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# Redwoods

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REDWOODS

by

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A THESIS

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## REDWOODS

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University of Nebraska, 2015

Adviser: Jonis Agee

To the outside world, Northern California might be trees, granola, hippies, rivers, snowboarders, environmentalists, farming, beaches, diverse wildlife, and wealth.

Through a series of loosely interlocking fiction stories, this thesis explores the Northern California below the surface where people work as garbage collectors by day and attend community college by night, where teenage girls scam people in the park for free alcohol, where lovers spend their date night as part of a nude human-chain to protect an old growth redwood from being cut down, and where animal rights activists smoke cigarettes and seek love. Informed by personal experience and a breadth of Northern California writers from Gary Snyder to Ursula K. Le Guin, this thesis aims to contribute to the long tradition of understanding place through character driven storytelling.

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## Chapter 1

### Sisters

Ducks coast over the pond water at Howe Park like they're made of Styrofoam, and these three girls, they look like sisters no older than fifteen, crunch and scratch over the crushed limestone trail, their long legs spidering forward from the jean shorts cut high on their thighs into their black ankle boots. They giggle, yelp, and adjust their matching black, over-sized, wayfarer sunglasses, sliding them up and down over their noses, their matching tank tops flapping around, asking each other how they look as they orbit in and out of the shade under the valley oaks near my picnic table.

They ask me if I was looking at them. I wish they're more intimidated by my tattoos, my beard, but it's not enough to deflect them. Everyone was looking at them. The old ladies fishing. The guys playing chess. They're dragging their boots through the rock shards, these girls. They're making a scene.

I return to my book and look up again when one of them hocks a loogie near my feet and asks if I was staring at her tits. The red rubber bands on her braces match her dyed red hair that's braided and lumped over her head like a basket of strawberries. She must be the leader. They're all wearing variations of the same hairstyle, but the other two girls' braids are more reminiscent of cinnamon twists.

“I want rum,” Strawberries says. “Do you have alcohol?” she asks me.

I don't say anything, thinking they'll go away. I want to become part of the picnic table. Transform into chipped, green-painted wood planks. The heat spills over my face,

lumpy like lentil soup, as I shudder and burp into my mouth and realize they're not going to leave me alone.

The fishing ladies watch me. One shakes her head. I consider lighting a cigarette, but Cinnamon Twist One eyes my pack on the picnic table, and I know if I do she'll ask for one.

“He's looking at us again,” Cinnamon Twist One says.

“At my tits,” Strawberries says and backhands my can of Diet Coke away from the picnic table.

“Why,” I say and stop myself. Anything I could have said after that flutters away. It's just easier to leave, I think, and I push myself up from the picnic table, grab my copy of *A Feast for Crows*, and my cigarettes, before I snap up the can from the grass, hike up my nylon shorts, and walk down the trail. A limestone shard wedges itself between my foot and flip-flop. They follow me. “Where you going?” they ask and I move faster, fighting the pain in my foot. Sharpness knifes up through my ankle so I stop and balance myself on a tree, dangling my foot over the grass until the rock drops away from the skin and rubber.

“Where you going?” they ask again, but I start walking toward Bell Street. I can see my apartment complex.

“Don't ignore us,” one says.

“We're right behind you,” another says.

They've formed a flying-v. Cinnamon Twist One and Two behind Strawberries.

“We have money,” they say. “Can you buy for us?”

“Sorry,” I shout back, nearing the end of the trail.

“Change? Got any change?” a guy shouts from a park bench.

One of the girls tries to jerk my nylon shorts down around my calves. The guy on the park bench hollers, staggers into the grass, and falls over. He's heaving with laughter. He coughs and chokes and turns over onto his stomach and looks at me. He says, “Did you see that? You see those girls? Holy shit!”

I tug my shorts up over my belly-button and turn around. Cinnamon Twist One stands on the grass a few feet from me. I want to grab her by the throat.

“Sorry,” Cinnamon Twist One says, half-frowning, and then half-smiling.

I say nothing and keep walking toward the sidewalk where I'll cross the street and hide in my apartment complex.

But they follow me. Their boots pop and clop, and they giggle together. Over my shoulder I see them strutting arm in arm. I power-walk the path past the apartment complex dumpster-corral and the girls shout at me. They clop faster, running up behind me, and I stop at the intersection where the main path meets a shorter path that goes directly to my front door.

“We just want to hang out,” Strawberries says, panting.

“So bored,” Cinnamon Twist One says.

“Come on,” Strawberries says and raises her wayfarer sunglasses. “It's hot.”

“You sisters?” I ask.

“You wish,” Strawberries says.

“It's so hot,” Cinnamon Twist One says.

“Don't be like this,” Strawberries says. “We just want to get out of the heat.”

Gary, my neighbor, emerges from his apartment and waves at us. “Come on,” I say and comb them over the path toward my apartment and nod at Gary as we pass him. He says something, but I unlock the front door and move the girls inside and into the kitchen. If he gets involved these girls would be here for hours. He'll want to show us all his snakes, one by one. We'll be stuck forever. Snakes. Snakes. Snakes.

“Who was that?” one of them asks.

“Nobody,” I say, looking out the window next to the front door. “So we'll hang out for a minute and you guys can get out of here, all right?” Gary loads rocks from the planters by our building into the belly of his yellow polo shirt-basket.

“I thought we were getting drunk?” Strawberries asks.

“So, where's the alcohol?” Cinnamon Twist One scratches the space where the skin shows between the brown braids on her head.

I shake my head. “You're all too young. I can't.”

“If you don't give us alcohol I'm going to tell the cops you kidnapped us. You showed us your dick,” Strawberries says and Cinnamon Twist One jerks an iPhone from her back pocket and starts thumbing around on the screen.

“Fuck,” I say. “Come on.”

“He made us touch it,” Strawberries says.

“They won't believe you,” I say. “You're lying.”

“Why don't you got a TV?” Cinnamon Twist Two says.

“It was so sticky and he made me put it in my mouth,” Strawberries says.



“He made me touch myself,” Cinnamon Twist One says. “Right here,” she says and rubs her crotch.

“I was too afraid to say no,” Strawberries says.

“He had a gun. A black one,” Cinnamon Twist One says. “He put it to my head.”

“I was so scared,” Strawberries says. “He brought his neighbor—”

“Fine. I got Vodka in the freezer.” I tell them it's the cheap stuff. The kind in the plastic bottle. Pours like maple syrup. Tastes like rubbing alcohol. “It's nasty stuff.” Out the kitchen window, Gary dusts off another rock. His shirt-basket already looks heavy. If he gets gusty, he'll knock on my door, and ask who these girls are. He'll want to tell them about all his snakes. That will be the rest of my afternoon. The last friend I have over, six months ago, we get stuck looking at his snakes for three hours. I make three screwdrivers and tell them, “Just one drink.” The orange juice swallows the vodka and Strawberries asks me if I'm having one. I shake my head and she asks if I'll turn on the air conditioning. I lie and say it's on. Maybe I'll sweat them out.

“Good drink,” Cinnamon Twist Two gulps a third of her screwdriver.

“So, what are your names?” I ask them. “In case I have to tell the police after you go missing.”

Strawberries scrunches her face.

“Joking,” I say and tell them my name.

“I'm One,” Strawberries says, snickering.

“I'm, uh, Two,” Cinnamon Twists One says.

“Come on,” I say and they laugh.

Screwdriver spittle slides over Two's chin and One wipes it for her with her fingers. They catch me watching.

“I'm Jenna,” Cinnamon Twist Two says. “Seriously. That's my name.” She bites her lower lip and sucks air through her teeth. One tells her not to do that—it's white trash.

“It's weird to have carpet in your kitchen,” Two says.

“Are you guys even in high school?” I ask them.

“Why wouldn't we be?” One asks and raises an eyebrow.

“How old do you think we are?” Two asks me.

“Whatever,” I say.

“We go to Mitchell. We're freshman,” Jenna says. “We're fourteen.”

One sips her drink and tongues her braces.

“You guys dress the same,” I say.

“It's what we do,” Two says, leaning forward like she wants to fist-fight me, holding her screwdriver at her side. “What? You don't like it?”

“Why were you looking at Nicki Minaj videos?” One shouts from the living room. She has my laptop in her hands and carries it into the kitchen and shows Two and Jenna the screen.

“He was probably jerking off,” Two says and holds the screwdriver in front of her mouth and laughs. I reach for the laptop, but One backsteps.

“Come on,” I say.

“He watched, like, three Nicki Minaj videos on YouTube,” One says. “Oh shit. Look at this.” She angles the screen toward Two. “Look at all these videos.”

“Guys,” Jenna says.

“Are these all black girls?” One asks me. “Why you save them on your computer?”

I reach for the laptop again and One backsteps into the living room. “No. No,” she says and drops herself into the recliner.

“It's time to go. I have to go,” I say. “You guys gotta go.”

“Hot,” Two says, bobbing her head. She sits on One's lap and they stare into the computer screen. Jenna shakes her head and apologizes to me.

“We need more alcohol,” One says and plops the computer on the carpet.

“Fuck,” I say. “Careful.”

“This computer's only worth like fifty dollars,” One says. “I need rum.”

“Me too,” Two says and kisses One on the cheek. One pushes Two and Two resists, hanging onto the arm of the recliner.

“You're gonna rip it,” I say.

Two stands and hovers her boot heel over the keyboard.

“I need rum,” One says.

“You guys should go,” I say.

“You can have mine,” Jenna says to One.

One takes Jenna's drink and downs it. She hands the glass back to Jenna and says, “I need rum.”

“Look at his iTunes,” Two stomps into the kitchen, holding the laptop in her hands.

“You listen to terrible music,” One says. “This looks so gay.”

“I think he's hot,” Two says.

Morrissey starts playing as One and Two move into the living room, the laptop dangling at Two's side. I follow them, cringing when the laptop bumps into the wall as they bumble down the hall, past the bathroom, and into the bedroom, screaming and laughing. Two flings my laptop on the floor and they jump on the bed. Jenna stands next to me in the hall looking into the bedroom and slides her hand up my t-shirt and over my belly. She pets my belly and eels swim along my spine until they coil around the vertebrae, tightening my posture.

“It's okay,” she says and returns her hand to her side. She leads me toward the bed, gripping my Frankenstein thumb in her fingers, and I feel my stomach turn, and I burp in my mouth. This is disgusting. I'm disgusting. They'll stay longer if they know it bothers me. These girls. Girls. They're girls. These girls. I have to let them sober up. Maybe I'll make them something to eat. Pizza. I have a frozen cheese pizza. Kids love pizza. Girls love pizza. I love pizza.

“Come on, Jenna,” Two says, jumping next to One on the bed.

“Why you got all those post-it notes on the wall?” One asks me.

“They're date ideas,” I say. “Are you guys hungry?” I ask, smiling hard, and pick up the laptop off the floor, fold it closed, and slide it on the nightstand.

“I thought you had to go?” One snarls.

“I'm gonna make a pizza if you guys want some,” I say. “People gotta eat.”

“What kind?” Two asks, jumping. One falls on her side and licks one of my

pillows.

“I’ll have some,” Jenna says and climbs on the bed.

“Pizza!” One shouts.

One pushes herself up to her feet, the bottoms of her boots crushing my comforter and pillows. I cringe, wanting to say something, but I redirect them into the kitchen, into pizza.

“Is this a California King?” Jenna asks me.

“So, pizza?” I ask.

“You love us,” Two stops jumping and says to me, her grin like an orange slice.

“When’s—the—next—time—you’ll—have—three—sexy—ladies—in—your—house—all—to—yourself?” One says while jumping.

Jenna rocks with the mattress and laughs and says, “It’s like a boat.”

“I got a boat motherfucker!” Two yells.

“No! I’m on a boat motherfucker!” One yells.

