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HOPE SPOTS

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Wittenberg University, Springfield, Ohio, 2004

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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in Creative Writing, Fiction

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*My youth? I hear it mostly in the long, volleying
Echoes of billiards in the pool halls where
I spent it all, extravagantly, believing
My delicate touch on a cue would last for years.
- Larry Levis*

LOVE STORY FOR MARIE, ALL HIGH AT PALOMINOS

I wrote Marie back. It was a love letter, a farewell card. That was over a year ago now. She responded, in a way, but then there weren't any more letters. I never brought it up again. Who writes letters now, anyway? She still lives in Gainesville and I try to see her when I'm in town. We have drinks and we shoot pool and I spend a lot of money while she complains about the college kids and the punk rockers, and also the humidity and that strange claustrophobia that you get when you live in Florida but are one hundred miles from the ocean. But she loves it here. It's cheap living and it rains everyday for at least a few minutes and that really gets her off somehow. And in between the rain it's as much fun in the sun as a girl could want. She has the outline of the state of Florida tattooed on her arm. She takes the good with the bad.

That's the natural state of loving things, little man, she says to me now. Punches are thrown and one must roll with them or else be knocked the fuck out.

She has learned a lot, she tells me, and I believe her. I think maybe she smokes too much pot and drinks more than she should, but that's all right. A lot of us do things like that. She's happy and she's in love. Isn't that what's important?

Get this: she was in love with me once. She never said it, but believe me, she was. Now she's in love with this divorced ex-junkie. He's a dozen years older than her. He works in the kitchen of the pizza place where she tends bar.

But listen, I don't want to sound resentful, because I'm not. Those are the honest facts about the guy. I've met Jack a few times; he shakes my hand firmly and doesn't ask questions. He kisses her on the cheek when she doesn't expect it. He seems like a man who has learned lessons from his past, who believes that lovely stories are born from harsh facts all the time.

Still, as all men do, I assume that I'm the better man when I see them together. I see her and him looking at each other and all I can do is remember the steady rhythm she and I had. She laughs at something he says and I think about the way she'd sink her teeth deep into the meat between my neck and shoulders. And then I think about the time that she sang *You Send Me* in this haunting, moaning voice as I pinned her wrists to the bed.

That was special. That was only for us.

I say this to myself while I'm shooting pool in Palominos. The tables here run fast and there's an old-fashioned jukebox against the wall. A group of young, hip girls have set up camp in the corner. They've all brought their own cues. Player cues, no more than a hundred bucks each. A fine stick for beginners. Across the room, Marie and Jack are holding hands between barstools. She's wearing the same blue and red cotton dress that she wore when we met once in Decatur and I can still see her shutting the hotel room door behind me, and that dress beginning to fall, from her shoulders to her hips, stuttering there, and then down to the floor.

I wonder how it will fall tonight, and if he'll watch it and study it and keep that memory under a bell jar in his mind, the way that I do.

I'm shooting against a bulbous old man who talks to himself as he lines up his shots. He curses when he misses an easy cut on the eight, setting me up, and I remember

that I've had times like that with other girls. Not with those exact movements and smells and motions, but something very much like it. And I know she's gone and done the same with other men, with Jack.

This is a good thing, I say to myself, and I attempt a bank shot. Sometimes it goes in, sometimes it doesn't. It's getting late now and Jack goes out to meet some friends but Marie stays behind. I join her at the bar and she asks me to ride with her to buy cocaine.

When I lived here, I shot straight 8-ball on a team with another man Marie loved. He was the team captain, a hell of a shot, young and handsome. He worked in *business*. Our team was good, and I stuck around town – even thought about applying to school here – because I liked playing with that crew.

Marie loved to shoot pool, too. And she might have been better than the lot of us. She had a Lucasi Custom cue. It was nineteen-and-a-half stunning ounces, floating split back and bocote wood points with metal diamond inlays on natural curly maple. She looked wild when she flashed that stick, bar light kicking off the finish like it was a ceremonial dagger. We'd sit back and watch her cut hearts out with that thing.

She talked about pool the way Southerners once talked about church. She used words like *fellowship* and *spiritual*.

Wholeness, she said once.

I asked her to explain.

You can win or lose the fucking game without the other guy taking a single shot, she said.

And you don't call that luck?

I call that purity.

When her man left town for a *business* trip, she hung out with me. One night, we got drunk and shared a cab and she invited me in.

What about Ronnie? I asked, but I was already moving my hand up her leg.

What about him?

He's my friend.

He's a pool friend. A teammate. And we're open. It's fine.

It'll make things weird.

Look at it this way, she said. You wouldn't stop shooting pool because he left, would you?

No, I said.

And I'm not going to stop doing what I enjoy either.

So it happened. And it happened again. And again. He returned, eventually. She was fine. I was fine. He wasn't fine. Then things were weird, and then I was the one who was gone, out of money, all the way back to Cincinnati. She dumped his ass and took a Greyhound north to see me, stayed for ten glorious days. No matter what's happened since, or who she's with now, you can't tell me that wasn't love.

She says she doesn't play pool seriously anymore.

It's a therapy now, she says. The sound of the balls, the chalk on the tip. It all levels me out.

She tells me the Lucasi is in her hallway closet. These days, she smacks drunken frat boys around and wins herself drinks with crooked house cues.

It feels better, she says. It's purer to beat them with whatever's on hand. Just me,

no help from the outside.

