, ST.
BARBARA'S MIDDLE SCHOOL

I didn't know that much about war. I knew some things, but I didn't really know whether or not it was hell. I'd never been in one and hoped that I never would be. It all seemed so silly. It seemed like something everyone should have grown out of. I figured those people—the ones who started the wars—didn't play baseball growing up. *They probably weren't allowed*, I thought.

“Sit down,” Dad said.

I protested, but was quickly steamrolled.

“I know, I know, the dance,” he anticipated and sliced right through my resistance. “We'll get there. You'll still go.” He paused and stared at me. “But,” he added, “not in that shirt.” He walked through the kitchen and disappeared down the basement steps.

“But Dad,” I pleaded.

“Hush,” Mom said.

I shot a glance at her. It was blunt, and I don't think she noticed it. But still, it was worth the effort.

Dad emerged from the basement almost as quickly as he'd gone. He had a massive book under his arm. Since the move, the books were in the basement. Mom was looking for some shelves that matched the cherry wood of the new upstairs bedroom set. She wanted to put them

downstairs, though, in the living room along the wall that didn't have any windows. The whole thing didn't make much sense to me.

"I need to show you something," Dad said. He crossed the kitchen, and his topsiders tapped out a weird, unbalanced rhythm on the linoleum.

I'd seen it before, that massive book. I didn't tell him that. He showed me this same book like three-and-a-half years ago when I was in fourth grade and we went up to the Air Force Museum. I said something on the way home about how all the Nazi planes were much cooler looking than the Allied ones. Dad had built like a million scale-models of Focke-Wulfs and Messerschmitts, Stukas and such, so I thought he might be on-board. Instead, he lost his shit.

He lectured me at home for almost an hour about war and the Nazis and how I should never, ever think any of that stuff was cool because it wasn't. He said it was evil. I wondered then, as I did now, why the basement work room was littered with tiny German aircraft? Even now, when he built remote-control flyers, I wondered how they always ended up with German insignias on their wings and rudders?

Dad had shown me this same book then. He paused at a page where someone's decapitated, charred head sat atop a fence post. The photo was black-and-white, so it wasn't as graphic as it could have been. Still, I thought about that fucked-up shit for like three months. I had dreams about the wide-open mouth, the cheeks that looked plastic. I thought about what had happened to the rest of that guy's body. I wondered if any of it hurt.

Dad showed it to me again—that head. At least this time, I was ready. I expected it. *But*, I wondered, *could I ever—would I ever—be ready for something like that?* I hoped not.

“It’s just important,” Dad said, as we slid down Price Road on our way to the mixer, “that you understand what all this is about. Why it’s not okay to wear shirts like that. To think about glorifying war or killing or any of that nonsense.”

I stayed quiet and watched as the Jetta’s headlights carved a yellowish groove along the right side of the twisted road.

Dad took the corners too fast, too sharp, and drifted over the double-yellow. Mom wasn’t in the car. He never would have drifted over a double-yellow with Mom in the car. “I mean,” he continued, as we bottomed out in the outskirts of old Milford, “if you’re going to wear something, you’ve gotta know what it means. What it really means.”

He was right, I guess.

“I just want you to understand,” he added, maybe only to fill the space I’d left empty. “Because,” he said, his tone the same as the engine’s, “otherwise, we’ll forget and it’s important to remember. It’s crucial,” he said, “that you be vigilant and not forget.” He coasted through a four-way stop at Forest. We were only moments from St. Barb’s. “And I don’t want you, son, to make a choice that’s not yours—that’s someone else’s.” He paused and eased the Jetta into the parking lot behind Milford Main. We bounced lightly over the speed bumps and onto the long drive where the busses waited on weekdays. “I want you,” he continued. The syllables were slow and steady behind his teeth. I paid special attention to the way their sounds arched across the roof of his mouth. “I want you to make your own choices—Tyne’s choices—not anybody else’s.”

I nodded.

“Okay,” he followed. “Have fun. I’ll see you at 10, when it’s over. Remember,” he added, as I stepped out onto the cool, dark blacktop. The parking lines had been freshly painted with a

kind of iridescent gold. “We’re giving Jason a ride home, so make sure you connect with him before you come out here.”

“I will,” I answered just as the door fell closed.

Inside, down a flight of concrete steps, I could hear subwoofers push the bass thump of “White Lines”. I pulled open the door, the squeak of the closer drained out by Grandmaster Flash. *And that’s the way it goes. The way it—goooooes.*

PAUSE

I'm not so certain that my dad ever forgave himself for not being drafted. I'm not sure that he ever forgave himself for not getting sent off to Vietnam. It's a weird thing and an even stranger notion to hold over one's own head. But, Dad carried it like a helmet or a grenade or whatever. Dad carried it then and maybe he still does.

I can't really understand or even imagine what it was like when he was in high school. I think it must have been the worst sort of confusion. It was 1967, '68. His classmates were getting plucked all over the place. And, then these kids—barely trained—were sent more than halfway around the world, only to be shipped back in a bag.

For him, those names—people he knew—became specters. They mingled with the many, many names he didn't know—the ones that got etched into a Wall. Those names haunted the space between his thoughts.

I saw his high school yearbook once. It was the one from his senior or junior year. So many of the faces had *DECEASED* stamped across them in red, boxy letters. It looked like a hand-stamp or something.

I asked about it. Mom laughed a nervous, sort-of uncertain trill. “Your dad,” she said, “did that. He wanted to keep track of people he knew.” She looked away from the red-stamped pages—away from me and my dad. “So,” she continued, “he made some stamp and did that.”

“Those people,” Dad piped, “died in Vietnam. They were killed in action or were prisoners of war. Those people—” he said, “they were just kids. They never came home.”

REWIND
TRACK FOUR: LOVED BY WOLVES

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 19, 1987
LOCATION: LOVELAND, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: THEODORE BLACK, PATRICIA BLACK, OSCAR GAMBLE,
YOUNGSTOWN, ECONO LODGE, WHITE CHRISTMAS

The night he dreamed that his dad died, Tyne Black slept with Oscar Gamble under his pillow. He also kept his fingers crossed on both hands. He saw Jesus doing the same thing in a painting next to the principal's office at Queen of Martyrs and asked Sister Edward Anita about it. She said that was how Jesus kept himself safe, which bothered Tyne in light of the crucifixion and Calvary.

But he tried not to think about that and kept his fingers tightly crossed anyway. Instead, he thought about the baseball card beneath his pillow—Oscar Gamble, safe at second amidst a cloud of dust—the Afro and the mutton chops. Instead of prayers, he recited the Big O's stats: *1584 games played, 1195 total hits, 47 career stolen bases, 656 runs scored in 17 seasons.* These numbers made him feel safe. He wanted to be Oscar Gamble. But then his mind drifted again. It drifted despite his best efforts and flew past his crossed Jesus fingers, beyond the flash that was Oscar Gamble on the base paths, and slammed head-on into thoughts of his dad.

Tyne didn't cry. He barely breathed. He thought about his dad's thick ties and crisp shirts—the ones with the colored pens clipped in the breast pocket. Tyne's prayers were statistics--*5'11", 165, .265 career average, 666 runs batted in, 200 career home runs.* His rosary—a First Communion gift from his grandmother—stayed put on his bed post. There were no *Hail Marys*, no *Our Fathers*, no *Glory Bes*.

Tyne thought about his mom, few rooms away as she lay awake. He thought about her face pressed sideways against fresh, white bedsheets. Tyne's brother, Kyle, slept soundly in the room between them. Patricia's eyes were wide open, but unfocussed in the dark. Her mind raced toward an image of her dead husband and his belt. Tyne considered, there in the dark—in his dream—how she thought again and again about the worn spots and grooves made by the tarnished silver buckle. Tyne noticed, too, how she thought about how that belt must have felt as it tightened around his dad's neck, a single, unruly tentacle.

That's how it happened, Tyne decided. He steered his dreams toward that hotel—a motel—off of I-80, he thought, near Youngstown. That's where it happened.

Tyne dreamed about that cheap motel with its sturdy pipes—high and exposed in the closet—strong enough to suspend his dad's 240 pound frame. Tyne considered how long his dad would have hung there before someone found him. He thought about what his dad looked like when they did find him. Tyne wondered if his dad's green eyes were open or closed. He wondered if there was any blood, anywhere.

Tyne thought about whether or not Patricia would ever tell him the truth about his dad or whether she'd play out some other story like a car accident or something. He wondered how long she'd have stuck to the cover-up. He could never tell.

Tyne dreamed that Theodore had examined four or five different rooms at the Youngstown Econo Lodge before he chose the one with the exposed pipes. Tyne dreamed that his dad checked in on a Tuesday, a little over four hours after he left them in Loveland.

Tyne dreamed that his dad, Theodore, tied-up his belt on a Thursday afternoon. Tyne dreamed that Theodore told his wife he'd be home from his conference that same evening. The

conference was in Cleveland, Tyne decided. Maybe it was in Buffalo, though most likely, it was in Cleveland. Of course, Tyne knew Theodore never went to Cleveland. It didn't have anything to offer him.

Instead, Tyne dreamed of him parking their blue Buick at the Econo Lodge in Youngstown on a Tuesday where it stayed until the police finally towed it the following Saturday.

Tyne dreamed that Theodore spent most of his first two days in Youngstown in bed. Tyne dreamed that his dad watched black and white movies on the small TV. His last day, though, Tyne decided, brought with it color and a run of *White Christmas* on one of the cable networks. The channel guide told Theodore that *White Christmas* played three times in a row. Theodore, Tyne dreamed, watched it through once, but never saw the end of the second showing.

Tyne dreamed that Theodore cried a lot on Tuesday. He watched as his dad walked to St. Mary's Catholic Church, which was just up the street. There, Tyne dreamed, Theodore tried to make a confession, but the church was locked and the woman at the rectory told him that the pastor—their only priest—was visiting a neighboring parish and wasn't going to be back until Saturday afternoon.

"Are there any other churches in town?" Theodore asked.

Tyne saw the woman clearly. She shook her head and the tiny, red, ornament-shaped earrings she wore jingled. "Sadly, we're the only one. The only Catholic one," Tyne heard her add.

"Well," Theodore replied, "that's just going to be too late, isn't it?"

"Excuse me?" the woman puzzled. Tyne liked the fact that in his dream, her sharp grey eyes, wrapped in lines and wrinkles, narrowed like a hawk or something.

The woman Tyne saw was short and well into her fifties—ten to twelve years older than his father. Tyne saw her in a yellow sweater worn over a white turtle neck. The sweater was all the way unbuttoned and it had a clutch of puppies embroidered on it. Tyne saw that they toyed with the ribbon of a partially-unwrapped Christmas present. The woman’s hair was a puff of perfect silver.

“Saturday’s too late if I need to see him today,” Theodore muttered. His voice dissolved like it had so many times. This further disturbed the rectory woman, but Tyne imagined that she wouldn’t really get involved. He thought she’d think it wasn’t her business to pry into other people’s affairs. She noticed, though, Tyne thought, how tired Theodore looked.

“I suppose,” she said through a squinted a half-smile. “But is there anything I can do for you?” Even though she didn’t want to be involved, Tyne knew that that just wasn’t the way folks did things. Tyne noticed that a heavy flavor of concern leaked from her mouth.

Tyne dreamed that Theodore stayed quiet for almost too long. Tyne watched as Theodore stood there and shifted his weight back and forth, back and forth, then exhaled.

“I don’t think so,” he replied.

At that, Tyne imagined that his dad simply turned and left. The rectory woman, Tyne noticed, stared at his dad’s back as he pushed open the old wooden door that led to the church parking lot. Tyne heard, through the deep fissures of his dream, a bell ring—a bell that was connected to the heavy, brass closer. Tyne watched as the rectory woman’s eyes dropped to look at Theodore’s feet just as he moved over the threshold. She noticed, Tyne dreamed, that Theodore didn’t have any shoes on. His bare socks poked out from beneath those navy blue slacks he al-

ways wore. Tyne smiled. The feet Tyne saw in the dream—his dad’s feet—reminded him of chipmunks.

“Sir?” the rectory woman called. Tyne imagined she’d be too late. She didn’t move right away and the door shut fully to separate them. She pushed it open and leaned her head and shoulders out of the frame.

“Sir?” she said. Then, after a pause, Tyne heard her repeat it, “Sir?” This time, though, her voice carried a wave of panic.

But Tyne saw—saw through the thick web of his dream—that Theodore didn’t stop. He walked on. Tyne saw that whether Theodore had heard her or not, he didn’t stop until he got back to the Econo Lodge. By then, his socks were almost worn through, so he threw them in the trash bin. He threw them in the trash bin under the sink, the one with the creepy, flimsy plastic bag that never seemed fit to hold a goddamned thing.

Tyne dreamed that Theodore turned on the shower but didn’t get in. Theodore, Tyne saw, let it run for almost an hour before he finally shut it off.

Tyne imagined that a reckless sun pushed its way through the tightly closed curtains that Wednesday morning, replaced in the afternoon by its golder, stronger brother. Tyne saw that Theodore ignored them both and didn’t wake until the evening had spread its violet paste across the winter sky.

Tyne imagined that Theodore thought about him and his brother, Kyle. Then, Tyne watched as Theodore considered Patricia. Tyne dreamed that his dad made a list of the things he loved most about all three of them. Theodore listed their smiles, the way Tyne’s hair curled out from underneath whatever cap he happened to wear, the way Patricia’s tongue tapped her front

teeth whenever she spoke excitedly about anything, the way Kyle ran down their narrow, upstairs hallway and slid across his bed every night, without fail. Tyne watched as the list grew long and eventually took up five sheets of the skinny hotel tablet paper. Tyne could see his dad's hand shake; the pen he used was the one that the maid had left on the glass-topped desk a few hours before Theodore arrived. It said *Econo Lodge* on it with a kind of red-sun insignia. The pen, Tyne noticed, wasn't really blue, but it wasn't quite black, either. When it wrote, the ball point scratched the paper and left a narrow furrow wherever the pen moved. The lamp on the desk held two lightbulbs, one of which was burnt out. Tyne saw that when Theodore had remembered all he loved about them, he went into the bathroom, put the five sheets of paper in the sink and douse them with water. Tyne watched, through the fogged window of his dream, those sheets turn to pulp. He saw Theodore scoop them up and throw them in the toilet. Tyne dreamed that his dad flushed them away. The roar of water filled the otherwise silent room.

Tyne Black dreamed, his eyes closed. His lashes fluttered, in the throes of sleep, as he watched Theodore go back to the desk and pick up the room's phone. With it loosely to his ear, his father listened to the dial tone. After a few minutes the hotel's desk clerk came on the line.

"May I help you?" she asked. Her accent was heavy, something from upstate.

"I don't think so," Theodore answered, then hang up.

Tyne dreamed that his father lay down on the bed again, and observed him stare at the turned-plaster ceiling. Tyne saw Theodore's eyes fall in and out of focus. Tyne dreamed that Theodore didn't get much sleep on Wednesday. The TV, Tyne noticed had now been on since Tuesday, the channel setting mostly left alone.

Time slipped through Tyne's dream, liquid through the fine screen of a metal sieve. Tyne saw that Thursday morning arrived with more wind. Tyne heard light sheets of rain parade against the hotel room's large, single window. The rain, Tyne noticed, was muffled by the still-drawn curtains, but its presence punctuated the little sleep that Theodore did manage. By then, *White Christmas* had started its first run. When it ended, Theodore took a shower, polished his shoes, and put on the suit he'd packed—a single-breasted, charcoal grey one.

Tyne dreamed of the conversation—the one that occurred between his mom and dad before Theodore left for Cleveland. He heard his mom ask his dad why he was taking his suit. Tyne watched as his father folded the suit—still on its thick wooden hanger—into the too-small suitcase. His voice, Tyne observed, lingered thin in the air like sheets of paper scattered by a sudden breeze.

“I have a dinner on Wednesday,” Theodore answered.

Tyne watched as Theodore's eyes tore away from his wife and fell upon one of two windows in their bedroom. Traffic pushed itself quickly down the street in front of their house. Tyne listened to Theodore clear his throat and add, “With the northeast branch's lead team.”

Patricia nodded the same nod she always did, the bob of her head slowed by the dream. Tyne knew that meant that she'd stopped listening. He knew it meant that she'd arrived at her own conclusions. Tyne knew his mom thought she hid this. He knew that she thought she was so covert. In the end, though, she was the only one who believed the story.

Tyne dreamed that his mother, still nodding, disappeared into the bathroom. She left the door partially open, and Tyne caught only slices of her, brought to life in the hi-watt globe lights over the sink and vanity. He watched her wash her face and fiddle with her vast array of cosmet-

ics. The bright light threw itself out of the bathroom, too, and patches of amber pressed themselves onto the walls of his parent's bedroom.

Tyne watched as Theodore stepped away from the still-open suitcase, turned on the bedroom lights, and moved closer to one of the windows. Tyne saw Theodore push back one of the silky, white drapes and look out at Newtown Avenue. His dad had never much cared for what was outside when he wasn't. With the inside lights on—even as dim as they were—Tyne figured his dad couldn't see much. But, he couldn't be sure Tyne did see that Patricia's reflection took up most of the pane. Tyne watched her while she flossed, her mouth open wide, neck jutted, as an unseeable piece of dental tape worked its way between tooth after tooth after tooth.

Tyne dreamed his way back inside the Youngstown Econolodge. Tyne knew that it was early Thursday afternoon, and in room 402, Theodore Darling tightened his tie—something he almost never did—and folded down the starched collar of his striped oxford shirt. He arranged the desk chair beneath the closet's door jamb and threaded his belt over the water pipes. He was sure to catch both the hot and cold.

On the TV, Tyne saw a fake Florida and heard a song about the fact that the best things in life happened when one danced. Theodore pushed his head through the loop his belt made and kicked out the chair. It happened in one motion, which surprised Tyne. Nothing, it seemed, ever happened in one motion.

Tyne dreamed of his mother, still in Cincinnati, her eyes closed and heavy with the weight of the tears that silently streaked her cheeks.

Tyne, two rooms away, slowly opened his eyes, dry and sleepy, and carefully threaded a small flashlight from behind his headboard. He pulled it through the loop of his rosary, and then

clicked it on to glance at his mostly closed bedroom door. He reached under his pillow and grabbed Oscar Gamble. Tyne Black held the card carefully, gingerly in his thirteen year-old hands. The faint beam of light played on the card's shiny plastic case. Tyne studied the tiny screws at each corner. He noticed the Big O, helmet-less, presumably safe at second, wrapped in dust. He noticed the fielders—a shortstop and center—motionless, but slightly out of focus. He saw that the turf was worn, the color of a dirty pillowcase. He noticed that the whole scene seemed suspended. There were shadows stuck halfway across the field that longed to lengthen.

Tyne thought it was Riverfront because the uniforms looked like the Reds. But, then he reconsidered. It couldn't be—the Reds were National and the Yankees were American. American never played National. Tyne puzzled and waited for the strange panic to twist over and around him, the one that would make him think about the fragile nature of today—suddenly aware of the fact that when tomorrow got there, yesterday would have disappeared.

In that moment, panic drew tight around his chest, strangled his stomach, and made it hard to breathe. His palms grew clammy, then sweaty, and his mouth ran dry. He lay the flashlight carefully in his lap and slid the Big O back beneath his pillow. He would try to think differently of his dad—to call out another dream—one not loaded with suicide.

That panic brought him to tears with its tight, merciless squeeze. It was the same unruly tentacle that was his father's belt. Tyne tried to breathe deeply, but his sobs arrived rushed and messy. He would patted his own head and repeated Oscar Gamble's stats. But, the numbers were no use. He picked up his flashlight and looked, once again, at Gamble. Cleveland, Tyne thought. It must have been Cleveland. The Indians were in the American and their uniforms looked kind of like the Reds. Municipal Stadium was a lot like Riverfront, too. He'd seen pictures. And just

like that, the tentacle would loosen. The Big O might have been safe at second, but Tyne Darling was alone at home.

PAUSE

Oscar Gamble was my favorite Yankee. He might have been my favorite player. At least back then, he was. I slept with his '73 Topps tucked under my pillow. There was something about that card—something about the dust and his Afro and the outfield wall. I always slept with Oscar Gamble under my pillow. I wanted to be like him: strong and fast. I wanted to slide head-first into second. Oscar Gamble never seemed to care too much if his helmet fell off. He ran so fast that it always seemed to fall off. He was a blaze of pinstripes as he wheeled around the bases. A blaze—that was going to be me.

REWIND
TRACK FIVE: LOVED BY WOLVES

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 20, 1987
LOCATION: LOVELAND, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CAROLINE DAVENS, SISTER MARY ROBERS, ST. ELIZABETH ANN SETON,
THEODORE DARLING

I wasn't exactly sure why I told them he killed himself. I didn't know why I even told them he was dead. But, I did. And, he wasn't; it was just a dream. Still, I told them. It was out before I could stop it—before I cared to stop it.

Miss Davens was the first one I told. Then, Sister Mary Robers. That was a bad choice. I should have just stopped with Miss Davens. But I was thirteen, so I didn't. Not only did I not stop, but I got more detailed—more specific—with Sister Mary Robers. I suppose, in a way, I just liked the story. The more I spun it, the more exciting it got. The more I thought about that dream—what I saw and imagined—the more real it became.

I think I might have wanted to see how far I could push it. I think, too, that I just wanted to have something that was all mine. That dream all was mine. I could shape it—do what I wanted with it. I had control of it.

REWIND
TRACK FOUR: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: AUGUST 2, 2009
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: HOME INVASIONS, SAFE TIPS

Nine days ago a man was beaten to death in his living room by two intruders. The attack happened five blocks from my house. It turned out that the attack and beating was retribution.

The deceased was a dealer, some sort of pin.

A few days after the attack, I got a *Safe Tips* email from the adjacent, suburban police department that detailed how residents could keep themselves and their property secure. I wasn't sure how I ended up on their mailing list. I wasn't sure, either, why they even sent the email—the crime didn't occur in their jurisdiction.

The email, itself, was poorly-written and savagely constructed. It suggested that residents nail their first-floor and basement windows shut from the inside, that they mount steel bars over un-nailed windows, replace glass or partial-glass front/back/side doors with full steel models—the list went on and on.

PAUSE

My dad talked about home invasions all the time. When I was a freshman in college, he and the family moved to a suburb almost a full-hour west of Atlanta. He bought a handgun—a 9mm Glock 17—a few weeks after the move. He said it was for protection. I supposed he meant for home invasions, but I didn't ask.

Dad never, ever talked about *break-ins* or *robberies*, only *home invasions*. I called him out on it. I said it sounded like a military operation—like a Delta Force exercise. Dad didn't think I was funny. He told me that an invasion was a specific type of crime that implied that the owner/occupants of the home were particularly targeted, caught off-guard, and therefore endangered by the invading assailants. He used the word *therefore*. Still, even after his lesson on semantics, the whole home invasion-thing made me think of Normandy, which wasn't at all fair because his whole obsession with home invasions was entirely ridiculous. I could hardly keep a straight face whenever he cited some statistic or story that supported—that justified—his decision to purchase the firearm.

Still, Dad bought the gun. Of course, he had to decide where to store it. It was a conundrum, of sorts. He realized, at some point, I think, that he couldn't store it in a safe or in a lock-box or anything like that. He got it for protection in case of a home invasion. If the weapon was under lock-and-key, it'd be useless in such an emergency. I think he realized he couldn't pause the invasion in order to grab his pistol. So, he mounted it—he mounted it right through the headboard of his and Mom's bed. First, though, he bought this holster-contraption that looked like something out of *Tron*, then he mounted the weapon and the holster on the back side of the head-

board. It was up high so that in the case of a home invasion, he'd be able to reach over the headboard and retrieve it.

The whole installation looked completely absurd. The male-end of a huge carriage bolt stuck out of the cherrywood headboard. Dad tightened it snug with a wing-nut, which dug into the veneer. When I first saw it, I thought it was a good thing both Mom and Dad wore glasses. Otherwise, that carriage bolt, sticking out as far as it did, surely would have gouged out an eye or two.

REWIND
TRACK FIVE: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: JULY 1, 1993
LOCATION: ANSLEY PARK, GEORGIA
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: THEODORE BLACK, GLOCK 17 9MM, ALYSSA EISLEY

I was home from college for the summer. Atlanta was new and shiny, and I was a tourist.

July has just begun and the city was a twisted spring of heat and humidity. I kept waiting for it to pop. I was out late with Alyssa Eisley. Her and her friends. They ran fast and mostly on rails—they did loads of cocaine. I didn't do any, but their pace was entertaining, and Alyssa had this thing in her walk—a dare or something. It drove me crazy.

I pushed the garage door open a little after 3 a.m. and pulled my shoes off in the laundry room. Mom had a planter—a large wood and wrought-iron planter—that she'd insisted on putting right at the edge of a two-step landing that led from the kitchen to the family room. In the dark and a little drunk, I forgot about it and kicked it over. The clay pot that balanced itself between three claw-grippers, crashed on the floor and split. The noise could have been worse—a dull, thick clunk rattled the otherwise silent house.

I picked up the planter and scooped a handful or two of dirt off the floor. I could have put the dirt back in the pot, but I didn't. I don't know why I didn't, but I didn't. Instead, I opened the back door—the one that led out to the patio Mom and Dad and Kyle never used—and tossed the black potting soil into the yard. I pulled the door closed, but it stuck against the jamb, so I had to pull it harder—and louder—than I'd planned. The mortice latch clattered against the catch.

I made my way up the stairs as quietly as I could. I was sleeping in the guest room down the hall from my parents. Three steps from the top, my dad spun around the corner, his Glock leveled. He barked what I thought was *Freeze*, but it could have been anything.

He easily could have killed me. It was nearly at point-blank range.

The first step of tyranny, he used to say, is to disarm the masses.

All I could think of as my slightly-drunk head crashed down on my pillow was that *guns don't kill people, people kill people.*

PAUSE

Jackie Mitchell was a pitcher for the double-A Chattanooga Lookouts. In April of 1931, the Lookouts played an exhibition game against the New York Yankees. Mitchell was called into the game and faced three batters. She was 17 years-old. The first two hitters up to bat were Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. Jackie Mitchell struck them both out in back-to-back at-bats. She walked the third and final batter she faced.

Shortly thereafter, Kennesaw Mountain Landis—the Major League commissioner at the time—issued a rule that forbade women or girls from playing in either the Majors or with any farm-level affiliate.

REWIND
TRACK SIX: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: DECEMBER 1, 1986
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: THEODORE BLACK, PATRICIA BLACK, DIAMONDBACK MIKE DOMINGUEZ
SIGNATURE SERIES

A Diamondback. A bright-as-fuck, neon-green, Mike Dominguez signature series Diamondback. It was everything I wanted. I was 12 and knew almost less than nothing, but I knew I wanted that bike more than anything. I read *Thrasher* and had designs on pulling table-tops and endos, seat-surfing down the dips on North Shadow Hill Way. I went to Montgomery Cyclery with my mom and dad three times to check it out. The third time, one of the guys that worked the skate desk let me take it out to the parking lot. The white tires were smooth. The five-star mags, totally bad-ass.

I was supposed to get it for Christmas. The bike was pricey. My parents made certain to hammer that home. I'd saved up from my paper route and had \$125, almost half of the \$295 price tag. I thought about how I'd cover it with that old blanket from downstairs, linen closet. I'd cover it in the garage to keep it new and protect the paint. The paint was so bright, so goddamned shiny.

The deal I struck with my parents was that I'd give them the \$125 I had, which would clean me out totally, and they'd pay the remaining \$170 as a Christmas gift.

It'll be your only one, though, they said. Just to be fair to your brother, and, they added, three-hundred dollars is a very expensive bike.

Mom told me that my dad's bike wasn't even that much.

I had no idea.

Mom had a bike, but she never rode it. My dad's bike was this powder-blue, 25-speed Huffy that he got when I was like 7. He'd put this big-ass seat on it, then flipped over the handle bars so that he didn't have to bend over as far on account of his bad back. Some chiropractor had told him to do that, and even though he said that chiropractors were quacks, he'd flipped the handlebars anyway. When he flipped them, I thought they looked a little like the trigger mechanisms that Luke and Han used on the Millennium Falcon when they blasted at TIE fighters. His bike stayed that way—a big-ass seat and flipped handlebars—until he got rid of it, but he mostly never rode it, either.

