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An unnamed God.

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AN UNNAMED GOD

By

Luke Cash Mansfield
B.A., University of Louisville, 2012

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts
In English

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December 2015

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A Thesis Approved on

November 20, 2015

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ABSTRACT

AN UNNAMED GOD

Luke C. Mansfield

November 20, 2015

This creative thesis is the story of a man returning home at the behest of a friend who is undergoing great difficulties in her life. While Docent Americana ostensibly travels home to help his friend, he is also trying to cope with challenges in his own life. He suffers from bipolar disorder and although he is receiving treatment for it the stresses of the experience trigger a manic episode that threatens his personal stability and his relationships with those around him. *An Unnamed God* is set in western Kentucky, affording a glimpse at the slow decay of rural communities as job opportunities decline due to factory relocations and advanced farming techniques. Docent's brother, Shitstorm, has fallen prey to the decreased opportunities and, like many in rural America, has turned to the manufacture and use of methamphetamine.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER 1.....	1
CHAPTER 2.....	3
CHAPTER 3.....	10
CHAPTER 4.....	16
CHAPTER 5.....	21
CHAPTER 6.....	23
CHAPTER 7.....	27
CHAPTER 8.....	31
CHAPTER 9.....	34
CHAPTER 10.....	38
CHAPTER 11.....	47
CHAPTER 12.....	50
CHAPTER 13.....	66
CHAPTER 14.....	76
CHAPTER 15.....	80
CURRICULUM VITA.....	88

CHAPTER 1

You aren't Tyrannosaurus K Gunship, and that frustrates you. Instead, you, Docent Americana, imagine TK Gunship's fingers gliding across your computer's keyboard with purpose, delivering purposeful strokes to fill the screen with prose as Cpt. Bunny Blue and Dr. Zea sit on the blue couch discussing Dr. Zea's new boyfriend. *A shame, you think, that I never asked her to please "Rock me, Dr. Zea."* If Tyrannosaurus K Gunship were here he would ask, gleaming eyes and moist lips and shoulders back, broad as barn beams, but he isn't – it's just you. It's weird to you that three people can be in a living room and as long as one of them has a computer or a TV they are omitted from the conversation. Not that it matters; Cpt. Bunny Blue won't hook you up with Dr. Zea anyway. *I don't deserve her, I guess, you think* and as you do your phone buzzes and because it's after ten P.M. you know it's not good because nothing good happens after ten P.M. anymore.

The phone vibrates a second time and you read the messages and you're correct; it is not anything good. The screen, backlit blue, spells out in black text that Lady Trebleclef is in despair and there is nothing she can do to fix it. She's crying; she has given up on life and she tells you that her beautiful brown eyes and curly blonde locks should be buried out by the lake

where the two of you used to hang out when you were still young enough to think that everyone was wrong and that life wasn't capricious.

You read the messages aloud so Cpt. Bunny Blue and Dr. Zea can hear: "All I can think about is sleep. There's nothing else I want. I'll never have my life back. I just want to go to sleep and never wake up again.' Fuck - what should I do? Should I go down there? I mean..."

"I don't know - It's probably nothing, you know?" Cpt. Bunny Blue says and you focus on her, make the conversation yours and hers while Dr. Zea is moved outside, shunted aside. Part of you knows this; part of you has intent in this conversation beyond the obvious, and that part of you is named Tyrannosaurus K Gunship, and even in somnolence he grins wide and flicks his tongue across his teeth and watches Dr. Zea disappear into the sofa. TK Gunship knows all the tricks, and when it is decided that the only proper thing to do is to go to Western Kentucky, it is TK Gunship that grabs your backpack and shoves your laptop and clothes into it, that checks to make sure that Cpt. Bunny Blue will be okay without you there and casts one last sidelong glance at Dr. Zea's breasts and her reddish maroon hair and straight bangs, trying to read where you are in her eyes.

It is Tyrannosaurus K Gunship who turns the ignition until the engine fires, and it is Tyrannosaurus K Gunship who guns the car down shadowy tree lined roads and swerves up the onramp and onto the interstate, all the while humming Possum Kingdom.

CHAPTER 2

home is western Kentucky; *Home* is Louisville. The difference is the shadows, really – at *home* you know who makes the shadows, and they are named Grandfather and Father and Shitstorm. In Louisville the shadows fall on everyone as if to say that no one is important except for Cassius Clay (and Secretariat and Aristides) but especially except for Muhammad Ali. This is why you love Louisville – this is why you hate going home.

The car drags you home though, purring now on the interstate, and the weather seems to know you need to *get home* and so the rain stops and you flick the fog lights on and slice the rest of the way *home* to where you grow up with Cpt. Bunny Blue and where your life begins to intertwine with TK Gunship and Lady Trebleclef.

Lady Trebleclef arrives in 2001 a chubby brunette, her hair as yet unbleached, with a bubbly personality and a way of inviting herself into every conversation. You hate her for about five hours until she suggests you go swimming and you watch her breasts try to buoy up to the top of the water. After that, you're love with her even if it's just an obsessive tic. It is with despair, then, that when you climb out of the warm green waters of

Kentucky Lake onto the metal wrapped dock you see Chester de Apricorn leaning over to clasp her hand and pull her up onto the same dock.

You spend a lot of summer nights on the dock your grandfather built. You take Cpt. Bunny Blue down there and spread her open the night you take her virginity, and afterwards you sit and stare upwards at the stars and smoke a cigarette until she says "I love you."

That's your cue, then, to flick your smoke into the water and lean over her, to block out the stars and to run your tongue along her lips and to say it back; to say that word that everyone struggles to define; to convey a feeling of eternity and sleepless nights and early morning coffee and promises that one day there'll be a hotel, and then an apartment, and then a house, and then children, then teenagers who sit on docks and that you will never, ever leave her. It is easier to convey this with a kiss than words, but you do both, and then you sit back up and pull your baggy out of your pocket. There are papers – Zig Zags – but instead you pack the bowl that you brought, a metal tube wrapped in porcelain and painted with peace signs, and you hold it out to her and flick your lighter so she can take the first hit. She coughs, and you take a hit and cough yourself, passing it back and forth until the pain between her legs numbs and you fuck her again, hard this time, fast, without a condom and when it's almost over you pull out and angle it towards the water and afterwards you curl up next to her and stare at the sky as your detritus pulls away from the dock with the waves.

It is on this dock that you bury your head in hands and cry when she leaves you. It is on this dock that you snort a line of ecstasy and are surprised when nothing happens. It is on this dock that you patch your heart again and again and build layers around it. When you leave this dock for the last time, you leave it with all of TK Gunship's secrets in your car.

It is on the dock that you watch as Lady Trebleclef flirts with Chester de Apricorn, and when the night comes that she and Chester disappear into his Mustang, the water is cool and inviting and TK Gunship plunges into it with a lit cigarette hanging from his lip and a bottle of bourbon in his hand. He treads water and drinks and pulls a cigarette out of the pack on the dock, lights it with almost dry hands, and smokes it until he flicks it wrong, hits the spot where a single drop of water has weakened the paper and the cigarette breaks. Then he floats on his back, lets the closed bottle float next to him.

"Docent? Where are you?" It's Lady Trebleclef – you can always count on her to worry, and that's what TK Gunship is doing; worrying her with his teeth until her sympathy comes gushing out and brings with it love and lust. He does all this even though he doesn't have a name yet, this relentless ticking inside you. Seconds after you hear her call your name, you hear her splash into the water and then an arm is around you, pulling you towards the dock but something is wrong; there is no softness. The arm is hard, bound in muscle, and TK Gunship sighs and subsides and you climb out of the water and wrap yourself in a towel and talk about Virginia.

Virginia is where Lady Trebleclef is from, and when she calls you at six A.M. to ask you to drive her there so she can get a driver's license because Kentucky will only give her a permit you light your ignition and the four of you, Chester de Apricorn and Lady Trebleclef and Docent Americana and Tyrannosaurus K Gunship drift down the Western Kentucky Parkway listening to Nirvana and Tool. It's at a gas station on the Bluegrass Parkway that Chester de Apricorn tells you.

"I'm going into the Marines" and he pauses, watches your eyes, then continues "in September. September the eighth."

"The Marines? Why the hell are you going into the Marines?" You say it without heat.

"Because," and here you see those inviting blue eyes turn gray and cold and you almost tremble, "I want to fight. I want to be strong and brave and I want to know what I'm capable of as a man."

"Does Lady know?" They spend most of their time together since they've started screwing – you've been thrust into a role you find strange, the elder confidante.

He shakes his head. "Not yet. I was figuring on telling her tomorrow but shit man, I felt like I had to tell someone."

You nod your head – you've had that compulsion before.

"The Marine Corps." You sound it out to yourself, tumbling your mind through the words and the advertisements and the movies. "I don't know that that's a good idea," and you're going to try to talk him out of it but Lady

Trebleclef appears and that's the end of the conversation until you hit the Bluegrass Parkway and Lady Trebleclef turns the music down.

"What's wrong with you two?"

She asks the same thing another time, as well, maybe on a trip to Paducah or maybe while rocketing around the countryside with a gallon of moonshine, Papa Americana's blend, and her in the passenger seat and Chester de Apricorn in the back seat with a joint lit.

"What's wrong with the two of you?" She asks, and you watch in the rearview mirror as Chester takes the spliff out of his mouth and leans forward to hand it to her.

His response rankles you. "We're in this mood."

"We're in a mood?" Your mouth drips the words out, lets them roll off your tongue and down into the mud-covered floorboard of the car to settle.

"We aren't in a mood. We don't *share* moods. You have a mood. I have a mood. My mood is my mood. Your mood is your mood. You might be feeling the same way I am – but we aren't *in a mood*."

This is the first time you let yourself think on it – Chester idolizes you; Chester finds something fascinating about you and you don't really give a shit how Chester feels right now, and maybe not ever. Chester is pathetic and drawn in by the way your name echoes around town when he is a freshman and you are a senior.

"He's a drug dealer," your teachers say to each other.

“He’s a bad influence,” Cpt. Bunny Blue’s parents say to her, and when the phone rings, it’s the youth leader at your church, and she confirms their knowledge – she knows for a fact that someone who knows someone has met someone who has heard that your dad knows some of the one percenters up around Sturgis and that he uses you to mule drugs in exchange for alcohol, and Cpt. Bunny Blue’s parents ground her for being two minutes late home from school and you don’t get to take her to prom.

Instead of going to prom, you get into a fight with your brother – he’s short and stocky and strong and you’re tall and skinny and drunk and your flannel shirt hangs loose around your shoulders while you scream at him incoherently for fucking this girl a couple years older than you that you used to date and it ends with you face first in the grass, left arm pinned behind your back.

“Had enough?” he asks, and when you stop trying to slip the hold he lets you up and you look up the front yard past the oaks to the white house with blue shutters and there are two shadows – Mama and Papa Americana – backlit in the living room and you’re sure they’re watching the two of you. Brother Americana – Shitstorm Americana – hands you a pill when you’re up, something blue and small, and says “take this, it’ll make you feel better.”

You go into the garage, into the apartment out there that Papa Americana built for his mama, and you stare into the mirror you cracked a week before as drums pound in your head. The drums you’ve heard before; the pattern starts slow and speeds up, and when the drums get too fast, when

they start scaring you, you take the blue pill and a pad of paper and a pen and sneak into the main part of the garage and into your brother's car, a black Celica with dark tinted windows and seats that cradle you like mother's arms or fighter cockpits and you write lines that don't connect, a series of non-sequiturs, until you drift off to sleep.

It's another Celica you drive down Western Kentucky Parkway now, cruise control pushing eighty, when TK Gunship heads to Dosta to save Lady Trebleclef.

CHAPTER 3

Tyrannosaurus K Gunship knows – you know – there is something comforting about smoking a cigarette on the phone, ‘bout drinking and leaning and letting your feet slide slowly out in front of you as your back slides down the wall until you sit in the hallway with your feet pressed against the far side, legs piled in front of you. That there is beauty in fitting grooves and overflowing banks, TK Gunship knows, just as he knows protecting the innocent doesn’t require names like “James Simpson” – that it could as easily be Samsung von Borealis or Flagellator Sundress. The only thing that matters is the surname, really, he thinks – you think – and those only in politics and western Kentucky, and you realize your surname is valuable as Ozymandius when you drive home to rescue Lady Trebleclef.

When Papa Americana explains to you the value of being an Americana and a Kerosene, he’s sitting on the back of his black Dodge sedan, the bags under his eyes trying to burrow in and warm themselves in the top of a beard streaked with gray and brown and black, and smoking a King Edward, taking long draws off the cheap cigar and blowing them out in rings, a vice he indulges when Mama Americana isn’t around, having sworn you to secrecy on the matter.