Her dealer is a punk kid I've never seen. He stares me down but talks to her like they grew up together. We get out of there and sit in the backseat of her car and she uses my credit card to cut up four absolute rails on the back of Jack's band's CD case. She asks me not to tell Jack about this and I agree. We take turns. Soon our blood is burning.

I'm in a healthy relationship for the first time in my life, she says.

I'm hurt by that. We never lived together, but I never thought of us as unhealthy.

I tell her so, tell her that I believe we had owned something real; we were just poor victims of circumstance and distance.

She licks the residue from the CD case and that gets the rest of me burning, too.

She thinks about what I said before saying that a child born with a chronic illness, through no fault of its own, is still an unhealthy child.

I point out that such children are often viewed as special gifts by their parents.

The parents have to say that, she says, and it goes on like that and I realize we've bought some very good cocaine.

Marie has gained some weight now but it suits her. She was shapely before, usually in small cutoff jean shorts on top of dark tights, her hair always pulled back in black or red bandanas. All tits and eyelashes and auburn curls. She was a stunning girl then, but she's something else now. That night in that hotel in Decatur, I did a line off of her chest and after I licked her clean she took a slug from a whiskey bottle and let her spill all down her front, dripping from her pink nipples into my mouth. Then she bent over and I inhaled another line from just above the crack of her ass. Her ass has a new

curve to it now; it's even more suited to that sort of beautiful debauchery. She'll never be able to do those things with Jack.

God, we live in a terrible world for love; the girl's got to lie to get high!

And think about it: she took me with her tonight, not him. Does she want me to think about those things? Do I make a move? I want to remember how she feels.

But listen, I'm not some creep. I'm as high as I've been in years, yes. And a little drunk. And she's laughing and talking like a firecracker and I think she's moved closer to me in the back seat. Or maybe I've moved closer to her. When she lowers her head to look at her phone, the screen lights her up and I can see pretty well down the front of that dress. This has to be on purpose, right?

Let me tell you something: you wouldn't even believe the way she looks naked. Naked and lying down; hills and valleys, all presenting themselves! If you'd have seen her like that, back in those days the way that I saw her, and then you saw her again tonight, filling up that dress: hell, it would beat you over the head, too. I'm not some creep for admitting it. If you were here, in the shape that I'm in, you'd be thinking the same things as me.

When I first met her I was as broke as she was, as broke as she is now. I was living on the road, running from the wreckage of all my empty affairs. I was starved of heat in those days.

And that body. It saturated me with this new, childlike wish for adventure. She made me want to climb trees. She made me want to get mud on my new sneakers.

Imagine me: an intergalactic explorer! And I map the galaxy of her freckles with a meticulous hand.

Imagine me: a noble privateer! And I discover new ways to fall asleep, and claim them in the name of the Queen.

She told me tales of past romances and the failures endured there, but imagine me: as brave as Caesar! And I vanquish those ghost-tribes of Aboriginal ex-lovers and send them off to labor in the salt mines.

I know I get carried away when the uppers kick in. And I know if you'd seen her then and if you could see her now, you'd get it.

But I swear I'm not here to try and wreck their love. Honestly.

We're on our way back to the bar, when Marie pulls up to her house. She leaves the car on and sprints inside. She returns, still running, with a leather case tucked under her arm.

She opens the door and sets the Lucasi on my lap.

Let's have some fun tonight, she says.

She throws the car into drive and we're off, slashing through the unlit neighborhood streets. They all look the same, feel the same, sound the same. The streets here are so similarly named it seems like the city planner wanted folks to get lost. We're on – I shit you not – NE 10th Avenue, then NE 10th Street, then NE 10th Place.

I never knew my way around this town. But Marie is local, born of the swamp, and she swerves through the backstreets, barely checking and taking turns, and pulls us back onto University Avenue. The lights from the main drag pour onto her, disappear, gush in again, illuminating her in a hundred small moments. There are no moves to be made when we're flying like this. It'll do for now.

Now Marie and I are back in Palominos, high as hell, and Jack and his friends have come back and we're shooting doubles. I'm on fire, like Paul Newman in the final scene of *The Hustler*. I'm on the verge of a break and run and I can feel it. Seven stripes are in. The eight is all that's left, but the solids are everywhere, like fat little bodyguards, blocking every decent shot at it.

So let's say you call it, three rails with the cue and kiss that eight into the corner. If you miss it, people will laugh and shrug it off, since you're not supposed to ever make that shot. Depending on how close you come, they may applaud your attempt. Even if you're unlucky and scratch the damn thing, they'll have forgotten about it the next time you play.

But if you sink that motherfucker.

You might get a few free drinks. You might impress a pretty girl. You might get a story to tell every game for the rest of your life. Marie is *my* teammate tonight, *my* girl again. Jack cannot make this shot: he doesn't have the skill or the luck; he doesn't see the *purity*. He won't ever even get a chance. I wait for her eyes to meet mine before I line it up. Sometimes it goes in, sometimes it doesn't.

I take a new drink outside with me to smoke a cigarette. The sun has been down for hours but it's still getting hotter. And the damn humidity. That's the real killer. It's the kind of humid that would cause violent crimes and riots in a crowded, more ambitious city.