And remember, they told me, this is all the money you have saved and the summer will be here soon and you'll want to do things with your friends and that might not be possible since you might not have any money saved.

I nodded. It was early December and summer was so far off it might as well have been a legend. I quickly counted—in my head—the approximate number of paper route paychecks a until school was out. I considered skate wheels and Kings Island and other stuff.

And also, they said, you've got to think about the price of a helmet and pads.

I frowned.

Because you'll need one if you're going to do those tricks and whatnot.

"You've got to be safe," Dad said. "A broken neck can end all of your opportunities, son. You understand?"

I nodded. Still, I had no idea.

About a week before Christmas, Mom and Dad told me they couldn't swing it.

"We looked at things, and this year, it's just not possible," Dad said.

“Maybe for your birthday,” Mom echoed.

I was crushed. It was all I’d been looking forward to. I’d already told my friends about it. I dreamed so many times of that bright-green paint.

On Christmas morning, I woke up looking forward to nothing. I went downstairs with Kyle and the bike was there, next to the tree. It was bright green. It had the white tires and the five-star mags. I touched it, studied it, and cried. It was beautiful.

After church, before we went up to Grandma B.’s to eat Christmas dinner and open presents with the aunts, uncles, and cousins, Mom and I emptied my piggy bank. I counted out the money—my share—\$125. I put four dollars and twelve cents back inside my plastic bank—the one shaped like a bowling pin.

Later that summer, with one foot on the seat and another on the handlebars, I surfed down North Shadow Hill Way with no helmet, no elbow pads, no chest protector, and no knee pads.

PAUSE

My parents sent Cass a Diamondback for his fourth birthday. It arrived a two-and-a-half weeks late. They still haven't met him, in-person. They called like hell to make sure it arrived. In the voicemails, they said they had delivery confirmation.

When I didn't return those calls, texts streamed in. They came as two-or three-parters. Finally, I called and thanked them. I wasn't sure what took me so long.

My parents asked if I could send them pictures of Cass on the Diamondback.

"It's just like yours," Mom said.

It wasn't, though.

The one they sent Cass was bright blue with black tires and black mags.

"Well," I fumbled. "I cant, really. It's too big for him." I collapsed into our soft, leather sectional, the phone to my ear. "You sent him a 20-inch." I stared up into the ceiling. "He's on a 14, right now."

REWIND
TRACK SIX: THE DELICATE ACT OF LOSING

TRACK RECORDED: JANUARY 29, 1987
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: STEVE HANDLIN, ST. ELIZABETH ANN SETON, THEODORE BLACK,
PATRICIA BLACK, SISTER HENRY PATRICE, MS. JERI MACK, MISS HOLLY
DREGGS, BILL DORAN

Steve Handlin was the janitor at Seton. He was tall—6'4" or 6'5"—and he looked a little like a clown. The top of his head was bowling-ball bald. A half-halo of Brillo-brown hair wrapped from just above his ears to the space just below the back of his neck.

We always saw him on bathroom breaks. He stood there in the doorway to the boiler room. He always had mop of some kind in his hands. He'd nod and say *Hello* if he knew someone's name. Mostly, we just gave him a wave and said, *Yo, Steve* or slapped him a high-five or something, especially once he started playing soccer with us on recess.

We tried to tackle him when he got the ball. He was really big and quite fast. Him playing soccer with us was what started the rugby thing. It was also the cause of so many grass stains and little tears, here and there, in our uniforms. Those tiny tears and grass stains cost all of us some demerits. But none of us really cared. It was worth it. When we played, we all knew to be careful with one another and to steer clear of Steve's boots. He wore these big, brown loggers every single day. Their steel caps peeked through the scuffed and missing leather at the toes. Those things hurt, but no one ever got injured. And so our games went on—everyday—and lunch recess ruled.

Then one Tuesday, Steve wasn't at school. It was winter and chilly and a feather-dust of snow painted the upper field where we always played. It probably shouldn't have kept us inside,

but none of us would have played without Steve there anyway, so we didn't mind the indoor recess.

Steve missed some days, on occasion, but not many. No one thought much of it, at first. But then Wednesday and Thursday came. The temperature was colder still, and recess stayed inside, in the cafeteria. Friday arrived with a big thaw that let us back out on the field, but Steve was still missing. Everybody wondered where he was. Four days was a long time. No one missed four days of anything.

We asked Ms. Mack and Miss Dreggs, and they said he was out. In art that afternoon, we all made cards and pictures for Steve, even some of the girls.

The next week, we played soccer on the upper field, but Steve was still gone. The games went on, but nobody tackled much. The grass stains slowly disappeared from the knees of our pants, and the elbows of our powder-blue oxfords.

Suddenly, it was Friday, again. Steve had been out nine-straight school days. Eleven, if we counted the weekend. Math was sweaty, our attention strained to the corners of the room as fractions and things we cared less about fell hard on our desks, then tumbled down to the badly-tiled floor.

Sister Henry ran math and Sarah James answered most of the questions. For a moment, we all thought we understood denominators. I felt pretty grown-up with all the chalk and stuff on the board. I wondered what would happen if a third grader walked in. I wondered what they would think we were up to with all the scrawled numbers, the slashes, the chalk dust, and eraser marks. It all made us look pretty smart.

When the final bell rang, each of us drifted to buses that took some of us most of the way home and others, all the way.

That Saturday brought a baseball clinic with Bill Doran where I learned to hit off my back foot.

“Don’t give so much away on the pitch,” he said. “Look.” He stood across from me in his Astros hat and a weird-looking rainbow-striped jersey, and got into his stance—a big league stance. His hands clutched an imaginary bat. All I could think about was how white his batting gloves were—how cool they looked. They were professional. Very professional.

Bill Doran was the everyday second baseman for the Houston Astros. He grew up in Cincinnati and came back a few times a year to run youth clinics like the one that morning.

“Your hips are good,” he said as he bounced lightly on the balls of his feet. “Just be sure to sink into it. Relax.” He smiled. “This is supposed to be fun.”

I laughed, nervously.

He let go of his imaginary bat.

“Now,” he continued and slapped my inner thighs, “get balanced, here.”

Again, he grabbed his imaginary bat.

“On the pitch,” he added, “there should be a shift.” I watched his feet. He had on these blue, Pony turfs—the ones with the tongues that the laces tied right through. Those turfs resisted a bit, as he swung. Their soles fought against the shiny gym floor. “But before that,” he instructed, “you should be balanced—ready to pop—depending on the pitch.”

I tried.

“Good,” he said. “But you’re losing something—see it. Right here—”

He pointed to my front foot.

“In the step, all the weight goes to your front foot. You’re giving too much away. Keep some. Here.” Again, he point to my back foot. “Keep it for the pitch—a change, a curve, whatever.”

I looked at him confused.

“Well, you’re not there yet. But eventually pitchers will come with junk, and that’ll allow you to compensate without losing your ability to get ahold of the pitch.”

I nodded. I’d never seen a curveball in real-life and the change-ups I’d seen might just have been accidental.

My dad was there, too. He had his *Coach Black* henley on, and it pulled tight across his paunch stomach. He watched me and Doran for a few minutes. Then, he walked around and joked with the other kids on my team. They had some jokes—running jokes—that I knew nothing about.

All that night, I thought of the next season. I thought about my balance, the pop, and not giving too much away.

Doran had told me, “Just think about your back foot. You want to explode into the pitch, but don’t forget—“ He’d slapped, then, at my calf. “Here. You’ll want some power here to drive through the pitch with your swing. There’s your control. Then, you can put it where you want. Pull, push, whatever.”

Sunday came too quick and my mom woke me up early for church. I hated going to church, especially that early.

“Why not 11?” I asked. “Why is it always 9?”

That was a mistake. I knew the moment I said it.

Dad was in a mood. He'd gone to Patton late Saturday, after the clinic, and I'd heard him say something to Mom about needing to go in today, too.

"Look, you ungrateful son-of-a-bitch," he stormed. I was twelve years-old and barely awake. I started to cry. "Jesus hung on that goddamned cross for you for an entire day. An entire day," he repeated. His voice was a black thundercloud. "You're going to go to church whenever I say, and you're going to do it and not complain or carry-on."

He paused. It was bait.

"Understood?" he followed.

I nodded.

"And another thing," he pressed. Mom stopped serving breakfast and Kyle held his breath. "There needs to be more discipline, here. No more of this nodding or answering okay or any of that shit."

Dad's face was swollen, and even though the table was round, I imagined him at the head, far, far away.

"*No, sir* and *Yes, sir*. Not *Maybe* or *Yeah*," he continued. I listened to him, but everything he said sounded like jet wash—it just kind of rumbled and seemed so far away. "Like the Melvins. Elster tells Gerald to jump and it's *How high?*"

I couldn't help it. I should've, but I didn't and I probably—definitely—knew better.

"But," I stammered, "isn't that different. I mean, if you said *Jump* and we stopped to say *How high?* Isn't that exactly what you're talking about not doing? Shouldn't we just jump, no matter how high?"

Dad's fat fingers caught me right in the mouth. His wedding band thumped my cheek. The surprise stung me more than the pain. That morning, my eggs tasted like blood, all tinny and awful.

After church, on the way home in the Malibu, Dad told Mom that Steve killed himself—committed suicide with a shotgun. Kyle and I were in the backseat, quiet as hell. I think Dad kept talking because he thought we weren't listening. Kyle wasn't, but I was. I always was.

I tried, but I couldn't even imagine it. I knew what it meant, but I still couldn't imagine it.

We pulled into our driveway a few moments later. We didn't live too far from church. The Malibu was an automatic with a large, front bench seat. The car idled in the driveway and Kyle got out to open the garage door. Dad turned and draped his arm over the back of the front seat, behind my mom's head and armrest. I flinched.

“What'd you know about Steve?”

I sat quiet, confused.

I shrugged. “He played soccer with us and stuff.”

Dad's eyes dug into me.

“And we'd see him, in the bathroom.”

“Doing what?” Dad said.

“I dunno. He usually had the mop, and was there in front of the boiler room or whatever.”

My mom and dad never talked about Steve after that. Not a single word. I thought about him a lot. I thought about the soccer games, his boots and the way they clapped against the tiny, square tiles of the hallway and the bathroom.

I thought about the boiler room, too. It got stuffier and hotter and darker the farther in you walked.

A few days later, after the conversation, Dad went to Cleveland for some meetings—something about the system, about Patton.

Cleveland seemed far away. I knew it wasn't, but the Browns were there and it always seemed cold. I was glad I didn't have to go. I hoped that I never had to go. Not, at least, the way he did.

I dreamed that night and then again for several nights after, that Dad killed himself in Cleveland. In my dreams, he did it in some hotel with *White Christmas* on the T.V. The note he left was gibberish.

I dreamed it so many times, with so many details, that for weeks after he got back from Cleveland, I'd sneak into his and Mom's room late at night and stare at his sleeping face. Sometimes, I'd just listen at the door to hear him snore. I listened just to be sure it was a dream. Each time I dreamed it, though, what happened felt so real. I'm not sure why I dreamed it over and over and over again. I'm not sure why I thought about Dad hanging himself in a hotel room in Cleveland. It just felt so real.

PLAY
TRACK TWO: ONE NIGHT

TRACK RECORDED: MARCH 18, 2015
LOCATION: AUSTIN, TEXAS
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: JEFF SHELLING, SHANGRI-LA, EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING, TWO COW GARAGE, DAN PEZYNSKI, KENT BECKERT

Austin wrapped me up and tucked me in the palm of its hand. The air tasted like the ocean, even though I knew that couldn't possibly be the case. I was nervous. I felt more dangerous than I wanted to be.

Emma and Cass were in Florida. I got to Austin late—six hours later than I'd expected. A hang-up in Houston and bad routing snagged me bad. A morning class at the college held me in Milwaukee until the early afternoon. Gate changes, runway backups, weather shifts, maintenance concerns put me in Houston in time to get texts from Micah and Shane. They had played a set with Bushwick Bill. The texts said it was an impromptu set, and that they did "When the Levee Breaks" and "Damn, It Feels Good To Be a Gangsta". That made me smile. I thought about how if someone was a gangsta, it probably didn't matter if they didn't have any place to stay. That made me smile even more. My friends were good people.

I landed in San Antonio because flying there was three-hundred dollars cheaper than Austin. I got in the rental at a quarter after eleven, and hit the gas on the hour-plus drive.

My buddy, Jeff, had been sleeping in his van in the Y parking lot, down off of Cesar Chavez. I called him as I broke under the overpass at Southpark Meadows. Not long after that, I slid through the front door of Shangri-La. At 1:50, Jeff and I headed up north to Pez's apartment, and by 3:00, I'd dropped him off, back at the Y lot across from the musky hollows of Barton Springs.

Eight shows in three days. That was the plan. Another would materialize along the way. Nine shows in three days. The ghosts gathered deep inside me. They were ready for a blow-out.

I had no band, but had promised to have one at three of the nine. As those shows approached, my anxieties swelled. Rooftops, 6th Street, riders, contracts, guarantees, and sponsors all ran a hard line. I wondered why I always seemed to over-extend myself. I wondered why I always worked to be something other than what I was. I wondered if any good would ever come from it.

I'd recorded some backing tracks—claps and snare, a kick and electric guitar. I'd sampled some strings, horns, and whatever else I could squeeze on and pass off as something like a full band. I dumped them with a click to my iPad and planned to run them direct for a fuller sound. I wasn't going to fool anyone, and I wasn't trying to. I figured I was mostly fucked and somewhat in danger of burning bridges I couldn't afford to burn.

My buddy, Kent Beckert, agreed to run the tracks from stage. I told him to play at some sort of engineer. He made it look good, like he was working on-the-fly. He added some harmonies and sold it, gold. By the time Saturday night rolled around I felt better, if not okay.

PLAY
TRACK THREE: ONE NIGHT

TRACK RECORDED: MARCH 20, 2015
LOCATION: AUSTIN, TEXAS
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: DON BAYLOR, BRYANT PARK, IN-N-OUT

I dreamed last night that I went to the batting cages with Don Baylor. He told me I stood too far away from the plate. I told him the plate was a metaphor for my ego.

“Your ego is a glass bottle, son,” he said. His voice was sandy, Texas dirt. “Break it and get out into the woods.”

I smiled.

“How are my feet?” I asked. I’d been working on my foot positioning for some time and felt pretty good about them.

“Terrible,” he replied, flatly. “It must be the cold—the temptation.” He paused and spit. His mustache was a bristle brush of wiry, black threads. “Maybe—well,” he considered. “I guess it could just be the fright of not really knowing yourself.”

I hadn’t noticed it before, but at that moment, I realized just how big he really was—how huge he must have seemed when he first got drafted back in 1967.

“Is that it?” he asked, leaning too close. “Do you not know yourself?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

We were at a batting cage in the middle of Bryant Park, on the lawn behind the library. Everything around us was empty—the streets, the sidewalks, the chairs and tables, the subways—the entire city. I could have heard a pin drop.

“Look,” he continued, “if you’re worried about your footwork, I can help.” He grabbed a bat—a wooden bat—and climbed in the cage. Suddenly, he was wearing the pinstripes—the

same ones he wore in 1983—his stirrups pulled high over black, Pony spikes. “Back in Rochester, before I hit the show, we used to have a saying. We said that it’s all about how you step in.”

“Step in?”

“Yeah,” he said, “Step in.” I looked at him through the web of black netting. It hung down, fixed somewhere—and I couldn’t quite tell exactly where—above the trees, above the tree line. I could tell, though, that it didn’t stretch above like the third or fourth floor of the Carbon & Carbide Building.

“It’s all in the step-in. You gotta mean it,” he said. He climbed into the box. “It’s like this: your body gets all taut, then both feet stamp with new power. See? But, it’s gotta be real power.”

The machine spit balls—the rubber-coated ones that were almost yellow, but not quite—the ones that resembled swollen golf balls. Baylor whacked every single one—high, low, inside and out—it didn’t matter. Every time, his front foot stepped the same way. Every time, it was, boom, boom, boom. He had power, too. Power to go opposite field, to pull it, to send deep line-drives, or soft, Texas Leaguers.

Afterwards, he bought me dinner at In-N-Out. I woke up thinking that he might be my new favorite player.

Pez and I talked about it over coffee.

“Where were you last night?”

“I played at Shangri-La, like at 6:15. Then,” I said, “I was all over.”

He shook his head.

“I ended things at Shakespeare’s, I think. Two Cow played on the roof and I sung a bit. It was a Sapporo party.”

“Sapporo, huh? Was that it?”

“I guess.”

PAUSE

Don Baylor was drafted by the Baltimore Orioles in 1967. He is the only player in Major League Baseball history to hit more than 300 home runs, steal more than 250 bases, win an MVP award, and win at least one World Championship. During his career, Baylor was hit-by-pitch 267 times. In 1987, he set a record for the most times hit-by-pitch with 28. In 2014, Baylor broke his femur as he attempted to catch a ceremonial first-pitch thrown by Vladimir Guerrero, the only other Los Angeles Angel MVP award winner besides Baylor, himself.

PLAY
TRACK FOUR: ONE NIGHT

TRACK RECORDED: MARCH 20, 2015
LOCATION: AUSTIN, TEXAS
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: SXSW, GHOSTFACE KILLAH, LOVE/40, HOPE, DAN PEZYNSKI,
MCDONALD'S

The rain came in buckets all afternoon. By 7:00, it stopped. I was on at eight.

They put a clear, plastic tent over the entire rooftop, and when the lights hit it, the whole enterprise became Thunderdome. Ghostface Killah was on the roof across the street. His stage was snow-white and had these urns that shot fire out of their tops. My stage didn't have any fire-shooting urns.

Kent wasn't available for this one; I'd be solo. I ran my iPad through the mains and the place filled up. Above me, the sky peeled back a thin sheet of clouds, and the stars came back vacation—rested and ready. Just before I stepped on-stage, Emma texted me a picture of Cass with his NCAA basketball bracket sheet. In the photo, he had on a black Batman mask, and he'd colored most of his bracket orange. His marker stokes were bold and beautiful. On the stage, just in front of the drum kit, someone had scrawled something in a sort-of silver ink. It could have been paint, but the lettering was sharp. It was upside-down from where I stood, but I could still read it: *Hope and punk are just four-letter words. Delicate is one I can never quite remember how to spell.*

I gave the sound engineer my levels and tore into my opener. By the third song, my heart was beating outside of my chest. The beats I made pump, pump, pumped behind me. They caromed all around me. My down-strums shook the floor. Old things, it seemed, fell apart. The new ones, though, were still being crafted.

I played “Love/40” fifth. It started fast and finished faster. I repeated the chorus at the end and then held the final note, as I pulled my face, slowly and steadily, from the microphone. The silence, as the chord—a suspended F minor—died with my hammers, hatched a new thought: I’d always wanted to be something, but then always found some way not to. Maybe that was okay. Maybe what I was was actually enough.

I closed with a song that I said was about baseball—about a conversation I’d had in Austin that previous year. It was called “Hope”, but it wasn’t entirely about baseball—I wasn’t completely honest. I repeated the chorus until the backing tracks ended, then carried it—a capella—for another few measures. The crowd pushed in and the quiet seemed paradoxical. I repeated, again and again, *Someday, I promise, I can be like that. Someday, I promise I’ll arrive.*

A few hours later, I lay in Pez’s kitchen, in between the refrigerator and the counter cabinets, and stared at the dark ceiling. Outside, I could hear the clatter from the neighboring, 24-hour, McDonald’s drive-thru. Static and echoes filled the space between my thoughts, and I drifted toward sleep on the partially-inflated air mattress. I rolled onto my left side and pulled my knees up to my chest. Sleep teased, but the distorted drive-thru speaker persisted and brought me back to the kitchen, to the heat and stickiness of the vinyl air mattress, and to the fact that I couldn’t seem to locate the top sheet I’d had the night before last. The parts of me that touched the vinyl were sweaty as hell.

The drive-thru beeped and buzzed and reminded me of my first job. I got it when I was 15. It was the first and only one I’d applied for. I got hired on-the-spot and started work two days later. My mom drove me to that McDonald’s on Route 28.

REWIND
TRACK SIX: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: JULY 31, 1989
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: PATRICIA BLACK, MCDONALD'S, ROUTE 28, CHERYL HALBERTSON

We pulled up in the Horizon and slid diagonally into a space. The tick-tick-tick of the valves was amplified by the brick—a stark, alarming red—and the overhang—the one that all McDonald's had with the french-fry lights, bent at the eaves.

"Just fill out the application inside," Mom coached, "then give it to the manager right away." She turned off the engine. The keys swung lightly in the ignition collar. "And don't just give it to anybody—make sure it's the manager."

I undid my seat belt and went for the door handle. She grabbed my arm. "And don't forget to ask them when you can start."

I didn't respond. I had to get hired first, but I couldn't get into that with her.

Inside, the restaurant was nearly empty.

I asked the girl at the counter for an application and filled it out in a booth near the bathrooms. I returned it to a woman wearing a white blouse whose crunchy, black hair was piled up on her head and held in place by a huge, green, plastic clip. Her eyes were blue and shifty and ringed with loads of messy eyeliner.

She took a few moments to read my application. I stood and waited as she turned it over once, then again. The back side was completely blank.

"Can you start [tomorrow](#)?"

"No." I still don't know why I said that. "But the day after that works."

She nodded and wrote a few notes on the top of the application, then gave me a Post-It that read *Cheryl - 5pm Weds 8/2*.

“I’m Cheryl,” she followed. “Just ask for me on [Wednesday](#), and we’ll get you a uniform. You can train on the grill right away.”

“Thanks.” I stood there silently for a second, waived, and left quickly. I think I was embarrassed.

When I got back to the car, Mom was ecstatic. She talked pretty much non-stop the whole ride home.

She guided us through our subdivision and then down our street. My brother was in the middle of the front yard with the garden hose. Mom’s chatter stopped. He had the metal, pull-nozzle attached and squeezed off thin towers of water that shot ten, fifteen, twenty feet almost straight up in the air. Mom lost her shit.

“Inside,” she growled, her teeth clenched. “What. In the hell. Do you. Think. You’re doing?”

The clenched teeth turned out whenever she was angry. The weird, between-words, mid-sentence pauses only came when she was embarrassed.

Kyle didn’t offer any explanation. He knew better. I knew better. It didn't matter and never had. Kyle just passed through garage, into the laundry room, where he made sure to take his shoes off.

My brother had on a Little League All-Star shirt. I'd forgotten, until then, that he was an all-star and I was jealous as fuck of that. I didn't like that he was an all-star and I hadn't been. I hated the fact that I was jealous of him for it. It felt a poison in my mouth.

PAUSE

A few years before those water spouts, when I was still in Little League and my soon-to-be-all-star little brother was still a toddler, an end-of-the-season all-star game started up. Some sponsor shelled out some dough and everybody got behind it. Two kids from each team were selected and the game was played on a diamond up at Harn's Park that had a grass infield and a fence that was green with a yellow stripe on the top just like in the Bigs. The field was like a mini-Riverfront. It had full dugouts, padded on-deck circles, and pegged bases.

For six years the league ran that all-star game, and for six years I never got selected. Dad was the coach. He was the one to submit the all-stars.

“I’ll put your name in,” he told me the first year. “But, I can’t lobby for you. I can’t push for you.” We were in the kitchen, and he was still wearing our team’s cap. His hair fell out of the snap-back like a duck tail. He took his cap off as he talked, and set it on the counter. Mom was going to be pissed if he left it there. “It wouldn’t be fair,” he continued, “for me to push for you.” He paused. “Because I’m you’re dad and the other kids on the team don’t have that advantage. Some of the coaches just put their sons on—like Rodgers or Calvin—but you wouldn’t want that, would you?”

I shook my head.

“Right,” he replied. “It wouldn’t be fair. I just give them the names.”

He ruffled my blonde hair, dirty and matted with sweat from the game I’d just played. I’d gone 3-for-4, with a double and three RBIs. We’d beaten the Cougars and had taken sole possession of first place.

“And Snake,” he said, as I turned to leave. That was my nickname. “Good game today.”

Eventually, some parents complained that the all-star game singled kids out, so the league ended it.

Dad was on the all-star managerial staff every year, so I went to the games. I never played in them, but I was always there. It was weird to talk to my friends and teammates, them in their uniforms and me not in mine.

The first year, I asked to go to the game. I thought that maybe if I went, I might somehow get to play. I remember that I wanted to wear my uniform, but my dad wouldn't let me.

"You can't," Dad said. "You don't get to keep that. Those go back. They all get turned in."

As he spoke, he struggled to buckle his belt—a worn, brown leather deal. He'd poked extra holes in it with his pocket knife as the swell of his waist pushed both east and west.

"Only the all-stars keep their uniforms this late. If I wasn't the coach, yours wouldn't even be around." He tucked the tiny overflow into his first belt loop. It barely reached. "Only the all-star selections get to keep them this long," he repeated.

I went to the game with no uniform, but still held tight to the thought that maybe, somehow I'd play. It was foolish of me; I hadn't been selected. I had no uniform. I didn't even bring my glove or my hat. Still, I thought maybe if I was there, someone might want me.

I hung around the field during batting practice and stayed in the dugout during the introductions. After that, Dad made me leave.

"You have to go around," he said, "and watch from out there." He pointed to the bleachers behind home plate. "Only people in the game can be in here." I stared at him. "I'll come out in a bit and check on you."

I turned and walked away.

“Hey, Snake,” he said. “We’ll catch up after.”

I took a spot on the bleachers. They were uncomfortable. A sort of shame wrapped around me. It was blanket-grey and heavy. I watched an inning and a half, then went and played on the jungle gym with Jeremy Patton's brother, Mark. Jeremy was in my class at school and was an all-star.

After the game, Dad found me playing with Mark. He was embarrassed. I could tell. The all-star kids were sweaty with dirty uniforms. I had sand in my hair and as he walked up, I was drawing furrows with a stick in the soft dirt at the bottom of the slide

Dad strolled over quietly with a shiny, gold trophy. His team had won. The sponsor paid for trophies. I wanted that trophy more than anything.

As we walked to the car, I asked Dad if his all-star trophy could go on my shelf.

"Do you think I can just put it there, Dad?"

"No," he answered. "You can't do that."

He opened my door and walked around to the driver's side.

"You didn't earn it," he explained. "It wouldn't be right for you to have it." He checked the rearview and backed the Taurus out of its space. "I mean," he added, "why would you really even want it if you didn't play in the game?"

We drove away from the park with its grass infield, real scoreboard and full dugouts. I had on my soccer shorts from the season before and a sky-blue, Mustang t-shirt. Dad had on his red manager's shirt—we were the Cardinals—and our team's hat.

He slowed to a stop at a red light on Montgomery Road. The car had been silent since we left the park. Dad glanced at me. "You know what I mean, Tyne?" he asked. "You understand what I'm saying about having not played, right?"

I remember I tried, but I couldn't look at him. I stared through the dusty windshield and nodded.

The rest of the ride home we didn't talk about baseball or trophies or anything like that. Dad played his Billy Joel cassette and we both sang along.

I don't care what you say anymore, this is my life.

When we got home, Dad put his trophy downstairs on one of the bookshelves in the family room.

I stared at that shit everyday. Sometimes, I wish I could've said something to him. Maybe not then, but later. But stuff like that happened all the time. I guess I should've said something to him. I guess I should've done a lot of things. But I didn't. After a while, I guess I just kind of went ahead with my own life and left his alone.

PLAY
TRACK FIVE: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

TRACK RECORDED: APRIL 10, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
NOTES/TAGS: WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, PARIS, FRANCE, JARDIN DE
TUILERIES, SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH, BURT'S TIKI LOUNGE, JON
ANGSTROM, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

I had another weird dream a few weeks back. In the dream, I was in Paris—a boule in my hand, the crunchy, orange stones of the Tuileries beneath my feet. I was set to toss it—the boule. The air was rich with the faint, sweet scent of tobacco. The breeze caught that scent in its lazy drift, gathered from the tips of cigarettes that burned here and there.

The silence of the moment surprised me. I wondered, in the dream, if I was deaf. Traffic lulled along the Rivoli. I looked up at the sky and thought about my shot. The dream seemed bit too trite and cinematic. High above, a jumbo jet shrunk to the size of a pinprick as it climbed farther and farther from CDG. A few seconds later, the boule spilled from my hand, its silver shell an explosion in the mid-morning sun. In that sleepy instant, I felt home.