Two tumbles over onto her side and rolls onto her back, her boots tangle with my pillows and she’s manically laughing. Jenna falls back, her head on Two’s belly as One jumps higher. Her tank-top sweeps up and down. A pink, nickel-sized butterfly dangles from the end of her belly button ring.

“Get up here,” One shouts at me, pointing.

“Fuck it,” I say, giving in. It’s just easier to say yes.

“Fuck it!” They shout.

I sit on the bed next to Jenna and watch her tickle Two’s stomach with her tongue.

Two laughs and pushes Jenna's head away, saying, "Stop it!" They're not going to leave. They've commandeered my California King.

"Come on," One shouts and reaches for my hand. I stand up and we jump around Two and Jenna as they lay tickling each other until we crumble over the mattress after Two punches me in the ditch of my knee.

All three dog-pile over me. One's inner thigh smooshes into my mouth, smelling of pepperoni and Dollar Store body spray. I wonder if this is what it's like to have sisters. They pin me. Jenna millipedes backwards over my belly, her tank top slips up, and her breasts sift through my body hair. The static from her bra fabric stings. She sits up and licks my forearm. "It tastes like salt," she says and the others snicker. "I'm going to the bathroom," Jenna says, grabs the laptop from the nightstand, and stomps down the hallway.

One and Two lay perpendicular over my body. We create an H together. I reach for the bottom of my t-shirt to pull it down over my gut. One notices and smacks my hand away and fingers my belly button. "I can fit my whole pinky," she says and chuckles.

"Let me try," Two says.

"No. Don't. It tickles," I say and One covers my mouth with her other hand.

Two jams her finger in my belly button and says it smells like rust.

One pushes her hand down over my mouth and says I can't talk right now. I move her hand and slide out of bed and tell them I'm going to get the pizza ready, but after the pizza they have to go. They laugh and I walk down the hall and Jenna sits in the recliner

with the laptop on her thighs. She stares into the screen and doesn't look up when I pass into the kitchen, preheat the oven, jerk the cheese pizza from the freezer, rip the box and packaging off, and slip the pizza over the rack. "What are you looking at?" I ask her from the kitchen.

"Checking my Facebook."

"Don't fuck up my computer, please."

She scoffs and I tell her she has to go after the pizza. I go to the bathroom to take a piss, and when I open the bathroom door, One and Two are standing in the hall. One has her head resting on Two's shoulder and they're smiling. My Macy's bags are on the floor stacked against their shins.

"Nice clothes," they say. "You got a job interview?"

"The pizza's cooking," I say and stomp into the bedroom and shove the Macy's bags on the top shelf in the closet. Don't fucking touch my new clothes, I think.

When I return to the living room One is holding my pack of cigarettes and the girls ask if they can smoke. I nod because it might sober them up a little "Smoking's gross," Jenna says. "Tommy commented on our picture. He said we're hot."

"Fuck Tommy," One says.

"Tommy's a fag," Two says. "Lighter?" Two asks, snapping her fingers.

"Hang on," I say and check the pizza. The crust isn't golden brown yet. Gary's not outside. There's an opening. Two hands me the cigarettes and I take one from the pack and figure the pizza has another five or ten minutes. They'll eat and be gone.

One opens the front door and I follow them outside. The heat presses into my

skin. I light their cigarettes before I light mine. They take drags and exhale as though they've smoked hundreds, maybe thousands, of cigarettes. One French inhales. I copy her and she giggles and wipes her brow with her forearm. Two flaps her tank-top and says, "Fuck. It's so hot, dude."

Gary flings his front door open, panting, and his Keds slap the pavement as he approaches with a big bag of garbage dangling from one arm. "It's a hot one!" he snarls. "Who are these lovely ladies which I saw earlier?"

"They're my cousins," I say.

Gary frowns and tilts his head.

"I'm Shannon," One says.

"I'm Michelle," Two says. "And, we're not his cousins. We're his friends."

Gary squints, introduces himself, and says, "I got some new snakes."

"You have snakes?" One asks and ashes her cigarette.

"I do. I have sixteen snakes right now. Not counting the baby corn snakes."

"Babies?" One asks. "I want to see."

Two nods and Gary says, "You're more than welcome to swing by."

They smile and look to me and I shrug and say, "I have to go soon. After the pizza."

"Would you like to see them?" he asks the girls and scratches his nose. I hate Gary's jagged, Cheeto-orange fingernails. Last time I saw Gary's newest snake I was there all afternoon. "I'll come by in twenty minutes," he says and glides over the path toward the dumpsters.



“We should go inside,” I say.

“We're still smoking.”

“I'm going to check on Jenna.”

Back in the kitchen, Jenna had already cut the pizza into slices. She sits with one clamped between her fingers and her feet are up on the recliner so her knees press into her chest. “It's good,” she says between bites.

“Do you want to see my neighbor's snakes?”

“Not really.”

“Are their names really Shannon and Michelle?” I ask her.

“I'm really Jenna, too,” she says.

Out the kitchen window, I notice Shannon and Michelle are gone. I hammer Gary's door and ring the bell. Shannon answers and says they're looking at his snakes. “Why didn't you tell me?” I ask her.

She shrugs.

“I was worried. The pizza's done. You guys didn't even tell me.”

“We're kinda over the pizza,” she says.

“I'm going to get Jenna,” I say and look past Shannon into Gary's living room where he stands with Michelle pointing at one of the sixteen aquariums on his aquarium wall. His curly hair bounces on his head as he moves his hands as he talks. He flaps his yellow polo shirt against his belly and wipes his forehead with his arm. He sees me and waves. I sigh and think in another hour they'll still be here. They'll still be in my life. Even if I leave them with Gary, they might wait for me to come back. He wouldn't fuck

with them. He seemed okay over the last year or so. He was a decent guy. Just likes snakes. Maybe I can get them all into Gary's apartment and he can deal with them now. They'll be his problem. I'll go to the mall. I still need some new shoes to complete my new outfit. I'll get a chicken sandwich.

“Jenna. Come on. We're going to Gary's.”

“Who?”

“My neighbor. He's got snakes. Your friends are there,” I say and take her forearm and pull her up from the recliner.

She resists, jamming her feet into the sides between the cushion and armrests.

“Stop, you're hurting me.”

“You gotta go,” I say and pull harder.

“My arm,” she says and grunts.

I release and groan. “Come on. Please.”

She snorts and stands up and stomps through the kitchen and out the front door, saying, “Snakes suck.”

Gary answers the door grinning. He flicks Cheetos into his mouth from a plastic jug tucked under his arm, and he's changed from khaki pants into cargo shorts somehow in the last five minutes. I want to ask him why, but I don't, and he motions for us to enter his apartment. Shannon and Michelle handle snakes at Gary's kitchen table. They're giggling while the baby snakes weave through their fingers and around their hands and wrists. “Baby corn snakes,” Gary says, leading us past the huge Snakes of The West Coast poster and the aquarium wall where four shelves held four aquariums each on the

side of his living room that shares a wall with my apartment.

The shelves are made of two by fours and concrete blocks. Against another wall were two of those big plastic Sterilite four drawer cabinets. One for mice and one for rats. He breeds them in those plastic drawers. And that's where they live until they die. He trades the excess feeders to the pet store for other supplies: lights, screens, water dishes, big bags of aspen. I wonder why he hasn't traded the feeders for a proper steel shelf for his snakes.

Shannon holds her Medusa hand at Jenna. "It's so tiny," Jenna says and pets the snake. "It's smooth," she says and Gary smiles with his hands on his hips. "I never touched a snake," she says and laughs. "It's so crazy."

Gary gets the baby corn snakes from a breeder. He has six. Different colors. They live in this plastic tub he keeps on the floor and he plans to grow them and breed them with other corn snakes that another person he knows has in a plastic tub somewhere and he'll sell those snakes on Craigslist to pay for more snakes or supplies or whatever. "Would anyone like some pomegranate tea?" he asks. "Caffeine free."

Gary works at Target. He calls himself a Herpetologist though. He goes herping on the weekends by the Sacramento River where he has a sweet spot. That's where he caught his rattlesnakes. He invites me periodically, always on the condition that I never reveal his sweet spot to anyone. I never go with him, though. "Would you like to hold one," he asks me. I shake my head and these girls insist.

"I really don't want to right now," I say and clear my throat. "I gotta get going soon."

“Just hold one,” Shannon says. “You afraid?”

“He's held snakes before,” Gary says, nodding.

I shrug and say, “Fine,” and Gary fingers the aspen shavings in the tub and cradles a yellow and white corn snake as thick as a pencil. The snake slithers from Gary's hands onto mine and coils around my index finger.

“That one's rare. Albino yellow,” Gary says.

“How do they get that color?” Jenna asks.

“They're bred for color. Bred over and over until the desired color is dominant.,” Gary says and pops another Cheeto into his mouth.

Near the kitchen sit stacks of tree branches. Mostly branches that look like rusted, bent up rake-ends. He cleans the wood and piles them up to change around the terrariums when the snakes seem bored. Gary has a few rattlesnakes which seems illegal. It has to be. Sometimes I have nightmares that his snakes seep through my wall and slip into my bed between the sheets and suck the blood from my body until my corpse has the consistency of a used condom, a creamy shedded snake skin.

“You want to hold it?” I ask Jenna and she shakes her head.

Gary cups his hand and scoops Cheetos from the big jug. Orange blossoms over his teeth as we handle his snakes and I know he lives for these interactions where he shows off his collection. He's told me about bringing his snakes to elementary school classes, and a birthday party once. He thinks children should embrace reptiles, specifically snakes. The way they move without arms and legs fascinates him the most.

Nights when it's really quiet I swear I can hear the sound of all the heat bulbs

going. The low vibration of the snake apartments. I think about pushing against the wall his apartment shares with mine, rocking it somehow, and knocking the whole complex down. In the destruction, some of the snakes would die, but some would escape. Maybe the rattlesnakes would attack Gary in his sleep.

The yellow, baby corn snake sputters its tongue at me when I try to pass it to my other hand and it bites my thumb. I flick the snake against the floor and it's dead. "Fuck. It bit me. I just reacted," I say. "I'm sorry."

Now they're Gary's girls, these girls. They hate me, baby-snake-killer. They'll be fine here. Circle of protection, snakes. Gary blasts through the kitchen cupboards with one arm while he holds the dead snake in his free hand until he emerges with a little cardboard box. He slips the snake inside and says, "I have to bury it."

"I can't," I say. "I gotta go."

"Then go," he says.

"We should go, too," Shannon says.

"I'm going alone," I say to them.

"We're not going with you," she says to me.

Gary lifts the lid on a plastic tub on the floor and the girls lower their hands one at a time into the tub and their baby corn snakes shoot into the aspen shavings. We show ourselves out while Gary shuffles around in his kitchen, holding the cardboard snake-coffin in his hand.

I lock the front door to my apartment and give Shannon and Michelle another cigarette because they ask and they seem upset. After I light the cigarettes, the three of

them lower their wayfarer sunglasses over their eyes and walk ahead of me twenty yards or so while I light a cigarette for myself. The girls don't say goodbye. Their boots clack away on the pavement, and I consider not leaving the complex and staying home as I watch them push past the dumpsters.

But, it's just easier to go to the mall and kill a few hours in case they come back to my apartment to test me. I don't want to recap the afternoon with Gary either. I know he'll ask me to bury the snake with him. He buries all his dead snakes by the Sacramento River. He'll probably say I owe it to him. No. I'm going to buy a new pair of shoes and a chicken sandwich. I'll get one for him, too. He loves chicken sandwiches.

Shannon, Michelle, and Jenna—their heads bounce as they thread through the cars in the parking lot, going right past my car without knowing it, and onto Bell Street, hopefully sobered up enough, and I imagine they'll return home and crowd around the television and eat hamburgers and drink soda and talk shit on Teen Mom, but slather with anxiety through the commercials between segments.