There's a loud dance club on the other side of University Avenue where a fight has broken out. Probably because of the humidity. There are cop cars with pulsing lights and tight-bodied people in their best clothes all around the doorway. The bulbous man

who played me earlier in the night is out here smoking. He's muttering something at the scene across the street. Jack comes out, too. He lights a cigarette beside me.

Where's Marie? I ask.

She doesn't smoke anymore, he says. Quit a few months ago. How long are you in town?

Just for tonight, I say.

He's a redhead too, but not the handsome kind. He still drinks. Marie says the booze was never the problem; it was all the dope, which is odd, I think. I've met a lot of people who refer to themselves as addicts and stop when it suits them best, usually when they're out of money. To me, Jack just sounds like a half-assed quitter.

After a few drinks, he's bloated and red-faced. He has an unkempt, lazy beard, and flour and pizza dough spattered on his jean shorts. He's wearing an ironic, badly fitting t-shirt, featuring the cover art from KISS' *Love Gun* album. He's the kind of guy that somehow looks overweight and bony at the same time. Marie just can't be comfortable sleeping beside him.

Listen, man, I say. I want to tell you something.

Marie is always happy to see you, he says. You're a big part of her past. That stuff is important.

Ugh, this guy. I don't want to get into any bullshit rehab philosophy. I'm going to make my move.

It's not just a past, I say. Things happened tonight.

What are you talking about?

She took me with her to buy coke. We did it together.

Jack looks to the fluorescent burn in the bar window.

She's high right now, I say.

He lowers his head and sucks hard on his cigarette and I want to know how he fucks her and how often they do it and if she loves him all around and inside her or if she feels obligated. I want to know how the hell she can say they're healthy when she sneaks off to do blow with an ex behind her man's back. I want to know how she can settle down with a bum who's built like a garbage bag full of lawn clippings. I want another bump. My high is wearing off.

Did you hear me? I say. We got high tonight.

Yeah, she does that sometimes.

And she doesn't tell you.

I don't need to know, he says.

Doesn't it bother you?

I can't tell her what to do, he says. I don't want to be around it. But she can do what she wants.

Jack puts out his cigarette and turns back to Palominos.

If she ever needs it, he says. She knows I'll help her.

I can't believe this guy. The crowd continues to leak out of the nightclub and spill all over the sidewalk. A barefoot blonde in smeared makeup and a tight neon skirt walks close by me, her heels gripped in one hand and a cell phone in the other. She's yelling into it, nearly crying about the shitshow the night has turned into.

He's such a selfish prick, she says. I've got my own shit to deal with, you know?

You and me both, sister.

I bet Jack gives up the booze soon, too. One step at a time, right? I've thought about doing that a few times. I'll think about it again tomorrow. Right now my head is hurting and I'm thinking – honestly thinking – that it's a good thing our love fell apart, that the distance dried it right up.

Christ, I believe I could have died for that woman. But not in a way I'd want to go.

It's a good thing she quit me. And now she's quitting other things, too. She's already two vices down. This asshole is probably going to save her life someday.

That love letter I told you about. It was a good one, a real romantic gesture. It had to be. I mean, just listen to what she wrote me first:

Dear Lee, it started. And then: I'm sorry, little man. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

She wrote it out three times, just like that. Who writes letters like that? Then she wrote that our love had become like a puppy in a classified ad: we were sweet and housebroken but too expensive and too much responsibility and the landlord didn't much like the way that our hearts would howl, the way we'd keep the neighbors awake at night. I was very drunk when I read it. And when a girl like that writes you something like that and you read it in such a sad state, what can you do except love her more?

So when I was moving out of my apartment on Ludlow, I found a picture of Marie and me on the white sand beaches of Pensacola, both of us leaping into the air, our arms held high and our legs turned up to the side like bad cheerleaders, with this fiercely setting sun making a pink and orange halo around us. It's a fantastic picture. I wanted to be romantic. And I wanted to one-up her letter. I found this poem by this writer she loves

that reminds us that before he fell, Icarus first flew. The whole thing was a triumph; the falling was the end of the triumph, rather than a failure. It's the same when love ends, the poem says. Real *poetry*, I know. But don't tell me you don't dig the idea.

I wrote my favorite parts on the back of the picture and mailed it to Marie. But it came off the wrong way and she called me out.

She texted me, saying: dude, you can't do things like that.

Well shit. It wasn't supposed to be an attempt to dredge up nostalgia or weaken the resolve of her new love; it was supposed to be a thank-you card for teaching me that it's not wrong to let things live well and then die.

But I didn't really believe that. If I did, I wouldn't have sent anything at all.

That's simply how I wanted her to take it. Looking back, she didn't misunderstand the gesture at all. I did. Sometimes it goes in, sometimes it doesn't.

Now I'm back inside and the high is gone. In the corner of the room, Marie is glowing with goodness and bar light and picking out killer songs on the jukebox and for a moment we make that old kind of eye contact and I wonder if she's thinking that it's the strangest thing in the world to not love someone anymore. She plays a Thin Lizzy song.

She pulls at Jack's hand and brings him close. They dance badly in the tiny space between pool tables. They're dancing closer and slower than most people would to a song this fast, and as he touches his forehead against hers, he looks like the mattress to her box spring: there are secrets stashed between these two, pressed hard together, that no one else will ever know.