I've carried that feeling—the one from the dream—with me for the past few weeks. I've troubled with it, wondered about its significance, and bothered about exactly what it might mean to be home. It seems that there's too much theory in just about everything I do these days.

I sat quiet and thought about the dream—the one in Paris—as I stared at a four grainy images that split a massive projection screen into equal parts. The images were digital feeds funneled in from the college's outlying campuses. It was standard practice for all departmental meetings. It was the easiest way to coordinate and assemble all of the English instructors at once. Outside, spring had been canceled. Snow blanketed blanketed most of the now-resentful city.

I really didn't mind the grain. My colleagues complained that it made it hard to see people's faces, but I didn't know most of the instructors from the other campuses anyway. My eyes were heavy and the last few days and nights had been a complete scatter.

Ten hours ago, I'd threaded my car between concrete barriers along a flooded I-294. What was normally a five-lane expressway had been reduced to a series of bobsled chutes. The spring's highway construction had been tempered by uncooperative weather. Chicago's April had been one nearly continuous deluge that sparked flash-floods and turned just about every section of grass in the city to a spongy mess.

The expressway was only one-lane wide for a good chunk of my trip back to Milwaukee. It was cordoned-off with orange barrels. Water rushed along the medians and stood several inches deep on the road's surface. Every now and again, a barrel floated into traffic only to be crushed by a semi or pushed awkwardly by a sedan. Traffic milled erratically and impatiently in the single lane, and where possible, on the grooved berm.

My head screamed. I'd had five cups of coffee on the day and it was only 3:15. I would have traded my right arm for a toothbrush and some toothpaste. Both of those things were in my suitcase. My own bathroom was a place I'd not seen in a week-and-a-half.

The previous eleven days saw me toggle between western states and Milwaukee or Chicago; between classes and altered office hours, cities and stages. Pretty, blue lights and wide highways punctuated each day of a short run of shows I did with a friend of mine.

He'd gathered some momentum on a new solo release. There was a *New York Times* write-up, comments in *EW*, *Rolling Stone*, and bumps from the likes of Frank Turner and Jenny

Lewis. He'd been up and down the west coast for a month and I'd been offered a support slot on nine dates that ended in Chicago.

My itinerary had me on a one-way flight out of O'Hare to LAX for the Troubadour that same night. Then, we were in Vegas at the Double Down with the remaining dates strung through Salt Lake City, Denver, Ft. Collins, Omaha, Des Moines, St. Louis, and Chicago. I was going to bail on Omaha to for class—a creative writing section—and then reconvene in Des Moines.

In Salt Lake, I ran into a guy I knew in high school. I hadn't seen him since then. His name was Jon Angstrom and he managed money for some firm in Los Angeles. He was a good thirty to forty pounds heavier than the last time I saw him. And, he seemed shorter.

"My new office is about 2,000 square feet," he laughed. "Bigger than my first apartment." He ran his hand through thin strands of nut-brown hair. "Fucking bigger than my parents' house."

I shook my head. "So what the hell are you doing here, anyway?" I asked.

"Shit." He shook a gold watch out of his buttoned sleeve and checked the time. "I'm out here for a conference," he replied.

He looked old. And tired. Crow's feet shot out of the corners of his eyes. They were like tiny fissures left by earthquakes of stress and turbulent markets. I considered asking about the conference, but didn't.

"I saw you were gonna be in town," he continued, "and I thought, *Fuck I gotta get to that.* I try to follow you on Facebook or whatever." He sipped from a bottle of Miller Lite. "We're friends."

I nodded, suddenly uncomfortable.

His smile pulled pink lips tight over tiny teeth. “Rolled here with some buddies, too.” He pointed across the bar with his bottle hand. “They kinda dig this stuff—John Mayer and shit. You know, Jack Johnson, Ben Harper—” He grabbed my shoulder. “Vibey stuff for just hangin’ and chillaxing.”

I nodded. I didn’t do that sort of thing, but whatever. It was cool of him to come out.

“So you’re teaching, too, I hear,” he followed. “How’s that?”

“It’s all right.” I guess social media pulled everyone close. I scanned the room, which steadily filled. I had thought tonight was going to be dead. “It’s something,” I shrugged.

“Exactly, brother.” His hand fell back on my shoulder. His fingers massaged my clavicle, and he took another draw off his beer. “Something,” he continued, eyes squinty, “that’s exactly what it is.”

Jon set his bottle on the table next to me and adjusted his belt. It was a black leather thing with dozens of metal grommets.

“It’s pretty cool that you’re out here chasing it,” he said. “Fuckin’ running around the country and all over the place.” His face reflected a blue sheen in the bar light. “I keep waiting for you to break big,” he laughed. His face was flat and pointed, and his shirt didn’t really fit. “For a song of yours to end up in a commercial or some shit like that.”

I shifted uneasily and gazed over his shoulder at the bartender. Her skirt was short and dangerous and her arms were filled with Jawbreaker tattoos.

“Anything happening with that—like a label or something?” The bottle pushed itself into his lips. “A buddy of mine knows this dude who knows Usher. We were at some party a few weeks back.” He paused. “I didn’t see him, though.”

“Who?”

He tilted his head.

“Usher,” he replied, and crinkled his forehead up. For a second, he reminded me of a bat.

“Oh.”

“So anything going on?” He pointed again to the room. “I mean, there’s what, 200 in here?”

I pursed my lips and rubbed my chin. My beard was too long.

“I dunno.” I scanned the club. “Maybe.” I’d always been terrible with numbers—guessing crowds and things. “There’s a bit,” I stammered. “Nibbles here and there.” I brightened. “I got somebody doing PR for me and there’s this thing in LA later in the year that might be something.” His eyes strayed to a girl who’d just stepped to the club. She had on this red, tank-thing that was probably a shirt, even though she wore it as a dress. Jon nodded as I spoke, but his eyes undressed the tank. “

I dunno,” I continued. “I mean, she’s pushing the old record, but—”

“Wait, who?” he asked.

I laughed. There was no competing with a shirt as a dress, especially if someone—and this blonde did—pulled it off. “The PR woman,” I repeated.

“Oh, right, the thing with the record.” His stare connected with mine quickly, then returned to the general vicinity of the blonde’s ass. It was a nice ass.

“Yeah,” I resumed, my enthusiasm tempered. “So she’s working the old record—the one that came out last year, but she says she’s gonna rep the next one, too.”

“Right on,” he replied, his attention back to me.

I glanced at the bar. The red tank was gone. Everyone else seemed to crowd and soil the space she'd left. A wave of something descended, crashed between Jon and I. It was as though we'd suddenly moved miles apart or began to speak different languages. It was weird. We still stood right next to each other.

“Well, when's that gonna happen?”

Before I could respond, he did some sort of thing with his arms and his hips.

“Yo,” he said, “what I mean is, *When's that gonna drop, son?*”

His voice was strange.

I smiled and sighed. “Man, I dunno.” I adjusted my hat. “Gotta find some money first.”

He grinned. His eyes grew narrow against the moment, against the steadily dimmed lights of the club.

“Oh yeah, right,” he fumbled. “The label and stuff.”

I shook my head and caught the bar clock out of the corner of my eye.

“Look, man,” I said, “it's good to see you.” We shook hands and I pulled him close for an awkward hug. He was uncomfortable and smelled like a strip club. I felt a little bad.

“Let's catch up after, if you're around.” I always said shit I didn't really mean. “I gotta find the sound guy and figure out what's up.”

His friends gathered around him, as if they'd been cued.

“Good luck, brother,” one said.

“Yeah, kill it, bra,” added another.

There was a clank of beer bottles that I wasn't part of, and then I thanked them. I turned into the mess of massed bodies and weaved my way toward the soundboard.

At times, it was hard for me to understand what I was doing or even to contemplate why. I mean, here I was, driving around the country, playing sometimes to almost nobody, chasing something that I really couldn't explain. Something so hard to quantify.

At the college, my semester load was pretty solid—two comp sections, a workplace communications class, a contemporary lit section, and a creative writing workshop filled with poets. The workshop was a joke. And not because of the students. They were sharp. It was a joke because of me. They wanted to sink their fangs into poetry, grind knuckles and ball their fists against the dying light. I'd never really taken a formal poetry class. Everything I taught in relation to meter, rhythm, and structure, I'd appropriated from songwriting, which is not the same thing. It's not even close.

PLAY
TRACK SIX: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

TRACK RECORDED: APRIL 10, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
NOTES/TAGS: WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, AUDREY REDDING,
ARIEL JONES

So there I was, in the department meeting, bored to death, my head foggy and pained, my breath like kerosene. There was a drone from across the room that emanated from a mouth connected to a face that I was sure was not from our department. The mouth talked about dress-codes and workplace-climate surveys. Underneath the mouth, which was pudgy and too pink, was a sweater stitched thick with trees and a name tag that read *SUE*. There was a title printed on the name tag, as well, but I couldn't make that out.

I flipped my phone over, which held my place in *The Ways of White Folks*, and checked my email. Three messages appeared in my inbox—one warning of injustices to wolves in eastern Idaho, one from the SIEU that urged more tolerance in hiring practices, and one from a student I'd had a few semesters back. I opened it up.

Yo, T. It said. You got a little time. Things are rough. Man, rougher than rough. I'm around today if you can talk. If not, no big. Here's my number or you can email. Today would be good, though. I'm losing light.

There was no signature.

It was from this girl, Audrey Redding. She took a comp class from me in the fall and had a three year-old. daughter. I knew she'd been struggling throughout that previous fall. Money was tight, she'd said, and her work supervisor had her hours on a yo-yo string.

I read the message again, then got up and left the meeting. I left my book and notebook where they were. Outside the meeting room, I sent her a text.

The hungover drudge that had only moments before wrapped me tight, quickly disappeared. She replied and said she was upstairs, in the cafeteria. I walked down the long hallway, away from the department meeting, away from Sue, and the grainy images of my far-off colleagues.

The foyer and stairs were crowded. Backpacks and jackets shuffled. Some faces turned and nodded, others moved on. I headed toward the cafeteria. I took one flight of steps two at a time, followed by another, and then one more.

“What up, Mr. T?” Audrey was at a table, by herself, her books stacked unevenly, awkwardly all around her. A notebook was open right in front of her, the pages filled with loopy handwriting that threatened to fall right off the page.

Ain't it funny, Audrey had said on the first day of class that past fall, how some black bitch like me have some British-ass sounding name?

I sat down next to her.

“Not much.” I paused and rubbed my eyes. “You know,” I tilted my head quizzically, “I’m getting by.”

She smiled.

“How about you?”

We were on the third floor outside of a small, food-service area called *L'Express*. It sold chips and doughnuts, coffee and soda and wasn't French in the slightest. I pointed to it and Audrey followed me inside, her things still spread across the adjacent table.

“So what's up?” I asked.

I filled a paper cup, then struggled with its plastic lid. Hot coffee dripped on my hand.

“I’m leakin, T.” She shook her head and tangled, then untangled the hood tie of her black and gold *Baby Phat* jacket. “Leakin bad.”

That fall, Audrey never once came to class on time. She was always 5-10 minutes late, sometimes as much as 20. And, she wore that same jacket—the one she had on now—August through December. And, she wasn’t subtle about anything.

I nodded to the register, took a sip of my coffee, and we moved together. The line was 10-12 deep.

“Seriously?” I followed.

“Kinda.” She shifted uncomfortably and pulled at her backpack straps. It looked empty, but she had it on anyway. In fact, she had it on while she sat at the table when I arrived.

“Any tighter and you’re not gonna be able to breathe.”

Her laugh edged sharp. “Right?” Then suddenly, her voice wavered, collapsed slightly. I glanced at her, then handed the clerk exact change. We walked back out into the main cafeteria.

“Things are gonna work out, though, yeah?”

We sat down back down at her table, the one she’d staked with science books.

“So what’s the deal?” I asked.

“Man,” she sighed. “I got this thing. I been trying to get assistance through the city for me and my daughter, right?”

I nodded.

“So, I filled out these forms and they interviewed me.”

Audrey cracked her knuckles. There was a tattoo of a hummingbird on the back of her left hand.

“They wanted to know where I was living,” she continued. “They asked where I was and I coulda lied. I coulda told them I could’ve told them anything.” Her eyes caught mine. “Instead, I was honest.”

She paused and her phone vibrated on the table. She picked it up, flicked her thumb over the screen, then tapped out a series of texts. She didn’t miss a beat.

“So, I told them my gran’s address cos that’s where I been staying—me and Ariel. I been taking care of her, you know, my grans.”

Audrey set her phone back on the table.

“Gran’s was paying me,” she added, “Like a job.”

“You’re not at the nursing home anymore?”

“Nah,” she sighed. “They cut all our hours down bad. Real bad.” Audrey waived to someone across the room. “I just couldn’t afford to stay there.”

“That sucks.” I rubbed my eyes, again. “About the hours, I mean.”

She nodded. She was in her phone again. Her thumbs cascaded texts.

“But what are you gonna do, really?” I added.

“I know, right?”

She lay her phone back on the table. It rattled again. This time, she ignored it.

“So things was good at my gran’s. Ariel was happy, but the city people told me that even though I was living with my gran and working, that because I wasn’t paying rent there and because I’m under 25, they needed to run my parents’ address as my home—”

“What?” I interrupted. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Yeah, it’s fucked—I mean, screwed up.” She stretched her arms high above her head.
“But, it was all good. I gave my parent’s information—thought I’d do the right thing. Then, my grans died—”

“Oh, Jesus,” I cut in. “I’m sorry to hear that. How—”

“But it gets worse, yo. Grans goes and falls while I’m at school and is in the hospital, so then I’m out a job and my parents—who I don’t even talk to me at all—are my address or whatever. Then, this bitch from the city calls me to say I qualify for assistance.”

“Well,” I puzzled, “that’s good.”

I studied her face. She pursed her lips and slowly shook her head.

“No?”

“No. Not at all.” She laughed, but nothing seemed funny. “They gave me six dollars.”

“What?”

“Yep.” Her voice poured like concrete. “Six fucking dollars.”

She arched her back and looked up at the ceiling, then tugged once more at her backpack straps. She’d continued to wear it even while we sat there.

I made to say something, but before I could, her phone shook again. This time, she picked it up.

“So that’s where I’m at,” she added as she texted. “Leakin’ somethin real. For awhile, we was livin’ out the car.”

“Who?”

Her eyebrows shot up and she set her phone back down. It vibrated yet again.

“Ariel and me.”

I stared at her.

“But just for a few days. Then we got in with a friend. Been there since.”

“Jesus Christ.” I backed my tone down. “But what the fuck? How can they only give you six dollars a month?” My words were paper thin.

“I dunno.” She sucked in her cheeks—a black Doris Day—and glanced again at her phone.

“And what about your parents? Anything?”

“Nope.” Her face hardened. “Not in over a year. Not since I had Ariel. I was 19 and that was that. But the city lady said that’s what kicked it over the top.”

“Whadya mean?”

“They make too much money, I guess.” She toyed with her braids. Curved pink nails dug in nervously.

I knew better, but I asked anyway. “And the father?”

“Not in a million years,” she laughed. “Never.” She paused and spun her phone around on the table like a top. “Things just never really seem to work out.”

“Fuck,” I said. I could only muster a whisper. And, I was exhausted. “I mean—fuck,” I repeated. I leaned back in my chair and clasped my hands on top of my head.

“Anything I can do to help? I mean, something?”

“Nah,” she smiled. “Thanks, though. Jill—my friend we been staying with—she’s cool. She works at a daycare so she’s been bringing Ariel in, too. Dunno what I would do without that. She been watchin’ her at night, cos I been pulling as much as I can at the urgent care. I usually can scrape up 30,” she sighed. “Some weeks, a little more even.”

I rotated my coffee cup. I should have said something. My eyes searched her face.

“So, T, I gotta roll. I got class at 4,” she said.

I glanced up at the clock. It was two minutes ‘til.

“It was good to talk, though.”

“Look,” I replied. “Let me know if there’s anything I can help with, okay?”

“I will.”

Amanda turned and walked away. “And thanks again, Mr. T. Sometimes, it’s just good to talk, ya know?”

I shook my head.

“Yeah, I do. Hey,” I added before she got out of earshot, “you know where to find me.”

She smiled and disappeared around the corner. I sat back down, folded my arms, and lay my head on the table. It wasn’t quiet, but it wasn’t loud, either. Just a dull hum as voices and other noises swirled, then blended together. I closed my eyes.

PAUSE

When I was still in school, I had to write a proposal for this test. The test was a gateway. The idea was that the test was supposed to help me establish my expertise in some areas of study that would allow me to get hired somewhere. The test was supposed to help me angle myself for a tenured teaching position. It was supposed to prepare me for what they all called *going on the market*. My friend, Micah, called it my magic test.

But, I told them, I already have a job.

Yeah, they replied, but for when you really get a job. When you go on the market for tenure.

But, I already have tenure, I answered.

Then, they said nothing.

“Get wizard,” Micah said when I told him I’d finally scheduled it. His eyes were big and full of the things so many people worked so desperately not to feel.

The test and the process of getting to take the test was complete, institutional bullshit. Systems and their bureaucracy are troubling.

Before I was offered the opportunity to take the test, I had to write a proposal. I wrote the proposal as best I could, then sent it to my committee. They offered solid changes—ideas I understood, hadn’t thought of, and appreciated. Then, after they approved it, I had to send it on to another committee—a committee I hadn’t ever met. They were a committee of ghosts who maybe didn’t know me or my work, and who’d never asked me even a single, goddamned question. They rejected it.

I asked my chair and a few others what happened with my proposal and that ghost committee. I asked them why it got rejected. Eventually, I got an answer. I guess someone on that ghost committee felt like my *proposal went into wildly abstract, theoretical riffs*. That same someone added—of me—that *it was often hard to imagine what he was talking about, not to mention, contemplate why*. I knew her name—the name of that ghost professor—and I Googled her. I never had her for any classes; I didn't even know what she looked like. The search results disgusted me.

I thought about the weight she must carry, as a result. All that shit stacked on her back, buried beneath the scholarship she hurled like hand-grenades to defend against something indefensible. Maybe, though, she'd managed to convince herself there was no weight—that she didn't carry those things. It was hard for me to imagine her choices, much less to contemplate why they'd been tolerated by the people who had the ability to act in the contrary.

PLAY
TRACK SEVEN: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

TRACK RECORDED: APRIL 10, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, AUDREY REDDING, ARIEL JONES,
WALGREEN'S, THE RAMONES

The light turned green and I pulled away from the campus—out onto Highland. I thought about Audrey. It was hard for me to imagine her and Ariel living out of their car. It was nearly impossible to contemplate why.

I idled at another red light a block from the lake, and dialed the Walgreen's up the street from my house for a prescription refill. It rang, was answered, then I bounced through a series of transfers. Recorded voices told me to *press 1 for the store directory*, then to *press 3 for the pharmacy*, and finally, to *press 4 for a prescription refill*. The first three times I pressed 4, I got bounced to a cashier who put me back through the cycle. Her voice was coarse and brutally midwest.

"They're not picking up, hon," she said each time. "Must be really busy, which is why you're getting back to me." Three times, she said exactly the same thing.

The fourth time I pressed 4, there was a loud click, a moment of silence, then a series of beeps. The beeps stopped and there was more silence. It was a long pause—a break—and I nearly hung up. As I pulled the phone from my ear, I heard the The Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated". I was on hold.

I stayed on hold the rest of the way home. The Ramones stopped their racket—"I Wanna Be Sedated" is only two minutes, twenty-nine seconds long. I was bummed. But then, it repeated. I thought I might have been sucked through some quantum vortex. As long as The Ramones were the soundtrack, I was okay with my sudden displacement, though.

I stayed on hold as I walked up the sidewalk and opened the front door of my house. I stayed on hold while I took off my shoes, hung up my coat, and put my bag on the long, two-person desk I shared with Emma. I stayed on hold as I walked into the kitchen. It was empty. The whole house was draped in shadows. Emma and Cass were at her parents'. In the slow-to-dissipate, early-evening light, the phone pushed a blue glare against my cheek, up into the corner of my eye. I sank into my couch and felt the cool leather tease at my arms. Joey, Dee Dee, and the rest carried on a third time, and I drifted back, back to 16, back to a car accident—a rear-end collision.

REWIND
TRACK SIX: LOVED BY WOLVES

TRACK RECORDED: DECEMBER 1, 1990
LOCATION: CINCINNATI, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: BLUE ASH POLICE, THEODORE BLACK, ST.XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL, CROSS-COUNTY HIGHWAY

It wasn't my fault. I buried my Honda Civic hatchback—a hand-me-down from Mom—in the back of a Dodge mini-van. The impact shook my teeth. I bit my tongue, too. The blood tasted tinny. My dad came to pick me up, alone. I waited for him in the back of a squad car. The totaled Civic traveled to a wrecking yard on a flat bed a few minutes before Dad arrived.

My dad was angry. I saw it as he pulled up. His round, red face steamed the windshield.

“You think you're that good?” he spat as we drove away.

It came as a question, but it really wasn't one.

I rooted my stare in the dashboard. I had no idea what he was talking about. He didn't wait for my response. He didn't want one. He never did.

“You think you're as good as me?”

He paused.

“Your driving? You think you can jam the gas and whip in and outta traffic?”

He paused, again.

“You think you're as good as me?”

It was bait, but I didn't bite.

“Because you're not. You're not as good as me.” He lengthened the word *not*. The word hung for just a moment, doomed in the sentence like a hot-air balloon with too many sandbags to stay aloft.

Beyond the windshield, the Cross-County Highway wrapped around Amberley Village toward I-75. My dad's eyes were on me. Mine were fixed on the road. I counted the dashed white lines to 13. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see his swollen finger point. It shook with the seams in the pavement.

15, 16, 17, 18—

“—and you'll never be,” he continued.

24, 25, 26—

“Reckless,” he snarled, “that's what you are. Goddamned reckless.”

30, 31

“Never,” he added. “Never as good as me.” Then, “You ungrateful little fucker.” His plain, silver wedding band tapped an impatient rhythm on the steering wheel. “Never.”

I looked at him. Tears streamed down my face.

And that's where it happened. The stitches had always been there, but that's the moment they got pulled tight. When all the feelings got sewed in.

A few minutes later, in the parking lot at St. Xavier, I pulled the handle to get out of the car. My cheeks shined with tears, my eyes stung salty. I remember that I thought I didn't care. I fumbled with the door handle and pushed the passenger-side open. Dad reached out for my arm, but I pulled away like he was on fire and let the car door close behind me with its own momentum.

The school lot was mostly empty. It was Saturday. The cars I recognized belonged to swimmers and people on my team, other wrestlers. Dad didn't chase after me or yell as I made my way toward the back, gym doors. He drove away and I watched our grey Taurus in the reflec-

tion on the massive, glass doors. I watched it exit left and grab ahold of North Bend Road with a slight squeal.

PLAY
TRACK EIGHT: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

RECORDED: APRIL 10, 2015
TIME: 5:05 P.M.-5:17 P.M.
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
NOTES/TAGS: WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY AUDREY REDDING, ARIEL JONES, WALGREEN'S,
THE RAMONES

And now, on my couch, I listened to the Ramones. It was hard for me not to imagine what they were singing about and very easy to contemplate why.

Moments later, a technician picked up and asked me some questions. I answered them. My voice, though, was hardly my own. It seemed rushed, disconnected.

Her keyboard clicked. It was rainfall on a rusted, tin roof. And then, suddenly, something in my exploded like that silver boule in my dream. It didn't really explode. The feeling, a massive shift, came stapled to a long-overdue realization.

Maybe it wasn't cassettes or the ghosts that really mattered. Maybe thinking about things that way wasn't exactly right. If the ghosts were my *vāsanā* and the tracks, my behavioral patterns, then my choices and my consent were the real issue. My choices to believe the ghosts and allow their tracks to trigger similar patterns at each every turn was what filled up that great, empty space.

Those choices, then, were like gasoline. I filled that great, empty space of possibility with gasoline. I thought it would give me some power. It didn't. Every time I filled it up, I consented to a lie—a lie to myself, to Emma, to Cass, to whoever. I tried, desperately, to pass off bullshit as possibility. That consent burned like the tip of a single match, and when it dropped into the space of possibility—a space filled with gasoline—I turned myself into a raging ball of flames.

I sat forward on my couch.

“Sure,” I said to the technician. “An hour is fine.”

I ended the call and tossed my phone on the ottoman. My head was light, and it swam up above my body. It did the fucking backstroke, and I laughed out loud—all by myself—in that somewhat darkened living room.

It was suddenly harder for me to imagine being afraid. It was easy, however, to contemplate why.

PLAY
TRACK THREE: ECHO/GOLD

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 18, 2015
LOCATION: CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: KHALED EL AHMAD, THE PUBLICAN, JACK SUPPINS, KENT BECKERT,
JONAH PHILLIPS, BRIAN LOWERY, GINGERMAN TAVERN

Khaled was back in America and that was cause for Chicago. All of us rendezvoused there, our sights set on The Publican. I drove down with Jack and Kent, and we met Jonah, Khaled, and Brian Lowery. We were primed for whatever PG-rated messes we could manage to dig up. Brent Cyszewski couldn't make it, which bummed us deeply. We'd miss his long hair, his Tony Alva Vans cap, and the way he always seemed to have the proper one-liner for just about any situation.

Chicago seemed quiet, but lively. The entire city still wore the previous night's rain like a cape. The Publican had a duck confit and pork belly thing, which was garnished with raspberry preserves. I tried to eat my weight in it.

I'd barely slept the previous few nights. Things had taken off—or were about to. I'd been on the phone, pecking out emails, and occasionally flying to New York and L.A. for meetings about tours, support slots, licensing, and, of course, the record.

We—me, Khaled, and the rest of them—cut a tangled trail through Chicago during the afternoon, evening, and now, we were pushed bar time. I joked with Suppins about Big City Tap and late-night.

“Jesus,” TD, he said. “Rabbit, doesn't know if he's up for that.” When he got drunk, Jack used only his nickname—*Rabbit*—and mostly spoke of himself in the third-person. If were anyone else, it would have been unbearable. But with Suppins, it was something we all looked forward to.

I lost them all somewhere after The Bedford. Or maybe, it was after The Rainbow—I couldn't remember. I did remember that Lowery had talked about Wrigleyville, so I hopped a cab up there. Wrigleyville was packed and frantic and I immediately regretted getting separated.

I made my way east on Addison as Friday night poured itself from the clouds that chalked the dark sky above. I should have been paying attention to where I going, but instead I was thinking about what Khaled had told me the night before—about his family and their New Year's routine. I was busy texting Kent, too, to find out where everybody had gone. He texted back, *Gin-german*. He was solid—a point of axis to revolve around. Moving too quickly toward Clark Street—I tripped and fell.

My hand scraped the concrete, and I nearly cracked my head on the base of a streetlight. It was all slow-motion. A rush of blood screamed to my head as the pitted sidewalk sprang up toward me. My knee hit a second before my palm and the collision rattled my teeth. Traffic scurried by in a blurred hail of tail lights, and I tried to stand, but instead leaned awkwardly in a sort of half-hunch against the Cubby Bear. My breath streamed in visibly-quick bursts into the strangely sharp, October air.

A couple approached me. Their leather soles tapped a smooth, patient rhythm on the uneven pavement. They stopped and the woman's voice chimed a sweet, out-of-place southern drawl.

"You okay?" she said. Her eyes were flooded by the rich and gleaming light that covered all of Wrigleyville, both ways, up and down the street. The sounds she formed in the thin space between her tongue and straight, white teeth slid into words that were lazy and slow to expire. The sweetness of those words was soft against the breaking waves of the night.

She repeated herself. I was glad to have been able to force those words, in that particular way, from her mouth a second time.

“Yeah. Thanks,” I said. Her and her companion walked away, and I stood back up.

Yesterday, Khaled told me about his family’s New Year’s ritual.

“We’ve done it as long as I can remember,” he said. Khaled was born in the Czech Republic, but grew up in Sweden. His mother was Czech, his father Lebanese. He had a certain way with life that other folks envied. I didn’t envy him, at all, though. Instead, I looked at him as inspiration.

Khaled was, in many ways, a typical former soccer player. He approached all of his undertakings with the same, steady cadence that he had a soccer match. He rode the highs, managed the lows. Khaled was a defender—and a good one. He saw the field in its entirety and used his innate senses to compensate for a lack of speed, his finesse to overcome a weak left foot.