When I pull my car onto Bell Street, I look for them, but they're gone. I take the long way through the neighborhood by Howe Park where I suspect they live and they're no where. Nobody's outside. It's about a hundred degrees. The late afternoon is the hottest part of the day in Sacramento. I kind of miss them, thinking the four of us would destroy the Arden Mall. I wouldn't have to keep my eyes down and away from the other girls. We'll walk arm in arm and mow over everyone.

## Chapter 2

### Quarters

When I'd moved the ashtray closer to the planters, near the entrance of the Railroad Museum, someone moved it back and left a handwritten note on a sheet of binder paper taped to the door of the supply shed: *Don't move the ashtray. Thanks.* Richard, my boss, had said I should be happy to see those cigarette butts all over the place. I should kiss them. I should make fucking love to them because an ashtray might put me out of a job. I laugh to myself and pick up a Starbucks cup jammed in the bush at the base of the maple tree with my trash-grabber and flick it into the bucket.

I'd been dreading this day for two weeks. It was Claudia's last day. She was the only one I knew inside the museum. She did all the accounting and smoked with me sometimes on her morning break. She didn't like the tour guides. I'd never been inside the museum. Seen the trains. Sometimes I think about going in on a weekend, but I can't spend my day off at work.

Something speckles from the boardwalk. A quarter. I thumb it up and slide it into my pocket. Most of the tour guides smoke around back, tipping their conductor hats at each other. They do it away from the picnic table. They have their own ashtray in a cove by the dumpsters on the West side of the building.

One time I hid their ashtray in a bush at the South end of the parking lot, but they just started filling soda bottles with cigarettes. Richard had said they refused to leave the butts on the ground because they didn't want to keep us working. The conductors always

looked through me when we passed each other in the employee parking lot under the overpass. They ghost me.

We both smoke menthols, me and Claudia. I'd told her that I switched to menthols after high school because I like how the smoke makes my mouth feel icy and slick. She had laughed like I'd said the funniest thing she'd ever heard. That made me like her.

I scoot the green bucket against the planter, check the time on my phone, and look into the Railroad Museum, seeing if Claudia is shuffling around by the lobby. Sometimes she did that. Her break would be in ten minutes or so.

Last week, on Claudia's birthday, I gave her a carton of her brand: Camel menthols. It was also sort of an early going away present. She had hugged me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been hugged. After that, she had complained about her daughter, saying her daughter shaved her head and pierced her nose and moved in with a bunch of lesbians. She asked, "You're about my daughter's age, right? You ever hear of a lesbo-house?" I remember how she said the words together, "lez-bow-hass." I couldn't answer the question. Laughter seized my lungs. I keeled over and fired phlegm all over the pine needles at our feet. She shook her head and kept saying "What?" between fits of laughter.

"You wouldn't happen to have a few quarters would you?" a woman asks me from the sidewalk. Her olive, smooth, suede-face, brushed with sweat, glistens around her almond mouth, and her perfect, square teeth. I want to lick her front teeth. Taste her mouth. I can't help it.

I shake my head, lying about the quarter in my pocket. I might need it later.



“Fuck,” she says. The word rocks her body. The hard sound jerks her head forward in a loop.

“Sorry,” I say and trace her bra-straps down her shoulders and under her mint and gray striped halter-top where the tightness cuts into her flesh. She's made of orbs. Large and small orbs stuck to orbs. From her toes to her head. No hard angles. Even her hair circles around her head. I tilt my head back and mouth-breath, thinking of tonguing the spaces on her body where orbs join other orbs until I hear her say, “There's some trash over there.” I flop my head down and my molars click together. She clears her throat and nods at a candy bar wrapper on the sidewalk. She says to her daughter, “We can stay another twenty minutes. Go play in the park.”

Her daughter grunts and stomps around the planters and dead-eyes me. I look away and back at her mother and think I'd rather bite the orbs. Bite them right off. I pinch up the candy wrapper and drop it in my bucket. Maybe I should thank her. Maybe she left the candy wrapper for me. If she'd picked it up and tossed it in the trash at the corner next to the ashtray, I'd be out of a job Richard would say. She gave me work. She wasn't so bad.

Her a-line haircut shrugs around her head as she asks another woman for quarters that's approaching the museum with a little boy. The woman coughs and sucks air through her teeth while she fingers her purse and plops a grip of coins in in the other woman's cupped hands.

“You got it! You got it! You got it, mommy!” the little girl yells, slurring her words, and spinning in circles.

“Thank you so much,” she says.

The woman nods and says, “It's gonna be a hot one,” and tugs the little boy by the forearm and they fumble into the Railroad Museum. The boy watches me through the tinted glass. The woman's mouth pops at him. He turns away from the window, and they move beyond the lobby and the part of the museum I can see through the bronze colored glass.

“Go to the park,” the woman says to the girl before she stands up and shoves the coins in her pocket. “I'll be over there in a second.”

“I don't want to anymore,” the girl says.

“Go to the park.”

“I want to go to the trains.”

“We don't have enough money.”

The daughter stomps and growls.

“I'll get you a candy bar.”

“No.”

“Mountain Dew? Snickers?” the woman says.

“Mountain dude and smickers!” the girl shouts and sprints toward the park.

The woman looks at me, and squints, and I say, “Kids.”

She scrunches her face and scratches her nose.

“It's gonna be a hot one,” I say.

She crosses the street and pushes into the liquor store at the corner while the little girl somersaults in the grass park area close to a picnic table. The grass bends under her

body without breaking. Amazing. The blades shine florescent in the sun, plastic and new. I whack the trash-grabber into the planter and wonder where her mother's car is parked. She probably lied. The money's for candy and booze. The girl rolls again in the grass and squeals.

Around the side of the Railroad Museum I check my reflection in a particular window where you can see your ideal physical self. Mine's stretched out and flattened. I'm a dozen feet tall. My head's a crescent moon. Through my reflection a gaggle of kids horseplay in the museum. They notice me sucking in my gut. They point and chuckle. Their miniature bodies heave with laughter. I want to stomp all of them out. Backing away from the window, I whack the trash-grabber on the pavement three times.

After they're done following the train conductors around on the tour they'll have lunch in the park area and leave their brown sacks and snack wrappers in the grass. They'll leave their shit everywhere. There'll be those little clear-plastic sheathes for the juice box straws that are too thin and small for the trash-grabber and I'll have to pick them up by hand one at a time. If I don't, the lawn guy will complain.

One boy approaches the window and presses his upturned fist against the glass, slowly giving me the middle finger. His knuckle-skin darkens behind the bronze tint. I rush the window and clap the trash-grabber against the metal frame without thinking. A few other kids make faces at me. I kick the glass and it whumps. A man escorts the children away and says something to the conductor. The train conductor laughs and waves me off. They move on into a part of the museum I can't see behind a black locomotive.

I check my phone for the time. Claudia might be on her break now. Our last break together.

“Everything cool?” the security guard that started three months ago asks me.

“What?”

“You kicked the window. I saw you.”

“The kids,” I say.

“You cool?”

I nod and shuffle behind the building away from him. Claudia sits at the picnic table by the supply shed, smoking, and waves at me. “Kids,” I say as I approach her.

“Field trips,” she says and laughs. “Sure are cute, though.”

She smiles at me and asks how I'm doing this morning after I sit at the picnic table across from her and light a cigarette. “Tired,” I say and look up at the pine tree and ash into the coffee can that I dump out every other afternoon before clocking out. The crimson lipstick she's wearing always pounds through my mind long into the evenings where I down half a Grande Meal under the swamp cooler, and stare into the flat screen, flipping from movie to movie, never pushing past ten or fifteen minutes with each selection, until resorting to Netflix roulette where I roll a couple of six-sided dice to make the final selection for me. There's something about her lips. The hard, yet rubber-soft, look of them. Like a truck tire. I can't shake it. I never think about Claudia, really. Just her lips. I wish I could take them home with me somehow. Keep them in the milk-crate by my mattress where I've got my magazines. Maybe she'd let me take a picture of her face.

She asks me if I saw the seal in the river this morning.

“I wanted to take a picture of it,” she says and looks at my bucket, asking if I got a lot of trash picked up already. “So, this is my last day,” she says.

“You excited about Texas?” I ask her, thinking I need a picture of her lips. I should just ask her. She'd probably say yes. She'd probably be flattered.

She nods and asks, “Remember that whale that got caught in the river a couple years ago?”

“Saw it on the news.”

“Was just thinking about that when I heard about the seal. Hope the seal doesn't die too.”

“It's not as big. It probably wouldn't get stuck like the whale did or whatever.”

“Yeah,” she says and lights a second cigarette after sipping from her Dr. Pepper.

“Your daughter going too?”

“Nope. She's living with those girls I told you about. She's staying.”

I finish my cigarette and say, “Well, I guess this is it.”

“Come over here. Give me a hug,” she says, smiling, and I walk around to her side of the picnic table and sit next to her, straddling the bench. She wraps her arms over my shoulders and we press our cheeks together. I'm so close to her lips I can taste it. This is our second hug. I consider turning my head so I can brush my lips against her's, but before I can, she pulls back, grabs the sides of my head, aligns her eyes with mine, and smashes her lips against mine. I count. One. Two. Three. “Don't tell nobody I did that,” she says. “Don't be telling Richard shit.” She flicks her barely-smoked second cigarette

into the coffee can, gets up, and walks toward the door into the side of the museum and says, "Good luck with everything. I'll miss those sweet lips."

After Claudia closes the door behind her, I feel sick and dizzy. She wants my lips. I could go into the museum. I could go right in and find her office. Ask Claudia for the picture. She would understand. Maybe she could take a picture of my lips, too.

The door into the side of the building is locked now, so I ramble around the side of the building to the front entrance. The bronze tinted doors sparkle in the heat. The girl who works in the at the ticket window in the lobby thumbs into her phone. I've never talked to her. I've never been in the lobby. The interview for this job was at some office downtown. My paychecks are deposited directly into my checking account. I use the public restrooms by the river trail. Never had a reason to go in. I don't give a shit about trains. No. I can't ask Claudia for a picture of her lips.

The lobby swirls around my head so I go back outside and look over at the park area and the little girl from before crawls on all fours around a picnic table where the woman in the striped halter-top sits and smokes a cigarette and talks on the phone. I wonder who she's talking to. Her husband, maybe. I dig for the phone in my pocket after feeling a vibration against my thigh. No call. Nothing. Just the time and date.

The girl sits on her heels and chucks wads of grass at the woman. Handful after handful. Green bits shower the picnic table and the woman dusts off her chest and her lap. The grass shards must be wedged everywhere. The woman shakes her head, walks ten feet or so from the picnic table, and waves her hand while she talks like she's chomping at the air. The girl grabs the Mountain Dew bottle from the picnic table and

itches it at the woman. The bottle hits the woman in the hip and lands somewhere in the grass, blending in, and I lose sight of it, wondering if they'll pick it up. I hope they won't. I keep the recycling for myself. The woman flips around and looks down at where the bottle must be and hurls her phone at the girl, but the girl ducks and the phone smacks the picnic table. The woman screams and the girl screams before she gallops through the park area and behind the yellow and red locomotive parked by the entrance to the river trail.

I need the picture. I have nothing to lose and Claudia's leaving, I decide, and tug open the door into the Railroad Museum and the girl working the ticket window looks up from her phone. "Can I help you?" she asks me and I rub my boot over the slick tile. It looks like a frozen chocolate pond. The air-conditioning swarms my pores and pushes the sweat out harder. I wipe my forehead and look at her. "Can I help you with something?" she asks, tapping into her phone again.

"Claudia," I mumble and look back outside. One of the conductors looks through me as he corrals some of the same children that had watched me through the window on the side of the building earlier. They ignore me, laughing, as they cram into an elevator. The doors sloomp shut and she asks me again what I need.