The drinks will flow and the blood will spill – that's the nature of loving things,

little man. *And if the boys wanna fight, you'd better let them.*

They spin around and now Jack is looking to me. It's a joyful gaze that only a certain kind of drunk, in a certain kind of light, can make. I'm leaning against the pool table and I lift my glass and tilt it towards him.

Secrets between us too, he and I.

Two redheads! Her hair is a darker shade of fire, and thicker, and as he twists her back in to him, it whips around his face. A couple strands become tangled in his beard and he bites at it playfully. Now the bartender's voice booms out the last call, and groups of drunken patrons turn to the bar, like wounded soldiers hearing a bugle sound their final charge to battle. Jack, never letting go of her hands, turns as well, and pulls her arms around his neck. She saddles up and wraps her legs around his waist and the two of them piggyback towards the last drinks of the night, and her darker fire is now draped all down and among his strawberry shade, burning and burning and burning.

Marie is perched like wings on his back. And now I'm following them, running behind them to the bar.

I'm begging for another drink.

No, it's something else: I'm begging them both to stay high, to keep it together, to never come down.

GIG MARKS

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kayfabe (n.; adj.) — The code of secrecy by which the secret of professional wrestling’s unreality is protected. *Keeping kayfabe* is the act of staying in character before, during, and after shows so as to maintain the illusion.

-

I was nineteen and Lee was only eight when our mother was sent off to federal prison camp for the first time.

“She’s away.” That’s what our father said. “Away for work. She will be for a long time.”

We didn’t ask questions. She was always away for work. Three weeks later, Dad asked me to come over.

“Children,” he said. He looked like an anchor tossed overboard as his heavy frame sunk deep into the sofa cushions. “We have to talk.”

So we talked about it then, and Dad even cried. He hugged us both and apologized for his deception. But I was a smart enough girl; I already knew the truth. And it had been in the newspaper, anyway. A cook at the Gaslight Café had showed me the article.

Something like *Local Woman Sentenced* in the heading. *Wire fraud, embezzlement, money laundering* in the byline.

“Same name as you,” the cook said. “Isn’t that wild?”

“Wild,” I said, and wiped my hands on the front of my apron. After closing, I snuck the paper away in my bag and read the article on the bus home. It was spring and I

was getting my shit together. I'd finally dumped Karl, found a decent job. I'd found a cheap apartment in Northside and registered for summer classes at Cincinnati State. But I changed those plans. I broke that lease and moved back home.

And, truthfully, she wasn't my mother. Pancreatic cancer had killed my own mother when I was two, and Dad remarried a year later. They hadn't planned on any more children, but we all know how that goes.

Wait, a wicked stepmother story? Yeah, I'm aware. And sure, she was a crook and fuckup, and she treated us all like dog shit sometimes. But that crook was the only mother I'd ever known. When you get dealt a shitty hand, you play with it, right?

Dad woke us early the next Sunday morning and herded us to the car. Lee was still in his pink and black pajamas. Dad hated those. Lee thought they made him look like Bret "The Hitman" Hart. We drove south. The prison was outside of Lexington, right in the middle of horse country. We took back roads. The roads were walled by undulating green hills; the hills were veined with miles of pure white fences, the fences leading the landscape up to so many antebellum plantation houses. The horses all looked like sculptures and there were stone fences lining the roadway, built a hundred years ago by slaves, Dad said.

Then there were a few ignored, unspoiled hills, followed by a more desperate one, capped with drab brick buildings. It looked like a military installation. This was Atwood Federal Prison Camp.

There were two prisons at Atwood. One for the men, and it had razor wire and towers. The guards carried weapons. Another for the women: minimum security for non-

violent offenders. If they wanted to, the inmates could walk right off the grounds, casually and unimpeded. Only a few ever did. They were soon caught and delivered to much worse places, with years added to their sentence. The ladies at Atwood knew they best sit tight.

In the weeks, months, and years to come, we would hear all these stories about secret letters and gifts delivered or thrown over the razor wire that separated the genders, of romances formed between people who could never touch, of hidden love growing up in those cages on the hill. The inmates called it *fencing*. This happened all the time, my mother told us. Sometimes one prisoner would be released and promise to wait for the other, but who knows if any of them ever did.

Every Sunday morning we'd go. I closed the Gaslight on Saturdays and I was exhausted and slept most of the way. The first few visits were dreary and strange and uneventful. We'd check in with the grumpy overweight guard, and settle into a room that felt like the waiting room of a dirty hospital. Mom seemed to lose weight with every visit. Her hair was mostly grey, had been for years apparently, and no one knew until she was locked up away from the salon.

"I've been walking three miles a day," she said.

We'd all sit together in that room, playing cards and Scrabble, looking to the tiny TV in the corner, always showing a football game or news about the war, sometimes cartoons for the kids. Sad couples leaned in and touched hands over tables. On the hour, the guard would announce count, and the prisoners would step away from their families and line up, a collage of women of every age and color joined together by numbers and matching sets of scrubs. When the weather was nice, the inmates and their visitors would

spend time outside in a yard littered with beat-up picnic tables. We could hear the voices carrying over from the men's prison.

On the third visit, a large woman, younger than Mom and with bleached blonde hair, was sweeping and emptying the trash by the vending machines in the visiting area.

"That's Tina," Mom said. "My roommate. Tina!"

Tina turned and waved to us.

"I've told her all about you guys," Mom said.

Tina was in on conspiracy charges. Her husband was a big time dealer in Indianapolis. Mom claimed Tina never knew what her husband was doing.