His dark, black hair was cropped close to his scalp, and when he spoke, his Swedish accent twisted English into a bizarre tangle of punchy sentences and misused idioms. I loved him like a brother.

“Every New Year’s, we gather around the table—my mom, dad, me, and my two sisters,” he said.

We were at Casablanca, our plates packed with items from the vast buffet. “Then, we go around and each of us says what we were most proud of from the last year, what we were most disappointed in, and what we’d like to work on in the next year.”

“That’s awesome,” I said. Maybe I did envy him.

“Right,” he followed. “But, then after each of us have said our three things, the other people at the table say one thing that they were most proud of you for during the year—”

“That’s really cool,” I interrupted.

“Yeah, but,” he continued, “then they say one things that they think you should work on in the new year.”

“Wow,” I replied. I definitely envied him.

REWIND
TRACK SIX: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: JULY 25, 1992
LOCATION: ANSLEY PARK, GEORGIA
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CREDIT CARD STATEMENTS, TIMBER RIDGE RESIDENCES &
APARTMENTS

I had them all piled up around me. I stacked them just like I'd stacked my baseball cards on rainy days. These, though, were official documents. Dad said I needed to keep them organized—to take responsibility for my own future. In front of me, in several different piles was an entrance counseling guide for my college loans, the very first of many tuition statements, college registration information, my latest bank statement, and the fine-print agreement for a credit card. There was other stuff, too. It all seemed pretty grown-up.

I was eighteen, and I sat alone on the floor of a two-bedroom apartment my parents had rented in Ansley Park, Georgia. My brother and I slept together in the adjacent room; my parents in another one on the other side of the kitchen. Outside, the white trim bordered red brick and thin, cleverly sculpted beds of green grass, thick as kale salad. In the center of the complex, there was pool and a community room with a fitness center and a deck that stretched out over some marshland into the shallows of a tiny, rock-lined lake. The lake was artificial.

There, on the floor with my stacks and a Coca-Cola, I grabbed my checkbook and in the ledger I drew concentric circles, round and round, until the ballpoint finally threatened to slice through the grey-lined pages.

I wondered if this is this all there was? Would this be my life, forever? Would these stacks just grow and grow? Would they get tethered to a family—envelopes full of bills, a mortgage? Would they get braided with my student loans and jobs and 60-hour weeks? I stared at the

papers, the letterheads and logos—Marquette University, MasterCard, BankOne, the William D. Ford Direct Loan program—and sunk deeper and deeper into a kind of panic I hadn't anticipated. I'd been excited about these statements, about organizing and filing them. Now, I was terrified. This never happened with my baseball cards.

PLAY
TRACK ONE: HIGHLINE

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 20, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
NOTES/TAGS: JIM DUNLOP GUITAR PICKS, CASS DARLING

He became more and more interested in the guitar. The drums, he pounded. The guitar he tried to dissect. His brain was on overtime.

“Papa?” he asked, his tiny acoustic hanging off-kilter across both shoulders. The strap was, somehow, in front of both arms. He wore it like a stole. “Can I have a pick? One like yours?”

I smiled. “Certainly.”

I opened the small dresser drawer and fished through the half-Solo cup that held dozens and dozens. The ones I used were super thick, like quarters, almost. But there were thin ones in there, too. I grabbed an orange one, a Jim Dunlop medium. I handed it to him.

“Papa!” he exclaimed. “It’s my favorite color. Orange. Yes.” He turned it over and examined it closely. “And look,” he said. “It’s got a turtle on it, too.” His eyes were Christmas lights. They twinkled like a beacon at something so simple. “This turtle is cool, Papa. So cool.” He looked up at me, his blonde hair askew and frazzled. He could have been in The Replacements—maybe Grand Champeen. “Why does it have a turtle?” he asked.

“It’s their design—Dunlop—the people who make the pick. You can put your thumb on it when you strum. It helps you hold it so you don’t drop it.”

“What’s *strum*, Papa?”

“It’s how you play.” I showed him as I held a G-chord. I strummed my guitar slowly, up and down, up and down. “Strumming is what you do when you play. It’s the way you move your hand up and down to let the pick hit the strings and make sounds.”

He wanted to keep the pick in his room. “When we’re not playing,” he added.

“Sure, Mister,” I said. “You can keep it in your room, if you want. You just gotta be careful with it,” I added “Because it’s tiny.”

“Don’t worry, Papa,” he chimed. “I won’t loose it.” He examined it again—the logo side, the blank side, then back to the logo. “I love it.”

PAUSE

Cass is proud of his room. Proud of his bed and his books. He's proud of what his room represents, all that it is. Sometimes, he asks when we're going to move again.

"I don't want to move, again, Papa."

PLAY
TRACK TWO: HIGHLINE

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 20, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CASS DARLING, PRACTICE, AUTHENTICITY

He digs in with his orange pick. Hard. I'm sure he does it because he's watched me and that's what I do. Another bad habit to break.

"I wanna sing, Papa," he says suddenly. "With the microphone. I need practice. Practice being the lead singer."

His smile is a 1000 watts, at least.

"Practice is important, Papa," he adds. "Practice makes it mean more."

I nod and set up the mic stand. I plug in the Beta 58.

His face goes blank. It's suddenly—alarmingly—empty.

"What's up, Mister?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"Something bothering you?"

He shrugs. Four year-olds own the shrug. "I just sometimes have trouble, when I'm going to be the lead singer, thinking about the words."

"The lyrics?" I ask. "The words you're going to sing?"

A frown breaks upon the ocean of his face. He nods.

"Oh, Mister," I follow, "Sometimes that happens." I pause. "It happens to Papa, too." I hug him tight. "Just take a minute. That's what Papa does. Find the words and then sing 'em." I smile. "And if you can't find them, you can always ask somebody." The smile that so quickly vanished from his face, returns. It's bigger now. Brighter. "Or, you can just make 'em up."

He laughs a steady stream, straight from his stomach. The quake pushes itself out of his rose-red lips.

“Okay, Papa,” he says and shakes his head. “Okay.”

REWIND
TRACK SEVEN: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 22, 1991
LOCATION: CLEVELAND, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: ALEX FREDRICKS, ROYAL ATHLETICS, NIKE BO JACKSON SE TURF SHOES, PATRICIA BLACK, KEVIN HARLAN, ST. XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL MAIN LIBRARY, JANET CONWAY, BRETT BOYLAN, STEVE SALVO, ST. XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL, CLEVELAND ST. IGNATIUS

It was Alex Fredricks who finally said it. Everybody else thought it, but he was the only one who actually said it.

“But you don't have any shoes on.” He laughed and chewed on his mouthpiece. “How could you possibly get in?”

I shrugged. My shoulder pads were so loose.

"Why," he continued, "are you even gonna warm up?"

Alex sounded like an asshole, but he wasn't.

He turned and ran across the field. His gait somewhere between that of a duck and a dog with three legs. He didn't expect an answer. I didn't have one, anyway.

He was right, though. I didn't have any shoes on, but not because I didn't own any. I had shoes. Fucking good ones, too. I bought them on sale at Royal Athletics with my own money since my dad wouldn't have thought to and my mom had refused.

"We went in for half of your other shoes," Mom said. Her eyes grew narrow behind thick frames. "The Reeboks," she added. "These," Mom continued, "are on you."

She handed them back to me. They were Bo Jackson turfs, about a half-size too big.

I tried to argue, but she'd already walked away. She was busy with my little brother and some Air Flight Lites.

I wanted the Bo Jacksons. Badly. They were marked down from \$72.99.

"But Mom," I challenged from across the store. "They're only 34 bucks."

The store was mostly empty. A few people milled about, but nobody I knew. I'd checked.

"Then," she countered as she replaced the green and purple high tops Kyle had pulled down, "you shouldn't have any problem covering them."

I stared at her, then at the shoes. The tread pattern on the bottoms was complicated and they had these shiny, orange strips of mylar or something on the sides. They were awesome even with the weird basket weave across the toes.

"I'm getting them," I said, full of confidence. I sort of floated up to the register.

"These are hot," the store owner said as he scanned the box. "And," he added, "they're my last pair."

I smiled. Mom crowded behind me. Kyle had moved onto baseball bats.

"Are you sure?" she said before she walked away. Her hands snatched a 32-inch Easton from my brother. She scolded him. "Not now." Then, she turned back to me. "They look a little like old man shoes, don't you think?"

"What?" I replied.

"I mean, with that basket weave."

I turned and faced the owner who had removed one of the shoes from its box. He checked the toe weave and pursed his lips. I watched him closely.

"I think it's sharp," he said after a bit of consideration.

I nodded.

He slipped the shoes back in their box.

The owner, Kevin, only had one hand. He'd lost the other in some gnarly-assed motorcycle accident. He'd been a body-builder at one point, I guess.

I reached across the counter and held the end of the box so he could scan it. He'd dropped it twice.

"Thanks," he said.

I wore the turfs the next day to school. They clicked loudly in the hallways, louder still on the classroom floors. Ms. Conway, the librarian, told me I had to walk quieter when entered on my study hall. Eventually, she told me if I didn't sit down, she was going to throw me out.

Still, the shoes were hot. They looked good and felt good.

I was stoked to wear them against St. Ignatius. Coach Salvo said we'd all have to wear turfs in Cleveland. The game was going to be played at some college and the turf was this new shit that had rubber pellets in it. Screw-ins and molded studs wouldn't be allowed, Salvo said. He asked if there were any questions. I didn't have any. I had my Bo Jacksons.

That was until Brett Boylan got them, straight from my feet, right there on the fucking sideline. I should have expected it; Salvo was a dick. He told me I shouldn't have even played football. He told me I was too small, that I'd get hurt. But I played anyway. I guess things evened out.

Midway through the second quarter, Brett Boylan blew out his turfs. He tore the side seam and opened the left one up like an envelope. Brett was our starting fullback. He transferred to X from California after his dad got a job in Madeira. He got laid all the time, boozed a little, dipped, and was just what Salvo needed when John Burlington had to quit because of his broken neck.

Anyway, Brett hobbled to the sideline during a timeout. He asked for tape; he wanted to spat his shoes like Sweetness, but Salvo stopped the trainer and asked Boylan what size he wore.

"9-and-a-half, ten," Brett replied, tentatively.

"Black," Salvo barked. "What size are you?"

I shouldn't have answered and if I did, I should have lied. But I didn't.

I lie all the time except when it matters.

"9," I replied.

My helmet was on, the chinstrap buckled like it was supposed to be. Everything might have been fine, but then, for some reason I added, "but these are a bit big."

I couldn't believe it. The words came, as if pre-programmed. Somewhere, in the very back of my skull, a voice pounded, *What the fuck?*

"Give them to Brett," Salvo ordered.

I stood motionless. The entire team seemed to stare at me, through me. People in the stands, too.

"Come on, Tyne" he snarled as he yanked his headset down around his neck, "take them off." He pointed to my Bo Jacksons, then barked, "Take them off and give them to Boylan."

His lips were all twisted in that Italian way and his head shook on his neck like it wasn't even connected. "Hurry now, Black."

His voice was sandpaper-grade and east coast. He'd played for the Steelers for a season or two, but had to retire because of concussions. His brain was a scrambled egg. His skin leathery as hell and a bit too tan. His hands darted around like kites when he was excited, a mad flurry of once-broken fingers and battered knuckles.

"Come on, for Christ's sake," Salvo spat, as I quickly and sloppily loosened my laces.
"Let's go."

And just like that, my shoes were gone. They were out on the field with Brett Boylan. They were stretched and turned, twisted into the turf. I stayed behind on the sideline in my bare socks, my helmet still buckled tight. The tiny, green, plastic daggers of grass reminded my feet that I was there, in that moment.

I pretended it didn't phase me. I stayed hopeful—like a jackass—in my tube-socked feet, careful of my teammates and their suddenly heavy-soled footsteps. We moved up and down the sideline and I watched as defense became offense and back again.

I pretended there was still a chance for me even though I'd barely played when I had shoes. Four snaps, I think, was all I'd mustered to that point, the entire season. Nine games, four snaps. Still, I practiced every day, ran scout like a motherfucker, and never dogged a single sprint. I was fast, even in my pads, as small as I was. I was fast enough to stay visible, fast enough to remind everyone I was still around.

But when Fredricks laughed, the reality of the situation threatened to submerge the vessel of my entire life. I'd listed to and fro on tumultuous waters for years. Football was emblematic of my struggle; I really shouldn't have been there on the sideline at all. And if I was there, I should have at least been honest with myself about the gag. I was a joke passed off graciously as a kid with a big heart who wouldn't quit. In truth, I was simply a kid out-of-touch.

I continued to hope all the way through the second half in spite of Alex Fredricks' honesty. I continued to hope in spite of my own bare-socked feet, in spite of the fact that the game was close and I never got in when the game was anywhere close to close. With that hope, I went

from victim to perpetrator. I thought of it as the good fight—an *I'll-fucking-show-them* moment. But it wasn't. Those moments don't exist. They're stories told to tint reality, stories told to cover up a bigger, more ominous truth with far more dire consequences.

See, my dad was going to show them, too. He was going to prove them wrong. He worked sixty hours a week to show them he was worthy—to prove he was a good programmer, a good manager. My grandpa was going to show them, as well. He started a printing business in his basement. He'd grind at the foundry by day, then retreat to the basement at night and chain-smoke cigarettes until he could emerge, worthy. But he never made it. The press worked fine and it even ran off some copies, but he never really emerged. Instead, he checked out. The world moved and it changed. He worked his ass off to catch up. He thought if he did, then he might be able to finally get ahead. He thought he'd be able to make someone notice, force them to see. He'd show them. He'd show them good.

My great-grandfather was the same. He came to America alone, his entire family still in Germany. He worked like a mule, then sent for them. He thought he'd be a hero to his children—children who no longer recognized his face. He told himself he'd be a savior to his wife, but she hated the very blood that ran through his veins.

My dad worked weekends so many times I can't recall a Saturday or Sunday where we didn't stop by Patton to switch a tape drive, check a back-up, or reboot the system. *Just a few minutes*, he say. Most times it was. Now and then, we wouldn't even get out of the car. When we did go inside, I colored with pens and pencils borrowed from someone else's desk, the metallic hum of the big System 38 behind me, the strange scent of reel-to-reel tapes in my nostrils.

Sometimes, I'd go in with him—just me and him—and I'd thread computer cables or parallel connectors under desks and beneath tables or cubicle dividers. I liked it, too. Mostly. But dad shouldn't have been there. Not like that. *Yes, sir*, he'd reply whenever Jerry Pfaltz would call. *I'll be there early. No, that's fine*, he'd continue, *I can get there by 9*. Then a pause. *Well, I guess I could try for 8*.

We'd leave for vacations a day late, sometimes two. *Something came up*, my mom would say, *and your dad has to fix the system*. Or, *The system's down again and your dad has to go in*. The explanation, for what it was worth, would always come from her, never him. The bitching, the complaints, the *Those motherfuckers*, and the *He's an asshole*, or *They just don't understand*, the *I just have to go in*, the *I can't because Pfaltz called and he's off the roof and I, I, I*—that came from him. Every time. Every fucking time.

PAUSE

I suppose, though, I shouldn't complain because kids get cigarettes put out on them. Kids get locked in closets for hours, sometimes days. I got vacations and private school and college and two parents, most of the time. Not like my friend Avery whose mom got shot in the face over an eight-ball. Avery was 12 when it happened. And he was right there. He stood right next to her while her face exploded behind a 9mm slug.

I never knew shit like that. Never. Not even close.

Avery's got scars. Big ones. They're hidden, though. They can't really be seen. Not right away, at least. You can't see mine, either. The cigarette burns, the whippings, people recognize that shit. *Isn't it awful*, they say. Pity, sympathy, empathy—it comes in waves. Colossal rushes. And it should.

All Avery has to do is tell that story. That's it. It's a game changer. But he never does because he never has to. Somebody else always tells it for him. *Well, you know*, they say, *his mom got shot on the street corner in front of him when he was 12*. And every time, it's the same. *Yep, I know. In the head, right there in front of him. A drug deal. Sad, isn't it? Right. Just awful.*

And all of that is true. No dad, no mom, only a grandma and the streets. Avery got fucked. That story is his shield. Me? I don't have a shield. Nobody gives a shit about my story. Nobody cares about my scars.

REWIND
TRACK EIGHT: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 22, 1991
LOCATION: CLEVELAND, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: ALEX FREDRICKS, NIKE BO JACKSON SE TURF SHOES, PATRICIA BLACK, THEODORE BLACK, BRETT BOYLAN, STEVE SALVO, ST. XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL, CLEVELAND ST. IGNATIUS

I never said anything to my parents about Salvo taking my shoes. They didn't really ask about the game, anyway. I rode the bus home, shot shit, and laughed with my teammates.

Boylan took my shoes off before he even left the field.

"Thanks," he said. His hair was drenched, his white helmet full of yellow and navy scuffs—St. Ignatius' colors.

I didn't put them on right away. I walked across the field in my socks like it didn't matter, like I didn't care. I walked through the tunnel and into the locker room, took off my shoulder pads and jersey, tucked my helmet inside, and loosened my belt. Then, I put my shoes on. But they didn't feel like mine. They were warm and heavy and I was ashamed to have them on, which didn't make any sense at all. I tried not to think about it; I couldn't do anything, anyway.

I boarded the bus with my stomach in knots. But then I made up my mind not to think about it and decided nobody else would, either. If they asked or said anything, I'd pretend it didn't matter. By the time I sat down, I'd made another decision—I decided I'd act like it didn't ever happen, that I hadn't been forced to give up my shoes and stand in my socked feet for forty-some minutes. I'd blow right past it. It'd be gone, ancient history. I twisted up my face and made smiles because everyone liked that. They expected that.

Nobody mentioned it. Nobody mentioned a word about my shoes on the bus, at practice, or in the hallway. And if nobody ever mentioned it, I was determined to pretend it never hap-

pened. And if it never happened, it was nothing. It was nothing to think about, nothing to feel, nothing to be upset or worry about. It was nothing at all.

Nobody cares about my scars, but maybe they should. The cigarette kids—they're few and far between. The kids who get left in the closet—fewer still. Kids like Avery who watch their mom's face get blown off are probably one in a couple million, if that.

It's just that those things are so awful—so terrible—that when they're discovered, everyone pays attention. And they should. But what happened to me—the shit I carry around, the scars—that stuff happens all the time, to countless kids, all over the place. Everyday, every hour, every minute, every second, it happens. Again and again and again. Nobody cares about my scars, but maybe they should.

PLAY
TRACK THREE: HIGHLINE

TRACK RECORDED: SEPTEMBER 14, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CASS DARLING, LIGHTNING BOLT, KENT RETRO POWER BMX, LAKE
BLUFF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, EMMA DARLING

“That’s fucking hilarious,” I say to Emma. I point at Cass, a good half block ahead of us. His tiny frame crouches over the handle bars of his two-wheeler, a bright blue and neon green Kent BMX.

“I know. It precious.” Her eyes are locked on him and his Spider-Man helmet, both straps of his backpack tightened over his small shoulders. We can hear him making blast-off *whoosh* noises as he rides. His balance is fantastic, and he zooms farther and farther from us.

“Cass,” Emma yells. “Watch the driveways.”

On cue, his head snaps right as he passes each one. “Clear,” he yells back. “Clear.”

PAUSE

Cass has ridden his bike to school just about every day this year. He's getting better with the brakes and more sharp with his steering and turns. He calls it *Lightning Bolt*.

"Because it's fast," he said when we got it for a few bucks at a rummage sale on the city's south side. We were at the farmer's market and Emma mentioned that maybe we should look for a two-wheeler on Craigslist or something.

"He's ready," she said while he slept in the backseat. "If that stupid bike safety class showed me anything, it's that he's ready."

Cass never had any training wheels. Emma found a balance bike through Amazon, and he rode that straightaway. At first, he didn't quite understand the concept.

"It's just like running," Emma told him. She straddled the tiny red bike and demonstrated how he could shift his weight from foot to foot and propel himself forward.

"And," I added, "these things on the back, here, are surfing bars."

"Surfing bars?" He looked up at me, his helmet massive—a sort of UFO—propped above his delicate face.

"Yeah. Surfing bars. Look." I put my foot on one to show him how he could move himself forward then pull up his feet and balance as he rolled along.

"Surfing bars," Cass exclaimed. "I love to surf."

He took off, suddenly comfortable with the shifts and balance that Emma had just shown him. Then, her and I watched as he picked his feet up and cruised down the sidewalk. His black mags sliced up the air and the space in front of him. Emma and I watched, both of us quiet, content, and happy.

REWIND
TRACK NINE: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

TRACK RECORDED: JULY 18, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CASS DARLING, LIGHTNING BOLT, KENT RETRO POWER BMX, LAKE
BLUFF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, EMMA DARLING

Cass learned to ride his two-wheeler in six minutes. I held him as we crossed the street and continued halfway up our block. I held onto him for about a-minute-and-a-half as we made our way up toward his school and the vast expanse of asphalt that he spun and steered across like he'd been doing it all his life. Six minutes. I jogged along next to him, then ran in earnest, to keep up. Sometimes, I thought I might have to catch him as he fell, but I never did. He was so happy.

He never fell or crashed, not once. He was steady and calm, careful and calculated. And Lightning Bolt cruised. Cass didn't know anything else. It was so incredibly simple it made me cry.

He made a second pass of the parking lot, and weaved in between the basketball hoops. Their silver poles were thick and solid. As I watched him, I felt a bolt of something. It wasn't electric, but it wasn't not, either. I'm not sure what it was. It didn't make me shiver, and it didn't make me shake. I thought about Jimmy and how happy this sort-of thing—Cass learning to ride his bike—would have made him. Everything always seemed to mean so much to him.

REWIND
TRACK SEVEN: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: AUGUST 1, 1980
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: SCHWINN BREEZE, THEODORE BLACK, PATRICIA BLACK, SCOOTER BELLAN, HUFFY SPACE SHUTTLE UNISEX, MANASSAS RUN RD.

Scooter just showed up. He just showed up on that Schwinn Breeze. He had the blue one, his brother, Matt, the yellow. I noticed right away how free and clear his mags and wheels looked. They were different. Something didn't quite add up.

"Ahh," Dad shouted, excited as hell, "no training wheels." Dad stepped toward the street and came down across the front yard. His white sneakers pressed down hard and matted the grass, thick and green from Chemlawn and Scott's. "Nice one, Scooter. Looking good."

Over lunch, I announced that I wouldn't be needing my training wheels anymore, either.

"Are you sure?" Mom said. She worked to clear the table—the clink of plates and glasses, punctuated her words.

"Yep," I said. I was over-confident. I was nervous and scared.

"Sounds good," Dad said as he pushed back from the table. "Let's go pull 'em off and try it out."

"Are you sure he's ready?" Mom asked, again.

"No time like the present," Dad replied. His lips wrapped over the rim of one of the tumblers we'd all been drinking from. He gulped down the rest of his iced tea. "Let's do it," he said. I hopped from my chair. "It's a big day—no training wheels. That's a big thing. It's a big deal, Tyne. A big deal."

I had this red, unisex Huffly. It had the double-S bars that made the hypotenuse for the front triangle. They ran from the seat tube to the head tube, on a sort of diagonal. I don't remem-

ber getting that bike. It just kind of showed up. I saw pictures, I think, of it all shiny and new at one of my birthdays, but I'm not sure if it was a gift or if it was already there when the pictures were taken. Either way, it was my first bike and stayed my bike until I finally got that bright-green Diamond Back.

The chain guard said *Space Shuttle* and had this crazy cosmic scene that was part *Final Countdown*, part *2001*, part Japanese ink print. My bike wasn't really red, either. It was more of an almost-pink. But I rode the hell out of it. I rode it up and down the street. I rode it all around the neighborhood. Eventually, I rode through other neighborhoods and on trails.

Both Bellan brothers were outside when Dad pulled off my training wheels. So was my mom. The Hacketts were out and Patrick, too, with his goddamned tennis racket and all the dents in the siding above his garage. Some of the Eagans were probably out, as well, since some of them were always out.

People stood there and watched like it was a big deal or something. Dad wheeled my Space Shuttle out into the street. He moved it right there into the middle of Manassas Run. The heat and the sun were relentless. I climbed on. My balance was unsteady and the white, plastic seat seemed harder than normal and maybe, too big.

"Now," Dad said, his grip steady inside mine. "I'm going to get you going and then I'll let go and you'll be cruising." His fingers were tight around my handlebars, but not on the grips.

I nodded.

"Just remember," he said, "push backwards for the brakes." He stared at me. My forehead was ablaze, my face dotted with sweat. "Tyne," he repeated. "Just stand hard on the pedals—push 'em backwards for the brakes. Tyne," he said, again. "Don't forget."

I nodded and we were off. I pedaled like crazy—a banshee or what I figure a banshee would be like if there were such a thing—and caught my balance. Dad let go and I cruised. But my trajectory was bent, and I drifted sideways on a flat angle toward the opposite curb.

“Tyne!” Dad shouted. “Brakes!”

But I didn’t use them. I didn’t stand hard on the pedals or push them backwards or anything. Instead, I drifted right into the Eagan’s mailbox. The brown, metal housing clothes-lined me like a motherfucker and I tumbled off my bike. I flipped backwards off the seat.

The Space Shuttle ended up ten-feet deep in the Eagan’s front yard. It stayed upright across the median and over the wide sidewalk and then ran up the small incline into the scorched, yellowed grass. I was on my ass. I saw the mailbox for a split second, but then I didn’t see anything. The whole world—all the corners and folds and everything—went black. My mind filled up with the empty, hollow sound of humming aluminum. I crashed, face first, into the arched tube of the short, front-hinged, drop-door mailbox.

My face was on fire, and an explosion of something just a little different than pain filled up my face. It wasn’t embarrassment. Not quite. I could feel the swell and the pressure of my cheeks as they ballooned. I didn’t know that I was crying, but when I touched my face, it was covered with tears. Mostly, I was just in shock. What happened didn’t quite add up.

Dad ran over and picked me up.

“Jesus, Tyne, the brakes.” His hands dug under my armpits and pulled me up—up to my feet. “Come on,” he continued. “Let’s go again. Come on.”

It wasn’t like I didn’t want to or wouldn’t have, eventually. It was just that I wasn’t entirely sure I knew what was going on. I wasn’t sure that I had any control over what had happened.

Nor was I sure I could control what was about to happen, much less what was supposed to happen.

Dad guided me back. Once again, I perched myself on the white seat. I was ready to cruise.

And cruise, I did.

I cruised right back into the mailbox. I cruised right back into the same mailbox, and my head filled itself with the same awful, hollow, empty sound that had punctuated my first ride. I was on my back, again, partly on the asphalt, partly on the cement. My ass was tucked in the long, sloped, poured-concrete segments that formed the shallow gutters. The sky, as big and vacant as anything, hung high above me.

Dad returned my training wheels to the outside of the rear-axle bolts, where they were promised to stay until I'd had more practice with the brakes. They would stay there, Dad said, until I could better understand the concept of the pedals and momentum and the force I needed to stop. They'd stay there, he said, until I could understand the response required to steer clear of a mailbox.

I'm not sure if he was disappointed, but he was definitely embarrassed. And, he wasn't embarrassed by his own attempts, but rather at the seemingly boundless persistence of my own failure. He seemed embarrassed by my inability to avoid that which I knew was there. I think he might have understood me hitting the mailbox once, but not twice. I don't think he could understand me hitting it twice in a row, virtually the exact same way.

REWIND
TRACK NINE: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: MAY 13, 1984
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: THEODORE DARLING, BOSCH & KOOGLER FIELD, DON BAYLOR, TED WILLIAMS

I wasn't afraid of the baseball. That was ridiculous. I was afraid of the pain the baseball would cause—could cause—if it hit me. Especially, if it was thrown hard. Plus, the pitchers I faced, were crazy erratic. To climb in the box against some hooligan who could barely get the ball to the plate, much less over it, just seemed insane. Unless, of course, there was some sort of exit strategy—a way to gauge things and make sure I wasn't going to get plunked. I was no Don Baylor, no Ted Williams. Not really.

I guess I was looking for a little control, which paradoxically, was what those pitchers lacked. But when it came to baseball, control was hard to find. And, it was harder, still, to hold onto.

I bailed out of the box nearly every chance I got. Inside, outside, low, high—it didn't really matter. I simply didn't want to get hit. My feet were an Irish dancer's during the wind-up. They were worse in the delivery.