“Son,” he says, and your left ear leads your face away from the GI Joes – currently engaged in trench warfare against the wicked forces of Cobra – to meet his eyes, “I want you to know – you ever get in trouble, any trouble, make sure you tell ‘em who your daddy and granddaddy are.”

“Yes, daddy,” you say, and that’s the end of the conversation; you go back to playing with Snake Eyes and Lady Jane until a big Ford truck turns into the end of the driveway, tossing up rocks and dust as it comes in a little bit faster than Papa cares for. Papa tells you to quit playing with the GI Joes and ‘get on in the house and tell Shitstorm to come on out.’

The black Dodge sedan becomes yours when you turn 17; Papa finds an old Tucker Torpedo down in Florida and brings it home to restore, the third headlight looming in his imagination, but he’s too attached to the black sedan to let it go and too pragmatic to keep it for himself. It’s in the Dodge that you pick up Cpt. Bunny Blue in the mornings, her mom’s disgust with you poorly veiled, and it’s in the Dodge that you take her out to abandoned cemeteries to fuck, and that you drive her down the ruts to the old dock Granddaddy Kerosene built when the waters came up and half drowned Dosta, leaving church steeples and the roof of the old courthouse above water. The wooden steeples disappear after a couple years, water churning through the submerged buildings below as waves and winds rip at the crosses fishermen use to tie off their boats until each church inaudibly groans and shrugs and falls inwards, the faith they espouse no protection against the passage of time. The courthouse, a concrete cast building in severe deco, as

harsh and overwrought as anything Speer designed for the Fuhrer, still stands in the middle of the bay, orange buoys failing to ward off curious teenage boaters who clamber onto the roof with cans of spray paint to write their names and quotes from Pink Floyd and Bill Hicks.

If you had your druthers you'd meet Lady Trebleclef at the See Rock City dock but instead she texts you when you're halfway there, parked at a pump at the gas station that stands athwart the Western Kentucky Parkway as your car guzzles down gasoline, a good hour or so from Dosta, and says **pick me up over by Dawson – out 62**, and so you divert, hit the off-ramp at mile marker 24 (a suicide ramp, centrifugal pull yearning to lead you off course to the woods cloaked compound of the Imperial Knights of the Ku Klux Klan but the Celica holds steady to the curve) and before long you're in a different dark woods, standing fifteen yards off the main road on a gravel drive as Lady Trebleclef disappears and reappears through a screen door, a crease marking where the top corner bends outwards, and you wonder what happened to it as she carries piles of clothing that she dumps into the trunk of your car.

The first time she reappears after greeting you, a man bounds out after her, his head narrow and pallid and hairless in the dim light coming from the porch, raising his hand to take yours as he says, "Hello, nice to meet you. My name is Taxonomy Grandiose but you can call me Taxi."

"Howdy, I'm Docent." A beat, then you add "Docent Americana," adding the last name as a polite gesture – *surely she's already told him my*

name – as your hands clasp, his hand squeezing tight around yours as though to say *I'm this pack's leader* and you grin, run your tongue along the inside of your lips when you realize this. TK Gunship does not need to alpha wolf.

Taxi proceeds to stand next to you as you smoke a cigarette and watch Lady Trebleclef bouncing in and out of the house so you try to come up with conversation.

“How old're ya, Taxi?”

When he tells you he's 30 years old you ask if he knows Shitstorm and he nods, says “yeah, we went to high school together.”

“Yeah?” you ask, TK asks, on sudden edge as you consider his hands – *soft, the grip of an office worker, good*. He's built like Shitstorm, even – a couple inches shorter than you, a couple inches wider in the shoulders. You want to leave it be but TK doesn't so he opens your mouth and asks, “hang out with him anytime lately?”

He must be stupid because when he opens his mouth he says “Hell yeah. Motherfucker is crazy as shit – we were hanging out all the time before he got ar-“ and that's when TK Gunship hits Taxi's face with your fist, hits him right on the bone that protrudes under his left eye, and he stands there, dumbstruck, slack-jawed, and then raises his hands as if to say *whoa, we don't want no trouble here mister!* but it's too late, Tyrannosaurus K Gunship is trouble and he's already here, and before Taxi remembers how to use his words your other hand balls up and launches into his belly, bending him over at the waist, and as he hacks and gasps for breath his feet push into motion,

tossing him shoulder first into your chest, the difference in weight bowling you over easy as Shitstorm would when the two of you used to tussle, and for a second you are scared, for a second you're reminded of being a kid choking for air with Shitstorm sitting on top of you, his face as red with rage as yours is purple with oxygen deprivation, but Gunship reaches up with your hands and grabs Taxonomy's legs and pulls them towards you, slides them on the gravel until Taxi loses balance and topples over backwards and then TK and you are on him, legs straddling chest as you throw punches that sometimes hit his face, sometimes miss and go pounding into the gravel under his head, and in the background, behind the red on your hands and in your head, you hear something, a voice,

and finally TK snarls and lets you look behind you to see Lady Trebleclef on the porch, clothes scattered on wooden planks as though her arms forgot how to function, surprised by the ferocity in front of her, and her voice on repeat, two words, "Stop stop stop please please please stop stop stop" and you look down at Taxonomy's battered face, blood leaking from one nostril and pouring into his mouth from a split in his lip, and you stand up, wipe the blood from your hands onto your jeans, and walk over to help Lady Trebleclef pick up her clothes, careful not to touch anything with your bloodied knuckles, and she doesn't ask you but you answer the question anyway.

"He's been hanging out with Shitstorm."

Hanging out with Shitstorm is a dangerous proposition even before he starts smoking meth, not that you know exactly when that happened – somewhere between his high school graduation and yours, maybe in the year he takes off between his freshman and sophomore years of college and spends dealing pot and selling moonshine, making runs for Papa Americana, loading down the back of his car and running it up Sturgis way to sell to the one percenters, a biker gang nicknamed the Deviled Eggs after the leader's yellow bandana and bald pate.

You're fourteen when he takes you with him to meet the Deviled Eggs – *you should meet the customers*, he says – and so you end riding shotgun in the cocoon of the Celica, a Smith and Wesson three five seven tucked in the back of your jeans, steel uncomfortably cold against your ass even through your tighty-whiteys, and a sawed off Remington hidden under your seat. You want to ask why, but don't – when it comes to family business, you do what Papa Americana asks, and when he's not there you follow Shitstorm's lead.

Those are the rules.

CHAPTER 4

When you meet the Deviled Eggs, Shitstorm grins all crazy because you go to shake their hands and your jeans start slipping down from the weight of the gun in the small of your back so you have to shake with one hand, the other shoved into your left pocket and balled up to create an artificial hip for your pants to hang off of, and you know they know you're packing by the way they all cover their beards with their hands.

When you finally meet *the* Deviled Egg, when you shake hands with the short skinny bristly man, faced covered with freckles and his arms tattooed with leprechauns, clovers, deviled eggs and a math equation that makes no sense: $26+6=1$, he smiles at you and says "You can call me Egg, iffen you want. Why don't you just hold your gun in your hand? It won't offend me none, not like you need it anyhow. Me and your pappy go way back, way way back, even."

That's how you end up standing on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere with a gun in your right hand surrounded by a bikers taking turns pulling off a bottle of 'shine as they load the rest into the back of a pickup truck, and when Devil pulls out a white handkerchief and unwraps it to reveal a light bulb, winking at Shitstorm, you're sent back to the car while the two disappear around the other side of the truck.

When they come back a few minutes later Devil leans in the open door of the car and shakes your hand, says “Nice to meet you, Docent” and then looks at you for a moment before reaching down and undoing his belt buckle, pulling it from the loops of his jeans and handing it to you. “Might help with the gun there. E’er need anythin’, let us know. Oh, and say hi to your pappy for us.”

The club mounts up as Shitstorm slides into the passenger seat, and the two of you close your doors, and he looks at the belt in your hand, a thick brown leather strap long enough to wrap around you twice, the pewter clasp engraved with the crossed stars and bars of the rebel states and a horned egg etched into the top V of the design.

“Well, that’s nice of him. I’ll put a hole in it when we get home so you can actually wear it, if you want.”

You nod agreement as he turns the engine, and when the motorcycle club guns their engines a few times and pulls back onto the road, throwing up a cloud of brown dust that almost completely engulfs the following truck, Shitstorm pulls in in the rear, following the bold white GMC printed on the green tailgate back to the highway as he chatters up a storm, tells you he’s *going to go back to college, down in Murray, gonna rock that shit out and become a businessman and make tons of money and going to marry a blond bitch with a big ol’ booty and tits to match* and at first you’re interested, at first you nod your head and tell him he can do it but after the bikers peel off to the left at the highway and Shitstorm turns right to head back down to

Dosta, and the speedometer inches up toward a hundred miles an hour you stop listening and start staring at the hand you have clenched around the door handle, watching as the knuckles turn from pink to red to white.

Your hands are white again except for the red of your knuckles and the dark bits of gravel and dirt that speckle the wounds as TK Gunship drives Lady Trebleclef away from the house in the woods, the tires squealing as you swerve onto 62 from the gravel drive, sending loose rocks tumbling across the road to fall into the ditch on the other side. Trebleclef is silent beside you for a minute, and then she reaches down into her purse and pulls out a pint of clear liquid, unscrews the top and drains what little is left into her mouth, then rolls down the window and tosses it into the weeds that line the road.

“Hey, Docent – can we stop off at this place I know for a minute so I can get some more vodka?”

‘This place’ is a bar up in Bootsville, a beatdown bootlegger bar with a spray painted sign on the door that that reads *members only* and a large black man who greets Lady Trebleclef with a smile and a hug and eyes you up and down, eyes pausing on your hands, until Trebleclef smiles and assures him *he’s cool, he’s with me* and Tyrannosaurus K Gunship smiles his biggest smile as the man introduces himself as Jest Hallows and then slides his massive bulk out of the doorway, letting you into a dim room where Trebleclef takes your hand and leads you up to the bar.

“Hey Silver, this is my friend Docent” and the man behind the counter, his skin light enough that a hundred years ago it would’ve been called high yellow, reaches his hand across to shake yours.

You hold your hand up, instead, knuckles towards him, and say “sorry, I don’t want to get blood on you.”

Silver lets out a low whistle, nods appreciatively.

“Been fighting?” he asks as he pours two clear shots from a plastic bottle of vodka and puts one in front of you and one in front of Trebleclef.

“Yeah, kinda.”

Lady Trebleclef smiles at you, says “cheers”, and the two of you throw the shots back, the cheap vodka burning its way down your throat, enough to remind you that alcohol is a poison.

You don’t drink often, not anymore, not since Cpt Bunny Blue shows up at your door, pounding her fist against it until you open it and are surprised to see her, surprised to see anyone on this night, the weather forecast getting worse by the hour as rain turns to darts of ice diving from the sky, the roads already slippery hours earlier when you brave the crowds at Kroger, the masses picking up bread and milk, just in case the storm is worse than they’re saying, and then make your way to the liquor store as well, the interior busy but with a different crowd – no concerned mothers and fathers here. Instead, there’re lone men and women roaming the aisles, picking out bottles of wine or 12 packs of beer in case they’re lucky enough to score a rare day off work.

When you open the door, you stare at Cpt Bunny Blue, your mind vacant, her presence unplanned, until she pushes herself against you, wraps her arms around you, the ice crystals that accrued on her blue parka on her way up the sidewalk now turning to water against your t-shirt, depositing little pricks of cold that soak through to skin, and you wrap your arms around her as well, bending your head to deposit a kiss on the top of hers, and then you pick her up and swing her inside, kicking the door shut with your foot before letting her go.

“Hi, kid.” You can feel the smile on your face, can feel it splitting your lips so your teeth show.

CHAPTER 5

The bootleg bar is in Bootsville, and so you're not surprised that the decrepit house's crowd is mainly black faces, older and worn down except for two teens at a table in the corner with a folded wad of green held closed with rubber band. No one stands; they all sit in hard plastic chairs lining the walls, the middle of what was once a living room left open for dancing although there's no one doing so until Lady Trebleclef takes a second shot and backs into the space, raising hands up to run through her hair and shake it out as she gyrates her hips from side too side, a little too far, enough that you can tell that she's wasted already, each sway of her ass from side to side dragging her feet across plywood sheets nailed down to cover holes in the floor. She doesn't seem in danger of falling, though, and you look around the room, wandering if you know any of the faces – if the young wannabe gangster in the corner with a wad of twenties and an entourage of one is someone's younger brother, maybe, or if the white lady, hair almost completely given over to white from red, is the mother of someone you went to high school with.

While you're looking around, Silver Dollar leans over the bar, says "Hey bro, no need to be scared. We don't care about race here."