"They kicked down the door in the middle of night," she said. "And they pulled her children away from her, guns drawn."

Every visit, Mom had new stories like this, gloomy tales about the inmates, all of them spotless victims of husbands and hustlers and crooked governments. They all believed this. So did she. I imagine that's what you do to get by. She convinced us, too, and we were happy to be tricked. She told us she had taken the fall for *someone else*.

"Why the hell would you do that?" I asked while Dad and Lee threw a Frisbee in the yard.

"Because," she said. "Our family is strong enough to handle it."

What could I say?

Because this is the truth: we'd rather believe her a martyr than a felon. Noble. Not greedy. What else can you do?

Dad came into the kitchen one Sunday as Lee and I were eating breakfast. A tape of Hulk Hogan's *Rock n' Wrestling* cartoon was playing on the TV. Dad was holding two pair of denim overalls. He held out the larger ones to me.

"I need you to wear these today," he said.

"What?"

"Just do it," he said. "For me."

"Why?"

"Please, Carrie."

He handed the smaller set to Lee, who stripped his pants off right in the kitchen and pulled them on over his white t-shirt. He kept his eyes on the screen. Lee loved professional wrestling, and once Mom left, it was all he wanted to watch or talk about.

"I don't understand," I said.

"I'll explain when we get there," Dad said.

Seriously, what do you do when your father asks you and your eight-year-old brother to smuggle contraband into a federal prison? When you know your mother is selling it on the inside? When he's making it sound like you're doing something *noble*, because the items are harmless, not drugs or money or anything, just simple things that these poor women have been denied? Here's what you do: you pull out the trash bag in the can in the visitors' restroom and you empty the pockets of your overalls into the bottom. You place the hair dye and makeup and all the other shit just so and then you put the bag back in. You wad up a bunch of paper towels to fill the trash just a little more. You convince yourself that your father lost one wife, and that he'll do anything not to lose another. You wash your hands and open the door to your baby brother, next in line,

his little pockets still full and his eyes nervous and you pat him on the head as he goes in. Then you wait until he comes out and you buy him a goddamn Snickers bar from the vending machine.

Tina came around and emptied the trash. We wore overalls every visit from that point on.

-

babyface (n.) — A heroic or good-guy wrestler. (*Also known as: face; baby [archaic].*)
(*Antonym: heel.*)

-

Lee got in trouble at school. Dad was working extra shifts those days, so it came down to me to meet with the principal. Lee was sitting in the corner of the office with his hands folded neat in his lap. I asked the principal what happened.

“Well, Lee body slammed Curtis Baker,” the principal said. “Right on the concrete.”

“It wasn’t a *body slam*,” Lee said. “It was a spine buster.”

“It’s unacceptable,” the principal said.

“Is the boy all right?” I asked.

And, of course, the boy was fine. But the principal wanted to make sure that I understood that *that* wasn’t the point, that Curtis Baker *could* have been seriously hurt. The principal went on to imply that maybe Lee wasn’t getting enough discipline at home and even though I didn’t care for the tone he was taking, I looked very serious and assured him that Lee was, in fact, and that his father would hear of it that evening. The principal scolded some more and furrowed his awful face and at one point even said

something about our *situation*, almost said something about our mother, and even though I didn't know exactly what a spine buster was, I was sure I could figure it out on him, right there in that office if he didn't shut his mouth.

But he didn't say it and I told him I was taking Lee home for the day. He said that was probably a good idea.

Lee kept his little head low as we walked down the quiet hall. There were art projects and drawings pinned to corkboard on the walls. I asked Lee if anything he'd done was hanging up. He shook his head.

"A spine buster?" I said as I started the car and rolled down the window. "Whose move is that? Tommy Blanchard?"

Lee lifted his face. "*Tully* Blanchard," he said.

"Got it."

"But it's not him," he said. "It's Arn Anderson's move. He's Tully's tag team partner."

"I was close. Is Arn a good guy or a bad guy?"

"Bad."

"But you're not a bad guy, are you?"

"No," Lee said.

"You want to tell me what happened?"

"Curtis was saying things about Mom."

"So you gave him a spine buster?"

Lee tried to look penitent, but his eyes – so much darker than mine and so big against his small face – were full of pride. He nodded.

“Curtis Baker is a big kid,” I said. “Could you really lift him up?”

“Lifted him *and* spun him around,” Lee said. “Are you really going to tell Dad on me?”

“Are you going to do something like that again?”

“No,” Lee said.

“You promise you’re not a bad guy? You’re not going to tell me one thing and then do another?”

“I’m a good guy. I promise.”

“School is out soon, right?”

“In two weeks.”

“OK then,” I said.

“OK,” Lee said.

Since Lee had missed lunch in the principal’s office, we stopped at White Castle and ordered sliders and fries. When he finished, he burped in an exaggerated, comically loud way. He had ketchup smeared all around mouth. He was a funny kid.

“So,” I said. “How did you finish Curtis Baker off? With the Bionic Elbow?”

-

shine (n.) — To look good in a match. The term is often used as a narrative section of a match, wherein the *babyface* “gets his shine” early on before he’s beaten back by the *heel*. (See also: *cutoff*; *hope spot*; *boom boom boom*; *double down*; and *finish*.)