The bucket and trash-grabber are propped against the planter nearest the doors. I see a guy approaching. He stops and picks up the trash-grabber and smacks the trunk of the maple tree before he slashes the air and slices a plume of leaves from the bush surrounding the base of the maple tree. I consider shoving through the doors and back outside and telling him to get the fuck away from my tools, but the guy flings the trash-grabber into the planter, crunches his shoulders, dipping his head down to light a

cigarette, and turns, and shouts something as he moves beyond where I can see him from inside the lobby.

“Can I help you, man?” the ticket-taker asks me again.

“Claudia's office?”

“What you need with her?”

“Uh. My paycheck.”

“Sure. Whatever. Third floor. Up there somewhere,” she says without looking at me, still thumbing into her phone.

I press the elevator button and wait, looking at the trash-grabber slung over the bush in the planter. The security guard enters the lobby and nods at me before he goes into the gift shop. I don't want to talk to him. He'll just ask me if I'm cool.

The elevator incites a queasiness in my guts as I'm craned up two floors. I unzip my orange vest before tip-toeing down the hall, passing closed door after closed door, and scanning the names of the inhabitants that are etched into black plaques and tacked next to each door. I find Claudia's and knock. She's talking to someone. She sounds angry. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. I knock again.

“What?” she shouts from inside her office. I back-step and consider what I'd say, how I'd ask her for a picture. I could ask for a picture of us together. That might not seem so weird. I could crop her lips from that image. Maybe, she'd kiss me again, too. One for the road. I open her door just enough to fit my head inside.

“It's me,” I say.

“Oh. Hey,” she says. “What's up?”



“Wanted to tell you good luck. I forgot to tell you out there.”

“Thanks,” she says. “Just trying to tie things up here before I take off.”

“Yeah,” I say. “So, I was wondering if we could, like, take a picture together.”

“What?”

“To remember you by.”

“Right. Sure. You got a camera?”

I crouch by her desk and hold my phone as far away as I can from our faces and press the button. I only captured half her face. I try again. The tops of our heads. “Let me get someone,” I say. “Is there someone?”

“I’m really busy,” she says.

“Just hang on. Please,” I say and go back into the hall and knock the the door to the office next to hers. A woman tells me to come in. I don’t know her. Never seen her. She’s wearing a navy blazer. I ask her if she’ll take a picture of me and Claudia.

“Hi, Claudia,” she says, “I didn’t know you were hanging around the yard guys, too.”

Claudia doesn’t say anything, but stands next to me in her office and the other woman takes the picture on my phone. She says it looks good. I check it. A full body shot of both of us. Claudia is pressed into my side. I can crop her lips from this, I think, and thank the woman, hoping she’ll leave, but she lingers and asks my name and how long I’ve worked here. She asks how I know Claudia.

“Smoking pals,” Claudia says before I can reply.

“Sure,” the woman says.

“I’ve gotta finish up here,” Claudia says and wishes me luck with everything. We hug again in front of her co-worker, but this time she releases me without a kiss. “Go on,” she says and I tell her goodbye before I thud down the hall to the elevator listening to both of them laugh in her office.

Claudia mimics my voice, asking the other woman for a picture. They laugh so hard they’re almost screaming. I stare into the brass elevator doors at my globby reflection, pressing the down arrow over and over and over as they chuckle down the hall, but the doors stay shut. With all eight fingertips jammed in the gap between the elevator doors, I pry at the doors and they give maybe a quarter of an inch before they pop back in place. They’re still laughing and I close my eyes until the door opens. I sway in the elevator as it lowers me down to the lobby where I can torpedo outside.

Back outside, someone had moved the trash-grabber from the bush around the maple tree to the bench of the planter. I pick it up and the bucket and cross into the park area. The guy who had toyed with my tools earlier sits on the same picnic table where the woman had been with the girl taking on grass-clump after grass-clump after grass-clump. He smokes a cigarette, looks at me and nods, before he pushes off the table and sashes over the grass area toward the yellow and red locomotive by the river trail. The blades of grass bend under his white Nikes. I know it. I’ve seen it before. After taking over the picnic table, I look at the picture of me and Claudia again. It will work. I’ll crop the lips, print them out, and delete the rest.

## Chapter 3

### Giants

Elli narrowed down Lenny's location to the thin lot of five, yellow cottages based on Lenny's description of where she lived in the Arcata bottoms when they had started dating three weeks before. She propped her elbow up on the alley dumpster, jerked an Amazon box free, and stuffed it in the recycling bin before she checked for anything else she could save from the landfill.

Through the window of the cottage nearest to the alley, Elli frowned at the Swiffer mop in the otherwise empty kitchen. She crept around to the front, pressed her face against the window and closed one eye, peeking through a hole where a section of the vinyl blinds had been snapped off, and realized the cottage was vacant. They had always made plans to make plans for Elli to come over to Lenny's cottage. But the night before Lenny dumped Elli outside of the Alibi after they had gulped down a few pints of Steelhead Double IPA. While Lenny told her she needed freedom, Elli kept her eyes fixed on the statue of President McKinley, plopped dead center in the Plaza. Lenny said she wasn't a girlfriend girl.

Elli could see a shirtless, old man watching television and taking hits from a purple water-bong on his couch in the second cottage. He coughed and leaned forward and traded the water-bong for a Taco Bell cup on the coffee table. Elli couldn't shake Lenny's tattoos or her lazy eye. Over beers in Elli's apartment, on their sixth date, Lenny had pushed a black, stick-and-poke tattoo of a circled V, a vegan symbol, into Elli's wrist.

Lenny knew how to do tattoos, she'd said. Her ex-husband was a tattoo artist.

Two girls sat at the kitchen table and stared into their Macbooks in the third cottage. One shouted something about Facebook chat being down. Elli ducked her head under the window, unsure if Lenny lived there with those girls. She hadn't mentioned having roommates. A black dog barked from the lawn around the fifth cottage as a man locked the front door and called the dog to follow him through the gate and down the sidewalk somewhere toward The Plaza.

Elli crammed herself between the blackberry bushes and the fence, and shoved herself through to the backside of cottage four, and squeezed her hands into a pair of large nitrile gloves. She wedged the second window up with the flat-head screwdriver arm on her Leatherman just enough so that she could wriggle her fingers underneath and open it all the way. She tore the sleeping bag off Lenny's bed and stomped over the twin mattress, twisting her boots into the fabric before she sprayed a PBR from the refrigerator over Lenny's desk, papers, laptop, and science books.

Rolling over the hardwood in little circles on Lenny's computer chair, Elli laughed to herself about their second date. On her suggestion, she had driven Lenny South, down the redwood coast, to the Richardson Grove protests where Caltrans wanted to widen the 101 into Humboldt County from two lanes to four lanes by cutting down giant, old growth redwoods because Walmart wanted to build a store in Eureka, but that section of the 101 wasn't wide enough for their trucks. They had undressed together with the other protesters and stuffed their clothes into Lenny's messenger bag and joined one of the nude, human-chains around the redwoods while the dozers and bobcats rumbled around

them.

In the livingroom, Elli spun the computer chair in a circle and shook an orange spray-paint can until she saw spots. She stood and spray-painted “FREEDOM?” on the wall over Lenny's desk. She kicked the chair over and spray-painted “GO VEGAN!!!” on the livingroom hardwood floor in big, orange letters from the front door all the way to the metal transition screwed into the kitchen linoleum.

The week before, Elli had driven them down to Woodley Marina. She told Lenny she was casing out crabbing boats that she wanted to sink. She was working on a list from highest to lowest priority dungeness crab violators. Lenny asked her if they were endangered, and Elli told her the dungeness crab was her spirit crustacean before she knocked a pile of unchained crab pots into the bay. They sprinted to the parking lot, worried the security guard would notice them, and Elli drove to Winco and bought a loaf of sourdough bread and a container of pasta salad.

At Table Bluffs County Park they ate pasta salad sandwiches under the moonlight, sitting on the grass on the edge of the bluffs near the South Jetty where people skyglided when it wasn't raining. After that, Elli watched the tide roll in while Lenny went down on her, and she pictured herself as a dungeness crab creeping through the marine eelgrass. They both chuckled when Lenny pushed herself up from Elli's crotch and said she was glad Elli had kept herself trimmed up. They drove North, back to Elli's apartment in Arcata, and in the car Lenny had said, “The last person who broke my heart—I broke their fucking windshield with the DVD player they got me for Christmas.” Elli hung onto the word “person,” wondering why Lenny had avoided a gender.

Elli chucked the spray-paint can into the livingroom and opened a pack of cigarettes from the carton Lenny kept on the roof of her refrigerator and smoked one in the kitchen, chasing drags with another can of PBR. She scanned her work on the floor and touched the last orange exclamation mark near the metal transition between the livingroom and kitchen, and sniffed the paint dot on her index finger before she pressed the dot into cellophane around the pack of cigarettes that she had left on the counter by the sink, and stepped carefully around the wet paint on her way out.

The black dog barked at Elli when she kicked open the gate to the sidewalk and peeled off her nitrile gloves. The man waved the compostable bag of dog shit around, begging his dog back to where he stood near the stop sign at the corner with his iPhone at his ear, and Elli knew Lenny would call her tonight, or find her at the Alibi, and she galloped away from the black dog and the cottages, through the Arcata bottoms, to the Plaza where she'd smoke her own cigarettes with the face-tattooed train-hoppers and the people selling weed by the handful for a twenty spot straight out of their backpacks, and she would stare down the President McKinley statue, hard in the face.

## Chapter 4

## Redwoods

Cypress dug her boot-heels into the grip-tape slathered ramp to the back patio of The Shanty, a bar in Old Town Eureka, and tapped her septum ring while she scanned the dozen or so picnic tables for a woman with blonde dreadlocks. Anyone that might be Clarissa from Craigslist. The pictures she'd sent were vague head-shots. This was her third attempt at thirty-three years old to meet someone from the internet. People sat at every table, drinking, buried in their jackets under the heaters and the nylon tarp shielding them from the rain. Most of them smoked cigarettes, and they talked louder and louder, competing with each other.

A possible Clarissa sipped beer at the table in the back corner of the patio and thumbed into her iPhone. Cypress stretched the bottom of her hooded sweatshirt down over her thighs and approached slowly.

“Cypress?” the woman asked.

“Clarissa?”

“You look just like your picture,” Clarissa said, smiling, and pushed herself up from the bench. They hugged. “How are you?”

“It's good to meet you,” Cypress said. They sat down and Clarissa slid the other pint toward Cypress. “Thanks. You go here a lot?”

“Not really. I didn't know where else to go.” Clarissa laughed. “The Shanty's cool, though, right? It's rustic.”

“I feel like we're inside a pirate ship.”

“Right?”

They looked at each other, smiling, and sipped from their pints a few times.

“It's gonna rain,” Clarissa said.

“It's always gonna rain here,” Cypress said.

“I'm not sure if I'm used to it yet. I mean, like, used to the rain being all year long.

It's like Seattle or something.”

“You said you hadn't lived here that long? You like it?” Cypress glugged down a third of her beer and sniffed weed smoke in the air.

“I mean, it's good. I love living by the ocean. The rent's cheap. I'm sure I'll be here another year at least.”

“How long you been here again? I forget,” Cypress said, scanning the patio for the smell.

“Been here about a year.”

“Yeah?” Cypress lit a cigarette. She offered one to Clarissa.

“No,” she said.

They sipped their beer, sitting for a moment, surrounded by jaundice looking people under the piss colored Christmas lights. “What beer is this?” Cypress asked.

“Great White.”

“I've had this,” Cypress said. “What part of town you in?”

“I live right by the bay, but I can't see it from my house.”

“Where by the bay?”



“By the library.”