You smile and reassure Silver that you don't either. You almost explain to him that you have black friends back in Louisville but then you realize how that must sound, and so you think about telling him about one, your friend Rocket, and that seems like a worse idea, bringing up a single specific black friend. You wonder how bad things still are in Dosta – you wonder if schools still empty out the day after a white redneck and a black kid get into fight, the parents too scared to send in their children in because word on the street is that the other race is out for revenge.

This is what you want to ask about but the idea of bringing it up makes you nervous and instead of opening your mouth, instead of trying to create a dialogue, you turn back around to face Trebleclef, to watch her dance, her facing back at you, always facing you, dropping to her knees and bending over backwards until shoulders press against plywood and tits strain at air, thrusting her hips upwards over and over, and you watch her dance for fifteen minutes, maybe more, until undulations become staggers, her feet unable to catch the motion of her body, and then you grab her and steer her into a chair long enough for you to pay up, and she pops back to her feet and stumbles up to the counter while you do so and demands a bottle of liquor, and Silver Dollar hands it to you and you pay for it and then pull her arm over your shoulder and lead her out the door, Jest holding it open as he squeezes himself out of the way so you can guide her past and into the car to head out to the house with the blue shutters.

CHAPTER 6

“Truth is,” you say, Docent Americana says, “if you told me you’d be here tonight I’d probably have bought better whiskey.”

With that, you drop your shot glass to the wood table, the hand attached only to keep the glass from tilting, rolling, and sliding to the floor like your stomach the day Cpt. Bunny Blue shows at your door, ice coating her blue shirt and blonde hair.

“Can we talk about it tomorrow?” she asks, running hands through damp hair. “I’m pretty tired right now.”

And with that she gets up, swaying a little bit, walks to your bedroom, and you sit, confused, until she calls out “you coming to bed or what?” and you leave the empty bottles on the table and crawl in next to her, hands shivering in the bitter cold that leaks in through old wooden window sashes, aching to touch her, to pull her close to you and promise her everything will be okay even though you don’t even know what’s wrong, the same way you don’t really know what’s wrong with Lady Trebleclef as she sits in your passenger seat, head against the window and snores coming out her mouth, soft, and you ignore Dosta as you drive through it, rolling through a stop sign or two then hitting the pedal, pegging it at 70 through the woods on the way

out to the house with blue shutters, holding it there through s-curves and blind hills familiar as Cpt. Bunny Blue's body, familiar as the way Cpt. Bunny Blue smiles and teases you.

The Celica doesn't slow until you hit the driveway, and then it's full-stop almost, slowing so tires whisper like sneakers on the concrete driveway, a recent upgrade from the gravel drive you wreck bicycles on as a child, car engine purring just enough to annoy a librarian but not to wake your mother sleeping alongside your father with his breathing mask.

Even the garage's automated lights acknowledge the importance of your stealthy entrance, maintaining darkness as you slide the car, in neutral now and with the lights off, under the oak tree between the garage and the main house, and staying off as you walk up to the door to the apartment your father had built into the garage, and open it, the door never locked out here, fumbling through darkness to turn on the light next to the old iron bed before going back out to get Trebleclef.

The car is empty; your heart stops for a moment when you find the passenger door hanging open, a black cavity where Trebleclef should be sitting, until a moan arrests your attention and jumpstarts your heart, and you follow it through the gloom until you find her curled up in the grass at the front of the house, and when you try to pull her up to lead her to the garage apartment she's heavy as lead, body making no movement to assist you, as though she's rejected comfort, and you shake her, shake her, shake her, pleading "Trebleclef, wake up" until she murmurs something like words

and moves just enough to help you pull her up, enough for you to knot your hands together under her ass and lift her so her head lolls on your shoulder and her legs part around you as you carry her towards the garage, shuffling, with each step tracing the grass in front of you for roots and rocks that might derail you, skirting wide past the oak tree that could send you and her both sprawling, and when you come to the apartment you lay her down on the bed, stare down at her, her makeup smeared into a inverse waterscape on her face, red lipstick under blue eye-shadow stretching down her cheeks.

TK wants to but you can't leave her in her jeans, and her shirt is grass stained so you check the closet as TK subsides a little, still there and wary, you can feel him, but he's content to let you take care of the boring stuff. You find a t-shirt, large, probably big enough to dangle down her hips, enough to make her comfortable in the morning when she wakes up instead of freaking out at being in underwear and bra.

The shoes slip off easy, the belt only slightly harder, and you're in the process of trying to get her pants off, trying to suspend her butt above the bed within one hand so you can pull the jeans down and around it when she startles, comes upright, starts pushing you away.

"Gerroffa me, gerroffa me," it takes a moment to understand, *get off of me*, and you back up as she stands up and starts to march-sway-stagger towards the door at which point TK Gunship thinks *fuck* and you move in front of her, ask where she's going, and she says into the house and you beg her, plea with her not to do it and she takes pity on you, says *I gotta pee* so

you lead her to the bathroom, wait for her on the bed, forcing yourself not to check on her, not even when something falls over inside, metal it sounds like, or hard plastic, and you spend thirty minutes playing games on your phone before deciding something has to have happened, and you open the door to find her lying on her side, jeans around feet and panties cuffing thighs together and you lean down and

shake her but she doesn't wake up, stays dead to the world, and so you try to pick her up, again, but the angle is bad, frustrating you, and it is only when you take her arms in your hands to drag her to the bed that you see the bruises, blue, brown, gray, and you stop, and look closer, look at red sores scratched and picked at until blood came out and congealed, turned hard and was picked away, the bruises and sores covering her arms and torso and running down to thighs and legs, and you change your mind about moving her, slipping a pillow under her head and a blanket over her before slipping out of the apartment and into the house.

CHAPTER 7

Triple antibiotic first, then Band-Aid; little daubs and tiny Band-Aids over each bloody sore, triple antibiotic spread across bruises as well just in case it does something for those, and when you're done there's just one Band-Aid left in the box and 23 on her and her skin shines with ointment and you slide away from her into the corner, the bathroom door closed and vent running so you can smoke while you watch her, and when you realize you need to pee you stand, straddle her legs, awkward, aim the stream into the toilet as you watch to see if her eyes open and they don't.

Then you sit back down to think, to try and solve Lady Trebleclef's life in one weekend, and you don't know so you text Cpt. Bunny Blue because she always knows what to do except the night you tell her you love her

not on purpose, of course, just words slipping from tongue to lips and falling out and then down, words you don't mean to say but you're watching her wash dishes, a chore she adopts via accusations of clumsiness and filth, hands in plastic yellow gloves and dishes in a single sink she hates but the ink on the lease is fresh when she comes to Louisville and ya'll got no money to break it and so she scrubs each dishes with the sponge, rinses, then places it in the rack, one after another, movements precise, every movement planned

and practiced, and when the urge strikes you to walk up behind her and hold her, you do, and she leans back into you, sighs, her hands pausing, before she leans forward, hands into motion, harder this time, as though trying to scour the steel from the knife in her hands and you say “I love you” and the knife slips through the yellow plastic glove and into her thumb, and when she pulls the knife away blood spurts from the glove, stops, her hands held downward into the sink, and the glove’s thumb rounds, yellow plastic darkens, and finally the plastic thumb dips, swings downward, blood dropping into the sink to sluice away with the running water as the glove’s thumb, lightened, lifts to repeat the process.

It seems like ten minutes, like an hour, before either of you move and then suddenly

“Fuck!”

It echoes, almost, but it’s her repeating it, the first loud, emphatic, followed by a staccato chorus of demuendoing *fucks* as she drops the knife and clutches her thumb at the base and you snap to motion, running, fingers clutching at doorways to redirect you as you slide into the bathroom and fling open the door to the medicine cabinet, antihistamines and anti-depressants and antibiotics knocked down into the sink as you search for scissors, for cotton balls and bandages and a towel and she’s still standing there over the sink, watching the blood drip out of the glove, still chanting *fuck*, almost inaudible, when you rush back her side and cut the glove off, tiny scissors struggling against rubber but you keep working, guilty, scared of

hurting her more, until you expose the thumb, the deep cut, and wash the blood away with water and hydrogen peroxide, cover it in cotton ball and wrap it in nylon, and it's out the door to the car, down the road, just a little bit, to a hospital downtown, the first one you see that isn't a children's hospital and all the while frantic, worried, and she sits mumbling *fuck* to herself, and five stitches later she's still pissed, stalking into the bedroom, door flung hard and fast enough to close and bounce back open, and you're in the kitchen smoking, contemplating the couch, when she calls, *goddamnit, are you coming to bed or not?*

Those words show on your screen, almost exactly, when you text her at 2 A.M. to see how she's doing, how her visit with Dr. Zea went, **Goddamnit, are you going to bed or not** and in response you send her a picture of Lady Trebleclef passed out on the floor, and now she's awake with you, phone vibrating faster than you can respond, as you spend an hour texting until she gets tired and tells you she has to sleep, that she has to work in the morning, and so you put the phone away and turn off the light in the bathroom and sit there in the dark, the only light from the cigarettes you chain smoke and the pale gleam of the bedside lamp seeping under the door crack until TK Gunship slows enough for you to step over Trebleclef and make your way to the iron bed.

In the bed you're restless; you force yourself not to check the time on your phone, and you tell yourself you should get out of bed if you're not able to sleep, that you should move to the back porch with a pen and a pad and

chain smoke and write like you've always promise yourself you will if TK Gunship appears. Instead you stay in the bed, turning your pillow over again and again in search of the colder side, or stretching your body as long as it will go, your feet pressing into the footboard of the full-size as hard as your head does into the bars at the top and your hands grasping out wide to each side of you as though trying to recreate the Vitruvian man in his square and failing for lack of a big enough box, all parts of you failing to reach their greatest extension, your body cramped in the bed even though you are used to sharing the full-size at home with Captain Bunny Blue. You imagine her, then, next to you, imagine the incidental contact of your legs and the way that you kiss her on her sleeping forehead on mornings when you leave before she wakes, and you smile and you say goodnight, same as you do on the nights when you can't sleep in the city, the nights when you wander to and from bed, scared of waking her with each squeak of the bedroom door, and you hold yourself though your body yearns for action.

CHAPTER 8

You wake early, the alarm on your phone popping your eyes open at seven A.M. and you check to make sure Trebleclef is still ensconced in the bathroom and then head up to the house, in through the side door that remains unlocked when your parents are home and Mama Americana shrieks in terror when the door swings open but moments later has her arms around you as Papa Americana rushes to the stairs, blind without glasses and still in boxers and wife-beater and steadies the shotgun on the rail as he yells *I'll blow your brains out if you don't get outta my house.*

"Dad? It's me, Docent," you yell up to him, and he pulls the shotgun off the rail, leaning over and squinting his eyes to make certain it's you.

"Whatcha doing here now? Yer mom know you was coming in?"

"Get dressed and come down and we'll talk 'bout it."

Papa Americana keeps the shotgun next to the staircase for a reason – he's unloaded a few shells in the past at folks thinking they'd just show up in the middle of the night and rob Papa and Mama, enough shells that the door has been replaced three times and if you run your hands over the wall you can feel the steel bumps underneath the latex paint, and with meth overtaking alcohol in the area crime has gotten worse. That's why he got out

of the business, that and the fights with Shitstorm. He tells you this for the fifth or sixth time while you're sitting across the breakfast table, both of you chewing on bacon strips and scrambled eggs between sentences and taking sips of coffee, his black, yours light tan and half sugar like Mama made it for you when you started drinking it at 6 years old, and when he's done apologizing for aiming a shotgun at your head it's your turn to explain about Trebleclef and how she sent you a text message that scared you and so you bolted home, and he grunts.

Then without thinking you start to ask "have ya'll talked to" *Shitstorm* but your mom shakes her head and you change the pitch to "Captain's parents?"

This is the cue for your mom to talk, to tell you the minor events of the town, tell you 'the Blues seem to be doing fine and they're at the church every Sunday and have you heard about Clash Infinite, he got arrested last week for possession, second time so I guess he's going upriver and. . .'

You nod your head or shake it as the sentences lead you until Papa gets up and carries his plate to the kitchen to wash and then your mother lowers her voice.

"He still calls but we ain't answering yet."

No one in the family speaks to Shitstorm. Sometimes he calls but you ignore them. *His own damned fault*, you think, and when Cpt. Bunny Blue tries to get you to pick up the phone when he calls it just makes you angrier.

“What’s the big deal?” she says, sweeping her hair out of her face so she can look at the puzzle she’s working. “He’s your brother, right?”

“Meth,” you say.

“Oh. That makes sense,” she says, “I used to see him in the grocery store – he was always super nice but he kept shaking, too, every time I saw him, and he’d talk so fast. Way faster than you talk, you know, except when you’re crazy. All agitated.”