Dad decided he'd fix it. He was the head coach and I think that the fact that his son—the head coach's son—bailed out of the box with nearly every pitch, embarrassed the hell out of him.

I'd had a few hits that season, but mostly I got on from walks. Once I was on, the stolen bases came in bushels. I was fast. Really fast. But that only matters if you can get on base consistently, and I didn't. My hits were mostly accidents. I only remember once seeing the bat actually strike the ball.

But man, I loved that feeling. I loved the feeling in my hands and arms, the feeling when I'd actually hit the ball. I loved the metallic ting of the aluminum bat, and the explosion of force through my entire body as the ball pushed its way out toward left field. I loved that one time—the one time my head was down, my eyes on the ball exactly the way they should have been—and I saw the bat hit the ball. The ball, so hard and round, compressed for a moment before it shot away from the bat, away from my swing.

At home, when we watched games on TV, Dad would point out Rod Carew or Julio Franco—guys who stepped into the ball—guys like Brett Butler, Will Clark, and George Brett.

"Look at them," he said. "Watch their feet. Boom. Each time, they step right into the pitch." Then, after a pause during which he'd look me over, up and down, he'd say that *Their feet are still. No twinkle toes there. No bailing out for a guy like George Brett.*

"Those guys," he said, "those guys aren't afraid of a tiny little baseball."

I wanted to tell him that of course they weren't. They were grown men, .300 hitters, professionals. Who the fuck was I?

But I didn't. I didn't tell him that. Instead, I just shook my head. When he started calling me *twinkle toes* at practice, and then put a bat behind me so I'd trip and fall every time I bailed out, I just cried.

My dad pitched at practice. He'd have a milk crate of baseballs next to him there on the rubber. There was no pitcher's mound at Bosch & Koogler. There were mostly no pitcher's mounds in Little League.

Dad looked ridiculous out there at just under six feet. The rest of my teammates were scattered behind him in the infield, a few others in the grass. The other coaches were there, too.

Dad always wore this red hat—a Phillies cap. He worshipped Steve Carlton and Tug McGraw. Later, when we got better uniforms, he'd swap that Phillies cap for one of our Milford Cardinals snap-backs. But back then, it was the Phillies cap. Every time.

"Best one-two punch in history," he'd say.

Even then, I knew he was full of shit. *What about Ryan and Seaver—the '69 Mets?* I wanted to ask. *Or even Spahn and Zane? I mean, they had their own rhyme, for God's sake.* But I didn't challenge him. Nobody did. I think everyone knew it would have been pointless.

"Look at twinkle toes," he chided. The timber in his voice was awful and tears streaked down my dirty face. Dad's cheeks, out there on the rubber, were always a bit swollen and too pink. "Just watch him bail out." With each pitch, it was the same. "There he goes. Twinkle toes."

He thought he was so clever, so big and brave or whatever. But he just shrank out there. He just got smaller and less and less relevant with every phrase. He became less and less with every pitch, every dagger he sent my way.

PAUSE

Sometimes, I think about going back. I dream about hitting rewind and reinserting myself in that very moment. I know it's impossible and what's more, that I probably really wouldn't really want to even if I could. To do so would be to consent to effects, rather than causes. To consent to reinserting myself would be an attempt to step into a given moment precisely by stepping out of another. The physics just don't check out.

But neither, really, do the physics of a curveball. For the most part, a solid, well-delivered Major League curveball only actually moves about three inches. This is the actual, measured deviation between the release point of a pitcher's hand and the contact point of the receiving catcher's glove. However, perspective—as a result of the height of the pitcher's mound, the location of the batter relative to the average speed and velocity of the ball, as well as the time and space the ball travels—causes a curveball to appear to travel about 14 inches, right to left. As a result, perception becomes a phantom limb that nearly cripples a majority of hitters who step to the plate at any level.

A three-inch deviation is certainly manageable. The baseball, itself, is about 2.8 inches wide. A 14-inch difference, though, is a deflection. It short-circuits, essentially, any attempt to predict the end point and/or the systematic behavior of the pitch as it completes its trajectory toward (and past) home plate. It's amazing that anybody can hit a curveball.

After all, the ball only travels a distance a little shorter than the distance of the pitching rubber to the front of home plate—a distance of sixty feet, six inches—during its delivery. The actual, real movement of a curveball is only three inches. If the average ball travels 626 inches from the pitcher's hand to the front of home plate (adjusted for the pitcher's arm span, as well as

the length of his wind-up and delivery), then the three-inch movement accounts for a measly .4%. However, perception amplifies this actual, real movement to 14 inches. As a result, the perceived movement of a curveball is 2.2%. This still isn't much, but when compared with .4% or 0% (the movement of a fastball), it's a lot. The framework of perception, then, is what accounts for the apparent motion of a curveball.

And that, in the end, was be the bane of my efforts. It was the end of what might have been. Too many *Probable pass* notations placed end-to-end, finally becoming simply *Definite pass*.

REWIND
TRACK TEN: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: MAY 13, 1984
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: THEODORE DARLING, TWINKLE TOES, BOSCH & KOOGLER FIELD, SCOTT MCCLURE, BILLY GENTRY, HUGH FOWLEY

I hadn't prepared for it. I hadn't expected it. Why would I? Why would anybody? *Twinkle toes* came hard and heavy from the pitcher's rubber. It came hard and heavy from my dad's mouth. I cried and cried, harder and harder. And, as a result, I bailed out more and more. Billy Gentry was embarrassed. So was Scott McClure. Scott went to St. Barb's. Billy didn't. They weren't embarrassed of me, but for me. And, they were only 10, maybe 11. I was ten.

Finally, Dad grew tired of *Twinkle toes*. Or so I thought.

Dad walked in from the rubber, towards home plate. I remember his shoes scuffed on the sanded dirt. I remember the sound—the unsteady squeak mixed with the clink of too many keys and too much change in his front pockets. I stood there, tears and snot all over my face, as he took a bat—a metal one from the team bag—and put it behind me.

“Now,” he said, “if you step back, if you bail out—Twinkle Toes—you'll step on the bat.” His eyes met mine. The difference, I imagined, was amazing. Mine were flooded with tears. They were red and ruined. His were like a pair of glazed donuts. They were focused on an agenda so far from all right. “Don't step on the bat, Twinkle Toes,” he said.

We were so close, and still, he did it. He called me *Twinkle Toes*. He didn't need to. We were so close—he could've used my name. He could've said anything. He could have hugged me. He could have told me it would be okay. He could have fucking lied. He could have done anything. Instead, he kept his voice steady—a notch over a whisper as though he were ordering ham at a deli or paying parking downtown.

I was scared. I wondered, *How many pieces can break off and fall apart before a thing just can't be put back together?*

He turned and strolled back to the rubber. Snot gathered on my upper lip, and I smeared it across my cheeks with dirty batting gloves. I forced myself to stop crying because I could just barely see. Again and again, he wound-up and delivered. Again and again, I kicked the bat out from behind me. Each time I kicked it, he'd make me reset it. Dad made me put it back, back behind me before I dug in. Then, he'd deliver. I kicked it, pitch after pitch. Eventually, I stepped on it and tumbled ass-over-tea kettle. My head was the first thing to hit the ground. I bit my tongue and saw my feet. They looked so strange and disconnected in my black McGregor cleats, pushed up against the window of blue-glass sky.

I'm not exactly sure how long I lay there. It could have been a few seconds, it could have been forever. Maybe, I'm still there. However, long it was, I stood back up, reset the bat, and climbed back into the box. My dad's face, as I stared out toward the rubber, was a dead TV screen—a flat void of nothingness.

“That's it,” he sputtered. “Fowley. You're up.”

I walked over to the dugout. It was above-ground—cinder block-built and screened with chain link. I set down my bat, placed my helmet gently on the wood-plank bench, gathered my glove, and jogged out to the outfield.

My lips quivered and I headed to right field. I set up deep, but not too deep, where barely any balls would come. I headed somewhere safe and moderately quiet. The ting-ting-ting of Hugh Fowley's short-swung bat pushed balls out toward left with a few—but only a few—to center.

I stayed there in right. I was ready; I waited for whatever. *Twinkle Toes*, I thought. Those words hung together—partnered. They hung there in front of my face. They hung there in the space that seemed to separate me from everything. It was a space that separated me from my teammates, from my friends, from the field, from my dad. I felt as though I'd almost had something, but then lost it.

PAUSE

I don't think Dad ever really played baseball. I don't think that was his fault. His dad was more absent than he was—more inclined to disconnect, more inclined to think about his printing business or Alaska. The printing business never started, and Alaska never turned out.

REWIND
TRACK EIGHT: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: JUNE 29, 1986
LOCATION: MILFORD, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: FINDLAY RAY, JESUS AND MARY CHAIN, LIVE OAKS, STEVEN OLIVER,
BOBBY OLIVER, ANNA LEIGH SOMMERS, CHARLIE RATZ BROFFIT, ST.
BARBARA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, BRIAN PITTMAN

It was the ruts that worried me most. The deep grooves cut across the outfield by slashing tires. Bobby Oliver's brother was probably responsible for most of them. I'd seen his '72 Camaro peel out of Findley Ray, The Jesus and Mary Chain blasting through those tinted windows. They were three-quarter of the way up and so black they sometimes looked purple. He'd done them darker than was legal. At least that's what Matt Johnson's dad said.

Bobby Oliver's brother went to Live Oaks, and spent most of his time tuning and retuning that SS. He didn't skate or play baseball, and most of the parents of the kids I knew—including my own—only talked about him with their hands over their mouths.

He wore a sleeveless jean jacket with a Black Flag back patch on it. I remember staring at those four bars while he was making out with some hot, blonde chick during the Frontier Days parade. I was walking with T.J. Anders and Bobby's brother gave us both the finger as we cruised by. He didn't stop kissing the girl, though. His other hand dug into the meat of her ass.

More than once, I'd heard him tell high school girls his name was Elvis Patton, even though his driver's license said *Steven Andrew Oliver*. He smoked Pall Malls when no one was around and would sometimes leave almost empty packs in the garage that Bobby would snag and then sell, cigarette-by-cigarette, in the schoolyard. We'd skate and share cigarettes until our heads got too wild. Afterwards, we'd end up talking shit about girls and the things we didn't fully understand that we heard from the books that Amber Leigh Sommers read on the bus.

One day, when we had five or six of Steven's left-over cigarettes between us, Charlie Ratz—a big kid who didn't skate—piped up. We were sitting on the steps of Milford Main. I pulled at the toe cap of my black Chuck Taylor's. They were splitting fast from all the ollies. Charlie was from Maryland and had only just transferred to St. Barb's that year.

“Yesterday,” he said, dragging a quick pull, then passing the cigarette to Brian Pittman, “she read part of one where the dude was licking some girl.”

He coughed and we waited.

“Yeah, so,” Brian puzzled. “What about it?”

Charlie fumbled. “Well,” he said, “not just licked her, but licked, ya know?”

We all stared at him. We didn't know, but no one was going to tip their hand.

“Like down there,” he followed. He motioned to his crotch with quick, karate-chop movements.

I smiled and nodded. I played it cool and pretended I knew what he was talking about. Sometimes, I pretended I was Elvis Patton. Because then, it wouldn't matter. I wouldn't have to worry about ruts in the outfield or anything else. I wouldn't give a fuck.

PAUSE

The first hand-job I ever got was a reach-around. Amber Shields jacked me off from behind. It was like being on the log flume at King's Island. Amber had on all these rings and they kind of raked my dick as she stroked. I didn't really ask her about it until afterwards.

"It's just the easiest way," she said. "All the girls do it like that."

Sometimes, I feel like I should track her down, call her up, and let her know she was the only one. I wonder if she'd remember?

REWIND
TRACK FIVE: PUNK ROCK DREAMS

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 21, 1991
LOCATION: CINCINNATI, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: KING KWIK, MADISONVILLE, PHIL DOWRY, URSALINE ACADEMY, MARK HEARST, NIRVANA, NEVERMIND, SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT, PHIL DOWRY, ANGIE CARLSON

Mark Hearst and I sat on the floor in the sunken part of Angie Carlson's sprawling living room and listened to Phil Dowry bang her in her parents' bed. Phil said she was a good fuck—a *screamer*. We believed him when he said it. But, it was one thing to hear him talk about it and quite another to hear it live, in-person.

We drove to Angie's in Phil's car. I rode shotgun. Phil was behind the wheel and Hearst was in the backseat pulling from a bottle of Crown Royal. The purple, velvet sack was at his feet.

"My grandpa used to drink that shit," I said when he bought it from the Madisonville King Kwik. "And, I can't believe that that thing works," I added, motioning to Mark's wallet and the fake Iowa license he had tucked between a condom and his St. Xavier student ID. "Those people in there must be idiots or something."

"Maybe," Mark replied. "Or, it's just that good."

"Or," Phil piped, "they just don't know what an Iowa license fucking looks like." Phil paused to whistle at a car full of girls I recognized from Ursaline. "I mean, who even knows what that shit is? It could be anything."

Mark had since stopped carrying his actual Ohio license. He was the only 21 year-old high school student I knew.

Phil's voice fell off as he walked toward the carload of Ursaline chicks. They were volleyball players we knew though this dude, Carter, who'd probably fucked them all. Carter was like that.

Mark went over with Phil. I stayed put. A few minutes later, Mark came back. He'd picked up the Iowa fake from some guy in Clifton for a hundred-and-fifty bucks.

"It's good," he smiled. "He had a board and everything. A massive camera set-up. The dude's legit, man, solid work."

"I know, I know," I replied.

"Seriously," he added, "you should get one." He motioned back inside the King Kwik. "Phil's the one who told me about it, set me up. I could probably get you one. Get you in touch with Phil's guy."

"Maybe," I answered, dryly. I didn't need an ID. With the amount of beer and liquor those guys pulled, plus the stuff they just stole for the hell of it, I would've never had a cause to use a fake.

"Enough about the ID, man," I snapped. "What about the chicks? Where they headed?"

"Aw, man, who the fuck knows." I could tell he was annoyed. "Bethany—," he continued, "the one who kinda looks like a fat version of that chick from Top Gun—is having some sort of party at her place, I guess. I don't know. Those chicks are a mess. I can never tell what the fuck's up with any of them," he sighed. "Fucking girls, man."

We left the King Kwik and ended up at Bethany's party. She and Mark had hooked up like a year ago. I'm sure he'd been a dick. He wasn't really a bad dude. It was just his schtick. Anyway, she wouldn't leave him alone and things were bound to get ugly if we didn't bail. Phil

wanted to go fuck Angie, so we split. Mark and I were third and fourth wheels, so we went, too. We had the Crown and I swiped some beers from Bethany's. We needed something pass the time.

So there we were, Mark and I, cross-legged on Angie Carlson's parent's living room floor. The long, wavy carpet piles were soft against my legs. We a cassette copy of Nirvana's *Nevermind* open and unfurled in between us. We crowded against the speakers—large, fiber-covered things. Our index fingers took turns with the rewind and play buttons. We worked in tandem, intent to figure out what the fuck it was that Kurt Cobain was screaming. The song we played and rewound was “Smells Like Teen Spirit”. It was like nothing I'd ever heard before. It was a five-minute street riot. We didn't listen to the song as much as the song erupted all over us.

We weren't being trite or overzealous—at least I didn't think so. There was something about that song. It was there in those words—in their shape and snarl. They seemed to wrestle with the guitar and drums. Eventually, they conceded, collapsed into a vacuum of metallic hiss. I couldn't get enough. Mark, I think, just wanted something to do.

Angie's parent's stereo—some sort of fancy Pioneer thing—grunted, snapped, and squealed as we pressed and repressed the buttons. We hit them too quickly. It was a miracle that we didn't break it. The tape was Phil's and we probably should have been concerned that it would get all tangled up in all the fancy components of the double-deck cassette player, but we weren't. Phil was fucking Angie silly, and we'd gone down the rabbit hole. *With the lights out, it's less dangerous.*

REWIND
TRACK SEVEN: THE DELICATE ACT OF LOSING

TRACK RECORDED: APRIL 27, 1994
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: TACO BELL, TYLER ANDERSON, HOLD-UP HOUSE, D.O.C., DELTA 88,
DODGE OMNI

It almost happened too quick. It felt like the whole scene fell out a reel-to-reel projector. Every single movement seemed split-up, frame-by-frame. The whole thing happened so fast. But, it also felt really, really slow.

I wasn't sure, at first, what I was watching. I don't think Tyler was, either. All we wanted were some tacos. It was late in the second semester, and since the end of wrestling season, everything had ground mostly to a halt. School was still going, but I was done. So was just about everybody else. I hadn't really been to a proper class in almost a month.

We pulled into the drive-thru behind a smoke-grey Delta 88 whose trunk and rear quarter panels rattled hard with the kicks of a hidden bass tube.

"D.O.C.," Tyler said. He nodded at the '88. A sharp smile knifed across his face as I eased the Omni—a baby-blue hatchback that everyone called *The Robin's Egg*—to a stop. Two other cars pulled in behind us and we all edged steadily, slowly toward the window.

It was a Wednesday and the hints of spring—fake or not—blossomed at the edge of the breeze.

I was in the driver's seat, Tyler sat shotgun. The '88 was a bucket. It was packed with a four or five dudes, hats tilted, brims mostly flat. They pulled up to the window, and then shouts bellowed through the otherwise unspoiled air. It was boisterous. Words and calls bounced back and forth between the '88 and the faceless, drive-thru window.

I put the Omni in reverse. Five cars—and then a sixth—had buckled themselves behind us, and a three-foot brick and cement wall separated us from the parking lot on one side. The other side was bounded by a ten-foot wall. Tyler and I turned our attention to the '88. The driver got out and strode slowly around to the trunk. We watched as he popped it and retrieved a shotgun. From the passenger side—out of both the front and the back doors—came two guys in Raiders hats. They pulled pistols from the waistbands of loose, dark jeans. The driver had a pudgy face, but he was massive. His white flannel was buttoned all the way to the top. I'm not sure if I imagined it or if I actually saw it in the headlights, but I noticed a scar, a scar that ran down the right side of his face. His eyes—especially the whites, or what should have been the whites—seemed rotten and ruined. They were jicama peels left on a cutting board.

I stared mostly at the shotgun. It was sawed-off and the pump had been duct-taped. The stock was wrapped in a white, plastic garbage bag.

I pushed myself deep into the driver's seat and gripped the steering wheel. For a moment, I thought about ramming them. That would have been idiotic. Simply ridiculous. Then, the shooting started.

The sound was nothing like I expected. It boomed hollow, hurried, and entirely empty. The blast spray reminded me of a firework. It reminded me of a bad, fucked-up Roman candle.

The Omni was in reverse and I felt it push against the front bumper of the car behind us. More blasts came. Boom, boom, boom. Some were snaps, others tiny explosions. Some came from inside the restaurant, others came from in front of it.

I watched as the kick of the shotgun popped and pushed the driver each time he squeezed the trigger. Farther and farther back, with the tenacity of carpenter ants, Tyler and I moved away from the gunfight. I was beyond scared. Tyler and I hadn't split as much as a single word.

There was a tangle several cars behind us and then nothing moved. We were twenty feet from the firefight and still trapped. The scar-faced '88 driver turned and blasted someone right in front of the drive-thru window. Tyler and I watched as the victim spun sideways from the single blast. It tore through skin, clothes, muscle, and bone. He—whoever he was—clung to the drive-thru's tray counter—the one that hung just below the automatic, double-window. We watched as he twisted, then fell, caught himself on one knee, then collapsed and crawled around the corner of the restaurant. The '88 screeched forward, then slam-dunked to scoop the driver, who climbed in the rear door, the sawed-off level at his waist. Before the rear door shut, the car tore off to the west. It ramped over the sidewalk and the curb. I shifted into first, popped the clutch, and peeled out of the drive-thru. I peeled past frames of shattered glass, past the rabble of people in front of the restaurant. Some of them had pistols still drawn and visible. I accelerated over the the curb and past the sidewalk. I spun the wheel and we careened left on Wisconsin and headed east towards the lake.

It was like we'd blasted off. The blocks whipped by until we hit a red light at 12th. I didn't know where were going or why.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I said. The quiet collapsed on itself. My hand pounded the steering wheel. “What the fuck was that?”

Tyler nodded, still somewhat in shock.

“Jesus Christ,” he said, finally. “Did we just see somebody get shot?”

“I dunno,” I said. I knew, though, that we did. “I dunno what the fuck that was.”

I gathered myself.

“We’ve got to call someone—the cops.”

“Why?” Tyler asked, plaintively.

“Because, fuck—I dunno.” I gasped, then quickly caught my breath. “Because. We’ve got to let somebody know. I mean, that guy got shot—killed people, maybe. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

I steered us towards Tower. Up in my dorm room, we dialed 9-1-1 and in as calm of a voice as I could, I relayed the details.

No, I didn’t have the license plate.

Yes, it was a Delta ’88.

Grey was the color.

Four, *yes*, *four* people were inside.

Uh-huh, someone did, indeed, get hit.

No, I wasn’t sure what happened to them.

West is where they went. *West*, down Wisconsin.

Everything, it seemed was so very far away and quite unreal.

PLAY
TRACK TEN: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 1, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CASS DARLING, GHOSTS, HALLOWEEN, HAUNTED HOUSE

His scream pierced the car. It threatened to poke holes in the roof, and it scared the shit out of me. We were on Oakland, just north of North. I steered us into the right-hand lane, and we were just about to turn toward downtown. I hadn't seen it, myself. But when he said it, I knew.

“Ghosts,” Cass cried. I saw some ghosts.” He was panicked. It was a tone I’d really never heard for him. He was totally and completely terrified. I knew, then, what he’d seen, but I couldn’t turn to see him—I couldn’t reach back and hold his hand or give him a hug. They were zombies. He seen zombies on a billboard ad for a new haunted house thing at State Fair Park.

“Oh, honey,” I said. I turned the car and nudged along the crowded avenue. “That was an ad. It was an advertisement for some Halloween stuff.” I slipped into the bike lane and spun to look at him. “Those were just costumes,” I continued. “That was silly stuff like dress-up.” The entire frame of his face was washed white, his breath rushed as hell. “They were pretty strange. Kind of scary, right?”

Tears spilled down his cheeks and I grabbed his hand. A horn bellowed behind us. He nodded, quickly, his head on a spring.

“Sweetie,” I followed, “you don’t have to worry, though, because those were just costumes. They were pretend.”

“But—but—I don’t like them,” he stammered. “No, thank you.”

“I know. I know.” A light rain dusted the windshield. “It’s a strange thing, Halloween is. Some people like those kind of tricks. But they’re tricks, and it’s not such a good choice to have

that up on the billboard like that, right?” He nodded again, his face less flush. “But now that we know where that sign is, we can remember it,” I said. “I’ll try to remind you and then you can look away, if you want. Or, you can just close your eyes.” I squeezed his hand.

A smile suddenly broke across his tiny, lightbulb-bright face. “Or,” he countered, “I could just growl at them and tell them to go away, that I don’t want any tricks, only treats.”

PAUSE

I was downstairs—all by myself—sprawled out flat on the thin, chocolate-brown carpet. Mom insisted on that color. *So it won't show spills*, she'd said. *Kool-Aid, juice, whatever. It would be ruined in a heartbeat.*

It was only a trailer—a preview. It was only thirty seconds long, but I freaked the fuck out. I just started screaming. Then, I ran. I ran upstairs. My feet pounded fast, and I rocketed into my dad's arms.

The preview was for *American Werewolf In London*. I didn't really know what was going on, but I knew there were yellow eyes and a mouth that was all twisted up. I knew there was hair coming from someone's hands and chin and palms. I knew that his tongue was blood red and angry. And, there were fangs.

I lost it.

Mom was there, too, upstairs.

“The TV,” I stammered. My hands were wild with fright. My eyes bounced all around the hallway, then shot across to the kitchen. “There was a thing—a wolf, a scary wolf.” I started to sob. It was uncontrollable, earnest.

“Oh,” Dad replied, “that. Yeah. It was just a preview.” He and my mom began to laugh. “A preview for a movie. It was just pretend. It's nothing to worry about.”

But I was. He set me down and I shivered. I was still scared, still lost in the distant frames of my frayed imagination.

“It's nothing,” he repeated. “Only a preview.”

He was right. It was just a preview. But, it also wasn't.

I dreamed about that werewolf for the next week or two, maybe longer. Each time, the eyes were more fierce. Each time, the fangs grew longer and longer. Each time, I dreamed about it, the werewolf got more and more threatening. I dreamed it was there—in my room—in the distant dark. I shuddered and cried and patted my head to try to settle myself down. I rubbed my chest and repeated, *Aw-aw, Tyne. It's okay. Aw-aw* until I finally drifted to sleep. The dried tears were ripe on my cheeks. My pillow was wet, and my stuffed bear, Tawny, was locked under my my arm, buffered by my chin.

PLAY
TRACK ELEVEN: COME ALL YOU GHOSTS

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 4, 2015
LOCATION: WEST ALLIS, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CASS DARLING, GHOSTS, HALLOWEEN, HAUNTED HOUSE

We were on the way to the farmer's market. I saw it probably at the same time he did, but I didn't mention anything because he didn't. I didn't want to draw attention to it. It was a different billboard, one depicting the same zombies he'd seen a few days earlier. They were the same ones that made him scream out in fear.

I thought about saying something. I thought about telling him to close his eyes, to or turn away or something, but it didn't seem right.

"Papa," Cass piped from the backseat. "I'm not afraid of those ghosts anymore."

"You saw them, too?" I glanced over my shoulder at him as we drove. "I saw them," I added. "Those silly tricksters."

"Yeah," Cass laughed, "those trickers. They were trying to trick me up there, those ghosts were. But, I saw them and quick changed into a superhero and charged at them and told them to get outta here."

I smiled as we slowed to a stop.

"I'm not scared of them anymore, Papa," Cass continued. "They don't bother me."

"That's great, Mister." I turned almost completely to face him, the light beet red. "I'm so proud of you."

He beamed. "That's right, Papa," he said. "Do you remember, a long time ago, when I was really scared of those ghosts? When I cried and cried when I saw them?"

"Yes, I do." I nodded and turned back to the road. The traffic light flipped green.

“Papa?” Cass asked. “Why do people like tricks?”

“What do you mean, Mister?”

“Well,” he said, his hands busy with the squeaky, plastic rat he’d been carrying around all weekend. It was a Halloween decoration, but he said it was his pet. “Why do people think it’s fun to trick other people when some people don’t like it?”

I shrugged. “That’s a good question, Mister.”

“Well, Papa,” he chimed. His voice was pitched and excited. “If a mean ghost came chomping through our house, I would just growl at him. Then,” he continued, “I’d grab my lightsaber and chop—” He did this kind of ninja-karate thing and smiled. “I’d chop them right in half and protect you, Papa.” I could see him in the rear-view, nodding his head quickly up and down. “I would, Papa,” he said. “I would.”

PAUSE

My favorite parts of baseball, almost, are the moments on TV when a camera blimp or plane or balloon or whatever flies high above the stadium after a commercial break. The players are already on the diamond, their bodies strange and obscenely small and finite from that height. Each one seems like a shadow planted in the rich emerald or burnt sienna. Everything is suspended in a sort of momentary exploration of the vacuum left when one thing ends and another has really yet to begin.

I especially love it when the stadium below the camera is Dodger. When it's Dodger Stadium, the outfield bleachers reflect the explosive glow of vertically suspended lights that, from that angle, seem to deny or at least defy the very constructs of physics.

PLAY
TRACK FOUR: HIGHLINE

TRACK RECORDED: NOVEMBER 18, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CASS DARLING, *GOODNIGHT CONSTRUCTION SITE*, EMMA DARLING

A sort of storm gathered above his brow. The furrows were fresh, new, and puzzled.

I lay next to him, tucked partially under the cover.

"What is it, Mister?"

Cass shook me off. It was like I'd signaled for a curve, but he wanted to bring the heater.

I prodded, lightly.

"It's okay." I angled a little closer to him and wrapped my arm around his head and shoulders. His face grew heavier, darker, and more troubled. "You can tell me." I paused and watched him. "Okay, Cass?"

"Well," he edged, "Quinn used to be my best friend, but now it's Ashton because we were building blocks in the building area and me and Max and Callum were making a tower—a tall, tall, super-high tower—" His arms spread wide, then stretched toward the ceiling. "It was a huge, big tower and then Quinn said that his tower was going to be the tallest. He said it was going to be taller than mine. Then, him and Max and Callum started building another one." His face lightened as he spoke. "But tomorrow," he continued, "tomorrow we talked about putting it on the table so that it could be super, super tall. It'll be the biggest one ever."