“That's where all the prostitutes are, right?” Cypress nabbed the extra ashtray from the end of the picnic table behind her. The three guys at the table turned and asked her how she was doing as she craned the ashtray onto the table she shared with Clarissa. They asked her if she wanted company. She told them she was fine.

“So. Yeah. The rent's cheap in old town,” Clarissa said. “I like it. I can walk to coffee shops.”

“I remember seeing them—the prostitutes. They always hung around inside the covered bus stop by the library because it was always raining.”

“Yeah. They just took out the bus stop so there's not as many now.”

“Fuck. That sucks for everyone.”

“Thanks for not calling them hookers, by the way.”

“It's hard work.”

“It really is,” Clarissa said. “I feel bad for them. They walk around out there in the rain. Mostly only the transgender prostitutes are still out there pounding the pavement now that the bus stop's gone. Fucking—sloshing around in the rain. They wear high heels a lot of the time.”

“They must be freezing.”

“I gave one an umbrella the other day. We started talking and one thing led to another and I found out she only gets like twenty dollars for a blow job. Twenty fucking dollars. Can you believe that?”

“It's hard out there.” Cypress rubbed her septum ring.

“Sorry. Didn't mean to get on my soap box.”

“You work at Planned Parenthood, you told me, I think.”

“I do community outreach for them. Go to schools. Give out condoms. Do presentations. That sort of thing.”

Cypress looked at Clarissa and grinned, thinking she liked her mouth and how her tongue flicked when she talked. She figured if Clarissa was willing to meet her here, at some dive bar in old town Eureka, after only talking a couple of times through Gmail, she'd be willing to let her stay the night. And, if she'd let her sleep in the same bed with her, she'd probably go down on her.

Mostly, though, she was tired of sharing a room with Franco at Eagle Feather. He made her come sometimes, but she hated his face. How his face existed for his beak nose. How his eyes were like brindle buttons buried in his cheeks. The way he rose up after twirling his tongue around her clit like a hawk finished picking at road kill on the 101, ready to fly back into the redwoods. It made her sick.

She'd asked for a new roommate, but Malica, the owner of Eagle Feather, said it wasn't possible right now. There just weren't any open beds and she didn't have any other complaints or people wanting to switch roommates, and she couldn't just shift beds around anytime anyone was irritated at their roommate. It just wasn't possible, she'd said. Not until someone moved out or unless Cypress could find someone to switch with her. But, she didn't want Franco to know how she felt because they'd been friends since college.

“So you live in a commune type of place, right?” Clarissa asked. “You didn't say

much about it before.”

“Eagle Feather. It's not really a commune,” Cypress said. “It's more of a deep ecology project, I would say.”

“So, like, what is that?”

“We live off the grid. As sustainable as possible. We're vegan. Like you. I mean, like, you know what that's about. We're just all about composting as much as possible. Like not making anymore landfill garbage. Growing most of our food ourselves. Having the smallest environmental impact possible.”

“You pay rent there?”

“No,” Cypress said, thinking that was the main reason she still lived there since she was thirty-three years old and didn't even own a cell phone. “The land, the whole place, is owned by this woman, Malica. We sell stuff at the farmer's market sometimes. A few people have part-time jobs in town for their personal bills or whatever. I don't, though. I got some money saved up from before.” Lately, Malica had been assigning the most disgusting chores to Cypress. Earlier in the day, she had to clean the outdoor toilets for the eighth time in the last week.

“That sounds really cool, but hard. I don't know if I could live with a bunch of people.”

“It gets weird sometimes.”

“So, what's the project part of it?”

“The owner, Malica, is working on a book and documentary about ways people can live this way—like, people in all sorts of settings. There's lots of little things you can

do.”

“Sounds really great.” Clarissa finished her beer. “Want another round?”

“Want to get out of here, just, like, completely?” Cypress put out her cigarette.

“Sure. I mean, yes. Definitely. I didn't plan on staying here all night anyways.”

“We can walk by the bay or something.”

Clarissa laughed and said Cypress had read her mind and asked if she wanted to go to the docks. They could pick up beer at the gas station by her house. “Are you cool with being in the rain?”

Cypress laughed before she slung her messenger bag over her shoulder, jammed her hands in her pockets, and pushed back into the bar, past the restrooms and the people through the hall, occasionally peeking at Clarissa over her shoulder, until they made it out front. A man, crouching against the brick exterior of the building to avoid the rain that poured down harder, asked Cypress for a cigarette just before she lit one for herself. She ignored him and took Clarissa by the arm.

Together they smashed through the rain and the alley, dodging two soaking-wet men yelling and grabbing at each other. One shoved the other into an overflowing dumpster and garbage spilled out and scattered over the asphalt. Cypress flicked her cigarette at the men and jerked Clarissa's wrist and they sprinted away from the alley where the rain sunk the town and everyone between the buildings.

They cut down fourth street to the gas station where they picked two tall bottles of Great White from the refrigerator. Clarissa tossed a four-pack of Oreos on the counter and insisted on paying just before Cypress mumbled that she hated plastic packaging and

flicked a twenty dollar bill at the cashier. "They're vegan," Clarissa said.

"I know," Cypress said. "I just don't understand how all packaging isn't biodegradable by now. They can make it out of corn. It's fucking stupid."

The cashier frowned, but he didn't card them. He sighed and checked the twenty dollar bill under the florescent light, all eight of his fingers plugged into a different skull ring. "We have to check them all now," he said. "I'm on camera." He cocked his head back at a camera bulb in the ceiling. "See." He rang up the beer and handed Cypress her change. "Too much counterfeit," he said as they pushed through the doors into the parking lot. The rain had stopped while they were inside the gas station and a guy with a shaved head and one hand wedged into the crotch of his baggy jeans asked them for money.

"Sorry," Clarissa said.

"What about you, girl?" he asked Cypress.

She shook her head and he sniffled, wiped the water from his brow, and said, "I know you got something."

"I don't got nothing for you. Sorry."

He jerked his hand from his crotch and his pants slipped down over his bare hips.

"Come on. Just trying to eat."

"Sorry," she said.

"Got a smoke?"

"Sorry."

"Shit. Bitches got no love." He hiked up his jeans, and wobbled into the gas

station.

“Peckerwoods,” Cypress said.

“Pelican Bay. They all go to places like that.” Clarissa pointed at the green three story motel across the street. The building looked like it was about to collapse where it bowed in the middle above a space between rooms on the first floor where cars could pass through to a parking lot in the back. “Hourly rates over there, I hear.”

“That's good.” Cypress laughed and lit another cigarette. “Should we get a room or what?”

Clarissa frowned and motioned for a cigarette.

“I'm just joking,” Cypress said as she lit a cigarette for Clarissa.

“It's fucking sad,” Clarissa said, exhaling smoke, and they walked around the side of the gas station and in the direction of the docks. As they passed the Carson mansion to their right, Cypress asked Clarissa if she'd known the history of the place, which reached the sky blooming with shades of lavender and purple illuminated by security lighting.

Clarissa shook her head and Cypress said, “It's right by your house. How can you not know? It's one of the most famous Victorian mansions ever built. The library is right there. Right behind the mansion. The prostitutes. The Ingomar Club. Come on.”

“I don't really know. I think it's gaudy and stupid, and surrounded by poverty,” Clarissa said.

“It is, but it's also weird.”

Cypress told her how a secret society for men called the Ingomar Club bought it in the fifties. “Nobody knows what they do in there, really, but they have a helicopter

landing pad, and sometimes politicians are seen on the property. There's no entry for the public either. No tours. Nothing. I think they get sued for sexual harassment by food servers sometimes. Not sure exactly, though." Cypress pointed at what looked like a pyramid with an eye above it carved into a triangular space just under the roof top above the entrance.

"That's just a shape. A shadow," Clarissa said. "But it's hard to tell this far away."

"We broke in one time," Cypress said.

"Broke in?"

"We broke in at night."

"Why?"

"We were all fucked up. It was when I first moved here."

"What happened."

"Nothing, really." Cypress explained that the mansion had been built in the Victorian style by Carson for his wife after he made a fortune on redwood lumber. Because his wife felt the house was too large, he built a smaller house across the street. Cypress pointed out the smaller, pink house as they passed it. It had been converted into a law office. They stood where the road ended adjacent to the Carson mansion and stared into the soupy bay. Across the bay boats were docked at Woodley Island Marina.

"Crabbers." Clarissa pointed to a boat coasting toward the marina, crabbing pots stacked high on the tailend.

"You think it's a coincidence that all the prostitutes hang around the library that happens to be right behind the Carson mansion?"

“I never thought of that.” Clarissa unsheathed the bottled beers from the paper sack and handed one to Cypress.

Cypress opened both beers with her lighter and they walked downhill toward the docks. “You ever think about fucking with all the crabbing boats? Like, doing something about it?”

“I’d get caught,” Clarissa said.

“I’m just saying. There’s a bunch of pots over on third street behind the processing plant. No fence. Nothing. One time, some friends and I took these, like, bolt cutters and shit and ripped out the part that traps all the crabs. Probably cost them thousands of dollars. Hopefully slowed them down at least a little bit.”

“Never got caught?”

“Nobody talks, everybody walks. Right?”

“I guess,” Clarissa said and they walked around the side of the Adorni Center and onto the boardwalk to the floating docks. Cypress laughed and swung her body in all directions as she stepped from dock sub-section to sub-section with her arms straight out at her sides, a beer in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. They stood together on the side of the floating, sectional dock that bobbed least through the tide in the darkness.

“It’s still there,” Cypress said, nodding back at the boardwalk where someone had painted “GO VEGAN!” vertically in white on a load-bearing pile.

“What?”

“The ‘GO VEGAN!’.”

“Oh. Crazy.” Clarissa sat down on the dock edge. Her feet hovered a foot or so



over the water and she patted the plastic surface next to her until Cypress sat down.

Clarissa weaved her fingers between Cypress's and they held hands for five minutes or so, sipping their bottles beers, and after Cypress finished her cigarette, she wanted to bury her face in Clarissa's blonde dreadlocks, roll the braided colored beads against her skin. Maybe Clarissa would want to go stickering and flyering with her at the Bayshore Mall.

They sat quietly for another few minutes while Cypress fantasized about sinking the crabbing boats across the bay and docked at Woodley Island Marina. There were security guards and cameras. She'd talked to Franco about doing it a few times. He was interested, but he didn't want to go to jail. It wasn't worth the risk, he'd said, not unless they planned it really well.

“You wanna go to my place? I got some beer in the fridge.” Clarissa jammed her beer bottle between her thighs and motioned for a cigarette.

“Smoke first? Haven't been on the docks in a long time.” Cypress lit cigarettes for the both of them and they smoked, listening to each other exhaling. Breaking her gaze from the blinking lights at the marina, Cypress caught Clarissa smiling at her out of the corner of her eye. She knew, at that moment, that Clarissa would go down on her that night.

They'd passed no prostitutes in front of the library on the way to Clarissa's two-bedroom house one street behind the Donut Mill. In the kitchen, Clarissa opened two more bottles of Great White and ripped apart the four-pack of Oreo's from the gas station. “Want one?” Clarissa washed down the first cookie with a mouthful of beer.

Cypress shook her head and said that she tried not to eat anything that doesn't have recyclable or biodegradable packaging because every dollar toward those companies is another vote to keep them in business. "Cesar Chavez said something like that, I think."

"But, you bought them."

"For you, I made an exception."

Clarissa ate another cookie, washed it down with beer. "But you smoke, too."

"I smoke only natural and organic cigarettes."

"Aren't those big, horrible companies still?"

"I guess I'm not perfect." Cypress pushed her bangs back, sipped her beer, and walked into the living room and complemented Clarissa on how organized the house looked. She could never keep a place this clean, she said. Clarissa mumbled something and jammed the Oreo package in the garbage by the refrigerator and sat next to Cypress on the couch so the sides of their thighs pressed together.

"No T.V. I like that." Cypress gripped her thigh. "Such a waste of time."