You nod, handing her a second beer, and she opens it, takes a swig, continues, “when’d you find out?”

“I caught him doing it in high school, but I thought he’d stopped until the last couple years.”

You find out by showing up at his trailer, the one he rents down the road from your parents, and knocking on the door. When you do it swings open, and you look down at the handle but it’s missing, broken off and the latch pulled out, the single wide fairly new but it’s trashed on the inside; when you flip the light switch next to the door the naked bulb reveals the carpet is filthy, what little you can see of it under the plastic bags and laundry scattered around the room, and you push your way through it, calling for Shitstorm until you find him in the bedroom lighting a glass pipe, and you stop mid step as he looks up, says “howdy, lil bro.”

CHAPTER 9

This is the difference between you Docent and you Tyrannosaurus K
Gunship: when you see your older brother smoking meth you leave,
stumbling out of the house, a plastic bag catching on your shoe and then in
the car door as you slam it, forcing you to open the door again, to rip at the
plastic clutching your shoe and as it gives way, as the blue plastic turns white
and then your foot tears free, Shitstorm comes out the screen door, hollering
hey where you goin? as you slam the door, shift the car into reverse, left foot
off clutch, right foot on gas, quick and without a shudder, and you pull the
wheel to the right as you cut the car back over the gravel bump that marks
the culvert, tires

then there's a squeal, a scream, a flash of silver and blue and the car
tilts, a boat sideways to a tsunami, and a second punch follows the first, the
car spins and then stops, hard, slamming but you keep going for a moment
and come to a rest facing up at your passenger door and it's funny how many
people there are, so many people, faces you don't recognize, faces blurring
and

you wake in the hospital, Cpt. Bunny Blue and Shitstorm and Papa and
Mama Americana looking in from the hall, Papa's face songbird red and

Shitstorm deflated, his frame imploded and verging on collapse, eyes flicking: your bed to Papa to your bed to your arm where a needle is nestled, and you gasp, and Mama calls for the doctor, Dragon Cabin, a big brute of a man with a moustache straining to reach his mouth's edge, an impossible task for lips that wide, and he prods at you with clammy fingers, waves them in front of your eyes and asks you to count them, and the entire time you wonder if you're brain damaged, if you're going to end up in a home, people spooning soup into your mouth, and then he smiles, pats you, and tells you *you're going to be fine*.

You don't hate this hospital the way you hate the second one, hate the way it smells and the threadbare sheets they give you to sleep on, hate the plastic fork and knife you have to use to cut your meat, hate the way you have to lean into a box and hold down a button until a wire inside turns bright red to light a cigarette, and you hate to have people come visit you so you don't tell them you're there, just sit in your room or in the dayroom on a beat-up blue couch and talk to a girl with scars on her arms, and then when she walks away another girl walks up to you and tells you that it's very obvious that the first girl was cutting for attention because she was wearing short sleeves and then slides her own shirt sleeves up to show you long red scars that crisscross each other, and you commiserate about how hard it is, and she asks you why you're there and you *almost* tell her it's because of Tyrannosaurus K Gunship but you just kind of shrug and tell her what she

wants to hear, *bad day, lost my job and failed out of school*, and she seems satisfied.

When the tunnel rat comes over she leaves; nobody except you likes the tunnel rat and you're pretty sure that's because no one can beat the reason the tunnel rat is there, no one can beat the terror of diving face first into holes every day to see if there's anyone down there, the terror of seeing your friends' heads blown off, everyone's problems so very ordinary in comparison to his, and so when he comes over to you everyone disperses, leaves the two of you sitting there.

Him you tell about Tyrannosaurus K Gunship same as you tell Cpt. Bunny Blue about TK Gunship the third night she's with you, sitting next to her on the old pink sofa, flower printed and starting to sag, starting to form an upside down bell curve and to force your bodies to lean into each other. You don't try to resist anymore than you resist the incidental contact of your feet with hers when the two of you climb into bed together.

When you hit mute on the TV, she looks at you, and even though you suddenly don't want to tell her, you are compelled now by the silence – she knows something is afoot – and so you pull your left leg up under you as you turn to face her and she mirrors you.

You tell her about Tyrannosaurus K Gunship and she laughs at the name, laughs at the idea of some carnivorous super-beast living inside you, even reminds you that some scientists claim the Tyrannosaurus was a carrion eater. When you start to tell her about the hospital, though, the

second hospital, how you wound up there, she stops laughing, lights two cigarettes, passes one to you, places an ashtray between the two of you and holds your free hand in hers, and when you finish telling her the story, when you tell her how your hands couldn't stop moving, how your thoughts couldn't stop moving, how you reached paralysis, rigidity, and then broke apart, disintegrated like a storm tossed ship, when you realize that your mind is shaking as she stares at you, that your hand has left hers and is scratching your leg, then running through your hair, then back to scratching your leg and then drumming on the front of the couch, when you finish talking and you realize all of this she takes you and pulls you tight against her and she whispers *it's okay - it's okay* until your brain slows, until your heart slows, until you ratchet back down.

CHAPTER 10

“No” of course, they say, “No, she can’t stay here” and TK Gunship predicts this, captures their answer in glances before their tongues touch teeth backs and explode down, driving air out to make the pronouncement emphatic, “no, she can’t stay here”, and so he redirects intent, shrugs at them, shakes his shoulders and yours and says “no, no, that’s not what I meant”, the beginning an echo, an affirmation of their negation, the latter a deflection as he shifts the question, obfuscates it, denies the implied in favor of the general, “that’s not what I meant – I mean,” and he widens eyes, furrows brow, puzzles your face, “I mean, do you know where she *can* go?”

and they have ideas, have numbers to call, churches, police officers, shelters, all the bottoms that you never manage to slam against no matter the millstones tied round neck as TK launches you off belfries, off balconies and bluffs, the familial parachute of many colors, each shade a name, guiding you to soft landings on better ground than you ever deserve, and so you never quite understand what bottom is, never get your feet caught in the silt, not when Captain Bunny Blue disappears on prom night and turns up the next day in your bed, her mother’s car parked outside your house and her mother’s voice echoing up the stairwell, not even when they find you,

Ambien-laced at the wheel of a car in a ditch on I-65, a tractor-trailer driver standing on the gravel grass and trash shoulder of the road as cops write statements in cheap flip-pads and pull you from the car and take you to jail where you spend the night, your second there in two years, the first for pissing on a cop car as the occupant stared you down through side mirrors, waiting for you to slide your cock back inside pants and zip them up before swinging the door open, swinging out in dress shoes and polices blues from the car and then swinging you into its side, pants soaking up the filth you discharged with care and then shoving you in the back door and hauling you away down mad streets past goal posts sprouted legs and walking to fraternity row, bringing cheers low and whipping faces round with brief squawks of siren and flashes of blue cherries, and both times you walk away with fines and admonishments from judges who know judges who know your grandfather's and father's names, the second time requiring a little more contrition than the first, a mumbled apology for just *needing to sleep* but not a mention of time travel, not a single mention of Ambien killing boring days to breed exciting tomorrows, not a mention of chasing nightmares of Holocausts and Mafia hits and a thousand versions of your body broken the way your fibula is when you make your way out of the hospital with Dragon Cabin's blessing, swinging your crutches forward and then yourself, rhythmic, *swing-thump, swing-thump*, Papa and Mama Americana there next to you, rising arms anticipating fall after fall and infuriating you in the process. They have the good sense to look abashed,

though it doesn't stop Mama from opening the car door and Papa from standing beside you, almost nonchalant, as you lower yourself in while trying not to drop your crutches. Papa waits for you to hand him the crutches instead of grabbing at them, and for that you are thankful.

They take the long way home so that Papa American can stop at the Methodist church, the one your grandfather grew up attending, over in Saratoga Springs. There's been vandalism, he's heard, gravestones tipped and a window broken.

"Stupid kids", he grouses, "always pulling shit like this."

You wonder if it's one of your friends; maybe Maelstrom or Bivouac, guys who lean out car windows with baseball bats to send mailboxes arcing through night skies, or if it's someone else, younger, the next generation of punk kids, maybe even actual punk kids, ones who listen to The Dead Milkman and The Mr. T Experience. Your curiosity is aroused, and when Papa pulls into the church parking lot, the black asphalt pad untroubled by parallel lines or stick figures in wheelchairs, you find yourself being helped out of the car by your mother and then you swing-thump your way around the side of the building, peering up at the old stain-glass to see if any is damaged, and find your father running his fingers over a glass box on the side of the building.

"Is it broken?"

"No," he says, "probably didn't realize it was even here." He turns to walk around the building, and you *swing-thump* into his place, fascinated

same as when you are a kid and the box is at eye level and your hand is in Granddaddy Kerosene's, the shaking that penetrates every fiber of his being weak but perceptible.

"What is it?"

"The Civil War. There was a battle right here, and the church got shot." You lean closer, peering into the two bullet wounds.

"Did anyone die?"

Of course you ask that; of course you want to know if you're spying on the dead, if these black holes have red cousins buried in the graveyard behind you. Granddaddy Kerosene answers "no", and tells you that he used to wonder the same thing, and his grandfather, whose father's father was a kid like you during the war, took him up and down the gravestones looking for markers to match the green historical landmark sign down by the road. There are none; you ask to double-check and he lets your hand free and stands alone, his body murmuring with the motion that later seems to rip him apart, watching you wander, looking at monument after monument; the new ones, smooth and shiny and made of gray or pink stone, you skip to stop in front of those discolored, cracked, and abused by time, running your fingers through crevices hewn by hand until you hear a whistle, short and low, and look up to find Mama Americana, née Kerosene, waving you back down out the graveyard to the church door, and so you stand, swatting dirt and grass off pant trousers, and run down the hill to watch solemn men in black and gray suits bring out a shining oak casket, and with Mama, with

Granddaddy, and with Papa, and with Shitstorm, you follow the pallbearers up and around the cemetery to lay Mama's Mama to rest, her body desiccated by cancer, and as they lower the casket Shitstorm takes your hand, his grip rough, squeezing hard, making you aware of how alive you are.

Alive, the way you feel when you go to wake up Lady Trebleclef, two mugs of coffee in your left hand, a glass of water in the other and a towel and a bar of soap tucked under elbow as you back your way out the front door, hitting the handle on the screen door with your hip, TK Gunship a quiet hum, almost unregistered except for an ache in your jaw that you know too well, an ache that craves dark chocolate and soda. It makes no sense, and you know that, but that is what he subsists on, those and coffee and cigarette after cigarette after cigarette after cigarette after waking until sleeping, if you can even do that, if your legs don't scream with energy and force you out your bed and into the hallway, into bathtubs full of hot water to chain-smoke again, flicking ashes into the toilet beside you as you play possible futures, as you sort trajectories of greatness on the back of your eyelids and wonder what your neighbors think of you, of pipes rattling as they struggle to life again and again, hour after hour. This is what TK is best at, planning and creating, and if he's lucky your pen will touch paper and fill sheet after sheet, and when he subsides you're shaken at having spent a day-week-month ragdoll in gleaming teeth, shaken to know what you might be capable of if only, if only, if only.

Today, though, the hum and the ache aren't searching out paths or trailing ink through white space but propelling you forward with disregard for propriety, pulling you to the garage apartment to step over the slumbering woman and place your offerings on the closed toilet lid before you bend over and shake Lady Trebleclef awake, watching her eyelids as they flicker open, then shut again, then open again, widening as she searches for something familiar and finds your face.

"What? Where am I? Is this your parents' house?" Her voice distorts around her yawns, and you explain as she sits up and takes the water you brought her. She hasn't been here in years, hasn't been anywhere with you in years other than a brief 'let's catch up sometime' at the restaurant where she works and a few beers and a joint later that night out on the dock, sitting in the middle of the 'O' in 'See Rock City', the two of you flirting by habit, dragging familiar old roles out of memory and playing them as though all the events that passed, as though your nights in the ward and her husband in the rearview are mere sparks in life's brief candle, unworthy of remark. You both take slow deliberate sips of beer as you size each other up, as you each tell concocted stories, remix events to make an artificial shared destiny, and you wonder how much the other says is true.

You don't kiss, though, and you don't fuck even though this shattered and reassembled history says each longs for the other, and always has. That, the not fucking, might be how you know it's not true, either that or the way your mind turns, as it tends to on the dock, to Cpt Bunny Blue and nights

spent almost like this one except for a portable cd player loaded with C-batteries playing Hum's *You'd Prefer an Astronaut* on infinite repeat as you twine yourselves together and tell her stories about Granddaddy Kerosene, about 150 years spent on the same land, a family barely replacing itself, as you tell her about how the Corps of Engineers came by in the early Sixties and marked the waterline and Granddaddy Kerosene saw the barn was on the water side so he tore it down and kept the wood to build the dock that you lie on, reassembling the advertisement for the roadside attraction down near Chattanooga, TN in the process.