I smiled. "How did that make you feel?" I asked. "With Quinn and him saying he was going to build a taller tower?"

Cass exhaled deeply. His breath, tinted by his mango-orange toothpaste, drifted pleasantly to my side of the wide bed.

“It made me feel sad. Bad,” he answered, flatly.

I hugged him tight. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I'm sorry that Quinn said that to you. It wasn't a very good choice, right?"

Cass nodded. His face had twisted itself up again, but only slightly.

"And we should be careful not to hurt other people's feelings, right?"

Again, he nodded.

"But also, Mister—" I turned to face him and propped myself up on my elbow. "You can still play with Quinn and not feel so sad."

His eyes widened.

"You can tell him that you'll help, that it's great if he wants to build a tower—a super tall tower—and that you can't wait to help."

His smile blossomed even further.

"Then you can play, too, because it's not really about who builds the best or tallest tower, or if his tower is the biggest. It's about having fun and enjoying it—about working together and playing and not worrying about being competitive or anything like that."

"Right," he chimed. His bright stare anchored itself above us, in the ceiling. "It's about being here, right Papa?"

I nodded. "Yes, Mister, that's right. Just being here. And enjoying it." I leaned in for a kiss. "I love you, sweetie. Thanks for being awesome."

"You, too, Papa," he said. "You, too."

PAUSE

In 1955, Walter O'Malley tried to build a new stadium for his Brooklyn Dodgers in the team's namesake borough. He envisioned a massive complex unlike any other—a domed stadium offering solace from New York's less-than-reliable spring and late-summer weather. Much to his chagrin, O'Malley couldn't sort a deal with the city. Eventually, he struck an agreement with city officials in Los Angeles, and vowed to move the beloved club west, out of Brooklyn.

Land, though, was still an issue for O'Malley, even in Los Angeles.

Through a contrived and ethically questionable plan, land for a stadium to house O'Malley's baseball team was obtained through a cocktail of the city's use of eminent domain, as well as funds gathered from the Federal Housing Act of 1949. Originally, earmarked as a site for the massive Elysian Park Heights public housing project—a collection of dozens of large buildings, townhouses, schools, and playgrounds to rival Stuyvesant Town in O'Malley's neighboring Manhattan—the space would morph, magically, into the site for the new stadium.

In 1958, the city's voters approved a measure termed the *Taxpayers Committee for Yes on Baseball*, which eventually allowed the Dodgers to purchase the Chavez Ravine property back from the Federal Housing Authority. O'Malley, according to the deal, would finance the stadium himself, while the City of Los Angeles would kick in two million dollars for site improvements. Groucho Marx, Ronald Reagan, and George Burns were all outspoken supporters of the stadium deal. Still, many hurdles remained for O'Malley, the Dodgers, and the city in orchestrating the deal and then constructing what would eventually become Dodger Stadium. The first hurdle came in the form of a struggle with the mostly Spanish-speaking landowners who held property within the perimeters of Chavez Ravine. Immediate, undervalued cash payments were initially

offered. As properties were obtained, the cash payments were systematically reduced, sparking a sort of panic for the majority of landowners. Several property owners held out and refused to take the bait of the cash payouts, culminating in what's been termed *The Battle of Chavez Ravine*.

On May 8, 1959, the remaining residents—the hold-outs of Chavez Ravine—were forcibly evicted by Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputies.

In September of 1959, bulldozers and other heavy construction equipment moved into the ravine and buried everything—Solano School, Palo Verde School, Santo Nino Church, a malt shop, a liquor store, several water tanks, as well as a handful of fruit orchards and mustard plants—under eight million cubic yards of dirt. Even the streets of old Chavez Ravine were buried.

PLAY
TRACK SEVEN: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 13, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, DOMINIQUE SHATEL, ROOM M564,
JAMAICA KINCAID, TEVELL MARSHALL, JOHAMI BRIXTON, RAVE ALERT,
LOCKDOWN

Dominique said his swag was a mile wide.

“A mile fucking wide,” he repeated, his head cocked, lips pursed like Jay-Z or something.

He had that tight fade thing going that Drake had—the one that Ahmad Rashad made famous.

Dominique always wore hoodies and Jordans. He asked me for a book a week. *I just wanna do this thing, ya know*, he said. *I just wanna read what you do. I need them words. Bad.*

We were in room 564 of the M-Building. Jamaica Kincaid had us talking about gender roles and whether or not we thought they still existed—whether or not we thought they were still a problem. The conversation was animated and everybody, it seemed, had something to say. I told them a few more comments and then we’d take a break—let a little of what was said settle in. The discussion grew. Voices weaved and tangled individual experiences. I watched as reflections blossomed. Smaller questions spilled from bigger ones and vice versa. Things got complicated.

There were nineteen of us, all together, and the door was open because Tevell Marshall came in late and then Johami Brixton left, but only to make a phone call. But, no one should have left. No one should have made a phone call. We should have been on the floor, seated against the back wall, the door barricaded with the table, lights off, our voices just above a whisper. That’s where we should have been. But, we weren’t. There were nineteen of us: me and 18 students. Attendance was good.

This should have been my first lockdown. This one should have been real. But it wasn't because the message—the lockdown warning—wasn't communicated to every part of the campus. There was no announcement, no RAVE alert. So, we carried on, Jamaica Kincaid and all. Then, we took a break. Just after I let them go, I got a text from Emma. She was in the C-Building. She had been locked-down.

Emma knew I was in the M-Building. She was checking on me, making sure I was doing okay. I thought I was. I had no idea. Suddenly, I was terrified. I tried to call them all back, but only some of them were there in the hall. Only some of them were close enough to call back. I counted. There were fourteen. We were four short. I couldn't lock the door. I couldn't barricade it. I could turn off the lights, but I wondered what good it would do? Four students were missing. Four students were unaccounted for. And, I'd let them go. I told them to take a break. And now, they were gone.

PAUSE

The incident happened outside the C-Building. The C-Building was a whole building away. Emma was in the C-Building, but she was safe. I thought about Cass. He was in the H-Building—in the daycare—and that was farther away. The H-Building was three buildings away from the incident.

Of course, the C-Building was connect to the S and M buildings by skywalks.

I didn't know it then, but those skywalks—all of the university's skywalks—remained open and active during the incident.

The details of what actually happened would only emerge through the fog of panic and anger much later in the day. It would take more than a week for everything to come into full focus. Even then, it was difficult to understand exactly what happened. It was harder—maybe impossible—to contemplate why.

What I knew was that the lockdown wasn't a drill. What I didn't know, at the time, was that the lockdown came as a result of an altercation between a student and another student's boyfriend. The boyfriend—who wasn't a student—pulled a pistol when the shouting escalated to something between doing and posturing, between being and not being able to turn back. A girl in my class said she was there.

“I just saw chrome and bailed, dawg,” she sputtered, matter-of-factly. “I ain't about to hang out and watch that go down. Uh-uh.” Her name was Ivida and the tattoos on her arms, neck, and the spot just above the cut of every one of her partially visible bras spelled out—individually—the names of her four kids.

It's funny how the human mind can do multiple things at once. It can listen to a conversation and think about something else. It can have a thought while concentrating on an unrelated task. It can have one thought and simultaneously have another and another. One would think that attribute would come in handy. One would think that attribute would be quite appealing.

Cass was in the H-Building, in the daycare. The H-Building is connected to the T-Building, which is connected to the M-Building, which is connected to the C-Building, which was locked-down. The connecting skywalks—the ones between the C-Building and the M-Building—remained open. And, campus police had no idea where the armed boyfriend was. I didn't think about those connections right away. I didn't consider those open skywalks, since I wouldn't have thought, in a million fucking years, that they would have stayed open during a lockdown.

I didn't think about Cass being in danger until after the fact, since I was certain that the skywalk was closed, and was certain that the suspect had been contained and apprehended. I'd hoped that I'd ever have to think about Cass being in danger. I hope I never, ever have to again.

But, that's not true.

Once you think about someone like that, you can't ever not think about it again. Ever. Especially, when that someone is your son. Especially, when that someone is your four year-old child. Especially, when that someone is the one thing you love more than anything else, maybe, in the whole, wide world. Once you think about that, you can never, ever not think about it.

PLAY
TRACK EIGHT: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 13, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, RAVE ALERT, LOCKDOWN, DJEMBE
HARRIS, JIHAD AHMAD, TEVELL MARSHALL

I called them back. I called back the ones I could. Then, they sent texts to the others—the ones who hadn't been called back. Soon, there were eighteen. I counted them. Then, I counted them again. I counted them three times, just like Cass's kindergarten teacher had last week during his apple farm field trip. She counted those four year-olds three times, and I remember that it made me laugh. You need to count kindergartners three times. They were four, and they moved like tiny hurricanes. But, I counted my students three times. They stayed still while I counted them, though, unlike the four year-olds. They weren't hurricanes. The hurricane was outside of the classroom. The hurricane was unlocked, and it ran through campus, an unlocked campus.

There were eighteen of them. Eighteen. I made nineteen. I counted three times.

I locked the door, turned off the lights, and then me and Djembe picked up the table to barricade the door. Jihad helped, too. Then, we sat, quiet for a change. The ceiling projector threw critical commentary about Jamaica Kincaid up on the screen. I grabbed the remote and killed the light—turned off the projector. I couldn't believe I'd left it on. The bulb died like the moon, quick and steady, and then they smiled. All of them.

“Woulda sucked if that gave us away,” Tevell remarked. Everyone else laughed, too. Those laughs, though, were braided together and they didn't sound right. Those laughs were hollow. Those laughs hid something else, something none of us were prepared to discuss.

Then, something remarkable happened. They began trading stories. They traded stories about how they had hidden under beds, in closets, and in the backs of cars. They'd hidden from

parents, uncles, grandparents, and step dads. A few of them hid from their mothers, too. Some of them talked about getting shot at on the street, on the playground, outside the store, on the way home from school. Some of them talked about getting shot. They talked about violence and abuse. They talked about guns and bravado and all the silly, infantile shit that gets played out in the streets, day after day after day.

I didn't feel good about the lockdown. Not at all. But if I had to be locked down, anywhere, with anyone, I was glad I was with them. The pulse of the room never wavered—not once. The pulse of the room never skipped even a single beat.

PAUSE

While I was talking about Jamaica Kincaid and part of the campus—but not all of it—fell under lockdown, Cass was at the WSU daycare just across the street. He was on the ground floor of the H-Building, which faced the C-Building. Both buildings were perched at the intersection of 8th and Highland. The C-Building occupied the southeast side, the H-Building, the northeast. The daycare had a fenced-in playground, ten feet from the sidewalk, fourteen feet from the streets.

I'd hoped, when I thought about Cass, that he was at lunch. Or, maybe he in the middle of art class. Maybe, I thought, he was in the large-muscle room, headed head-first down the tree slide. I had hoped that his teachers got the RAVE alert—the lockdown notice. I'd hoped that they'd gotten the alert that hadn't come to me. Surely, the campus police would have notified the daycare. Surely, they'd do that. Even if they fucked up and kept the skywalks open, even if they didn't lockdown the entire campus, they certainly would have informed the daycare. I didn't have to worry, I thought. There was no way they wouldn't have locked down the daycare. There was no way.

I thought about how they would have gathered all of the kids in their ten or twelve-person classes and lined them up to play the game that they sometimes practiced. It was a game Cass had told Emma and I about. When he did, we stared at one another, then took turns crying in the other room.

I thought about Cass and his school friends—Wesley and Jenna and Felicia, Isaiah and the rest playing that game that Cass had told us about. It was one where they'd go into the closets along the walls, and then they'd be as quiet as they could be in order to hide from Amber, the

daycare supervisor. That's what Cass's teachers told him. That was the game they played on drills. This wasn't a drill. This time, they'd play that game for real.

But he wasn't playing that game.

I'd hoped wrong.

PLAY
TRACK NINE: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 13, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, RAVE ALERT, LOCKDOWN,
MRS. AMBER HARRIS, WSU CHILDREN'S CENTER & DAYCARE

While I was talking about Kincaid, Cass was on the playground with his friends— the one at the corner of 8th and Highland. If he would have looked, he would have seen the police cars, the tactical team, the armored wagons, and the commotion. He would have seen it all.

I hope he didn't look. I hope that he wouldn't have noticed it for what it was if he had. I hope it would have seemed cool—just a bunch of red and blue lights, paraded in siren bars, back and forth, back and forth.

It was those lights—the squad cars and the other vehicles—that let the daycare teachers know that something wasn't right. They noticed the lights. They knew them for what they were. Those lights, for the daycare teachers, weren't something cool. They weren't just a bunch of red and blue lights. Those teachers gathered Cass and his friends, and they went inside. They went in their classrooms and closed the doors. But, they didn't play that game. They didn't play that game because when Amber called campus police, campus police told her it was nothing to worry about. Campus police told her it was just something that had happened outside the C-Building. But, Amber isn't believe them. She didn't believe them because it didn't add up. She could see the lights through the daycare's windows. She could see them while she was on the phone with the campus police dispatcher. She could read the trucks—the ones with the tactical unit's logos. She knew it didn't add up. So, when she hung up the phone with the dispatchers, she went from room to room and told the teachers that they were going to play that game. She told the teachers that they were going to play that game, and that she didn't know how long they were going to

have to keep playing the game. She told the teachers that she wasn't sure, anymore, if it really was a game. She told the teachers that something didn't add up, and that she wasn't taking any chances.

PAUSE

The lockdown, itself, revolved around a single point. It was an unfixed point, which had unleashed the counter-gravity that took shape in the form of panic, miscommunication, and poor judgement.

At 9:57 a.m., a 27 year-old male, a low-life thug with a firm established rap sheet, named Caleb Hunt, dropped his girlfriend—a student at WSU—off at the northwest entrance of the C-Building—the one at the corner of 8th and Highland. Caleb Hunt was not a student.

As he put his Buick Park Avenue—a faded, navy blue sedan with a missing front bumper, a broken left taillight, and no door-side rear-view mirrors—into drive, he noticed a fellow that he had scrapped with, briefly, a few nights ago outside of a Center Street club. Caleb threw his Park Avenue in reverse, twisted the keys out of the ignition, and hopped out of the driver's seat.

He and the fellow he'd recognized—a male WSU student named Darnell Allen, who was waiting for a ride following an eight o'clock math class—exchanged words. Caleb and Darnell grew loud, according to witnesses, then turned boisterous, before they squared off.

What happened next was only a surprise to people like me.

Caleb pulled a pistol from his waistband.

When this sort of thing happens—and it happens too much—most people imagine that everyone gets gone and runs away. Except they don't because that's the problem when this sort of thing happens. It's all so very, very out-of-context. No one—even the people that actually do—quite knows what's going on.

A gun at a school is insane. Except that it's not. It doesn't fit into any sort of context. Except that it does. Still, most folks operate from a place where a gun at school doesn't add up.

Most people operate from a space where it doesn't match. And even though everyone should probably know better by now, no one does. So, everyone mostly freezes and tries to cram what's happening into some gestalt. But, nothing fits. And, when nothing fits, everything just goes to hell. Nothing makes any sense. This is the way with these things, though. Everything just goes to hell.

PLAY
TRACK TEN: LOVE/40

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 13, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, RAVE ALERT, LOCKDOWN, CALEB HUNT,
CASS DARLING, AMBER HARRIS

Caleb Hunt ran through the corridors. He raced through the connecting segments of sky-walk and hallways. He dashed from the C-Building to the M-Building. He cut through the T-Building and could have gone through the H-Building, but he didn't. Instead, he headed out across Winnebago, over the freeway, and then farther and farther away. He left his car—the navy-blue Park Avenue—with his keys and his jacket on the front seat. In his jacket, he left his wallet. And, in his wallet, he left his driver's license with his home address.

Caleb must've moved like a ghost through the hallways at WSU. The cops arrested him later, though. The news reports talked about how officers found his wallet and went to his house. The news report said that Caleb Hunt was arrested some forty blocks away from the disturbance of the morning and the restless wake of questions that rippled over the consciousness of students and faculty, administrators, parents and partners.

But, while Caleb ran, while he evaded campus public safety and sparked the arrival of the tactical team and SWAT, Cass played. He and his friends laughed and swirled, slid down the slides, bounced over the the balance pads, spun circles and squiggles on the tricycles and the scooters. it wasn't until he was already on Winnebago and headed across the freeway that Amber Harris went room-to-room and told the teachers that this time, it might not be a drill.

PLAY
TRACK FOUR: ECHO/GOLD

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 15, 2015
LOCATION: NEW YORK, NEW YORK
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: CMJ 2015, THE SHRINE, HARLEM, FEAR, MANHATTAN, JAMES FOLEY

I'd been up at The Shrine tonight, on a bill with four others. Every time I was there, that place jump-started my heart. I especially loved the walk up. I always—except for once when I drove a rental straight from LGA—had taken either the Eighth or Sixth Avenue line uptown to 125th. From there, I walked east, then up Adam Clayton Powell. The street was always a hustle, and I thought about Baldwin, Hughes, Petry, and the rest of that gang and what they saw. What I saw was much, much different, but the old threads still remained somewhat in tact. The hems had been altered. The seams had been realigned. But, especially at The Shrine, the threads—the old, true threads—mostly remained.

And, I loved to run my fingers over them.

I played second, and dug in on that stage like a pinch-hitter with a 2-2 count, 2 outs, and a runner on in the bottom of the seventh of a tie game. I dug deep. The sound was crisp, and my voice danced over the crowd. It danced all along the ceiling and down the side walls.

Sometimes, when I play, thoughts that seem disconnected or not quite congruent, pop into my head. I think it might happen as a result of being present and vulnerable during my set.

I moved my capo to start my second-to-last song, and had one of those seemingly disconnected thoughts pop into my head. It arrived the way a hummingbird does—quickly, out of nowhere, and persistent as hell. As I stood there and adjusted the key, I thought about what fear is. I thought about what it means to be afraid. I thought about how fear has a nasty habit of holding me tight.

Fear, I thought, isn't what has been lost or taken away—what's lost is gone, and mostly gone for good. Fear, I thought, is different. It's what's given away without conscious consent. Fear is habit. It's future problems stitched to the present tense—the unconscious agreement with one's *vāsanā*. Fear, I thought as I hit a few down strums to check my tuning, is a chance to realize that I'm actually the one in control.

I realized that there on-stage. Then, I sung a song about Jimmy. It's a song I've sung hundreds of times before. I changed it at The Shrine, though, without really even realizing I'd changed it. The words tumbled from my mouth, crashed into the microphone screen, and then ricocheted back at me.

I started normally—the way I'd sung it hundreds of times before. *These dreams decorate the sky*. Then, I switched it. *Our screams decorate the sky*. As I pushed into the end-chorus, I held tight to the notion that fear is opportunity. I thought, as I played the syncopated chords, that fear might not really be anything to be afraid of. I didn't want to ever forget that. I didn't want to let that go. I steadily picked up the tempo, and the syncopations disappeared. Then, I sung, *We're all in this together. We're all in this together, one-by-one*.

PAUSE

In 1949, Marcenia Lyle Alberga began her professional baseball career with the San Francisco Sea Lions, a short-lived Negro League team. Alberga played under the name *Toni Stone* because that's what the kids she grew up with called her. They called her *Toni* because it sounded like *tomboy*. They called her *Stone* because she rode horses with no saddle. They said she was as hard as a stone.

After a short stint with the Sea Lions, she played from 1949-1952 with the New Orleans Black Pelicans. The Black Pelicans became the New Orleans Creoles while she was still their everyday-second base player. In 1953, she signed a contract with the Indianapolis Clowns. She played second base for the Clowns, as well, since their previous second baseman, Henry Aaron, had signed a Major League contract with the Milwaukee Braves. In 50 games with the Clowns, Stone batted .243. Near the end of the season, she faced-off against Satchel Paige and earned a base-hit. She said that she wasn't ever classified. She said that people weren't ready for her. She said people didn't know what to do about her.

REWIND
TRACK THREE: HOPE

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 27, 2011
LOCATION: COLUMBUS, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: SHANE SWEENEY, FATHERHOOD, GLOOMY BEAR

We talked in the kitchen, each with a beer in steady fingers. The clock on the microwave pushed closer and closer to four in the morning. Shane's eyes locked on mine. His hand was a magnet on my shoulder—heavy with truth and tattoos.

"You're gonna be a good dad, buddy." Shane paused. "A great dad." His voice was deep and rough, but soft like cedar. "You know that, right?"

I did. And, I didn't. I was definitely scared shitless. Fatherhood had always looked like a loaded gun with a loose and unreliable safety. That's what I saw—that's what was modeled for me. I didn't want that. I didn't want to be that. I wanted to be something different. I wanted to be something for Cass that nobody had been for me.

I stared and thought about those things as Shane's balled-up fist tapped my chest. His hair was shaved on both sides. The top, which should have been a mohawk of some sort, fell upon the top of his forehead in pompadour fashion. He was just a few inches shorter than I was, and five or six years younger.

"My dad," he said, his fist still against my chest, "was always around, but he never was here, never present." Shane's lovely, baritone drawl cascaded those words across the small space of his kitchen. "But look," he added, his eyes even more intense and fixed on the frame of my face. "My son knows even when I'm not around, that I'm here. And," he continued, "when I'm around, I'm fucking here—for him, for me, for us. And you'll be there for your son, too." He paused, again. "Because that's what we do. That's where all of these songs and shit come from."

Embarrassed, for some reason, I smiled. It wasn't a real smile. It was all lips and teeth.

"Seriously," he pushed. "Don't bullshit. Not me and not yourself. You know—all you have to do is show up." Then, his smile bloomed. It was genuine and thick in the eyes. "But really show up. I mean, mean it. Mean it as much as you can, then mean it a little bit more." Gloomy Bear sat on top of his son's art table. Gloomy's bloody claws seemed to reach up at me. His fangs and messy mouth dared me to do something. "It's a fucking beautiful thing, buddy," Shane added. "So fragile and lovely and beautiful."

Outside a train cut through the middle of the night, and all of February—the entire year to come—melted into that single moment. Those words—the ones that came so easily from Shane's mouth—etched themselves deep inside me. *All you have to do is show up.*

PAUSE

Those words have easily saved my life a dozen times, already. I'm sure they've got another few dozen in them before it's all said and done.

PLAY
TRACK FOUR: SUMMER KISS

TRACK RECORDED: NOVEMBER 28, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: JAMES FOLEY, TOMMY FAULKS, DAVE VETSZY, KING FIELD, MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB, ALLIGATORS, DREW HALTERER

The sun woke me up too early. It's aggressive, glimmer-knife of light violently stabbed its way under my tightly-drawn shades. I'd been dreaming about my friends. We were playing rugby and somehow, stolen alligators got involved. Jimmy was there, of course, and he told me not to worry about the alligators.

"Faulks'll take care of them. No sweat," he said.

I stared at him in disbelief. The match continued, but he and I just stood there, talking. The entire world was a blur on either side of us.

I could tell that he could see my doubts. They were colored purple around my eyes and ears. He touched my face and I was surprised by how cold his fingers were. They shocked me, really. It was weird that he was there, in front of me, when he shouldn't have been. I almost said something about it.

"Seriously," he continued. He had his hands tucked into the tiny pockets of his navy-blue shorts. "He'll just call the zoo and set it straight. Faulks'll get things sorted."

"But what about all the other animals?" I asked. "The ones they're going to eat. The ones they're bound to eat before the zookeepers can even get here." I look around and without even trying, I counted eight gators. "They're hungry, Jimmy," I added.

He shrugged. "It'll be okay. That stuff happens. Just make sure you don't forget how important it is to watch them." He squinted, and gazed around at the alligators. They were all over the place. His dark bangs fell into his eyes. He pushed them back, but they returned, nearly to the

same spot. "It's important to watch, you know. It's important to really watch, no matter how bad it is, no matter how much you might want to turn away or forget. It's important to know so—"

I cut him off. "So that I—that we—know the truth." My words were tepid, and they felt borrowed.

Jimmy smiled. "Kind of," he replied. "But, knowing isn't shit, unless you talk about it. You've gotta tell the goddamned story. All of it. You've gotta get ahold of those details, too—the grizzly, nearly forgotten bits. All of it."

At the end of the pitch, Drew Halterer was kicking for post.

"That's the only way anybody," Jimmy said, "will know what happened." He stared across the pitch as an alligator crossed 17th Street. "Fuck the truth," he continued. "That's only part of the story. If you stop at the truth, you'll miss the other part."

I was really confused, and the snap-snap of gator jaws all around us didn't help.

"The other part," he said, "is why we're here, Tyne. Look, there are much better places to have this conversation than in the middle of fucking King Field during a rugby match. What really happens in any given instant has mostly nothing to do with truth—what someone says occurred or thinks happened—and everything to do with why. That's why it's important to watch—to observe and learn. That's why it's so important to talk about what we've seen, what we've heard, what we've imagined." Again, Halterer kicked for post. He was four-for-six on the day. Jimmy shook his head. "Shit," he continued, "it's even important to talk about the lies—the ones we've been told, the ones we've overheard, and especially, the ones we've told."

It was halftime and our team gathered in the south try-zone. The alligators gathered in the north one. The other team had left—they'd gone to the bar already.

“That’s the start of the why,” Jimmy insisted. “It’s the thread that unravels this whole mess.”

"But is it safe?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Safe for what?"

"To pull the thread? To risk unraveling everything?"

His smile glowed, and I imagined that's what the Earth looked like from outer space.

"Absolutely not."

This time, I laughed.

"But that's why," he added, "it's so important to do it."

We got back in the game, and I forgot about the alligators for a little while.

"Go ahead," Jimmy said, as I ran to support Dave. "I'm with you. I'm with you."

PLAY
TRACK SIX: ONE NIGHT

TRACK RECORDED: DECEMBER 12, 2015
LOCATION: LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: LAX, MARRIOTT CENTURY BLVD., SILVERLAKE LOUNGE, SILVER LAKE, THEODORE BLACK, *THE PHOENIX*, CASBAH, MALIBU, PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY, EMMA DARLING, CASS DARLING, POINT DUME, VITAL ZUMAN, NICKEL DINER, SANTA MONICA, HOLLYWOOD, LOS FELIZ, HOLLYWOOD, CHATEAU MARMONT, NUMBER 64, CHRISTINE HENNE, LHC GROUP

I'd been out on a run since classes ended. I picked Cass and Emma up that morning, an hour after I rolled into town. My eyes were ringed with sleep. I drove out, and played my way across. Tonight was the Silverlake Lounge.

We checked in at the hotel and settled our things. The day drifted and we wandered. Load-in was at 6. I left Cass and Emma at the hotel after an early dinner. They were wiped out. We were staying at a Marriott of some sort, near the airport. I pulled out of the lot, and swung the car across and over La Tijera. By the time I got up to LaCienega—up beyond the crest where the tiny oil rigs clung to the hillside—L.A. was everywhere. It looked completed ragged. I steered my way across Sunset and through The Junction. Silver Lake stood motionless. It was heavy and dark all along Occidental Boulevard. The lights seemed to only crowd the space just beneath the reservoir. That, of course, was where I was, but I wasn't sure if that meant anything. Everywhere else was a special kick of black. The air was warm, too, especially for the first part of December.

When I was like 10 and I watched *The Karate Kid* with my dad, I remember that he said L.A. was a cesspool. At the time, I didn't really know what he was talking about. Now, I know that he couldn't have been more wrong. I parked on Vendome. Something was bound to happen, I could feel it.

The Lounge buzzed busily. Its massive *SALVATION* sing—lit with huge ice-white bulb—pushed behind me. My voice and strums were intent and meaningful—more meaningful, maybe, than they’d ever been.

I swam with Cass that afternoon. The pool at the hotel was cold-as-fuck, but we did it because we could. We did it because he wanted to, and it was fun.

The entirety of Silverlake Lounge was sweaty and packed. The stage was almost at floor level. Things were tight. The club swelled and mouths sung along. It was infectious—a groove worn into wax—and I rode it. I rode it for the length of my set. I wished Cass and Emma had been there instead of back at the hotel, but the Silverlake Lounge wasn't that kind of club.