"Have you been to Golden Harvest?"

"Not in a while."

"We should totally go."

"We should."

"Breakfast?"

"Are you trying to get me to stay the night?"

"You can if you want. I'm off work."

“I'd love to.”

“I can give you a ride home tomorrow, if you want.”

“Thank you.” Cypress downed her beer. “Smoke?”

They stood on the porch sharing a cigarette. Cypress touched the filter with the tip of her tongue after she took a drag and handed it to Clarissa. “I usually don't smoke this much. I used to smoke, a lot.”

“Do you smoke weed?”

“Not really.”

“How did you end up here anyways?”

“Went to Humboldt State.”

“I went to San Francisco State. Long, long ago.”

“I just graduated about a year ago. I took forever at community college. Took like one class at a time for a million years.”

“So, you're what—31? 32?”

“Something like that.”

“You look so much younger.”

“It's the cigarettes,” Cypress said and asked if she had anymore beer.

They drank another round and sat on the living room couch and Clarissa told Cypress all about her job promoting safe sex around Humboldt County, mostly in the schools, until they both yawned their way into Clarissa's bed and under the flannel comforter. Face to face and on their sides with their heads buried in pillows, they whispered to each other. Cypress complimented Clarissa's big, lemur eyes. Clarissa asked

about Cypress's tattoos. They touched each other's arms and cheeks until Clarissa kissed Cypress on the mouth. They rubbed their tongues together, palming each other's hair and necks before Cypress moved her hand down Clarissa's stomach.

“No,” Clarissa said. “Not tonight.”

“No?”

“I can't.”

“Are you sure?” Cypress sucked air through her front teeth.

“We just met.”

“But I'm in your bed.”

“I like you.” Clarissa kissed Cypress.

“I do, too. I mean, I like you, too. That's why I'm here.”

“I just can't. It's, like, my rule.”

“I'm so wet.” Cypress rocked her hips over the mattress.

“I'm sorry.”

“Want to have a cigarette with me, then?”

“I'm tired,” Clarissa said.

“Stay right there. Don't fall asleep,” Cypress said, slid out of bed, and threw on her hooded sweatshirt. She stood on the porch, smoking, thinking maybe after Clarissa fell asleep she'd make herself come all over the flannel sheets.

Cypress drank a palm full of water in the bathroom and kicked her panties off before scooting herself behind Clarissa. “You're so naked,” Clarissa said.

They kissed for another fifteen minutes or so until Clarissa started yawning again.

She rolled over and asked Cypress to spoon her. Cypress said she couldn't because she wouldn't be able to sleep with her crotch against Clarissa's ass. After Clarissa fell asleep, Cypress slipped her hand down the front of Clarissa's panties and grazed her pubic hair until Clarissa coughed and rolled over onto her stomach and slept face down, snoring into the pillow.

Cypress woke up before Clarissa and bumbled into the bathroom, sat on the toilet, and pissed. She blew her nose into the wad of toilet paper before she wiped. After she scanned the unfamiliar brand of hand-soap for the crossed out, cruelty free bunny on the label, she lathered two pumps in the center of a yellow towel and wiped her armpits and crotch, gargled with tooth paste, and stomped back into the bedroom and jumped on the bed until Clarissa woke up. She yawned and smiled at Cypress and asked if she wanted to take a shower.

“I'm good,” Cypress said. “I cleaned up.”

“With me?”

Cypress shook her head, saying she was fine, but she hated showering with people. She hated standing cold and naked behind them while they stumbled around under the water. An average shower used seven to ten gallons a minute. At Eagle Feather, they had outdoor, one gallon bucket showers or dust showers.

“You sure?” Clarissa asked, half-way in the hall.

Cypress said she was sure and cringed remembering when she was young and laid face-up in the bathtub with her crotch under the faucet letting hot water smash into her

clit until she came. She used about 1680 gallons of water per week masturbating in the bath for about thirty minutes a night, in addition to her morning showers before school. Cypress did the math after she heard the clank clank clank of the shower curtain and the shower water blast on. At 8.33 pounds per gallon she used almost 7 tons of water a week for those masturbatory baths. Cypress tugged the beanie over her head from her messenger bag before she got dressed and downed a glass of water.

On the porch she smoked her last two cigarettes while Clarissa changed into clean clothes. Cypress wondered what Franco was doing. If he was still down to go to Trinidad sometime later that night and destroy some crabbing nets and pots stored on the boats at the harbor like they'd planned.

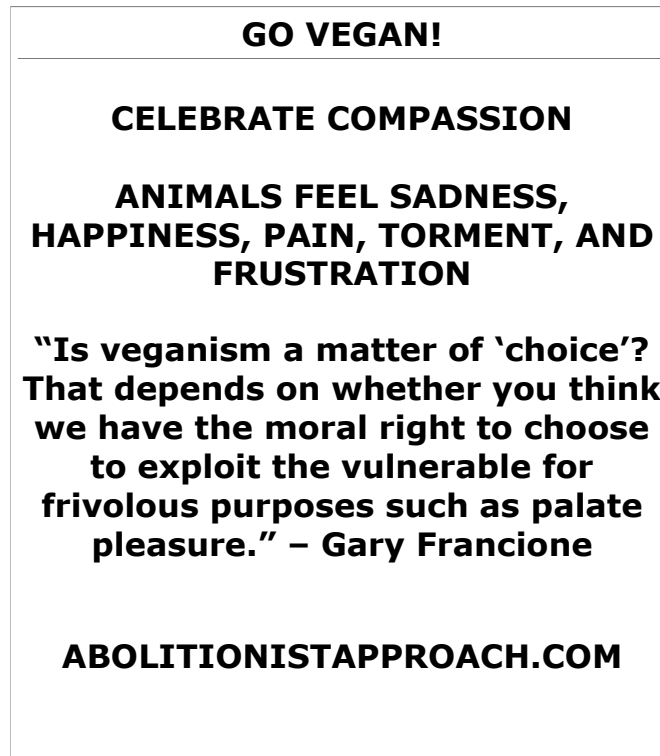
Clarissa drove through Eureka, South on Fourth Street to the Golden Harvest, a vegan friendly diner, but it was closed when they got there. Clarissa apologized and asked if Cypress wanted to go to the co-op and pick-up some groceries to cook breakfast at her house. "I'll make you breakfast," she said. "I'm known for my killer home fries."

"Sounds good," Cypress dug through her messenger bag for her roll of three inch circular stickers showing a bloody cow's head surrounded by the words, "MEAT IS MURDER – DAIRY IS RAPE," and jammed the roll in the front pocket of her hooded sweatshirt.

"Sorry again about it being closed," Clarissa said as she pulled into the parking lot. "I think me making you breakfast will be more fun, anyways."

"I'm excited," Cypress jerked out a wad of quarter-page, home-made fliers from

her messenger bag:



Cypress told Clarissa she'd meet her inside as she slipped a flier under the windshield of the car parked in front of the planter next to them. Clarissa asked her what she was doing and Cypress told her that she made these fliers to put on cars when she went to grocery stores. She figured if she put them on at least twenty-five cars or so every time she went grocery shopping that maybe one or two people would consider veganism or at least go to the website. “It's worth it,” she said. “Only takes like five minutes.”

Clarissa scanned the flyer, “Is this legal?” Scrunching her face, Clarissa handed the flier back to Cypress. “I mean, I'm sure it is, but it seems a little much don't you think?”

“By any means necessary, right?”

“Sure.”

“Want to help?”

“I’ll just meet you inside.”

Cypress shrugged and moved on to the next car as Clarissa grabbed a shopping cart and power-walked through the sliding doors into the Eureka Co-Op. When Cypress ran out of fliers after covering about half the parking lot, a guy asked her if she'd put a flier on his car.

“What's all this about?” he asked, loading bags into his trunk.

“Veganism. No animal products,” she said.

He smiled and asked what her name was.

“Jericho,” she said.

“Cool name,” he said.

“This your website?”

“No. Gary Francione.”

“Who's that?”

“Animal rights lawyer.”

“Okay. Okay. Sure.” He closed his trunk and wheeled his cart into the return.

“You go to school here?”

“No,” she said.

“You live in Eureka?”

“No,” she said. “Sorry. I gotta go. But go vegan. It's the right thing to do.”

“Sure. Yeah. Okay.” He winked at her. “I’ll check out your website, Jericho. I’ll



look at it.”

“Thanks. See ya around,” Cypress said and the guy said something as she skipped into the co-op and scanned the aisles until she found Clarissa snapping up a container of Earth Balance butter spread from the refrigerated section. Clarissa smiled and asked Cypress how the flyering went. “That's got palm oil in it.” Cypress took the container of Earth Balance from the cart and held the side showing the ingredients toward Clarissa.

“So?”

“Palm oil is usually sourced from these behemoth, rain forest plantations where, like, orangutans are losing their habitats and dying off. It's really fucked. Palm oil is usually called vegetable oil on labels. It's how they hide it. I can't eat that stuff.”

“This is a good brand, though. I'm sure they're doing it ethically.”

“I don't know about that.” Cypress took the roll of stickers from her front pocket and peeled one off and stuck it on a gallon of milk in the refrigerator.

“What's that sticker?” Clarissa asked.

“I make these in two-thousand sticker rolls online.” Cypress smacked stickers on three more milk jugs.

The Earth Balance container bounced on the bottom of the cart as Clarissa said, “I don't know if I can do this, Cypress.”

“It's fine. I'll do it.”

“I mean, this,” she said, swinging her hand at her side. “I can't do all this stuff. The stickers and the palm oil and the flyers. I'm sorry.”

“It's okay. It's just habit. I'm sorry.” Cypress pushed the sticker roll back into the

front pocket of her hooded sweater. “I won't do it anymore. Okay?”

“I don't mean to be like, you know?”

“Let's go have breakfast. It's fine.” Cypress thought she almost lost her. She walked behind Clarissa toward the vegetables wondering how she could run her tongue down the insides of Clarissa's pencil arms and mow over the prickly blonde hairs.

She turned back at Cypress as she dropped a sack of organic red potatoes in the cart and said, “I didn't mean to be bossy. I'm just not used to people being so aggressive about it.”

“About veganism?”

“Yeah. I mean, I don't want to be like an extremist.”

“It's fine.”

“I just think people should do what they want to do,” Clarissa said and asked if Cypress would grab some bananas and apples for a fruit salad.

The cashier knew Clarissa by name and asked her how things were going at Planned Parenthood. Cypress bagged the groceries while they chatted about their jobs. In the car, Clarissa said the cashier had a really sexy tattoo of a mermaid on her thigh. Cypress smiled and nodded and Clarissa said, “But, I really, really like the redwood tree tattooed on your forearm.”

“Thanks. I got it after I got my ecology degree and also in support of Richardson Grove.”

Clarissa exhaled and asked Cypress if she needed cigarettes.

“They want to widen the 101 and cut down a bunch of old growth redwoods so

bigger trucks can get up here. They say they can't build a Walmart until the 101 is wider for the trucks. It's fucking crazy, right?"

They stopped at the gas station by Clarissa's house and Cypress bought a tall bottle of Great White and a pack of cigarettes while Clarissa sat in the car. Through the gas station windows, Cypress could see Clarissa thumbing furiously into her iPhone behind the steering wheel.

## Chapter 5

## Bakery 138

After waiting at the corner for about five minutes Denise popped her head out from behind the New Roman Bakery door and waved me inside, her pink hair glistening under the halogen bulb over the door. I followed her behind the counter and she palmed the sides of my face and tongue-kissed me. She thanked me for picking her up. "It's kinda scary walking home alone this late. You're really big. Nobody would fuck with you."

"Sure, but I don't think anyone would fuck with you," I eyed the Black Flag bars tattooed on her neck, just under her ear. "How long does it take to close?"