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Lee was never outgoing, even before Mom left. He played sports, poorly, and when he failed he took it straight to heart and sulked for days. He wasn’t a great student, either. He

always forgot his homework. But he could be whip smart and hilarious as hell when he opened up, and he opened up when he talked about wrestling. Once she was gone, he consumed it wholesale; he didn't care about anything else.

So I fed it. I started buying wrestling magazines at the local comic book shop. I learned about the business. I could speak the lingo. It became my gimmick and I was going to get it over. I looked for angles and storylines where the hero fought and struggled and, in the end, overcame the odds and triumphed. I'd find the events where the best matches took place and I'd rent the videotapes for Lee a few times a week. The kid loved these stories. He'd be sucked in for the duration of the show, and he wouldn't shut up about it for hours after it was over. He didn't care anymore if he dropped the ball in Little League, or if he got a D in math. There was justice in his world for a few hours. I loved seeing him feel that. I loved knowing that it didn't matter if his family let him down; Dusty Rhodes, the American Dream, never once did.

Dramatic? Sure. And maybe Lee was just the kind of boy who liked watching these pumped-up dudes beat the hell out of each other. Maybe I was projecting on the kid.

Maybe. But it was the best idea I had.

Our Aunt Susan, a retired schoolteacher, sometimes came over and cooked us dinner when Dad worked late. She worried. And whenever she glanced into the living room, the features on her face worried right up into that sharp look that old school teachers get. She'd see Lee's shadow in the glow light, eyes bolted on Magnum TA or Bruiser Brody, their faces busted open, blood staining the canvas mat, and she'd lecture me in whispers. She'd say that Lee was an eight-year-old boy, learning his way in the

world, dealing with the violent urges that often go along with the evolution of young males. I explained my theory, told her the way Lee talked to me about it, explained that he needed some kind of righteousness in his life. I raised my voice and she sighed.

On one of her visits, she laid it out:

“He needs *guidance*, Carrie,” she said. “And this is *not* it.”

She stirred the pot of chili with a stern arm and I wanted to shout how wrong she was.

I didn't. In her own way, she was trying to help.

If Lee noticed our talking, he never let on. He kept watching until he fell asleep. When dinner was finished, I brought him a bowl of chili and placed it on the table beside the couch. Randy Savage was giving a loud, theatrical interview. He was promising victory. I left the video on and didn't wake Lee.

I didn't care if I was wrong. No one should be all alone in the world.

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hope spot (n.) — The narrative portion of a match in which the *babyface* looks as if he's on the verge of winning, only to be dramatically rebuffed.

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On a Saturday late in the summer, Dad came into the Gaslight Café. He said he'd taken the rest of the day off and ordered a whiskey. He drank quickly and ordered another.

“Since when do you drink?” I asked.

“I have a drink sometimes.”

“That's not what this is,” I said.

“Jesus, honey,” he said. “Cut me some slack.”

I busied some tables and when I returned behind the bar, Dad said:

“This is really hard.”

“You think I don’t know that?” I snapped.

“I can’t lose her,” he said. “I just can’t.”

I topped off his drink and reached under the bar for my bag. I gave him the rented tape that Lee had watched the night before.

“I need you to return this on your way home,” I said. “They’ll be closed by the time I get off.”

“Sure, honey.”

“And get him a new one. Wrestlemania Seven. He’s been waiting on it for weeks.”

Dad’s drink was full to spilling and he lowered his face and sipped from the top of the glass.

“You hear me?”

“Sure,” he said. “Wrestlemania.”

“No, it’s got to be Wrestlemania Seven.”

“Does it really matter? Jesus.”

“He’s seen the others.”

“I’m not sure I like him watching this shit, Carrie. All these big guys in their underwear, holding each other down. The kid might get ideas.”

“Oh, come *on*.” I said. “Something important happens and he needs to see it.”

“I don’t want people to see *me* renting this shit.”

I snatched the tape off the counter and shoved it back into my bag.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m trying. I really am.”

“Finish your drink,” I said.

Dad got the tape after all. The next day, on the ride to the prison, Lee went on and on to me. The Ultimate Warrior beat the Macho King Randy Savage in a retirement bout. He took five straight diving elbows off the top rope and still kicked out. Then he beat the ever-living shit out of Savage, knocking him out of the ring, then dragging him back in and pinning him, arrogantly, one foot planted hard on his chest. But that wasn’t the important part. After the match, Randy Savage’s wife and former manager, Miss Elizabeth, came in from the crowd and saved him from an attack. She had left him a year before, tired of his evil antics. They wept and reunited in the middle of the ring. Everyone in the arena was in tears.

“So he has to retire?” I asked Lee.

“Yeah,” he said. “But he’s a good guy again.”

See, here’s one of the eternal truths of wrestling: face or heel, they all turn eventually.

Five years later, Terry “Hulk” Hogan would turn heel for the first time at the Bash at the Beach Pay-Per-View. Lee was a smartass teenager by then. Somehow and sometime behind my back, he had smartened up to the wrestling business, and thank god, I thought. If that had happened earlier, if the purest and most heroic of all the wrestlers had betrayed the fans, turned his back on the beautiful and honest and still-believing little Lee, I don’t know what would’ve happened.

I mean, if Hulk fucking Hogan was a bad guy, what hope did any of us really have?

“It’s a great angle,” is what Lee said to me on the phone. “That hero act of his was getting *old*.”

I felt like an idiot for how much that broke my heart.