I held fast to my last chord, as it rung into the rafters, supported the pressure of my aching fingers. My voice carried onward over the din. *Someday, I promise I could be like that. Someday, I promise, I'll arrive.*

A woman was there at the show. Her name was Christine, and she worked for from some firm in the Valley. It was a management firm. The whole enterprise kind of baffled me.

Her firm was called the LHC Group, she said, and they had worked with everyone—Macklemore to Willie Nelson. She gave me a card—a fancy one—and she asked me if I would give her a call. She also asked if I was free the next day. She was hosting a party at Chateau Marmont.

“You know? The hotel,” she added, coyly.

I knew it.

“On Sunset?”

“That’s the one.”

She clicked closed her pocketbook and slid it back into her bag. Her hands moved quickly as she talked. They were traces of bright-green nail polish and bangles. The bangles' soft jingle filled the space around my head.

Christine introduced me to a handful of other folks—an A&R guy from New York, some agency folks, and someone who worked with John Varvatos that had done his campaigns with Ryan Adams, Perry Ferrell and ?love.

Christine's arms were a lively canvas of fierce tattoos. Demons with horns and nose rings were tightly stretched over thin muscles. Those muscles were positioned exactly where they should have been. With Christine, nothing was where it shouldn't have been. Her eyes were hazel, and iced with a lavender shadow that was richer than all the cupcake frosting in all the bakeries in Los Angeles.

“So you'll come?” she pried.

I smiled. I was still sweaty, and clicked my guitar case closed. “Yeah, sure. I think so.”

She fixed her hair. It was dark, and cut ribbons, like Betty Paige.

“What time?”

“Whenever. Just tell the concierge you're there for 64.”

“64?” I repeated.

“Yep.” She smiled. “You'll know it. And,” she added, “these guys will be there, too. You should talk more.” She looked me over, then adjusted the collar of my jacket. “Especially to Lisa,” she added.

Lisa was the Varvatos connection.

My dad would've told me not to get my hopes up. *Because they're heavy, son. And if they fall, they're bound to crush you.*

I said goodbye to her and promised to stop by Number 64. Our hug lasted a touch longer than it should've.

The next morning came like a freight train. The hotel room was hot and humid. The windows—on the other side of thick curtains—were extremely gold.

I'd dreamed of medallions and this TV show that I loved as a kid called *The Phoenix*. My breath pulled me forth. It was dry and made of cotton. My lips were stiff and a little cracked. I heard Cass shift in his blow-up bed on the floor. It was nearly seven and I thought about coffee—Turkish and strong. Maybe Casbah, but not yet.

An hour later, we woke, showered, then slipped up to Malibu. Our tires edged the hem of the PCH—north, then a little farther north. The waves rolled light at Point Dume. They were mainly short breakers jelly-rolled upon themselves. We spotted a whale that we thought was a windsurfer at first. It was right there, so close to shore. Cass and I swam, and we ate avocados that we bought from the farm stand across the highway. They sold honeycomb and balsamic lemonade. We were dharma bums, and the party at Number 64 wasn't until 8. There was plenty of time left for Cass to chase the sun.

Later, when the edges of the sky glowed dark blue. We cut across Santa Monica and past Beverly Hills with its glitter. Above us, the Hollywood hills were threadbare, but almost boundless. We climbed from La Cienega through the Canyon, and then spilled over the banks of Mulholland. From there, we wrapped around, nearly to where we'd started. La Brea became Melrose and the fresh tar and asphalt reminded me of that September during the first month of my sixth-

grade year at St. Barbara's. We did SSR and the smell of the roof at Milford Main with its cranes and buckets and aluminum ladders pushed through St. Barb's wide-open windows.

The Los Angeles sky fell fast with its faulty rip cord, and we watched as the gentle hills cushioned its crash. The city's yellow glare grew green and as traffic rushed, we ate at The Waffle. Around us, the buildings folded up their shadows, one by one.

Somewhere along the way, Emma and I remembered the Nickel Diner. We hatched plans for the following morning. Cass told us it was okay because he'd already had breakfast.

Further west, the sky stacked itself in almost perfect, parallel colors. Clouds hemmed themselves along those colors. If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn the clouds were mountains. Sometimes, even though I did know better, I swore they were mountains anyway. I wondered how long it would take to sail out to them.

An hour or two passed and just like it always did, the dome over Los Angeles exploded. The soft sheets of amethyst drifted black and up above Griffith Park pinprick stars suddenly sparkled. I wondered what they looked like up close. I wondered, too, if I could get up next to them, whether they'd be too bright. In truth, it didn't matter too much to me. I was right where I wanted to be.

But, Dad might have said, *Don't get too close, son. Don't love it too much or it'll destroy you. It'll cut you to ribbons.*

I arrived outside the Chateau a little before 9. Number 64 was packed with people I didn't know. There were drinks and drugs and the thump, thump, thump of something low and minor on the turntables. Everyone looked famous. Agents looked like rock stars, rock stars looked like models, and models looked too fragile and kind of mean.

I talked and talked, shook hands, and pocketed cards. When I needed a breath, I went outside and stared across the city. I leaned out over the Boulevard and let my eyes lose their focus. Hundreds of thousands of tiny lights broke blue and white and yellow. They were little, leftover pieces of something bigger.

It was anything but a cesspool. I began to come to terms with the fact that what I'd obtained that night was something I couldn't ever hold or show off. It was something, though, that nurtured dividends upon dividends. It was the key to doors I didn't even know existed.

At twenty-after-one, in a different hotel room, I stood in front of a window and watched as planes passed. Half of my face was drenched in the low-glow, blue flicker of a muted TV. Outside, the endless incongruity of the sprawling city seemed to reshuffle itself. The whole enterprise was suddenly—in the blink of an eye—rebooted.

My breath fogged the pane as Emma slept. I listened to Cass sleep, too. Out there—beyond that fogged pane—a different Los Angeles bloomed. It was one that would lay unguarded until just past daybreak. It was, in a sense, both a mirage and a hidden diamond.

PAUSE

I had a professor once who told me that when I met someone for the first time, I should try to determine their deepest fears.

“Don’t ask them, directly,” he said. “But just try to get in their head and take a walk. Think about who they might kill and how, if they had a chance. That’s the way you get to know a person. Perhaps,” he added, “that’s the only way to really know anybody.

I never knew exactly what the hell he meant by that. I wondered if it was just something shocking for him to say. That same professor urged me to *go to the center of the Earth*.

“Things are mostly matter-of-fact,” he said as he stood and gazed out his cloudy office windows. “They’re not nice, and to get to the heart of it is usually—when it counts—not far enough.” He turned to face me, his sharp chin and his cheeks stubbled with aborted bristles. They were only just millimeters high and varying shades of brown and grey.

The sun played tricks with his profile, accentuating features and angles that probably would have been better off left alone. “You’ve got to go straight to the center of the Earth. You’ve got to cut through the shit and the mire that fucks everything up. You’ve got to cut through it all until you’re not afraid to say what you want to say—what you hope to say.”

He also once accused everyone in our class of being chickenshit. I wanted to say something to him—to prove him wrong. I wanted to show him that I wasn’t chickenshit. I stood there as the rest of the class shuffled by me and left. I stood there until he laughed and walked away.

PLAY
TRACK FIVE: HIGHLINE

TRACK RECORDED: JANUARY 11, 2016
LOCATION: PARIS, FRANCE
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: RIVER SEINE, 2ND ARR., PONT ALEXANDRE, TROCADERO, MIGUEL ST.
MARTIN, BASTION, L'OLYMPIA, WOLFBRED

The cityscape was curtain of dead weather. The streets and wide boulevards choked on snow and slow traffic.

“Don’t worry.” Miguel’s voice seemed piped through a tube—a clean one, but a long, narrow one. “About the weather,” he added. “It’s nothing.” His words hammered lightly over the connection in three-quarter time. They were absinthe-strong and apple-crisp. He was in his late-forties. I’d only just met him for the first time—in-person—the day before. The suit he wore to our meeting was impeccable, and his hair looked like it had been styled by angels. His firm—Bastion—had repped Vance Joy and the singer from Mumford & Sons, among others. He was the man in France, Christine had said. “Maybe in all of Europe,” she’d added.

Miguel and I and his two assistants had drinks the night before at George V following my Oui.FM in-studio set. He’d spent the morning working an iTunes Session for me tomorrow or the next day. Everything seemed so dependent on everything else. It was all so subject to change. I tried my best to keep up, but I was beginning to think it was impossible. It was just easier to show up.

I switched my phone from one ear to the other.

“Things are good for the show,” he said. “We’re excited to have you on as support.” He took a sip of something hot, presumably, which drew out his pause. “You’ll check at five?” he asked. “Christine gave you the details, no?”

She had.

Miguel's voice was so French it was hard to for me to pay attention. I was glad for Christine's notes. I was glad for her texts and the emails. I felt like they kept everything aligned. I didn't want anything to get shuffled. I didn't want anything to fall apart.

I went outside with Emma and Cass. The lights of the city gleamed, even in the earthquake daylight. We walked through the 2nd to the Seine, which nearly glowed. It was a creamy, mint green. The setting sun danced on the masonry socles of the Pont Alexandre—the fames working infinitely to restrain their Pegasus.

PAUSE

The Bastion folks had added me, fairly quickly, to a European run with Wolfbred. They were a four-piece out of London who'd blown through all the big clubs and now were selling out theatres—like L'Olympia—all over Europe. In the U.S., they were still sewing their roots, but Christine said they'd be doing a 32-date run through North America in the late-spring, early summer. The U.S. run was going to be followed by a collection of Asian dates, which included India, Japan, and Thailand.

“I want you on those, too,” she said.

Christine had pushed hard with the folks at Virgin—Wolfbred's label—and they bit. Bastion sorted out the details, and before I knew it, I was on this 15-date swing. I was doing France, Spain, Germany, Sweden, The Netherlands, then the UK, to end it.

It was a tune-up, Christine had told me.

REWIND
TRACK FOUR: HOPE

RECORDED: DECEMBER 19, 2015
TIME: 9:01 A.M.-9:13 A.M.
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
NOTES/TAGS: CHRISTINE HENNE, CARNEGIE HALL, CASS DARLING, ATWATER PARK

Christine texted, then she called about thirty seconds later. “Where are you?” she asked.

“Uh, I’m at the park.”

“Cute,” she said. I think she might have meant it. “Well, listen,” she followed, quickly.

“We’ve got something cooking. There’s a band here in LA. Hope Parade, they’re called.”

“Sure,” I replied. “I know them. Well,” I corrected, “I know *of* them. They’re great.”

“I know, right?” Her voice pumped through the connection. “They’re doing a U.S. run early in 2016. It starts in late-January.”

She was on her phone, probably in the car. I imagined the traffic—gnarled and twisted all around and up on the ramps and cloverleaves. I was glad I was at the park with Cass. We were on the bluff above the Lake and I watched as his feet steadied themselves on one of the tall, blue ladders—the one that connected to the plastic, spiral slide.

It was mid-December—only a few days before Christmas. The sun seemed to have forgotten the date. It was strangely warm, and Cass wore only a light jacket with his bright-red *Avengers* knit hat.

Christine continued. “It’s 22 dates, Tyne. Some plane, some drive.” She cursed at something, something there on the freeway. I wondered if it was the 5, 10, or 101. “But, look,” she said, “this is big. Bigger than anything you’ve done.”

I nodded and watched as Cass moved to the fire fighter’s pole. “Papa,” he chimed. The wind tussled his shiny, blonde hair. “Look.”

I smiled and waived, the phone still tight to my ear. He slid gracefully down the long, steel tube. His legs were wrapped tight. His hands and fingers latched just enough.

Christine paused. A quarter-mile below me, the Lake and the Atwater inlet could have been the Pacific.

“You’re gonna do Carnegie,” she said. Her voice was melted caramel. “In February. Early February.”

PAUSE

The Wolfbred dates ruled. During and afterwards, stuff exploded. I could barely keep up. I was set for the U.S. run with Hope Parade—Carnegie and all—and when I was in New York, Lisa wanted to do the Varvatos shoot. She sent along an email from John. *I'd like him to do a bit for the late spring. I think his image will pair nicely with what we've got going in the line.*

Something happened there at Brixton Academy during the last show of the Wolfbred run. My voice became something other than what it had been. I can't really remember ever having seen Emma's face so bright. Cass was there, too, because the the Brixton was that kind of place.

REWIND
TRACK ELEVEN: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 7, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: "BEAT IT", MICHAEL JACKSON, CASS DARLING, WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY, LAKE BLUFF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Cass asked if we could drive to school that morning.

"Just this once. Please." His mouth was full of sausage and eggs, a half-empty glass of milk stood a good foot from his plate. "Just this once," he repeated. "So I can listen to "Beat It" on the way. Please."

I laughed. "Well, Mister—" I tapped my hand against the side of the coffee grinder. "We'll take the car to WSU school." His protest came quickly. I'd anticipated it. "Because," I continued, "we live too close to Lake Bluff school. We'll be there before the song is even half over."

He puzzled the truth of my statement, then nodded in agreement as he silently chewed his breakfast.

"Okay, Papa," he resigned. "But on the way to WSU school, let's put "Beat It" on repeat."

I thumb-crunched him.

"Deal, Mister. Deal," I replied.

PAUSE

I'm really not sure where it came from or how it started, but I do know where it started.

We were up at the high school, on the second floor. Emma and I were crowded in the back of a small dance studio with three or four other parents. We'd signed Cass up for tap class—what he called *tap-shoe school*. The studio had a large, oak floor and sported huge mirrors across the inside wall. The back of the room, though, was crammed with seven or eight exercise balls and three upright pianos.

The room baked in the mid-June heat, and the eight or so three and four year-olds ran, spun, and slipped across the slick floor. They studied their dynamic reflections in the full-length mirrors and mimicked one another's movements.

It was the third of six classes. The kids had grown comfortable—they'd shed the mantle of insecurity that seems to always come with something new.

I'd found Cass some Marvel superhero socks—the tiny kind that were good for the heat of the summer—and he'd chosen *The Incredible Hulk* for the day. The bright-green socks peeked over the top of his patent-leather, black tap shoes.

The instructor called the kids to order and took them through their tap exercises. Clicks and flickers populated the room, and after 15 or 20 minutes, they transitioned out of tap into the standard dance segment of the class. This was the segment that Cass was way less interested in. I couldn't blame him. Switching from tap shoes to socks kind of spoiled some of the gusto.

During the transition, Cass strolled over. Sweaty strands of his blonde hair were plated against his forehead. I helped him out of his tap shoes, the ties too much for his tiny fingers.

“Nice work, Mister.”

“Thanks, Papa.”

“High five,” I added, as he stood up in his socked feet. The Hulk’s disembodied face covered their tops.

Cass shook his head. “Thumb crunch.”

I was confused, and looked at Emma. She shrugged.

Cass extended his thumb like a hitchhiker, and signaled for me to do the same. I did, and he proceeded to press the pad of his thumb against mine. As he pulled his thumb away from mine, he made a soft, explosion-like sound.

I’d hardly ever before experienced something quite so awesome.

REWIND
TRACK TWELVE: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 7, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: "BEAT IT", MICHAEL JACKSON, CASS DARLING, LAKE BLUFF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

I picked Cass up, as usual, at a few minutes after 11. I walked the two-and-a-half blocks up to Lake Bluff on foot, and then together, we piloted his scooter home.

"Let's hustle, Mister. The sooner we get in the car, the sooner we can listen to "Beat It.""

In the car, I cued up Michael Jackson. The verbed-out, hollow gong sound hummed through the system. Cass clicked his tongue, and hinged his arm back and forth at the elbow. He was pure *West Side Story*. I looked over my shoulder as we backed out of the driveway. His face was all wrenched and twisted up.

"Mister?" I queried. "What's going on?"

PAUSE

With Cass, I always panicked about the silliest things. There was really no need.

REWIND
TRACK THIRTEEN: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: OCTOBER 7, 2015
LOCATION: MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: "BEAT IT", MICHAEL JACKSON, CASS DARLING, WISCONSIN STATE UNIVERSITY

Cass shook me off and sang about every third word of the opening verse. His face, though, was still all jacked up. Then, he nailed the chorus. He continued to hinge his arm back and forth, back and forth. He was a perfect Tony.

At the red light, I turned in my seat. He sat sideways, his face to the window. It was still wrenched with one eye closed, his upper lip askance, and his teeth bared. "Cass?" I asked. "What's going on? Are you okay?"

He nodded. "Beat It" headed into its final chorus.

"Mister—" My voice pitched with sincerity. It was a little more than serious, but miles from panic.

The light turned green and I eased us into the left-turn box. My eyes met his in the rear-view, his face still all screwed up.

"It's my "Beat It" face, Papa," he said. "Why I'm sitting like this is that I wanna show everybody my "Beat It" face." He pressed his index finger against the window glass. "Everybody out there," he added.

"And is that your "Beat It" face?" I asked.

"Uh-huh, Papa." He turned, again, to face me. I chuckled. He looked like a pirate. His face was one part fierce, one part adorable.

"That's awesome, Mister." I steered us onto the freeway and closed the roof. "Your "Beat It" face rules."

I asked to see his “Beat It” face two more times before I dropped him off at the daycare. I asked him once at the traffic light just after we got off the freeway. Then, I asked again only a few minutes later in the lobby.

“I love you, Mister,” I said and pushed open the heavy glass door that led into his daycare.

“I love you, too, Papa,” he chimed, as I followed him down the long hallway to his classroom. It was the last one on the right.

I could hear him hum “Beat It” as we walked.

“Papa?” he asked, just before we got to his classroom door. “Why is “Beat It” so short?”

“Well,” I answered as I helped him pull off his sweatshirt. He hung it in his tiny, wooden cubby. “It’s a pop song and they usually shoot for about three minutes for those—for the radio. It’s short like that so that it can get more plays on the radio—in the rotation.”

He squinted and nodded. “Well,” he replied, his hand wrapped around the doorknob. Inside, I could see his friends busy with blocks and plastic ponies and dump trucks. “I wish it was longer. I wish it was hundreds of minutes long.”

I kissed him and set off. My heart five times its previous size.

PAUSE

I always just thought Mike Van Wasenhoven was a dick. But, maybe there was more to it. He smelled like wet Marlboros and hung out with Paul Saenz, Kelley Goldschmidt, and the whole sort of skater lot. They didn't really skate. Well, Saenz did, but the rest of them didn't. Goldschmidt was a GFO and Van Wasenhoven wanted to be Sal Paradise.

They'd sneak off before first bell, up through the back side of the cafeteria, behind Theatre Xavier. Everyone just called it TX. Van Wasenhoven and his crew would go to the long hallway that ran between Miss Meyer's art studio and the Jesuit residence. The only time I was ever up there was for mass before games, but Van and the cats he hung with would run up there to catch a smoke before first period, then again after lunch, and sometimes, during their seventh-period study hall.

TM—Tom Meyer, the assistant principal—would bolt up after them, and then somebody—never Van, but usually Saenz or Goldschmidt or this other skinny fucker named Powers—would end up with a handful of JUGs or some afternoon clean up. TM would bust them for smoking on school property.

Sometimes, some of the Skins would follow them or even go along, but Van and his crew hated the Skins almost as much as they hated me for hanging out with Joey Thomas and the rest of them.

Mike Van Wasenhoven sat right in front of me in first period Math. His feet were flat-as-fuck and they looked like a clown's in his high-top Chuck Taylors. He rolled his shirt, rather than taking the time to actually tuck it in. We were both freshman and knew just enough not to know

we didn't know shit. He was a west-sider and I was from so far east that it didn't even count one way or another.

Van Wasenhoven would usually say something to me just after I sat down. He was always in class before me. He'd say some smart-assed thing before Dr. Cappell had a chance to take attendance or anything. He'd ask me why I hung out with the niggers. Or, he'd ask if any of my family was black. I thought that was weird given how much Van hated the Skins. He'd always talk shit about them. He'd say how it was fucked-up that the school allowed them to walk around with those white laces and their black, nylon flight jackets—the ones with the flag on the shoulder.

"You're a goddamned wanna-be, Black, you little fucking shit. Like your name." He was always sweeping his long, sandy bangs out of his eyes with his left hand. "What is it anyway with Joey and Wilson—those guys? You're like the fucking filling in an Oreo."

His voice rolled harshly from his thin, folded lips. It was all sanded and scarred from the cigarettes, as well as the whiskey he tipped every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. His flask was legendary. It was always primed to be passed. But only for those in his exceedingly small, exceedingly cinched clique.

At the time, I was too worried about trouble to punch him and too at odds with myself to render any sort of retort. Instead, I mostly shrugged and stared into my textbook or at my backpack. I'd stare at them as if something might materialize that would make him go fuck himself.

Eventually, things got physical, but only with the Skins. Nothing ever really happened with Van or any of the assholes he called friends.

REWIND
TRACK NINE: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 12, 1990
LOCATION: CINCINNATI, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: ALOYSIUS KEATING, HARLAN ROLL, ST. XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL, QUEEN CITY SKINS

Harlan Roll was a bad-ass. He used to talk about how, growing-up, he and the kids from his block would fight with batteries in their hands.

“C-size,” he’d say. “Break a nigga’s jaw quick as a motherfucker.”

Harlan always wore a drop fade with a ramp top, and there was usually something cut into it—a swirl or some stars or something. He’d spend most of his time in the art room, and had quit football to concentrate on wrestling. He only ever dated white girls—ones who were already in college. Sometimes, he’d come to wrestling practice wearing their underwear. He’d stand there in the locker room, his leg up on the wooden bench, and tug at the waistband of some lacy pair of lime green, pink, or black panties.

That night, though, he wasn’t joking. We were in the hallway, past the drinking fountain, and something like Salt-N-Pepa bumped from inside the cafeteria, from inside the dance.

“He’s a fucking knife, man,” Harlan spat. “Wish Keating is a fucking knife and I’m going to break his shit, bad. Cracker Skin motherfucker.”

PAUSE

Wish Keating was Ned's older brother. Wish was a Skin. And, so was Ned, I guess, but Ned was a puff. He had no poke. Ned wore white laces in his boots, and stood all of about 5'2" with a board to his back. He had a chain wallet and sported those Vato flannels that most people wore with only the top button fastened. Ned's head was shaved, but not all the way. It was a commitment thing, I think.

Ned Keating always tried to run the courts at lunch, but he sucked. Big time. He blew threes like a punk, straight from his belly—a total chucker. Nobody bothered to block his shit even though it would have been easy as hell. Nobody bothered because his shot was so off. Plus, he had the loudest mouth I'd ever heard. Somebody should have kicked his ass and thrown him in the dumpster like they did Adam Hickey, but nobody did. Maybe because for as fake as Ned was, his brother was as hardcore.

Ned's brother wore red laces and a black pilot's jacket with the orange lining and the flag patch on the arm. People talked like he was the real deal, but I suppose no one knew for sure.

Ned's brother's name was Aloysious, but everybody just called him Wish. His head was shaved clear to the scalp, always, and he went to Roger Bacon. There were some Skins at X, but they really only play-acted. Because of Ned, though, Wish and his crew would sometimes show up to our football games. This one time, they crashed a cafeteria mixer after one of our home basketball games. That was the first time I got punched—the first time I got knocked down and mostly out. It was the first time I ever really put my face in front of something. It was the first time I really stepped in and got messy. I ended up with a fucked-up jaw, swollen eyes, and a

bloody face. But, I also ended up with something else—something that never quite healed. It was something I hoped never would.

REWIND
TRACK TEN: SET FIRE TO CONVICTION

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 12, 1990
LOCATION: CINCINNATI, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: ALOYSIUS KEATING, ST. XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL, LESHAWN HARPER,
BOYD CULLEN, ANDRE MANTISTE, HARLAN ROLL, TREMAINE LEWIS,
MR. DAVID FAULK, ROGER BACON HIGH SCHOOL, QUEEN CITY SKINS,
NIKKI KATZMANN, MR. MICHAEL PRITCHARD

I shouldn't have even have been there. LeShawn Harper warned me not to go outside.

“They’ll come after you hard, dawg,” he said of Wish and his crew. “The moment they see white struttin' with us, they’ll fuckin’ pounce.”

LeShawn had a Detroit Pistons hat on sideways and one of those Slick Rick gold ropes around his neck.

"They'll hit you, dawg. Shoot for you. Straight at you." He unhooked his chain and shoved it in his pocket. "Just stay here, man. Skirt some of these bitches.”

I protested, but he cut me off.

“Things is about to get real out there. You don't wanna get caught up in that." He smiled slightly, then drew his eyes thin like the viewport on a tank. "It's just us niggaz out there.”

I nodded. My stomach wrenched as I watched him slide out the side door with Andre Mantiste. Andre’s dad was a judge and city councilmen.

I moved deep into the dance and drifted in and out of conversations with Nikki Katzmann and her friends. I paid attention to Nikki, but mostly I just watched as Boyd, Harlan, and a few others slipped out the same door that LeShawn and Andre had. Wish and his Queen City Skins were already out there. Tremaine and his cousins were already out there, too.

Mr. Faulk—my freshman theology teacher—had bounced Wish and his crew after the initial scuffle. I think Faulk expected them to go home or something. Instead, they just waited outside. Out there in the cold, they steeped in their hate.

"Look," Faulk spat, flushed and probably a little scared. He held Tremaine Lewis by the shirt collar. "I don't care. Not at all. There's no excuse for it." His eyes ballooned. "None."

It was nothing more than some pushes and shouts, for the most part. Maybe Harlan threw a punch, but he always threw a punch.

Most of the Skins ditched. They were all Bacon guys and poseurs like Ned. Wish and a few others held out. They watched as Mr. Faulk and some other teachers pushed us back.

Tremaine fumed.

"Well, fuck that," he said. Faulk's eyes got bigger. "I mean, they can't say that shit. Not like that. Not now." Tremaine screamed over Faulk, then around him at Wish and the others. Faulk angled to keep the distance between Tremaine and the Skins. "I ain't nobody's *boy*," Tremaine shouted. "And," he continued, "any of you motherfuckers say *nigger* again and you'll be chewin' your fucking teeth." Tremaine clenched his jaw. He looked a lot like Carl Lewis. "Cock-sucking motherfuckers," he spat.

Wish stepped to Tremaine, his arms raised. Tremaine charged back and the roof almost blew off the place.

Faulk grabbed Tremaine quickly, but Tremaine didn't stop. I suppose he couldn't or maybe he just didn't want to. There was weight there. Lots of it.

"Pussy-ass bitch motherfuckers," Tremaine yelled, as a mess of teachers worked to calm Wish and the remaining Bacon Skins.

Boyd and I tried to talk to Faulk and some of the others. They wouldn't listen.

"I didn't hear them," Faulk replied. "I can't vouch for what I didn't hear."

"What?" I said. "You think we'd just lose it for no reason? You heard Tremaine. Andre, Boyd, LeShawn, all of them will tell you."

"Well," he fumbled. "I didn't hear it and—" He pointed over to Wish, tall and smug with his black jeans tight-rolled. "They've got every right to be here. It's an open mixer and they're Roger Bacon students.

"And fuckin' Skins," I charged. "Open your goddamned eyes."

Faulk's jaw tightened. His hair was a perfect shelf of bronze. "This, Mr. Black," he fired back, "is not a debate." He was a Ken-doll—plastic and hollow as hell. "Any more problems and we'll skip detention and go straight to suspension." He took a breath and re-tucked his already tucked-in polo. It was chartreuse and sand-knit. "You understand?" he said. His eyes moved around and settled on all of us, individually.

Most of us nodded.

"So," I said and motioned to the Skins. "What about them?"

"I'll take care of it," Faulk replied.

"But—"

He waived his hand. "I don't want to discuss it. It's not your business."

Boyd jumped in. "Our business?" he said. He didn't exactly yell, but he wasn't calm, either. "Our business?" Boyd pounded on his chest, his fist closed tight and angry. "It sure as hell is our business. You can't let that shit fly—"

“And another thing,” Faulk interrupted. “It’s not okay for you guys to talk like this.” Again, his stare bounced from face to face. “I know you’re angry and hurt, so I’m going to cut you a break. But,” he added, “this isn’t okay. You can’t talk to teachers—to adults like this. I mean, you talk about their language, but what about yours?”

Collectively, we exploded.

Faulk shouted over us.

The deejay let “Sweet Child ‘O Mine” go and the raw fuzz of Slash’s Les Paul took shape in and around the speakers. The bass dropped and the tempo quickened.