"I'm almost done. Do you want a donut? Take whatever you want," she looked over the receipts and stuffed a couple in her pocket. She opened the register, counted the money, and set some cash to the side on the counter, jamming the remaining money in a zipper bag. "I like your shirt. I love Danzig."

"Me too. *We are 138* is my favorite song." The rows of donuts, bagels, cakes, and breads behind the glass looked like perfect plastic imitation foods for photographers.

"My ex had the sexiest devil-lock," she said. "He was obsessed with The Misfits. He had the fucking sexiest sleeves. A bunch of traditional—like sailor—tattoos. He has a crimson skull tattooed on his hand. I want one of those on my shoulder. You would look really sexy with tattoos—sleeves."

"Yeah—thanks. You know the song—*We are 138*—is about like being able to kill without emotion? Like being a robot. No feelings. That's pretty tight, I think, but Danzig

is the only one who knows the true meaning."

"I gotta drop this in the safe. Come on." She crammed the money left on the counter into her back pocket and stuck the zipper bag under her arm.

"Aren't you worried you'll get caught?"

She shook her head, "Caught?" Her ass bobbed in the white pants she wore as she pushed through the doors to the back where the baking was done and the back office was located.

"This is cool," I said. "They make everything here?"

"Yeah. He comes in really early and makes everything."

"Do you like working here now that you've been here a little while?"

"Yeah. All the other girls are really cool," she said and bent over in front of an opened steel container bolted to the floor and dropped the zipper bag inside. The latch crunched when she secured the lid over the top.

"It's already open like that?"

"He leaves it open. After we lock it he's the only one who can open it again. Nobody has the combination or whatever."

I nodded.

"Want to hear something crazy? This girl—Jennifer—she told me that this girl got killed and raped here like ten years ago. She was closing—like me—and it happened. Never got solved. They think it's haunted now. So far I haven't seen anything, but I've heard some noises. Jennifer said people have seen like lights flickering and stuff moving or whatever."

"Fuck. Are you scared?"

"No. Come on," she punched my arm and snatched my hand, leading me past the ovens and racks of unbaked breads draped in plastic toward a bathroom the size of a broom closet. She scooted me around, my back to the toilet. "Sit."

She straddled my lap and tongue-kissed me, her fingers digging into my skull. She left the door to the bathroom wide open and I looked at the bakery behind her, the dim light splashing over the tables and mixers and silver concrete floor, imagining things flying around, lights flickering, a murder taking place.

I broke away, "We should get going."

She kissed me again, her tongue pushing further into my mouth, gyrating against all the insides of my teeth.

I broke away again, "Let's go. I want to show you something."

"What?"

"A haunted house."

"Where?"

"Not far from here. Maybe five or six blocks."

"Really? I didn't know about that."

"It's pretty famous, I think."

She pushed herself up, both hands on my chest, and side-nodded toward the doors leading back into the front store of the bakery.

On the way out of the store front, she fills a large pink box with a couple dozen donuts and plops it on the counter, "Take this." The box matched her hair and lips.

The donut box bounced in my hands as she walked beside me through Mid Town, the top of her head barely as high as my shoulder. I thought she looked like a science fiction factory worker with the white shoes, pants, and shirt paired with her pink hair, scattered tattoos on her forearms, and neon make-up. Through the opening in the front of her shirt two birds peeked out, tattooed on her chest. The birds puffed up when she inhaled. I'd heard tattoos hurt worse on skinny people. I wanted to ask her about it, but she mostly stared at the night sky for the first two blocks or so until she asked where the house was located.

"Near twenty-third and H."

"You're like a really good guy aren't you?"

"I guess—I don't know. Define good."

She cocked her head back and laughed, "My grandmother would probably fall in love with you."

Lion statues roared at us silently from both sides of the steps leading up to the front porch of the haunted house. A black rod-iron fence bordered the property and the house stood three stories or more from the lot of weeds and dirt. "It looks Victorian," she said and hocked a loogie over the fence. She jammed her foot between the rod-iron bars and pushed her petite body up and over the fence, crouching after she landed. "Let's check it out," she whispered. "Come on."

"I don't know," I said, drumming my thumbs on the donut box. "Someone might

see us."

"You said it's haunted. I want to see."

"It is. A family was murdered here a while ago."

"I'm going," she said and scuttered up the steps between the lions onto the porch and pressed her face against one of the windows. "I see something—a light."

"You see a light?"

"It's flickering. I'm gonna go inside." She placed her hands flat on the glass and pushed up, bowing her torso inwards like a scoop. "I can't get it. Help me."

"Fuck. Hold on." The fence rocked as I oozed over the top and scratched my exposed belly on the spear ends of the rod-iron bars. The donut box watched from the sidewalk while I licked my thumb and rubbed the red mark on my belly after falling over onto my side into the crabgrass.

"It's stuck," she walked down the steps and waited while I pushed myself to my feet. "Let's go around back. There's something in there."

"A squatter—maybe," I panted and laced my fingers on top of my head, inhaling and exhaling slowly.

"Maybe. I want to get inside. There's gotta be a way."

We crept around to the dark, backside of the house, and checked all the windows and doors for an opening inside.

"They all look painted shut," I said. "I don't think we can get in."

"I can still see the light," she said, her face pressed against the window closest to the back door. "It's flashing."



"Maybe someone is watching T.V.?"

"No. It's like a light—white or blue." Weeds crunched under her shoes as she approached a window near the darkest end of the house. "I'm gonna kick it in. Nobody'll see me."

"Don't do that." I rubbed my eyes and spun around checking for spectators, good samaratins. "I think a cop drove by."

"So? I'll go in and come around and let you in through the door."

"I don't want to go in. It's a bad idea. What if someone's in there?"

"Fuck 'em."

"I'm just not up for it. We should go back to your apartment—watch a movie—eat those donuts. I'm tired."

"You can do whatever you want—John. I'm going in. My ex would have been the first one inside already. We used to do this all the time." She dropped down onto her ass and the glass swooshed after she kicked through the window. "Get me a stick."

I ripped a branch from a tree in the corner of the yard and jogged over to her. With the stick she cleared the bits of glass from around the window frame and slipped inside the basement like a rubber snake. "I can't see anything," she said. "It's real fucking dark in here. Like—pitch black."

After kneeling near the window, I picked up a bit of glass and flicked it away, "I know a cool place we can check out if you want. But it's kinda far. We should go now if you want to go."

"Yeah?" Her face appeared at the window and I almost tumbled over. She

laughed. "You're so scared of everything, aren't you? Now I'm seeing your true colors—your stripes. Maybe I should be the one walking you home from work. Help me out." I held her hand as she pushed through the opening and into the yard. "Where's this place? What is it?"

"A train bridge. By the river. It's by the train station."

"Never been there. That's kinda far—the river. We can walk?"

"Yeah."

Her tongue burned electric in my mouth when she kissed me before we walked to the other end of the yard where she noticed an opening in the fence line where the rod-iron bars had been bent far enough apart for us to pass. The donuts were waiting for us around the corner, facing the roaring lions, and I considered going back and leaving a donut for each of them right in their frozen, open mouths.

We walked East toward the river, keeping pace with each other, occasionally I would slow down to watch her ass. On the third block I plopped the donut box on the sidewalk and lifted her up onto my right shoulder. "You're like a bird now. You could sit up there and feed me snacks," I said.

She laughed, "I could feed you those donuts."

"I don't need anymore donuts—probably, like, ever."

"I'd eat donuts for every meal if I could. Maybe I will now that I work in a bakery," she slid off my shoulder, slipping through my hands, and back to the sidewalk. "You probably shouldn't have any donuts," she chuckled. "You should start going to the

gym. You would look so hot if you were toned and muscular. My ex had a six pack. We could work out together."

"Maybe," I said and picked up the donuts.

She jog-walked to the corner and over the crosswalk and stopped across the street.

"There's this new girl that started this week," she said after I caught up to her.

"She has 'never trust a junkie' tattooed on her arm. She invited me to a party this weekend."

"That's wild."

"She's not a junkie anymore."

"There's another girl—Sarina—that wants to have sex with me, too. You would like her. She has big tits. You could watch us."

"I don't know. Like—how does that work?"

"You can't touch her—just watch us. She has such nice cleavage. I wish I had cleavage."

"You're beautiful."

"I think I'll get implants when I'm older."

"Why?"

"I want to have c-cups," she said and smiled. "You wouldn't like that? If you were married to me and I had huge tits?"

"Sure. I guess. I like natural."

"Tattoos aren't natural."

"I don't have any," I said. "I don't know if I'll ever have any."

"You would look so good with tattoos—like—so tough."

I laughed.

"Are you afraid of the needle?"

"No. I'm not afraid of anything except aliens."

"Aliens aren't real. You're afraid of everything. You wouldn't even have sex with me at work."

"It's not that. I'm just into regular sex," I said. "I'm not afraid. We can do it next time."

"You're kind of a big pussy I'm finding out."

The donut box busted open after I dropped it on the sidewalk. I whipped out a pocket knife and jammed the blade into the rear tire of a white car parked next to the sidewalk. As air hissed free, I slipped the knife back into my pocket.

"What the fuck? Why—"

"I'm not afraid of shit," I snarled and hocked a loogie.

She bent over and scooped the donuts back into the box. "We should go," she coughed and handed me the box. "I want to stop at that store over there," she nodded to a liquor store a block over and across the street.

The donut box rested on the ground as we stood outside of the liquor store. "Can you buy me a beer? I need cigarettes, too. Can you spot me?" She asked.

I squinted and looked over my shoulder.

"I'm not twenty-one. You know that," she hocked a loogie into the street.

"I'm just not into buying beer for people. Just buy the cigarettes."

"Why?"

"I don't drink."

"You don't drink?"

"I'm straight-edge."

She laughed, "Are you fucking serious? I had no idea. You never said anything the last three weeks. You didn't say anything all those other times I was drinking and shit.

You're edge? That's so fucking funny."

"I'm just not into drinking. Sorry."

"Are you a crazy vegan, too?"

"I'm a vegetarian," I winced.

"I had no idea."

"It never came up."

"Okay—so, come on. I'll pay you back. I just want some Camels and a tall can. Maybe some beef jerky, too."

I covered my mouth with the palm of my hand and dragged it down over my lips and chin, feeling the stubble scrape against the insides of my fingers, and said, "What about that money you took?"

"I need it for something else."

"For what?"

"Don't worry about it. Are you down or not?"

I shook my head and jammed my hands in my pockets and walked into the liquor

store.

The bell chimed and the cashier watched me scan the refrigerated beer. I picked a Mickey's tall can. I'd seen her drink Mickey's before.

"Thank—you," she said and smiled with only one side of her mouth after I handed her the black plastic sack with the tall can and a pack of Camels.

"Sure."

"How long you've been edge? Vegetarian?" She cracked open the beer, wrapped the black plastic sack around it, and sipped the beer that spilled over the opening into the top part of the can.

"A while."

"But you had sex with me? I thought no casual sex?"

"I don't follow that one."

She smirked, opening the cigarettes, tossing the cellophane and foil into the gutter, and pulled a cigarette from her pack with her lips holding the box close to her mouth. "There's a lighter in my back pocket. Can you get it?"

Her ass, soft as a sponge, smashed against my fingers as I dug the lighter free from her pants. I lit her cigarette and she slipped the pack of Camels into her front pocket, took the lighter from me, and nodded. "So how much further to the bridge?"

"Not too much," I said. "We should keep moving." I picked up the donut box with both hands and we crossed the street, heading East. She told me a rockabilly guy had been coming into her work every day for the past week. She said his name is Rocky.

"What kind of name is that?" I laughed.

"He wants me to see his band play. He's pretty hot. He has a bunch of tattoos— and a pompadour."

"Fuckkkkk—"

"He drives a fucking sick car. So, shut up."