-

blood (n.) — Contrary to most assumptions, the blood in pro-wrestling isn’t fake; it’s blood drawn deliberately, usually by means of a small, secreted razor blade. The process of drawing blood this way is called *blading*; the razor is called a *gig*, and the resultant scar is a *gig mark*. To bleed is to *show color* (or *get some color*) or to *geek*; a blood-covered face is called a *crimson mask*; a hearty bloodletting is called a *gusher*; to get busted open naturally (i.e., without the assistance of a razor blade) is called getting busted open “*hardway*” (as in “the hard way”).

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The Sunday visits became routine, like we were like going to church. I’d check the clock on the visiting room wall, and I’d feel ashamed. When the holidays came, I asked Dad about Christmas plans, and he simply said:

“Lexington.”

This was how we lived then.

Christmas was on a Wednesday, but the prison was still open to visitors. Dad came home the night before with gifts for us.

“I don’t get it,” he said, handing me a bag with Lee’s name on it. “But he’ll love this, don’t you think?”

There were a couple of action figures, a video copy of Summerslam '91, and several wrestling magazines. I looked up to Dad.

“This is great,” I said. Dad was happy. I opened one of the magazines and started to flip through it, looking for some of Lee’s favorite guys. My heart dropped.

“Dad,” I said. “You can’t give this to him.”

“Why not?”

“These are written behind-the-scenes,” I said. “They’re dirt sheets.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“They break the secret.”

“What, that it’s all fake?” Dad said. “Everyone knows that.”

“Lee doesn’t.”

“He’d figure it out soon or later. Maybe he’ll get a kick out of it.”

“No way,” I said. “He can’t find out like this.”

“Lighten up,” Dad said. “This ain’t Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny.”

“No, this is bigger.”

“Christ, honey,” he said. “I’m trying to do something nice. I don’t know shit about this stuff.”

Mom had been gone eight months. Eight more to go. When time passed and she went back a second and then a third time, now sentenced to multiple years, it felt commonplace. We were older; I had a family of my own. Lee was in and out of college, in and out of trouble. We’d still go visit when we could. Here’s a thing: my children *met* their grandmother in prison and it didn’t even feel strange. But it was something to have

Christmas dinner in Denny's that first year. To deal with the empty spot since every table there is set for four. To see Dad eating nachos with watery eyes.

“What do you think happened to *these* people?” he asked, looking around the dining room. “How did they end up in a Denny's on Christmas?”

I leaned over and put my head on his shoulder.

We watched as Lee made makeshift turnbuckles out of the salt and peppershakers. We took turns casting his new action figures off the top of them onto each other.

Let me tell you about Lee now: he still watches sometimes; follows the business on internet blogs and things like that. But he focuses on the villains now. He gravitates toward the heels. The way they show ass week in and week out and grin as the crowd hates them. The way they roll quietly out of the ring after being pinned, letting the babyface have their moment in the light.

Lee says it's selfless and he loves them for that.

When a wrestler – especially a *great* wrestler – retires, they nearly always lose their final match. It's called “going out on your back” and it doesn't matter if you're good or bad, the point of it is to pass the torch, to put someone else over on your way out the door. Take the heat you worked for and give it all to someone else. I think that's a hell of a thing to do. Tell me how that's fake.

I don't know if Lee is looking for justice anymore. I hope so. But I believe the real point is this: you can always, no matter what, be forgiven of your sins.

So you dug a pointed shard of wood from a broken chair into the forehead of your opponent when the referee was down?

Friend, you can change your ways. Take your comeuppance and change your story, and redemption is nigh.

Maybe you kidnapped your rival's child, held them ransom for a title match? Son of a bitch!

But you'll take your beating. Then you can save the day next week, and you can be absolved.

It doesn't matter how evil or hated you've been. You can be different. And in the end, if you do business, if you go out right, if you put over someone else for a change, you're made for life.

That heat, that shine. It'll keep on going.

POSSUM

Seventeen years after things got weird in the New York, Lee and Joe Schwartz found themselves alone again. Someone had put on Lou Reed's *Street Hassle* and that elevated cello was reaching and pouring onto the porch from the open cabin window. It sounded like the opening to a big movie.

"I don't know," Joe Schwartz said. "We're old. We've gained weight. But hey, we've got better taste in music now."

Lee nodded. A big movie where the first scene faded in on someone running. But not racing like *Chariots of Fire* or anything. Running with good news to tell. Or terrible news, perhaps.

"Maybe not better," Joe said when the vocals kicked in. "More *interesting*."

Lee had heard that Joe Schwartz was coming to the cabin too, but he didn't believe it until he saw him there. Joe was a couple years older than the rest, too cool for most in high school. There were eight of them that weekend, renting out a spot on a lake in the Kentucky woods, fifteen years after high school. Frank, who had been in Lee's year, was finally getting married, and someone had the idea to combine the bachelor party and a reunion. Joe was invited because he'd been on the basketball team with a few of the boys and now he worked with Frank at some sales job. The two of them went out for happy hour every Thursday after work.

Frank had been telling everyone that Joe was a different guy now. Really *settled*, he kept saying.

Lee lit a cigarette. It was strange they all still lived in such a small world.

He had gone to their weddings and received their Christmas cards, new babies in festive jumpers appearing every few years. Now Frank was getting married and Lee was the last bachelor of the old group.