Maybe this is how you know that your destiny is elsewhere, Lady Trebleclef a distraction, and you're still aware of it as Lady Trebleclef clambers to her feet, the right side of her exposed hip red from pressing against the cool concrete floor of the unfinished bathroom overnight. She's a hard distraction to ignore as she leans in and kisses you on the forehead and affords you a glimpse down her shirt at her tits, ensconced in a bra but even what little you can see causes TK to groan inside you, restless for a second until she straightens up and staggers out of the bathroom to rummage around, coming back a moment later with the bottle you bought off Silver the night before. You can see in the sunlight it's the cheap stuff, Popov vodka, Russia's Finest as you used to say in college, and Trebleclef unscrews the top, her fingers fumbling with the plastic, and takes a swig then reaches for the water, holding it in her hand as she takes a second swig of the vodka before chasing it with the water and screwing the lid back on the bottle.

She's almost modest in the morning, even if she's drinking already, shooing you out of the bathroom as she starts the shower and steps inside, letting steam fog the door before calling you back in to talk as she washes and you stand on the toilet lid, blowing cigarette smoke up at the fan and flicking your ashes into the shower with her, tempted to lean over and look and free your thoughts to refocus on anything other than where you aren't looking. TK would look, you know this, and in your head you can feel him rumbling.

"Oh my god, so what happened last night?" She asks, "How drunk was I? How'd we end up here?"

Of course she wants to know; of course you tell her. Tell her about the fight, the dancing, the jailbreak and carrying her into the apartment and her ensuing collapse onto the bathroom floor, complete with the picture you sent Captain Bunny Blue to demonstrate your concern. You expect questions, expect apologies for her behavior or an attempt to understand the fight, but none comes, just a shrug.

"Man, I was really hammered last night."

Yeah, you think, then say it: "Yeah."

Yeah, you say, and that's it. You finish the cigarette, still flicking ashes over into the shower, and step down and dispose of it in the toilet, the unflushed butt leaking a trail of yellow down into the clear water.

You leave her in the shower; leave the room and go out the back door of the apartment where she'll be able to see you when she comes out. Clay

whiskey jugs line the edge of the concrete porch, painted brewery names faded and unidentifiable. You sit down by one, rubbing your jaw, and smoke another as you wait for her to leave the shower and dress. *I should make a plan*, you think, but it's futile. TK has unhinged his jaw and swallowed your mind whole, clamping your jaw closed in the process. He makes plans in idleness, sparks of brilliant divination but doesn't *need* plans the way others do. He *is* a plan, the plan, mad as mutually assured destruction and as doomed as Gallipoli.

CHAPTER 11

Before Lady Trebleclef emerges, Papa and Mama leave. They have plans to visit relatives, an uncle and aunt who leave a strange feeling in you when you meet them, a chance encounter of a few minutes a year or two after Granddaddy Kerosene passes. You know, of course, that your mother is adopted. It's never been a secret but rather a point of pride – Granddaddy and Grandmommy Kerosene adopting a cherubic five year old with red hair, knowing the instant that they see her that they will love her. Photos and actions prove their love; there is never a doubt that she is their daughter. Still, though, there exists this other family with its ties of blood, and when confronted with it, confronted with the uncle your mother avoids in the grocery store or the envelope with five dollars and a strange name on it at graduation, your connection to Granddaddy Kerosene seems tenuous at best; you wonder at who you really are. Your mother, keen to avoid her blood when Granddaddy Kerosene lived, seeks it out when he passes. You understand, of course. Understand that she feels alone, that mortality has set in, and you encourage her. You see the way that Granddaddy dotes on her, and that she dotes on him, see the way that he lingers and lingers after his life becomes misery, unable to sleep for his hands shaking him awake and

unable to bear the waking moments, memory beginning to fail until the only one he knows for certain is her, and you stand there, watching tremors wrack his body as though the New Madrid Fault has gone live inside him, while your mother whispers to him that she is okay, that she is 'taken care of' and if he's worried about her, he can go on and take off. She might be 'taken care of', Mama might be, but you're pretty sure there's an emptiness she isn't ready for, and so when they get in the car, you tell Mama to say hi to your uncle for you, and go back to the porch to wait for Trebleclef.

She appears after a bit, her hair pulled up under a towel but other than that dressed and made up, swaying as she walks, bottle tucked under one arm and coffee mug in the other, and before plopping down next to you she splashes a little from the first into the latter.

"Got a cigarette, babe?"

You do, and so you light and hand it to her, thinking, *well, now here's the part where I find out what's going on*. You're wrong, though – almost as soon as you hand the cigarette to her, her eyebrows arch up and she holds it back out to you, waving it as she says, "just a sec" and she pops back to her feet and dashes inside, returning in a few moments with her purse, one of those oversized mom bags, digging inside it until she pulls out a wad of cash, bills crumpled together, pennies and dimes falling out from it to ring on the concrete porch and flee towards the edge, none making the final plunge but one comes close to you and you slap it down with your hand, pick it up, a dime, gray and dull and coated in grime except for edges that shine, the

copper beneath exposed from years of use, and while you squint to make out the design – Roosevelt head, 1966 – Lady Trebleclef slides back down beside you, taking the cigarette from your hand to perch it in the corner of her mouth as she sorts the bills, flattening them across her leg, and you wait as she counts the bills once and then again, the corners of her lips turning down with disappointment.

“Docent?” She accents the first syllable and trails off the second.

“Yeah?”

“I need to go see my psychiatrist today – can you lend me a couple hundred dollars and take me?”

You know better, or at least you should, but TK is doing the math and instead of thinking he opens your mouth and you say *yes*, and so Lady Trebleclef and you pack back into the Celica and head towards Dosta.

CHAPTER 12

The speed limit headed back into Dosta is 55 but you don't even hit that. It's been a while since you've been to town, and so you sightsee on the way, keeping an eye out for new houses, wondering if the slow hollowing of Dosta continues apace, the houses in the town proper falling into disrepair as they hit their fortieth, fiftieth, seventieth, one hundredth birthdays and are abandoned in favor of new houses built on the cheap land skirting the town. It's abhorrent to you, the discarding of the old in favor of the new and easy, and you wonder at it as you drive, winding your car around curves, wonder at the way these rural towns, surrounded by nature, are so keen to despoil it, to take the most beautiful plot of land they can find and plant a house inside of it.

Lady Trebleclef listens to her voicemails as you drive, a finger pressed into her closest ear to barricade the road noise, and when she pulls it free and drops her phone back into her purse, she sighs, and says "So there's this guy, right? And I've been staying at his house sometimes. I work with him like two nights a week. Anyway, he's driving me insane. He left me like five messages last night, I guess after you picked me up from Taxi's house, and he's begging me to come over there right now."

You don't want to go over to anyone's house; being in Dosta makes you paranoid you'll run into someone you know, maybe one of those old 'friends' from high school that keep hitting you up on social media, or one of the teachers who so frequently expressed their concern about you to your friends while ignoring you to your face.

"Is Docent," they ask, "okay?" or at least that's what Bivouac Carabineer tells you when he catches up to you after class, his arm freed from the clutches of yet another invested educator, and the two of you laugh about it as you cut out the side door and across the parking lot to your car. Bivouac has weed; he offers the joint to you but you light up a cigarette instead. You smoked pot for a little while, maybe six months, long enough for your black Dodge sedan to hit the cops' radars, Dosta the only town in western Kentucky where Papa Americana's influence is subdued, and since then there have been too many close calls, too many times pulled over on the side of the road, hands shoved in your pockets as you watch them rifle through your car again, and again, and again. Even when you're not worried about getting busted, the joy's gone out of pot – you're not sure why but when you smoke it your stomach turns sideways and your head grows fuzzy and faint. It feels like a bad cold to you – it feels slow, and you don't like being slow so you turn it down every time Bivouac offers.

Instead, you smoke a cigarette while he hits his joint, sucking it in and holding it until his exhale is almost clear, is almost EPA approved.

“This is some good shit. Some of that Hawaiian-Afghanistan mix, dude,” he says, his fat lips splitting into a grin, yours matching. The week before he’d come into homeroom laughing, the local paper in his hand, and slapped it down on the table in front of you. On it was a picture of Dosta PD’s only detective, Miter Danger, standing in front of a folding table piled high with marijuana. “Get this – you know how they busted Recall last week? Well now they’ve got Stranger Danger in the paper claiming it was some exotic foreign blend called Hawaiian Afghanistan mix. I know for a fact that punk just sells skunk – douche is just making shit up to look good.”

“I dunno, Treble – let’s go see your shrink first,” you say, and she agrees, and as you cross the bridge across Dosta Bay, she gives you directions. He’s new to Dosta, Dr. Fairylight is, and her directions take you back into the hills and not along the bay through Crowtown to the Dosta Mental Health Center. Instead, he’s out by the strip, his office part of a long cinder block building anchored by a former Wal-Mart turned tractor store, the previous tenant having vacated when the company opened a Super over in Princeton, another blow to Dosta’s dreams of relevance. It is the Wal-Mart in Dosta that you walk daily as a teenager, with your friends or without, a break from infinitely looping your car around town. It is in this Wal-Mart that you get into your first (non Shitstorm) fight, a carry over thing from the high school parking lot.

You kick one of the empty cans of Skoal that forever litter that parking lot while leaving, and it pops up and ricochets off the light gray Chevy truck

of Triumph Abbreviation, a wannabe cowboy and son of the Baptist minister. You know him in passing, the way everyone knows everyone in passing in Dosta County High, but never really think much of it. Your clique and his don't mix much – the drama nerd soccer burnout grunge contingent being small and insular, the country-western revivalists dominant. When he yells after you, “What the hell do you think you're doing kicking shit at my damned truck?” you yell back “Sorry” and hop in your car and leave, further thought not given until he edges his way into the long line of cars waiting to exit the high school parking lot behind you, putting his truck into your rear view mirror and revving the engine, over and again, the exhaust header removed, each hit on the accelerate a roar, deep and throaty, a simulacrum of fury.

It's a part of a ritual, the header removal, a festival of sorts come each spring, a day when the rednecks and the hillbillies gather together to celebrate what they learn in one hour blocks at the vocational school that juts off the far side of the high school's gymnasium. In a fit of masculine hubris they combine their engines to create a cacophony that brings classes to a halt, a fifteen minute assault on the o-zone for the feeling of more power, a feeling of strength and speed. All this work is nothing, though, nothing that matters on the road. Bluster is all it is – years spent riding shotgun for Shitstorm on deliveries teaches you that, each frantic grab at panic handles for a collision that never comes a reminder that a car sticking the curve is better than a truck towering over it when it comes down to a run. Your license is a year old now, and you've taken to the same type of driving as

Shitstorm and pretty much any other bored teenager in Dosta – hitting the road as soon as school is out and making the loops around town, testing yourself at 70 on curves marked 35, and when Triumph drops into line behind you and revs his engine, you’ve got a pretty good idea he’s pissed, and when Captain Bunny Blue cranks the handle on her window and thrusts her middle finger into the air, you’re certain. Triumph isn’t completely crazed with anger, though – he’s smart enough not to try to drag you out of your car in the high school parking lot, and not angry enough to ram you when you’re out of it. Instead, he rides your ass through town, flashing lights at you until you say “Fuck it” and slam on your brakes to cut left into a gas station parking lot, and his self preservation kicks in and he cuts to the right around you, off the road, his truck clipping a road marker, dooming the sign for Highway 730 to lie bent almost into the mud until long after you graduate, and then slaloms his truck back onto the road while you and Captain Bunny Blue scoot through the back alley out of the gas station and head back the other way.

You think you’ve gotten rid of Triumph and so you go to Maelstrom’s trailer, a piece of shit single wide in the middle of town with a square hole in the front door, an imprint left by the battering ram the cops use when they come by to bust his dad for selling pot or coke, you don’t ask which, and he and Captain Bunny Blue smoke a joint while you play with his dog, a beefy black bulldog mutt named Coon that likes to lick your face and has an unfortunate tendency to step on your balls in the process, all 40 pounds of it

compressed onto that singular foot. When Captain Bunny Blue is done smoking pot, and Maelstrom is finished talking shit about his baby's momma, 'that stupid nigger bitch' he calls her so consistently that you have trouble remembering her real name, you say 'bye' and he tosses you a faux Nazi salute and a Heil Hitler, and you head over to old Crowtown to drop her off.