“I don’t care.” Faulk shouted. Little bits of spittle gathered on his mustache. “I don’t care. And, that’s it.” His eyes searched our faces. They dared us—begged us even—to do or say anything else. He pushed us to try and toe the line. “Another word about this and it’s suspension.”

I don’t remember exactly what happened next, but nobody said anything else to Faulk. At least not directly and not out loud. I remember that we all just kind of stared at him. We didn’t move and we definitely didn’t consent.

“Okay?” Faulk asked.

Still, nobody responded. We just stared. Then, after a minute, LeShawn shrugged his shoulders. Faulk nodded. “As long as we’re clear.” He pointed his index finger at all of us. The tip quivered. He issued a final warning. “Anything else and it’s suspension, gentlemen.” He fooled again with the waistband of his pants, his shirt still tightly tucked. “No questions asked.”

If the music wouldn’t have been so loud, I’m sure we could have heard his loafers click as he walked away.

We watched as Faulk spoke to Wish, then to the others. The Skins moved to the door and then outside. But before they did, they threw a couple indignant glances in our direction. Faulk resumed his post near the bookstore delivery door.

The song changed to EMF and Tremaine slipped through a side door, followed by his two cousins, whose names I didn't know. They didn't go to X. Walnut Hills, maybe.

LeShawn gathered the rest of us.

"They're out there," he said. "We can't let this go. Not like this."

"I'm in," I replied.

LeShawn smiled.

"That's my nigga," Andre added.

"No," LeShawn answered. "You can't."

I tried to stay inside and dance with Nikki. Maybe touch her ass as we pressed close, but I couldn't.

I left after Ugly Kid Joe crucified Cat Stevens.

Outside, it was cold and the wind blew just a little bit of snow. I only had on my hoodie. My coat was still inside, in the check.

I tucked my hands into my pockets and gazed around. At first, I couldn't find anyone. The parking lot was crowded with cars and the lights were dim. But then I heard a scuffle—boots on asphalt. I heard what sounded like tomatoes being smashed against a concrete floor.

I ran and in the spots where the lot lights cut through the dark, my breath glowed silver. When I got to the upper lot, Harlan was on his knees. I saw Wish—his fists like boulders—pound Harlan's face, over and over and over. He was a giant, awful turn style.

I broke into a sprint. I didn't think about it, and I really don't remember most of the moment. I do remember the way it felt when my fist—straight from a dead run—crashed into Wish's chin. Pain—cold and sharp like the points of ten-thousand tiny needles—shot through my hand and up past my wrist. I fell hard to the ground as a patch of ice capitalized on my reckless momentum.

I watched as Tremaine stomped Wish. The sound was hollow—somewhat disconnected. Wish tried, but couldn't quite get to his feet. His mouth hung slack and open, full of blood. Wish spat and laughed like we were all part of some B-movie.

Eventually, Tremaine got tangled up with some wiry Skin. The two of them became a whirl of teeth and frantic fists. I made for Tremaine, but never arrived.

I didn't see the punch. I don't have any idea who threw it. I just remember the sound—a metallic sort of clang—that exploded in my ears. I remember, too, the warm flow that erupted from of my nose and mouth. I felt my cheek hit the pavement and then my stomach. I could feel my ribs and chest being pounded, again and again, harder and harder each time. Then, I couldn't hear or see anything. Everything became nothing.

I woke up in the back of Andre's car. LeShawn and Tremaine were there, too. My eyes hurt to open and I couldn't talk.

I got suspended and so did some of the others. In fact, I think we all did.

Most of my suspension, I spent on the couch in my living room. Dad was angry and barely talked at all. Mom, I think, kind of liked to play nurse. For four days, I drank everything through a straw, followed by two more days of only red Jell-O.

“You can’t fight other peoples’ battles, Tyne,” Dad said on the way home from the hospital. I was in the back seat. I could see his eyes in the rear-view as I touched the stitches on my chin and cheek. Mom told me there were 31 of them there. “It’s not up to you to get involved.”

My head felt like it was in a vice. But, not the entire thing—maybe just my temples.

“Look,” he continued, “you go getting mixed up in that kind of shit and it leads to no good, you understand?”

I mumbled an affirmation and stared out the window. The sky was grey and I could have counted on one hand the number of cars we passed on I-275.

“It’s not your fight,” he said. “You can’t get involved.”

Which is probably why I always did.

REWIND
TRACK FOURTEEN: VALENTINE HEART

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 28, 1990
LOCATION: CINCINNATI, OHIO
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: NIKKI KATZMANN, ST. XAVIER HIGH SCHOOL, WINTER FORMAL,
CINCINNATI MUSIC HALL

The winter formal pictures showed Nikki in a low-cut silver dress and me with a raccoon mask. The space under and around my eyes was a little purple, but really more brown and light-blue. Nikki put cover-up across my nose and under my eyes before we went to see the photographer.

The flash was too bright, and it burned my eyes.

“I can hardly even notice,” she lied, as she kissed my cheek. We drifted out onto the parquet floor and into the fold of Sinead O’Connor’s mezzo-soprano. *Tell me, baby, where did I go wrong.*

I pulled Nikki close and we danced, slow and tight. Her scent was everywhere, our faces so close I could hardly focus. There was something about that fight—something that bothered me even then, weeks after the fact. It wasn’t the suspension or the stitches, the bruises or the worry of retribution. It was something else.

I didn’t want to get involved. I tried to stay inside. I tried to stay safe. I went outside simply because there wasn’t any other choice. I went outside because to not do so would have been to tamp down a fragile fire that had just then begun to burn. I went outside to help carry some weight that no one had asked for, weight that didn’t belong to any of us—not to me, not Le-Shawn, not to Harlan, or Tremaine or anybody. I went outside because I knew if that weight hit the ground it couldn’t ever again be picked up. I went outside so I wouldn’t ever forget whose

fight it was. I went outside because there wasn't really a fight, just a lot of mixed up shit that couldn't stay that way. I went outside because I wasn't really safe inside. None of us were.

PAUSE

In 1952, Hank Aaron signed his first professional contract. It was worth \$200/month and made him a member of the Indianapolis Clowns, a Negro League team founded by a Florida bootlegger and a carnival manager. The team settled in Indianapolis in 1946 after brief stints in both Miami and Cincinnati. The Clowns were a barnstorming club who—despite being a legitimate side—also fielded members known for their comic acts. Joe “Prince” Henry also played for the Clowns. Henry was a Hall-of-Fame shortstop who would, in the 1990s, fight an extended, arduous legal battle with Major League Baseball in order to recover pension funds promised to Negro Leaguers.

Hank Aaron broke Babe Ruth’s career home run record in 1974, and is widely considered one of the best—if not the best—power-hitters in the history of the game. Aaron only played for three months with the Indianapolis Clowns. During that time he remarked that he and the team were eating breakfast at a restaurant near Griffith Park in Washington, D.C. Aaron said that after they ate, he could hear the kitchen staff breaking the plates they’d used in the alley behind the diner. Later, he commented that the restaurant staff did so because they thought that they *had to destroy the plates that had touched the forks that had been in the mouths of black men. If dogs had eaten off those plates, they'd have washed them.*

People can be assholes when they want to be.

REWIND
TRACK SEVEN: PUNK ROCK DREAMS

TRACK RECORDED: JUNE 22, 2002
LOCATION: BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
TRACK NOTES/TAGS: JACOB DUPLANT, JOHN UPDIKE, BROOKLYN-QUEENS EXPRESSWAY, THE KING COLE, ST. REGIS HOTEL, QUANTUM THEORY, GREENPOINT, ELLE FOSTER

We were on the BQE, in his girlfriend's car, when Jacob DuPlant told me he ran into John Updike.

"You're full of shit," I said.

And he was. But he wore it well and there in the passenger seat, his fingers busy with Zig-Zag papers, he shrugged and pushed a curtain of blonde hair behind his ear.

"Seriously," he insisted, still busy with the papers. "I literally ran into him on Fifth, just there by the St. Regis."

He tightened the ends of the joint and sparked a pink Bic that had slid back and forth across the dashboard with every turn and ramp since we pulled out of the parking structure on 87th.

Jacob lied all the time. He lied simply because he could. He wasn't vindictive. He was just really good-looking and charming. Plus, I think he genuinely enjoy it. He loved the chase. For him, a good story, which usually involved some type of clever, yet not-too-calculated lie, was everything.

About a year and half ago, Jacob told me that he met some girl after a show at the Mercury. He said he went home with her. She lived in Chelsea and they made out, he said, basically all the way down Houston. *She wouldn't get a cab right away*, he'd said. *She said she just wanted to walk for a little bit and make-out*. After they finally got in a cab and were headed uptown,

she kept reaching down his pants and jiggling his balls. Once they got to her building, she pulled him inside and gave him a handy in the elevator on the way up to her apartment.

23rd floor, he'd said. And she was loaded. He'd smiled. Goddamned fine, too. Had me fuck her right there on this white, leather couch in the living room. We hadn't taken but like three steps inside and she just dropped her dress. I just pulled off her panties, but told her to keep her bra on. Fucked her right there from behind.

He was so full of shit.

But, Jacob DuPlant was patient, too. Patience was a characteristic I'd noticed was usually missing from people who were generally full of shit.

“So,” I said, finally, as I steered us toward Greenpoint. We were headed to the apartment Jacob’s girlfriend occupied with her dad’s money. “What happened with Updike?”

His smile blossomed and if it could have made a sound, it wouldn't have been a sound, at all. Instead, it would have been the sweet spot of my favorite record—that groove that the needle rides—eager and just right—before the song even starts.

“Ahh,” he teased, “I thought you'd never ask.” He puffed at the joint like a ninth-grader. “He invited me inside.”

“What?” I didn't bother to wait for a response. “Where?”

I eased us off on Varick.

Elle, Jacob’s girlfriend, had the best cars. Every time I was in town, she had something different. And, her cars were always exotic. This one—a Jaguar of some sort—felt like putty.

“The St. Regis. Well—” he corrected, “the King Cole.” He cracked his window an inch-and-a-half at the top. “I asked him to sign a book for me.” He laughed. “Of course, it was a book I didn’t have on me.”

“What in the hell?” I replied.

“Yeah, exactly. Updike just kinda looks at me. And then he smiles and says *C’mon, kid. Let’s go get a drink. It’ll be more interesting that way.* I don’t even know what the fuck that was supposed to mean.”

He signaled for me to turn on McGuinness just like he always did, as if I’d forgotten.

“Then, he orders us two boxcars and asks me what I know about quantum physics.”

“Updike?”

“Yeah, fucking Updike,” Jacob countered. “Who else?”

“Fuck off.”

“Seriously.” I could feel his stare on the side of my face. It was that kind-of, but not quite stoned, slack-jawed stare that he had. I could feel his glacier-blue eyes boring into my cheek, needing, wanting me to believe him. He probably wasn’t lying, either. That’s the thing about a guy like Jacob DuPlant.

“Right,” I protested. “Fucking John Updike.” We were at a red light and I braved the chance to stare him in the eyes. They were exactly as I’d expected. “So, let me get this straight. Fucking seventy year-old John Updike invites you to the King Cole, buys you a drink, and then asks you about quantum physics?”

“Exactly.” He didn’t miss a beat. There was no stutter—no nothing. He was unbelievable. “So I told him,” he continued, “that I didn’t know much. I mean, strings and quivers and stuff like that. I told him it was the messy work of busy minds better than my own.”

“You said that?”

“Fuck yeah, I did. It was John Updike, man. I had to bring the fucking A-game. C’mon. I’m no goddamned amateur.”

And, he wasn’t. I shook my head and signaled to parallel park.

“No.” Jacob chimed. “Not here. It’s a loading zone 24/7—not marked, either. Just go up to Box.”

I pulled away from the row of cars and a space the size of a city bus. “And what did he do?”

“He laughed.”

Jacob gently squeezed his tongue between his thumb and index finger and doused the joint. “Then, he started talking about electrons at the quantum level. He said the atom is mostly empty. That space is mostly fluid and that it’s only the rate and orbit of the fucking electrons that causes shit to be solid.”

Jacob opened the passenger door before I came to a complete stop.

“He started talking about walking through walls and shit.”

We strolled down the sidewalk toward Elle’s loft.

“Then, he says, *But sometimes, you need a wall to be a wall just to be able to break through—to alter whatever needs alteration.*”

Jacob dug in his pocket for a key. “Fuck,” he said. “We’ll have to buzz a neighbor. There’s a spare above her door inside.”

I pressed a half-dozen tiny, black buttons and we waited.

Jacob continued like this was all part of the plan. Like it was scripted or something. Maybe it was.

“Then, Updike says that when we get anxious or fearful or whatever, that we start to have an electromagnetic charge issue.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“That’s what I said.” He smiled as the door panel growled and pulled our way in. “Nice neighbors,” he said, and motioned for me to go first.

Our heels echoed on the wide, poured cement hallway that led down into the main lobby—the one the balconies overlooked on inside of the building. “I said that same thing,” he repeated. “Though I said it a bit more eloquently than you. I mean, it is John Updike. He’s not a heathen.”

I rolled my eyes and Jacob patted Elle’s doorframe in order to find the spare key—the lockout key that was mainly for him.

“He said that we rev-up our electrons when we’re anxious or fearful or nervous or whatever and that sometimes, it’s good. I mean, in terms of protection, right? Solid walls don’t let the house fall down.”

He was remarkably lucent and I started to wonder where all of this might have been going and why. I wasn’t quite ready to believe him, though. Not yet.

“But other times,” Jacob continued, as we both plopped down on opposite ends of Elle’s massive, black-leather sectional, “it’s bad. Like in terms of growth and change and shit like that.” He pulled out his phone, unlocked it, and squinted at the screen. Then, he tossed it on the couch. “Updike said it was a sort of paradox. With gases, electrons move slowly. They lose weight and so they’re light. With solids, though, electrons move fast and gain weight, so that they have an even stronger electromagnetic charge inward. This, Updike said, is what prevents access. It’s what makes a fucking solid, a solid.”

I was with him.

“So—” he handed me a bottle of Brooklyn he’d fished from Elle’s fridge. “Updike was asking me what I thought about a middle-ground. He was asking me how to find middle ground.”

“A middle ground?” This whole thing, I thought, smelled more and more fishy.

“Yeah,” Jacob answered. “Like a liquid or something. Something capable of change and alteration, but still present in a distinctly physical state. Updike was looking for something in a more physical state than a gas. He wanted something more solid.”

It was like he was trying to talk me into something. I couldn’t imagine what, though. Nor, why he’d take this long to do it.

“Then he fucking said something totally amazing.”

I shrugged, it was, after all, Updike. Even if it wasn’t. “What’d he say?”

“He said,” Jacob replied, “that understanding that it’s nearly impossible to avoid suffering but still trying is all that keeps us from shaking to pieces. He said it’s all that keeps from falling apart and totally dissolving.”

I nodded. I knew he was lying, but I wasn't sure why. What's more, I wasn't even sure that I cared.

That night, I dreamed I was the one who talked to Updike. I dreamed that I was the one who had the conversation that Jacob regaled—the one at the King Cole over boxcars.

“Like octaves exploding from a piano, black, whites, blue notes—a butterfly migration, fluttering and springing, drifting and dancing, seemingly aimless, at times, but always with intention,” Updike said, between sips. His tone was so relaxed, so confident and sure of itself. His teeth were so white, too. His eyes were clear and soft. He was so very gentle with each and every one of his words. “Time,” he said, as his fingers pincer the bar nap, “and really everything else if we want to go that far, is arbitrary.”

I chuckled.

“Seriously.” His hair was an undisturbed cap of white-grey. I knew, too, that he had an office somewhere in Midtown. It was an office above the city, above it all. I knew that he sat in that office and looked into the city. I knew he looked into everyone.

“It's an invention,” he added. His eyes were suddenly on fire and in the blacks of his pupils, I could see myself. “But by writing, we can control it.”

My gaze betrayed me.

“Look,” he said and leaned toward me, his voice a touch lower, “what I mean is we can confront it and describe it, if we want. Then,” he continued, “we can possibly begin to make sense of it—to really understand it.” He leaned back in his chair and crossed his left leg over his right. “Then, if we dare, we can start to change things. Or, at the very least, we can learn to accept their impossibility, the impossibility of the entire enterprise. The impossibility of life itself.”

I laughed. I didn't want to, but I couldn't help it.

He watched me, his jaw loose. His eyes grew thin—they were pointed at the sides, but still not threatening. I jiggled the ice in my glass, tipped it to my mouth, and swallowed the last of the gin. The juniper stung at my tongue.

“But we wouldn't do that,” he said, at last.

“What?” I asked.

“Admit to the impossibility,” he replied. “We can't admit to any impossibility, can we?” He carried on without waiting for my reply. It was only a dream, but I was relieved, nonetheless. “We just aren't wired that way. And, so we scurry on, over, and amongst all of this mess—the good, the bad, the disastrous. All of it. And what we learn is how not to spin those electrons quite so fast. We learn how not to tighten ourselves quite so tight. We learn that we can't breathe—that we can't allow ourselves to breathe—if we do.”

He sighed, leaned back in his chair, again. His passion was palpable. I noticed, too, that his suit was flawlessly pressed. I imagined that all of his suits were flawlessly pressed—every single one he wore for the past four decades.

Those were the sorts of things that I imagined about John Updike. Impeccably pressed suits—those were the kinds of things that just happened for John Updike.

“And so,” he said, his verve noticeably dissipated. “Here we are, boats and the current and all that noise, but not doomed. We're not doomed at all.” He waived to our server, a call to settle up. “But what we are is confronted with a seemingly impossible task. We're confronted with the task of slowing our own electrons in order to explore, reshape, and reconfigure ourselves on a quantum level. It's there, at the quantum level,” he said, “where minuscule changes

carry the weight of generations. It's there where gravity and dimensionality don't work in the manner in which we conceive of it."

I worked harder than ever to follow him, to even keep up.

He shrugged.

"All I'm saying—"

"Is everything," I jibed.

"Well, maybe." He paused. "Maybe." Then, he smiled and grew more serious. John Updike grew grey, a bit, in the face. "The whole endeavor is ours to fundamentally configure in any way we see fit. I mean, there are rules and constrictions, but we can't even conceive of them. We can't even conceive of the bounds, I mean." He opened the check holder, scribbled something, then closed it, and lay it flat on the table. It was angled away from him, away from us. "We can't possibly avoid suffering. It's part of the human condition. But," he continued, "we can and should exercise control over when, where, why, and how much we suffer." He nodded his head. "We should do that because, of course, it's clearly, wholly, and inextricably within our control."

PAUSE

Jimmy composed a letter while in captivity in Syria. This one had a different tone than the one he wrote when he was imprisoned in Libya. This one wasn't written down at all. Instead, it was memorized. He composed it with a sort of indelible ink. An ink that colored the the spaces and crevices of his mind.

I can't even begin to imagine the process he must have gone through in order to compose, then commit that letter to memory. Furthermore, I can't conceive of how it could come to finally occupy the space of someone else's mind.

Jimmy didn't hold that letter all by himself. He never was able to deliver it outside of Syria. So, when it was ready, he asked another prisoner to memorize it—a Danish journalist.

The journalist had two young daughters. He often described for Jimmy the sound of their often bare feet on the wide, worn, and oil-darkened planks that wove a herringbone across the entirety of their home. Jimmy asked him to do it. Jimmy asked him to describe those sounds with clarity and intent so that the details and sensations would fill up and echo throughout darkened space of their cell.

He described for Jimmy the details and contours of his daughters' voices. He told Jimmy how they sounded when they laughed. He described those laughs and the manner in which they echoed through the narrow hallways of the family's flat. He told Jimmy how he and his daughters would run around and around and around their kitchen's long island. He told Jimmy how he and his daughters would pass by the galley of pantry shelves and then head the living room. Their laughter, he told Jimmy, was their soundtrack. Always.

Jimmy asked him for those details. Jimmy insisted on those details. That's just how Jimmy was. He needed things around him that were real. It was what compelled him.

I think about that letter quite a bit. I think about how it was composed, but I can hardly think about why it was composed.

When I think about that letter, I think about Jimmy. Often, when I think about Jimmy, I think about a conversation in Chicago. It was a time when his hair was just as long as it should have been. His face, though, was thinner than it needed to be. We were in Chicago—somewhere up in Lakeview.

“Without the details—” Jimmy said, “it's easy to forget what matters. Things of great importance run the risk of being reduced, fundamentally. It's important to be intentional with both the choices we make, and the ones we don't. Details,” he added, “minding the details—shapes intentionality. And, they keep us human,” he laughed.

We were headed to the L&D on Belmont.

“Those details,” he continued, “hold the words that form the voices of everything that potentially goes unheard.”

Jimmy smiled and took a deep breath as traffic whizzed by on our right. He lit a cigarette and the smell of hung on the air—mixed with the air—and reminded me of a hundred thousand things at once.

“That's why I've gotta do it,” Jimmy said. He took a long drag and blew smoke toward the glancing headlights.

Dusk had broken—been fractured into countless pieces of orange, purple, red, and blue. “That's why I've gotta be there.” He paused and his eyes, brown with tiny flecks of green and

grey throughout, told me something I would have probably rather not known. On that street, in that neighborhood, in that city, where so much seemed possible, but so little could be captured, Jimmy stood and measured out the distance of the known universe between his thumb and index finger.

“Because it’s this close,” he said. “This. Close.”

All around us people pitched and the city swelled at its hems. I was only a spectator. It was Jimmy that formed the axis. It was Jimmy who took hope and its shy friend belief from some shallow, forgotten pocket and lay it out for everybody and anybody to see.

Jimmy smiled. “I’ve got to finish the story.” His face was suddenly washed by the glint of pink neons along Halsted. Summer was only just around the corner, and already the city threatened to turn itself inside-out.

“Sometimes,” he sighed, “I’m not even sure what the story even is. I’m not sure if it will make any sense at all.”

He motioned toward Belmont—toward their friends.

“C’mon,” Jimmy laughed, “let’s go. We can talk about it some other time.”

But they never did.

Jimmy documented, listened, wrote, and watched intently. He worked to finish the story.

And still, I think about those stories he and the Danish journalist must have recalled.

Those were stories told in the darkest places on the planet. Stories that brought light—that brought hope—to those places. And, that light—that hope—came a little bit at a time, at first. Then, there was more and more and more, and soon, there was a steady glow. They must have been stories of kids and laughter, of frizzy-blond hair and toenail polish—stories of stuffed

bears. They were probably stories about bedtime, nightgowns, and lavender. Stories about the big windows let in too much sun, but not enough light. They were probably stories about how those same windows surrendered too much heat to the winter. Stories about the Christmas tree lit-up in sparkles. Stories about the fire in the hearth and its smell against hints of chocolate and Madeleines. Stories about the gentle, distant sound of doors being opened, then closed.

I'm sure of these stories. I'm more sure of them than I am about gravity or the likelihood of a long-ball when the wind blows out of Wrigley.

Jimmy would have listened intently and asked for the details. Jimmy would have indulged a fancy here or there, added something of his own.

I wore the hat Jimmy brought back from Libya after he'd finally been released. I wore that hat at a quarter-to-two on a Monday night in a bar folded into the center of Marquette University's campus. That hat was white and had a green and red bill with a strange Velcro closure across the back. It wasn't comfortable, but it looked like it should have been. And, it wasn't stylish or appealing, though that aspect wasn't much of a surprise.

The front of the hat was emblazoned with a heat-transfer of Muammar al-Gaddafi in full military dress. Colonel Gaddafi appeared to giving a *thumbs-up*. The hat was ridiculous and me and some other took turns wearing it as we toasted and thought about Jimmy.

We told stories and crafted tales that almost seemed to invite Jimmy's arrival, at any given second. I think most of us could almost see him coming through that same bar door he'd entered so many times before. But not this time. This time was for memories. But, it was also for something else. It was for bothering about the details. It was about being intentional and working to craft a voice where there was had been nothing.

“Tyne, buddy—” Tommy Faulks growled. His close-shaven scalp reflected the bar lights and the liquor slurred his words, but only slightly. “Finish the story,” he said, as he wrapped his arms around and over me. “Finish the fucking story.” His voice, pure south side Chicago rattled my insides and his hand fell somewhere over my heart. “Finish the story,” he repeated. “Finish it.”

But sometimes—some days—I don't want to finish the story. It hurts and it's too god-damned hard and I'm really fucking afraid. And, sometimes, I'm just too tired. Other times, I don't know if it matters. I don't know if it'll amount to anything at all. But there, in that space—that stuck, frustrated, hot and angry moment—I can sometimes catch a glimpse of something. Sometimes, it's Cass's smile—his full cheeks and his eyes shiny with magic. Or, I see Jimmy in those Hunter S. Thompson shades of his, a cigarette pinched between his teeth, his hands eager as he talks of Junot Diaz. Sometimes, I see Emma—her heart filled with a fire so blue and hopeful it could warm the entire world.

Or, I feel the feel of a random Sunday evening in late April when Manhattan has finally emptied itself of people. A moment where all the push and shove of the city slows and nearly stands still. I smell spring as it populates the air. I hear the traffic—a soft, subtle hum. I imagine a city conscious of its own endless possibility.

In these moments, I think that perhaps it might be possible. Maybe I can finish—or at least manage to *try* to finish—the story. The story is a rebellion. It's an admission, an opportunity, and an intention. The story reveals where I came from and what I experienced, but it doesn't determine who I am or how things can be.

Jimmy wasn't reckless, but he didn't mind insecurity if it offered a chance for growth, and he wasn't threatened by vulnerability if it fostered an opportunity to teach and learn. There's a riot, now, deep in my soul. It's in my heart and in my mind, as well.

FAST-FORWARD
TRACK FIVE: THE WEIGHT OF ENDLESS POSSIBILITY

TRACK RECORDED: FEBRUARY 3, 2016
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TRACK NOTES/TAGS: MANHATTAN, MIDTOWN, CARNEGIE HALL, RENAISSANCE TIMES SQUARE

Carnegie Hall. Carnegie fucking Hall.

My thoughts raced and wrapped around themselves. It felt strange to feel so settled. It was almost alarming—like something was wrong simply because it wasn't. I kept waiting for everything to upend itself. Or, for everything to get upended.

But, it didn't.

Maybe because I realized and finally admitted that it was about my voice—that it was about me, not the ghosts and their cassettes with those tired, worn-out tracks. It was about being my voice. It was about being me.

Again, I thought about the lights at Carnegie. I thought about the way my voice and my strums would exploded across that auditorium. I thought about that feeling—the one I'd have, there, onstage. But, at its core, it was the same feeling I'd had so many, many times before. Nothing about it was new. Nothing about it had really changed. I'd always desired that feeling—the one of hope and happiness and connection. I'd been desperate for it. So desperate, in fact, that I actually got in the way of it. I'd envisioned it every time I thought about playing at Carnegie Hall. But it was also the same feeling I'd had too many times to count when I was in the basement at home with Cass and Emma anytime we played and sang and danced. It was the same feeling I'd had when we listened to our voices as they climbed the walls and rattled around in the plastered corners of our basement. That feeling was what I'd always wanted. It was my intention for as long as I could remember.

Outside, the lights of Times Square flashed and beat non-stop. They ushered in the very notion of possibility. New York was out there, just as it always was and always would be.

Stories spilled everywhere. They were all around me, Emma, and Cass.

Soon, the city would wake up. In a sense, it had really never gone to sleep. It had just been busy with its own mechanics. It had spun, shifted, re-aligned, and reset itself.

A room away, Cass slept soundly. He'd stay quiet and peaceful for the next two hours or so.

Meanwhile, Midtown hummed with early busses and taxi traffic. Garbage trucks rumbled. They busied themselves with collecting and compacting. My head swam amidst the possibility. I was easy, light, and free. I left the window and the ever-changing scene and crawled back in bed. I draped my arm around Emma, and she shifted toward me—warm from the covers, soft in the bleach-white sheets.

My attention fixed on the three of us—Cass, Emma, and me. It fixed upon where we were, and upon what we'd become. Beyond the walls of the hotel, in the shimmer of the winter's morning sun, the city carried on. It was a fixture—a foundation to stand upon. In that very moment, millions and millions of people shuffled across the darkened edges of sleep. They shivered awake in the anxious traps of their own anticipation. They swelled from the fever of desperate longing. And, despite this—or maybe because of it—the city just kept on going.

And, so did I.

So did Emma.

And, so did Cass.

We all kept going. We worked to finish the story, just like we knew we always would.

CURRICULUM VITAE

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