"Maybe you should go see his band," I said and walked ahead of her down another block. "Maybe you should be his girlfriend and ride in his sick car."

"Don't be that way," she jogged right up next to me, slugged from her beer, and dragged on her cigarette, exhaling in my face.

"Whatever. I'm going to start a hardcore band."

"That's cool. You should play bass, though. You probably wouldn't be a good singer."

"Thanks."

"I gotta tell you a secret," she frowned and tossed her cigarette into the street.

"Yeah?"

"I totally thought I was meeting someone else when we met. My friend told me I was supposed to meet this other guy—this really hot guy—he's one of your friends, I think. She got the names mixed up. I was kind of bummed when we met at that show a few weeks ago. I'm not gonna lie. But, like, I'm happy now about it now—obviously."

"So, you weren't into me at first? But, you fucked me on that first night. I'm confused."

"I was into you after like five minutes of talking to you. That's why I fucked you. I was just—like—shocked at first. You know?"

"I don't know—like, I'm really confused about what you're saying right now, but—like—while we're talking openly, honestly—why do we have to listen to Bright Eyes—why do we have to listen to him when we fuck? I never heard Bright Eyes until the last three weeks—"

"Bright Eyes makes the sex more emotional. He cries in concert. He's beautiful. I won't have sex without him playing," she said.

"I think it's bullshit," I pulled a donut from the box and chucked it at a parked car. The donut exploded against the windshield.

She reached into the box and snatched a jelly donut and crushed it in her hand, the insides dripping through her fingers like red ectoplasm. Laughing, she smeared the donut on the passenger window of another car parked along the sidewalk.

"This car," I nodded to a black Mercedes. The alarm screamed and headlights flashed as donuts scattered everywhere after I overturned the box above the hood. We pressed and crushed the donuts into the black paint with our four hands collectively, the red and blue goo smearing everywhere. She poured her beer over the car just before we sprinted down the street side by side.

After running four or five blocks the car alarm dissipated and I stopped near a garden hose in the front yard of a four-plex. I washed her hands and my hands and drank from the house, panting, gasping.

"That's so gross," she said. "You shouldn't drink that."

"I'm—so—thirsty."



"I don't like tap water. I can't drink it. Tastes like rust."

"I don't—know," I drank more from the hose and stood up after turning off the nozzle. "The river is just another block. There's the train station," I pointed in the direction of the massive brick complex. "We gotta go through the parking lot—down there."

After passing through the mostly vacant train station parking lot under street lights, we hopped a fence and crossed through the darkness, tromping over gravel, to the first cross-tie at the edge of the train bridge that stretched across the river. I grabbed her at the waist and pulled her close to my torso, "It's beautiful, right?"

"Yeah. It's cool."

"You don't like it?"

"I like it."

"I love how quiet it is—relaxed. "

"Are we going to cross it?"

"What?"

"Cross the bridge."

"A train might come—or we could fall through between the cross-ties. It's like fifty feet down to the river."

"We won't fall. The train is still at the station. We just gotta hurry."

"You're insane," I said and she pulled away from me and skipped over the first few cross-ties on the bridge. "Fuck. Fuck! Be careful!"

"Are you coming? Hurry up. You gotta come. It's amazing." She turned away and began hopping effortlessly from beam to beam over the two foot gaps.

The train seemed small as it sat parked at the station a hundred yards away. She laughed manically while she glided closer to the end of the bridge. Arms forward like a drunken mummy, I stumbled over the first few cross-ties, feeling vibrations shoot up to my knees. I had to follow her so I kept my eyes down as I moved closer to her and watched the river scroll by, waiting and rippling, shining like an onyx blanket.

## Chapter 6

### Heathens

Not long after my first communion, I'd decided I wanted to become a Catholic priest. More specifically, I wanted to be an exorcist. I'd seen all the movies. It was my calling.

Mass every Sunday with my mom and sister. Catechism once a week. Hanging around St. Christopher's parish with other kids from the church, riding our skateboards up and down the wheel chair ramp on the side of the brick building. We drank sodas from the Quick Stop at the corner and hocked loogies in the direction of the kids who smoked cigarettes and sipped stolen beers around the ruins of the burned-down Sego milk plant across the street.

Now, I was almost 12 and my confirmation was approaching and the priest, Father White, had come over for dinner. He shook my hand and said hello and dropped to one knee and handed me a Bible, heavy and blue. He smiled and praised my mom for all the crosses hung around the house, over entryways and windows.

“Where is your husband?” Father White asked my mom.

“Oh, he's only here on the weekends,” my mom said and motioned for everyone to step into the kitchen. “Would you like something to drink? We have iced tea, Coke, beer.”

“A beer would be spectacular,” he said and looked toward me and smiled, his eyes like cats eyes.

“Joey, can you get a beer for Father White,” my mom said.

I hurried into the garage to the beer refrigerator and plucked a Budweiser from my father's collection. I visualized myself working with Father White, wearing all black and visiting people's houses for dinner.

We sat around the kitchen table and my mom had served us some kind of meat, probably baked chicken, and mashed potatoes, salad, Caesar salad, I think, and Father White prepped my mom for the confirmation ceremony that I would be going through in the next couple of months, telling her in his Irish accent what she might expect. He shoved meat and potatoes into his mouth and drank the beer and roared about how proud he was of me for doing all sorts of work around the church. I sipped the soda my mom had poured into a wine glass for me and watched the pink skin on his face come together and apart like an accordion as he chewed and swallowed and licked the food bits from his fingers.

I remember my mom serving him a second or third serving of everything, but the salad, and he told her in detail about how I'd helped him prep for mass several times and all the days I'd volunteered to clean up after catechism and how the money I'd helped raise going door to door selling candy bars had helped the church buy needed supplies.

“You know,” Father White said, “if Joey here is really considering the priesthood, I could help him. I know a lot of people.”

“He talks about it all the time,” my mom said.

“We are also very appreciative of all the work you have been doing for the church,” he said to my mom. “You have been a fantastic help to us all.”

“Thank you,” my mom said.

“When the time comes, I could write Joey a recommendation, you know,” Father White said and shoved food into his mouth. “Not enough young men are doing gods work these days. These are dark days. Young men lack faith now. These are troubling times. They lack gumption.”

My mom nodded and he said some other things I forget and he reached over the table and patted my hair, his hand palming the entirety of the top half of my head.

After dinner, my mom and sister and I walked him to the door and he told me I would make a fine priest some day. Father White's loose bulldog face smiled and he waved to me and walked around the side of his car and climbed inside. I watched him pull away from the curb.

A couple weeks later something happened and my mom quit the church. She quit the religion. Our family quit, she said to me and my sister. We prodded at her, but she wouldn't say why we wouldn't return to church.

She started hosting women's empowerment group meetings at our house a couple nights a week. For the first couple meetings, my sister and I spied on the women's empowerment group from the stairs. They sat around our living room, drinking wine, eating and complaining, crying and hugging, talking about angels and crystals and their lives.

One afternoon, I asked my mom about the confirmation. I told her I wanted to go.

“I don't think so,” she said.

“Why?”

“It's not a good idea,” she said.

“I want to get confirmed,” I said. “I want to be a priest. I can't be a priest if I don't get confirmed.”

“I don't want you to go. I don't want you to be part of that church. Nobody in this family is going back to that church. Do you understand? Do you hear what I am saying?”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because we're not going back!” She screamed.

“You're a bitch,” I said to her. “You don't care about me. You don't care about anything, but your stupid women's group.”

I remember running down the hall and toward the door to the garage and feeling afraid and strong paradoxically for calling my mom a bitch. I slammed the door behind me and sprinted toward my bike on the driveway and rode through town until dark. After I returned, my mom ignored me when I walked through the hall and kitchen and upstairs to my bedroom.

My father returned home eventually on a Friday night. He tooted around in the garage, drinking beer. I stood behind him, helping him sort nuts and bolts and nails and screws into empty coffee cans.

“Hand me that can,” he turned and pointed across the garage.

“Dad, I need to ask you something,” I said.

“Get some hustle,” he said and coughed. “You gotta move faster. Nobody wants a guy who moves like that.”

I grabbed the coffee can and it slipped from my hands and fell to the concrete floor.

“Jesus Christ,” my dad said. “Just give it to me.”

I picked up the coffee can and he ripped it from my hands.

“Dad.”

“What?”

“Can I go to the church. Mom said I can't go. She won't let me go. My confirmation is coming up,” I said to him. “I need to be confirmed to become a priest.”

He squinted and held his bottled beer close to his lips and swigged. “Do what your mom says. Come on, Joey. Get with the program.”

“If I don't get confirmed, I can't be a priest. I probably can't go back.”

“Why would you want to be a priest?”

“I want to be an exorcist. I want to do exorcisms.”

“Joey, you dance with the devil and you're gonna get burned,” he said and handed me a coffee can he had half filled with screws. “Put this over there. By the other ones,” he said and nodded toward a shelf on the other end of the garage where he kept other sorted nuts and bolts and screws and nails.

At this point, I'd been absent from St. Christopher's parish for nearly six weeks. I decided I would go on my own, in secret.

In the afternoons, I would ride my bike to St. Christopher's parish, but Father White would be unavailable or busy when I tried to visit him. I attended a few masses on my own, telling my mom I was going on a bike ride. I tried to speak with the priest after each mass, but he would brush me off. Eventually, on the third or fourth time I'd attended, I caught Father White off guard, as he walked down the middle aisle.

“Father White,” I said and he stopped mid-stride, turned and looked down, his eyes burning a hole through my head. “I have been trying to talk to you,” I said. “Why are you ignoring me? Why are you—”

“Son, you should leave. You should not return to this church.”

“Why?”

“You are not welcome at this parish. Please, go,” he said and bullfrogs crept up my throat. “God be with you,” he said and touched my shoulder.

“I’ve tried to see you,” I said. “I wanted to talk to you. I want to be a priest like you. I want to stay in the church. I know my mom quit. Please let me stay.”

The priest said nothing.

I looked around and all the people in the church were gathering their things, roaming about, talking with each other and laughing. Other kids I’d known were gathered in a circle at the other end of the church, all dressed in shirts and ties and dresses and skirts.

“Please,” I said.

He said nothing and shook his head and walked through me. He approached a group of people and they all talked. I spun around with my mouth open and started to cry. I stood invisible, watching a boy enter the confessional.

My face cold and dripping, I staggered out of the church and rode my bike around town until dark, thinking about all the time I’d spent doing things for the church, thinking about how proud everyone was when I’d told them I wanted to become a priest.

I remembered the big blue Bible the priest gave me and how I’d stashed it under



my bed after my mom told me not to go back to the church. I rode home and went straight to my room and grabbed the Bible. I held the Bible in my hands, thinking how heavy it was, and carried the book outside and down to the curb where the trash can had been moved for the morning pick up. Water bounced off the lid and onto my face and into my mouth when I popped it open. I gagged, almost vomiting, before shoving the bible under the black trash bag closest to the top.

Through my bedroom window I stared at the olive green garbage can and noticed how it was illuminated under the street light as it waited for the garbage truck that came every Monday morning after I'd left for school. Before I fell asleep, I considered going back for the Bible. Maybe I could still be a priest. Maybe I could find another church. I realized, though, as I drifted away, that I'd missed my confirmation.

Images of the blue bible rotting away in the county dump haunted me for weeks until I eventually made new friends and forgot about becoming an exorcist priest and forgot about St. Christopher's parish aside from the occasional morning when I rode by and noticed the crowd of people gathering around outside after mass, milling around and looking tired, confused.

Sometime after I started high school, the parish moved to the outskirts of town. The church I'd attended became some sort of outreach center for pregnant women and Father White vanished or moved or died.

And, one night when I was drinking beer with a couple of guys in a vineyard near Lodi I saw my first UFO hovering over the rows of grapes. The black triangle in the night blocked out the moon. We all dropped our beers and stood silent.