When the waters come up, and before, Old Crowtown is the black neighborhood. It looks down on the houses of Dosta proper, down on the churches and on the courthouse, tucked into a curve of the hills that rise above Dosta Creek where it meets the Cumberland. The railroad runs through the edge of Crowtown, or did, and now lies just below summer level, a reef of ballast stones left behind when the ties were yanked up in anticipation of the rise, and during a dry summer it is not uncommon to see children or adults walking like Jesus out on the water until they come close to the buoys that indicate the channel cut for the white families with their jetties jutting into the space between Crowtown and the railroad bank.

When the waters come up, the blacks are forced out via economics, the displaced doctors and lawyers of Dosta making seemingly obscene offers to housekeepers and factory workers, and as the lake settles at winter level for a second year, the railroad bed clearly visible and the church steeples and tree tops and the old courthouse roof beyond still poking up through the waves, the shoreline sprouts a series of ranch houses and A-frames, the trees that lined North Franklin chopped down to open the view of the lake come mornings while the blacks retreat further up the hill to build houses of their

own, another series of ranch houses more closely spaced, the new neighborhood given the moniker Bootsville in response to how quickly they'd been dislodged from their last. It's to one of the smaller houses in Crowtown that you deliver Captain Bunny Blue, pulling your car into the driveway and parking so a tree obscures the view from the backdoor of the house to the front seat of your car as she takes a bottle of Visine from your glove box and holds it out to you. She has a tendency to flinch, a great fear of something hitting her eye, and so you press forefinger to one lid and thumb to the other and drip the liquid into one eye and then the other.

"I'll see you in the morning, right?" She blinks away the artificial tears as she gathers her book bag.

"7:45. Be ready? Mr. Inspire pulled me aside after class – apparently someone else who is showing up late is failing or something, and he can't come down on them without coming down on me." Inspire is your first period teacher, Poli Sci, one of your favorites, and he has a policy of not reporting seniors late. You've got a C, and he knows you could have an A if you bothered to turn in your homework instead of just taking the 100s you get on tests. Everyone knows you could have As, now that your ACT scores are in, the standardized test an easy comparison for you and your classmates, and you come out the 98th percentile the first time, and as a *fuck you* you take it again, memorizing the Pythagorean theory the night before ($a^2 + b^2 = c^2$), and end up in the 99th. You brag about the scores, easily and loudly, pointing at being tied for

highest with the salutatorian and your class ranking, 77 out of 149, as proof you're bored in high school and destined for something greater than this, reminding people you used to be on top, that you were both Gifted and Talented, that in middle school you were selected as a Verbally and Mathematically Precocious Youth and sent to dweeb camp for three weeks at Western Kentucky University. You crow and Tyrannosaurus K Gunship roars and neither of you catches the defect, neither of you realizes that it's not ennui but puissance keeping you from success, and so you brag.

Maybe it's this boisterousness that keeps you in Triumph's mind; maybe it's something else. Rumors pervade the town about Triumph's father while you're in high school, terrible ones shared between teens in whispers, rumors picked up from careless parents and from those in-betweeners of small-towns, old enough to be considered adults and therefore privy to *serious matters* yet young enough to smoke pot and play Magic: The Gathering with high schoolers. One of the local librarians, a sweetheart named Ephemeral with blonde hair and blue eyes who ran the children's section upstairs and on summer days and winter breaks screened movies on a reel to reel projector in the library's auditorium for the cluster of kids sprawled on the floor – yourself one of them – is dead, ostensibly a suicide but the rumor mill makes it more, lays blame at the hands of her boyfriend, Brother Abbreviation. The rumor mill says he beat her, that she was found with marks from a golf club all across her body, and as you get older you hear another variant, one that says Ephemeral, all of five feet tall, had been found

with a shotgun lying outside of the truck where she lay dead as though she had held it out the window to pull the trigger, an impractical option for someone with short arms like hers.

Maybe Triumph knows these rumors; maybe they live inside of him, gnawing at him and filling him with rage, and maybe he looks at you, 5'8 and 110 pounds in 1996, and sees an easy target. Maybe he's just pissed that you kicked a Skoal can into the tire of his beat up Chevy. You don't know, and when you go into the Wal-Mart looking to burn some money on a random CD after dropping Captain Bunny Blue off you're too young to think of possibilities, too young for empathy, just a child with the as yet unnamed god of Tyrannosaurus K Gunship wreaking havoc inside you, and you just want to spend the cash Granddaddy gave you on something with distortion and inane lyrics that'll seem meaningful while you scream along. You don't see his truck pull in behind yours, and maybe he doesn't arrive when you do. Maybe he's looking for your car, for the classic black sedan with tinted windows and chrome accents in the sea of tan and blue and green and red cars, and spots it in the parking lot long after you've gone inside and pulls in and climbs out with his friend, a tall blonde kid whose name you don't know egging him on, telling him to 'kick that faggot's ass', to beat that 'stupid queer', your long hair and propensity for hair dye both outlier and identifier in backwoods 1990s Kentucky, another factor spurring animosity from parents and classmates along with the bags that linger under your eyes, a sure sign of a stoner even though they're from sleepless nights spent thinking too much, from making

plans you never keep. It doesn't matter how he finds you, just that you're standing in the CD aisles when Triumph shoves you, his friend at the other end of the aisle in case you make a move to escape.

"Hey faggot – hey queer. Why'd you kick that can into my truck?" He pokes his finger into your chest, the contact between tip and clavicle loud enough to hear. You look down at him – Triumph is short, maybe 5'2" in his junior year, and that probably doesn't help matters for you.

"What? It was an accident, dude. I just kicked it, I didn't mean to hit your truck." You back away, hands held up and out to your sides, fingers splayed, but inside of you TK unfurls and fills you with energy.

You think for a second that Triumph might let it go – he looks briefly uncertain at your meek response but glances at his friend behind you, then comes closer, bumping his chest into yours. "I don't think so. I think you're a faggot asshole who needs to learn some fucking manners so why don't you come outside."

It's a calculation you don't need to make – you versus the two of them and however many other friends Triumph might run into on the way out or have waiting in the parking lot. The most you might hope for is that you run into Maelstrom on the way out – his nunchukas are no joke, the small skinhead a brown belt in karate and fast as lightning, his speed a replacement for what he gives up in mass, the near riot he causes at a party at the end of Junior year legendary. People in school are wary of Maelstrom, and that's part of why you're friends with him if you take it down to a

strategic level – when people fuck with you Maelstrom sticks up for you, and he’s scary enough that people who call you homo in the hallways come back after conversations with him and beg forgiveness.

Maelstrom isn’t in Wal-Mart, though, as far as you know – it’s as likely that he’s passed out under his trailer from huffing paint or fighting with his father after being caught stealing pot to sell, and you haven’t seen a friendly face in Wal-Mart other than Intrepid, the town homosexual who graduated with Shitstorm, an oddity in the town, open and proud and prone to coming into his job stocking shelves dressed as a woman for Halloween, prompting murmurs of disgust and whispers loud as those that surround Triumph’s father.

Bereft of friends, you can’t go outside so you stand your ground and when Triumph bumps his chest into yours again you ask, “Why are you doing that? Are you trying to make out with me or something?” and Tyrannosaurus K Gunship snorts in unison with Triumph’s friend, and you realize it’s a mistake when Triumph’s hand comes flying up into the right side of your head, rocking you into the CD stands and you push yourself back up right into another punch in almost the same spot, and so you clutch him, the shorter Triumph easily your match in weight and better muscled for his size, trying to wrap your arms around his and pin them to his side but he pushes you away and hits you again and TK takes over and moves you and the next thing you know you’ve got him in your hands, the intervening period a blur you diagram in your head later while peering in a mirror at the mass of bruises

and lumps rising on your torso and face. You have him in your grasp, an arm locked around his neck and another pressed against the side of his head and you can feel TK scream inside of you as you realize Triumph is very still, his friend looking at you with his eyes wide and panicked, and you pause, your body kinetic, and the Docent part of you fights TK, fights the burning ache to move, and after seconds, or maybe minutes, you become aware of the sweat coating Triumph's neck, and the copper taste of blood on your lips, and then you start to hear, first your own harsh breathing and then Triumph's intertwined, and his friend across from you saying "no, no, no, no", and you let go, Triumph stumbling down the aisle to his friend, and then turning to peer at you. Looking around you see a cluster of people, their mouths hanging open, gathered in the exit from the electronics department, and you shake your head. Taking a last look at Triumph, body and face unmarred except for a redness fading from his neck, you turn and limp your way through the crowd, their legs shuffling backwards as they press against each other to let you through and out of the store and into the parking lot, looking for your car among the sixty or so lining the parking lot and cursing when you spot it at the end of the lot, a habit born of disdain for the eagle eyed circling the parking lot for minutes, searching for the perfect spot to save effort. You wish you were one of those now as you hobble through the lot, the people walking in stopping in their tracks and staring at you instead of giving you the sidelong glances you're used to, and you feel blood dribbling along your chin as you open the car door and slump into your seat, willing

yourself to pull your legs in and finding you don't have the strength, all the strange energy of TK recaptured in the Leyden jar of your mind.

Nowadays the massive parking lot sits empty except for a few clusters of cars parked close to store entrances and a solitary beat up F-150 out toward the road, cab blue and bed white, both shot through with patches of rust, the front passenger tire deflated and the entire vehicle pitched over toward the offending member. In front of the shrink's office there're a few cars, more than you'd expect for a single practice, and inside patients sit in chairs lining the walls, faces blanched by fluorescent lighting. A sign by the receptionist window says CASH ONLY, NO INSURANCE. Trebleclef goes to the window and you sit down in a plastic bucket chair, picking up an old sun faded copy of Sports Illustrated, the mailing address clipped off the bottom corner, and pretend to thumb through it while eyeing the people around you – young, mostly in their twenties or thirties, with a few outliers, an older black lady with her hair, mostly silver, pulled back taut, and a white man around Papa's age with a cherry cane, polished and shining, between his legs. He spins it as he sits; taking the ball at the top between two fingers and flicking it like a coin, the cane rising and collapsing back down, gravity trumping momentum. The man notices you watching him and nods, and as you reciprocate Lady Trebleclef's shadow falls across you.

"It'll be a while since I'm a walk-in. I had to sweet talk them to get them to let me in at all – luckily, they like me."

You grunt, and settle back into your chair. "So we wait."

And you do wait. You wait, chatting and wondering when the conversation will turn serious as the crowd thins, as the man with the cane shuffles through the door next to the receptionist, and then the lady with gray hair, as the couple that replaced Lady Trebleclef at the counter and spent ten minutes quietly arguing with the nurse (*But our insurance said that they'd pay it if you could bill them directly for this*), and a half-dozen more make their way through the door and back out, until finally the laminated particleboard sally port opens to admit Lady Trebleclef.

She goes through the door, and you wander out the other, jaw still aching, striking out across the parking lot for the gas station, a Marathon now, formerly the Minute Mart where you buy cigarettes for the first time at 15, nervous, Bivouac across the counter just as much so, looking back in the office to make sure that the manager is out. A box of Marlboro Reds, the brand of choice for Kentucky high schoolers in the late 1990s, the cardboard package durable, the flip-top a handy tool to count how many cigarettes you smoke in a day and make your claim to indestructibility.

You don't get Marlboro Reds while you're waiting for Lady Trebleclef. You get USA Silvers, cheap at twice the Nineties' price, and to ease the grinding of your teeth you get a bottle of Dr. Pepper and a Milky Way Midnight, and as you swipe your card the girl behind the counter, probably the same age as Bivouac when he sells you cigs in high school, brushes pink hair behind her ears and begins to bag your purchases.

"I don't need a bag."

She takes the items out of the bag and pushes them across the counter at you and then turns and tosses the empty bag into the garbage can behind her. This irritates you and you choke down your urge to comment, wondering if she lives in one of the new houses on the edge of town, if she's a second generation discarder, and you remind yourself that you'd done the same thing when you were young, that all the natural beauty in the world didn't mean shit until you were surrounded by concrete and mortar, and so you take your cigarettes and shove them in your pocket, and outside of the store you sit the soda down and lean against the wall and eat your candy bar, TK ravenous in your head, and then you suck down a few gulps of the Dr. Pepper before lighting a cigarette for the walk back to the psychiatrist's office.

Lady Trebleclef comes out of the office before you're halfway back to the office, shielding her eyes against the sun that's made its way up to sprout rays that nestle, uncomfortable, on your neck as you walk, and you take your flannel shirt off as you walk to meet her at the car.

"How'd it go?"

"Oh it went great. He's a really good guy. He like, really listens. I went so long without a psychiatrist after I lost my insurance, and then I went into this guy when I started waitressing and I told him what I'd been on and he didn't give me any shit or anything, just wrote me a prescription. This guy is just great – I'm so glad there's a psychiatrist like him in town."

“Yeah?” You turn the engine and the Celica sings to life. “Where to now?”

“Well – you know how I asked to borrow money? It wasn’t for the doctor. I actually need to go fill my prescription. In Princeton, at a pharmacist there.”

You swing the car onto the road and head up through the hills until you hit 293 in front of the old church, and then turn right. You’re wondering though, and so you have to ask, “What are you on meds for, anyway? Depression?”

“Yeah, that and BPD.”

“BPD?” You should know this one because of how it isn’t what you have but you always forget, always have to fumble at the letters a few times in your head before you get it right.

CHAPTER 13

“Borderline personality order”, she says, and you nod. You know BPD, or at least you’ve seen *Girl, Interrupted*, and so you think you have a clue what it is up until you find out you don’t.

“Yeah... Um, after Chester Apricot left and then you did things started to get a little weird down here. Like – goddamnit, I don’t know. I don’t know why you guys had to leave, and then I don’t know what the hell happened. I keep trying to pick it up but the pieces don’t make any sense when I start fiddling them back together.”

She pulls the bottle of vodka out from under the seat, a surprise since you didn’t notice she’d shoved it under there, and you straighten up and pay a little more attention to the traffic on the road – a tractor that you crawl behind for a quarter of a mile before he crests a hill and waves you past, the man on top the John Deere waving down at you as you shoot around him, a couple of vans headed the other way, probably to go hang out at the lake on one of the last good days of the year, or maybe to hop the interstate up to Paducah or down to Nashville.

“Look, Docent.” Pausing, she opens the bottle and takes a swig. “I think I fucked up, and I don’t know where it begins and where it ends. Like

my ex-husband, right? He's a complete asshole. A fucking asshole, and his dad runs Wemble County. Judge Executive Dojo, lord of all he fucking purveys. And his son is a douche – a real rough guy. Y'know? Ya'll'd left and I was driving over to Murray and I meet this fucking kid, around our age, and he's kinda cute and he was into Magic like you guys'd used to be, and so I hung out with him and his friends and stuff because when you two left nobody really wanted to hang out with me because I was new in Dosta and, so, you know I made friends with him.”

“And he seemed sweet, Iguana did, real sweet. My car broke down and Granny couldn't take me to class and he offered to come pick me up. Forty miles outta his way, three days a week or more. I know that because he made real sure to point it out to me when I tried to leave him the first time. He counted it up on a piece of paper in front of me, did some math, all quiet and his brow furrowed as he looked down at the paper and I thought he was just concentrating on the paper instead of having to deal with me saying I was leaving him, and then he looked up at me, his face red as the devil, and climbed out of that armchair of his and waved that sheet of paper in my face. '1360 miles, Trebs' – that's what he called me, his pet name, sweet at first but now just the sound of it makes me shiver – '1360 miles,' he said, 'of me hauling your dumb broke ass from Dosta down here to school so you can get your useless fucking degree, your precious Bachelor's in psychology. At least 1360 miles of my time and gasoline, and what the hell have you ever even

done with your stupid degree? You're a receptionist, Trebs, and you're lucky to be that. What do you think you'll be without me?"

"I worked for Iguana, then, I was his receptionist, and it was terrible. All day long I'd watch him work, greet his clients and take his calls with a smile on my face, and I'd know that the slightest fuckup and he'd be on me when we got home, a fucking Budweiser in one hand and poking his damned pointer finger into me with the other hand. Just tap, tap, tap. Punctuating each and ever fuckin' sentence he said."

"And I had to be careful not just to do things right but not to be too nice. There was a guy who used to come in, some custody battle with his missus, and he loved to chat. Just a super friendly guy, no harm meant, and one day Iguana catches me talking to him and laughing, the guy leaning forward onto the counter, and he stiffens right up and storms into his office. The guy don't even notice, and a few minutes later Iguana called him in and they talked for a while and the guy leaves, just as cheery as normal. That night, though, Iguana gave it to me good – not hitting, he didn't do that for a long time, just yelling at me and throwing shit around the house, asking me what it was like to be 'such a goddamned whore'. The next week, the guy comes back in and brings me a flower he picked on the way in, a daisy. Tells me his daughter loves them – tells me my husband is doing a great job for him and that he can't wait to get his daughter back. And so I put the daisy in one of those paper clip collectors, those clear cubes with the magnets in a circle at top that catches them – the paperclips, that is – when you drop them

in, and I wait for him to go in and see Iguana and then I tell him ‘thank you so much’ when he leaves for the flower, and as soon as I see his car pull out of the lot I pull that damned daisy out and wad it up in a piece of paper so Iguana can’t see it and throw it away.”

“It’s on Main Street, just turn right here.”

You don’t understand the last bit for a second, you’ve been so engrossed, and you look at her blankly, the Celica idling at the stop sign across from the county courthouse, before you separate the last sentence from the rest and turn the car right, pulling to a stop in front of the drugstore, an old building, the awning out front covered in gray pantiles. At some point the drugstore changed hands; the new owners tore down the old owner’s name, leaving the big white letters that spell out DRUGSTORE at one end. The inside of the store is clean and confusing, the front of the pharmacy given over to a mixture of placards and signs, one wire rack full of signs appealing to God to bless, alternately, this mess, this family, this home, and this business. You look through these, trying to keep your face in a pattern that indicates intrigue rather than bemusement, while Lady Trebleclef makes her way to the back to talk to a pharmacist, the scrip crumpled in her left hand. When you realized with dissatisfaction that there are, in fact, no signs asking God to bless anything mentioned in Mark Twain’s ‘The War Prayer’ – no prayers for victory in war or for the deaths of strangers – you head back past the wooden carvings of beagle puppies.

You pause at a plastic display case full of ceramic dolls of a black man and woman. The woman wears a bright red apron, the man's hair is a white Hippocratic wreath, and both hold their hands clasped together in front of them. Looking closer, you see holes in the top of the figurines, two on the woman and three on the man and realize that you've looking at salt and pepper shakers, and so you take a photo to send to Rocket. Sending pictures like this to Rocket is habitual, ever since the two of you meet in a Sociology class freshman year. It's actually the first class you attend – a Monday morning lecture, eight A.M., but on the first day of school you're early, mind buzzing through the night and frustrating your attempts at sleep, and so you get up at 6 and take a shower and walk over to class, stopping at the maps they have mounted every few hundred feet or so on campus, finding yourself and then the building you're headed to, and when you get to the building the door is locked and you check your watch, six forty-five A.M., and so you find a place to sit and read and smoke until the doors open. It's while you're sitting there, comfortable in a niche in the wall, a bench cut out of the design of the building, that Rocket comes up to you.

“Hey, buddy.” You hear him first, and then a shadow falls over you, darkening the page in front of you, and when you look up you see a massive man, a few inches taller than you and wide as a refrigerator. You blink, once, then twice, as you look at Rocket, and he smiles at you, his teeth gleaming white on his dark face. “Mind if I get a cigarette off you?”

You would've given him a cigarette anyway, you tell yourself later, even if he hadn't been so massive and so, well, black. Your fingers shake a little, not enough, you hope, for him to notice, as you pull the cigarette from the pack, and he makes a flicking motion at you with his thumb, and you pass him the lighter with it. He lights the cigarette, takes a big drag, and you wonder if he's going to give you back your lighter.

"Mmmm." He hands the lighter back, holding the smoke inside him, and finally breathes out. "Man, it's terrible that this shit is bad for us."

"Uh. Yeah, I guess."

He takes another puff off of the cigarette, holding it in and closing his eyes, raising his chin slightly as though expecting a picture to be taken, and breaths out.

"Sorry, bro. My name is Rocket, thanks for the cigarette." He looks down at the bench where you're sitting, your legs sprawling along it, and reaches down with one hand and gently swats at your legs until you move them, and he sits down in their place. "You here for a class?"

"Yeah, Sociology."

"For real? Man, me too. Eight a.m., right?"

"Yeah. This is my first class. Like, ever."

Rocket smiles. "Me too, man."

That's how you meet Rocket, and how you become friends with him, and when his roommate drops out at the end of the first semester you move in with him, and when you come back to Louisville you and Rocket get an

apartment together, the two of you cracking jokes about race, preferring to be aware of the difference in your backgrounds and examine it from one angle and then another, curious as to how you are defined in relation to each other, and so when you see things like the salt and pepper shakers, modern replicas of a racially divided past, you take pictures of them and send them to Rocket for his opinion. That accomplished, you meander down the aisle past the antibiotic ointments, past the laxatives and past the lubricants and the condoms, glancing to see if the town has faltered enough in moral fastidiousness to carry vibrators and there, above the XXL Magnum jimmy jackets is a long box labeled 'personal massager'.

You smirk and move down the aisle to meet up with Trebleclef, the scrip now parted from her hand, and she runs her hand through her hair and you notice now how bad her roots are, a couple inches of brown running down the strands, and you pause to take another look at her in the light, the fluorescent making the fading blue bruises trailing up and down her arms look worse against her pale white skin. She looks tired, too, her face as worn as Mama's family bible, the exterior long having lost its luster from being opened and reopened over the course of a hundred years and five generations.

"Hey, you." She stifles a yawn against the back of her hand. "It'll be like... fifteen minutes or something. Wanna sit down?"

The two of you sit, and Lady Trebleclef pokes your leg.

"Having fun yet?"

You shrug.

“Seriously, though, for real, thanks for bringing me out here. Do you have that money? I’ll get it back to you in a couple hours – we just need to run a couple of errands, real quick like.”

“They take credit?”

“Here? Yeah... yeah they do.”

The card is buried deep in your wallet, an emergency fund that you dip into less often as the Lamictal takes hold in your blood stream, TK Gunship making less appearances and less demands. When he is there, he wheels and deals, he needs things and he gets them, and it’s only by calling home, terrified, that you manage to stay afloat, manage to stay in Louisville. You rely upon the good graces of your parents and of Rocket, that the former will send you money and that the latter will float you until it arrives, and you do the math, month after month, figuring how much you can spend and how much you should save and every month the math is wrong – every month TK Gunship worms his way into your mind and recalculates, makes exceptions, one small thing and then another – a movie, a video game, a pair of tennis shoes, and a hat. Every month you call home, it seems like, every month for years, even after the second hospitalization when you leave with a prescription for Celexa and bandages under your sleeves.

The Celexa is not a cure – it’s not even palliative. The Celexa burns in your brain, wakes TK Gunship up and shoots his veins with amphetamine. For a year you take the Celexa before you give up on it, and for a year TK

Gunship is there, driving pen across paper and buying five dollar coffees and packs of cigarettes and CDs and computers with rent money, and for a year you barely sleep, giving in to it only in fits– three or four hours a night and, with luck, naps in the afternoons, and every week or two you miss one engagement or another, body spent beyond TK Gunship’s considerable energy, and you are too ashamed and too perplexed to explain, and so you miss classes and never return, and you miss work until your manager sits you down and lets you go, and TK Gunship tears apart all the things that are supposed to bind you together. You stop the Celexa when you miss a psychiatrist’s appointment and are too ashamed to go back, and so you spend five years with your body system empty of the drugs, five years of TK Gunship and the black dog drifting in and out of your mind.

You look in the wallet for your credit card, and for a second you think you’ve forgotten it in your rush, that it must have made its way out and onto a floor somewhere or maybe it’s tucked into a pair of jeans back in Louisville waiting to be washed, and then your finger runs across the hard edge, tucked behind a picture of your niece, Shitstorm’s daughter, aged 5 and smiling and waving at the camera, and you work your thumb in behind the picture and drag the card out, the image on the front of Porky Pig a joke, a way to keep yourself from using the card more than necessary but you know what’s it’s like to go without medications – you know what it’s like to have TK and the dog both uncowed – and so you’re pretty sure this qualifies, this opportunity to help someone is worth the temporary hit to your wallet, worth scrimping

for a couple of weeks instead of visiting Heine Bros or Starbucks to suck back lattes.

When the time comes, then, and the lady places the white bag on the counter you slide the card, holding your breath, a habit born of countless failed transactions before you were medicated, until the card clears and the lady smiles at you, pushing the receipt across the counter for you to sign, your signature clear and bold, *Docent Americana*.

CHAPTER 14

When you get into the car, Trebleclef tells you to pull around the corner to Big Springs Park, a memorial stop on the Trail of Tears, and so you do, sliding the black car under a tree and putting it into park as she rips open the bag, two bottles inside.

“Look... I’m bout to do something weird, but I swear it’s how my psychiatrist wants me to.” Her eyes are steady so you forbear any questioning and nod agreement, wondering *just what the hell is going on here* as she digs through her purse for the second time of the day, alternating between peering inside and then running her fingers through, the items inside jingling and rattling, until finally she’s collected a couple silver objects and a dollar bill and she drops them in her lap before turning and shoving the bag in the back seat and then peeking out the windows in every direction.

“So my shrink, right? He’s a bit unorthodox.” She moves to grab one of the bottles of pills out of the door, and you see now the silver in her lap is two spoons, the handles on each one broken off down close to the bowl. “See, he’s really concerned that I get the most out of my meds. Like, and this is for all of his patients. He used to practice in Tennessee, right? Moved, no, run out of state, really, by the cops over some bullshit.” She shakes two orange

pills into her hand and screws the lid back on and places the bottle back next to its brother. “Adderall, by the way. I need it to focus... I get so confused, sometimes, otherwise. Lost... I have trouble remembering what I’m doing. What was I saying? Oh...” She places the Adderall in the top spoon, and then trades its place with the bottom spoon, the orange pills disappearing between silver. “You don’t have a clean straw by any chance do you? No? Do me a favor, and roll that dollar up for me. Leave a decent hole.” You take the dollar and roll it between your fingers as she cups her fingers around the bottom spoon, and places her thumbs in the indentation of the top, her thumbs turning white for a moment before there’s a click as the spoons collide, the pills between crushed, and she grinds them against one another as you finish rolling the dollar bill and hold it out to her, and she smiles at you and pulls the top spoon away, rests the other on the dashboard and leans forward, dollar bill in her nostril, and winks at you before inhaling, the orange powder disappearing. She slams her head into the headrest as an extension of the snort as though the particulates had slammed through her nose and into her throat, the force of their impact tossing her backwards, and she sits there for a moment, blinking, before smiling at you.

“So when I take Adderall as a pill, it tears up my stomach. I just end up throwing them back up which is, you know, no bueno. And so I asked Dr. Fairylight about it and he said I could snort them and... yeah. So I snort Adderall. Like... three of these pills a day. I have to come here because none

of the other pharmacies will fill a prescription that big.” She pauses, then her smile widens. “You should have one! You’ve got to be tired.”

You aren’t tired, not yet, but your head is starting to throb and you don’t really mind the idea of it, and TK isn’t raising any objections either. It’ll be your second time for Adderall, though you’d swallowed it the other time, and as you watch she places another pill between the spoons and crunches them together, grinding the pill to dust, and then it’s your turn to put the dollar bill in your nose, a little awkward, cocaine a drug you tried once and dismissed so you’re not used to snorting, and you rise up off the spoon when you feel the load of powder shoot out of the bill and into your nose, and you sniff, and sniff again, wondering if any of the powder has dropped out of your nose and into your moustache.

“Fuck.” You let the word drop out of your mouth, not sure how you mean it, and Trebleclef says it back to you, almost languid, “Fuck.”

Then she amends, “Fuck is right.”

You rest there a moment with Lady Trebleclef, your eyes closed, until you hear her start to rustle around, and open your eyes in time to dodge her as she thrusts half her body into the back seat, ass wriggling in the air next to your head, and then pulls herself back through, purse in hand.

“Yeah so I was stupid – I needed this. Gotta put my tools away, and I believe I owe you two hundred dollars.”

You try to wave off the money – you know her financial situation is dire enough that she doesn’t have anywhere to sleep at night.

“No, no... I owe you money, and I can get it easily now. I just need to make a couple calls. Why don't you drive us back to Dosta, and I'll see what I can do about getting your money?”

It is a plan, or at least something to do for a few hours, and so you shift the car into reverse and drop the parking brake, then slip backwards into the road and head back out 293 towards Dosta as Trebleclef flips open her phone and starts dialing.

CHAPTER 15

By the time you take the turn off 293 to head over to Dosta Trebleclef's found a buyer, a guy you assume because she calls him baby, and so you head to meet him at his place.

"I've got some stuff there I need to pick up, anyway. We used to... well, we used to fuck, I guess. For lack of a better term. So I would spend the night here. So there's stuff there. Of mine." The explanation ends lame, unsurprising considering what you've seen so far of Lady Trebleclef's sleeping arrangements, and so you ride in silence over to meet the man, the quiet broken only so she can ask "You know where the low income housing is?" and, when you nod, add "Number 308. It's at the end of the cul-de-sac."

You know where the low-income housing is because a friend of yours lives there when you're in elementary school, one of those fleeting friends who you can only remember a few discordant things about. You remember playing at his place one day, the two of you running action figures along the deck of his prized G.I. Joe Aircraft Carrier, the crown jewel of anyone your age's collection except for, maybe, a Millennium Falcon. It's sometime around Christmas – you know this because you have to wear a coat and knock the snow from your shoes against the brick walls before entering their

house, and because you remember asking about the candelabra they have on a table in front of the window. They explain it to you in basic terms, enough for you to understand that Mono is somehow different but he still seems the same to you, and the two of you continue playing with the aircraft carrier, the action figures divided along the equitable lines of masks that look more like ninjas and those that don't look like ninjas at all. Storm Shadow and Snake Eyes fight together, side by side, and when the battle ends they emerge triumphant. That's the only time you go to the low income housing as a kid – Mono leaves not long after, after a day where kids corner him in a corner of the playground and point and chant, without even real malice, "Mono the Jew! Mono the Jew!" and you join in with the rest, caught up in the noise and the camaraderie. It isn't until years later that you realize what you do – it isn't until you're not sure who to ask that you wonder why he left.

To get to 308 you drive past Mono's old apartment, and you glance over at the window to find it empty, mini blinds pulled up high and windows cracked unlike 308, the last townhouse, shades lowered and closed against the daylight, and as you pull in you see them jump, a small space opening towards the bottom of one, and when Trebleclef pops the door and stands up the shades snap close. You mirror her, even down to stretching when you get out of the car, and when she ducks down to get the pills out of her door you duck down to watch before catching yourself, foolish.

"You want me to wait or?"

“No, dummy. Come in! I’ll need your help to carry my stuff. Besides, he’s a really good guy just, you know... young. He washes dishes at the restaurant. But oh my fucking god is he hot. Like H-A-W-T hot. Too bad he’s,” and here she glances at the door and the window to make sure they’re closed, “limp-dicked most of the time, and doesn’t handle it well. I mean, I can deal with not getting fucked, no big deal, right, but he just gets so damned embarrassed and then he turns into a complete asshole.”

Nodding, you follow her up the stairs to the stoop, and as she raises her hand to knock on screen door the door behind it pops open. The man behind is young – younger than you imagined, and it’s obvious that she’s been robbing the grave worse than you do when you’re only 29, picking up a 20 year old at a coffee shop the day after telling Rocket that you think you’ve got “just one more” in you, one more in this case being a teenager, or at least someone too young to drink, and you’re right about having just one more in you. The romance between you is terrible and overlong – a brief period spent learning her body, learning what she likes and doesn’t like, and then a long cooling off period when you realize that she’s a prude in the sack, your interest fading quickly in the two acceptable positions of boy on top and boy behind, and before long you sink into despair at the realization that this girl, only just starting her way up to the peak of her virility and attractiveness, is too ashamed of her own body and wickedness to succumb to enjoying it, too concerned with how she might look in the process of using her mouth to open it and too worried about her taste to be eaten. It takes a

year or two after it ends for you to acknowledge the actual problem in the relationship, the one that manifests itself when the two of you are nude but permeates the entire thing. You cast her as redeemer, seeking something in her whimsical nature to ground you, and when TK Gunship endures despite her love you resent her, and she resents you for being unchanging. In the end, though, it is the collapse of the relationship that saves you – you find a psychiatrist who diagnoses you with bipolar, and things begin to get better.

If your failed entanglement was 20, though, then Lady Trebleclef's must be 18. He's tall – not so tall as you at 6'1" but tall enough you know he's above average, maybe 6 flat – and his eyes are the blue of Rand McNally lakes dulled a bit with what you guess is marijuana by the stench of the apartment he leads you into. From his chin dangles what you can only term cracker goatee – a left over from the nu metal era (or error, as Captain Bunny Blue puts it), as common in towns like Dosta as dented cars, and in his case only exceptional for the fact that he's attempting to grow it at all. But you can see why Lady Trebleclef swooned so over him – the shirt he wears doesn't simply have the sleeves cut off but has been sliced down the sides to just above the hem, and it shows off his arms well, the biceps easily double your own, and when he bends over to move some magazines so you can sit on a bean bag across from the sofa that he and Lady Trebleclef settle into you catch a glimpse of his abs, a pack of them though you can't tell the number.

This is what she sees in Chester Apricot, too, you remember – not his personality, for that was in most ways an imitation of your own, but his body,

not as defined as Alloy's but when Lady Trebleclef arrives in town, her belly and cheeks still packing a little bit of baby fat, and the three of you go swimming at the lake his body is still superior to yours. Maybe she does like you better as a person but she likes his body, or the fact that his body responds to hers, better than she likes yours. You think on this while Lady Trebleclef relaxes on the couch, and when he comes back from the kitchen with three beers you pop the top in unison with the others, raising it and saying cheers.

"So, baby, whaddaya got for me?" he asks, and you begin to have your suspicions that things aren't under control. It's the way he says "baby" – without a hint of flirtation in his mouth. It has a sense of finality to it, or of the possessive – an assuredness you don't think appreciates the situation. It's the 'baby' of someone who expects a sleeping partner, not the 'baby' of someone looking to buy pills off his ex, and so you look at his hands while he and Trebleclef negotiate.

"Well, darling," and she throws on a shit-eating grin, and you wonder if she's been throwing you the same one or if her desire to be around you is genuine, "I've got some Adderall and I've got some Xanax here. I just need to sell like 10 of one or the other – I owe Docent here some money." You raise your beer, thinking *salut*, when they look at you, and take a swig.

"Oh yeah? Well, shit, baby, I got some money but not a lot. Like 50 dollars, y'know? So how about – I dunno, I give you fifty dollars and you give

me like 5 of each. Y'know I'm good for it. 'Sides, you owe my mom money too."

The grin disappears off Trebleclef's face, a ripple of uncertainty, and then she plasters it back on, leaning in against Alloy. "Now I know you're just teasing me honey. I mean, if I give you Xanax for free it's not like you're going to give your mama a hundred dollars and say 'Here's that money Trebleclef owes you.' You owe her money for rent yourself. Speaking of which, when is Miss Thing coming home? I'd kinda like to mosey along before that happens – maybe come back around later tonight once I've got Docent paid off and I've got some money for your mom. After work. You working?"

"Yeah, I'm working. Gotta go in at 4 – why don't you stay here and ride with me? Mom doesn't get off until five, and she's still got go by Grams and pick up the brat."

"I told Docent I'd hang out with him today. Besides, I was going to run some laundry over at his parent's place – I just need to grab it from upstairs. And how about – since I've got to sell some of this to make some money – how about I sell you 3 Adderall for 50 bucks, which you know is cheap for the big ones, and then I guess I let you have 3 Xanax and you give me some money when you get tipped out tonight." She dumps the pills on the coffee table in front of them, a brass framed glass topped monstrosity that eats what little space exists between the couch and the T.V., lining the bars of Xanax up end to end, an Adderall dot hovering over each one, and then

rearranges the Xanax into a U, placing two Adderall above into a heavy metal umlaut and punctuating the vowel with the last while Alloy searches his pockets, back first and then front and comes out with a wad of dollars, and counts them into Trebleclef's hand.

"You'll be back tonight, right? After work? When I get here, you'll be here."

"God, of course I will silly. I promise... I was just staying at Taxi's because his niece really wanted me to, is all. I'm coming back here tonight and I'm going to stay." When he looks down to continue counting, she flicks her eyes skyward, the universal symbol of supplication and exasperation, and you take another suck off the bottle, wondering when or if he'll ever reach fifty. The wad of dollars turns out to be a wad of singles, handy for a strip club and annoying as fuck for a dope deal.

When the money is finally counted, Trebleclef thanks him and runs upstairs, leaving the two of you across the glass coffee table, you sunk into a cheap beanbag and him on a sofa that's seen better days. He eyes you as you take another gulp off the bottle.

"You from around here, Docent?"

"Yep."

"Know anyone I might know?"

Shitstorm, you think, *Papa Americana*. *Bivouac Carabineer*. *The fag used to work at Wal-Mart before it moved out of town*. Instead, you say, "Yeah, I knew a guy used to live here. Named Mono. Number 205, down the way.

Looks like maybe it's empty now, got the shades open and windows cracked like it's airing out. You know him?"

"Nah.... It's been empty a while."

"Just as well." You pause, consider where you are, what you're doing.

"He was a fucking Jew."

And on cue Lady Trebleclef comes down the stairs, a backpack, unzipped and stuffed with clothes to the point that they must be held in by pressure alone, in one hand.

"Hey, you mind if I take this bag? I'll bring it back tonight."

"It's cool. See you at work, baby."

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