Lee was surprised when he heard Joe Schwartz married young and had three kids in three years. He'd once been close with him but hadn't seen him since high school. Joe filled out his frame twice over. He'd smiled and shaken Lee's hand when he arrived and they'd all gone fishing and played cards on Friday. One of the guys had been making homebrew in his garage and he brought a keg with him. It wasn't very good but they all acted like it was and everyone got drunk early on Saturday, especially Joe Schwartz.

"It's been a long time," he slouched down in the Adirondack chair and looked up, bleary-eyed, to the porch ceiling. "A real long time since I've had a weekend."

"Yeah," Lee pulled another cigarette and offered it to him. "Want one?"

"Hell, *that* has been a really long time."

But he took it and used Lee's lighter, inhaling so deeply it seemed respectful, something sacramental.

It was late and the others had passed out inside and Lee and Joe were alone.

Lee asked if Joe still played music. He laughed and swayed from the booze as he sat back up and said that these days it was only in church on Sundays and he slurred as he went on about his wife and how they'd just bought a new house in Oakley.

"I quit years ago," he said. "She'd kill me for this."

"She won't ever know."

"She's got a nose like a bloodhound," Joe said. "How long have you been smoking?"

“High school. Since that trip to New York.”

“No shit?”

Lou Reed’s vocals wavered and fell and disappeared. The sound died and resurrected until the cello came back in full and Joe closed his eyes.

“I ended up living in Brooklyn for a while,” Lee said. “I’d go to that bar sometimes if I was in Hell’s Kitchen and look for that girl. You wouldn’t believe that neighborhood now.”

Lee looked to Joe, who was supposed to fill with memories and light up, to laugh and reminisce about New York, but he spat off the porch and stared at his dying cigarette. The vocals to the song came back in – *hey man, that cunt’s not breathing* – and Joe laughed at that and spat again and stubbed the cigarette butt out on the arm of the chair.

“Looks like I’m gonna have to ask you for another one,” he said.

Here’s the way Lee once heard Joe Schwartz ask for cigarettes:

“A box of reds,” he said to the cashier, like he’d been doing it his whole life.

But it was the first pack Joe ever bought himself, in December of 1996, after basketball practice on his eighteenth birthday. They walked back to the school parking lot and sat in Joe’s truck. Lee was still wearing his junior varsity practice jersey, blue mesh with a faded number five. Joe lit up and smoke mixed with the smell of sweat and made Lee feel nauseous.

“Varsity for the playoffs?” Joe said. “A big fucking deal.”

“That’s what Coach told me.”

“Just don’t blow it,” he said, coughing. “What are you doing over Christmas

break?”

“Family stuff, I guess.”

“Wanna get out of town for a while?”

Lee nodded.

“New York City,” Joe grinned and blew smoke out of the side of his mouth, almost losing the butt he was trying to keep in place. “That’s the plan. We can celebrate my birthday the right way.”

Lee was a sixteen-year-old sophomore who went to basketball camp and had never smoked a cigarette. Joe was a senior who played electric guitar in a band that played shows at bars. He had a Dead Boys patch on his backpack and bushy black sideburns that had come in full by the eighth grade.

But he also stood a fit six-foot-five and started at power forward for the varsity squad. He loved setting hard screens on opposing guards. Lee was in the same art class and since they knew each other from practice, they worked on a project together. They molded chicken wire into the life-size shape of a man and then covered it with paper mache. Lee suggested they paint their wire guy to look like Mick Jones on the cover of the Clash’s self-titled album. They were lazy, lousy artists and it looked like shit, but Joe Schwartz took a liking to him. From that point on, Lee ate lunch with Joe Schwartz, and Joe Schwartz ate lunch with attractive girls.

Lee was thankful for that.

“We’ll leave after practice on Friday,” Joe said. “Be ready to pay your share.”

That night, Lee told his father he was going on a vacation with Joe’s family. Lee’s father gave him three hundred dollars.

“Your mother,” he said, “she’d want to make sure you’ve got plenty of cash.”

Later, as Lee was stuffing clothes into a gym bag, his father stood in the doorway and reminded him she’d probably like a postcard or something, too.

On Friday, Lee climbed into Joe’s truck. Joe lit a cigarette and smirked as he opened the glove box. There was a re-corked bottle of merlot and a half-empty liter of green label Evan Williams inside.

“And get this,” he said, reaching for his wallet. “I’ve got a buddy at UC. Works at the rec center. People leave their shit in the lockers and he finds their ID’s. He’s got stacks of them.”

He pulled two driver’s licenses out and tossed one at Lee.

A stubbled face with dark features glared at him from the lost card. *Robert Nunez*, age 22. He lived on Straight Street, over by the hospital.

“Memorize all that,” Joe said. “And don’t shave until we get back.”

“This guy’s Hispanic.”

“So?”

“So? I’m not Hispanic.”

“It’s close enough. They just look at the date anyway.”

“I don’t look like a Nunez.”

“His name is *Robert*,” Joe said. “That’s not Hispanic. You got a better idea?”

“You said your buddy has a whole stack of them, we could at least find a white guy –”

“Jesus, Five,” Joe said. “How about you just find your own ID? Or better yet, sit

in the fucking hotel while I go out.”

Lee put the card in his pocket. Joe put the truck in drive.

“You owe me fifty bucks for that,” he said and peeled out of the parking lot.

They drove until midnight, through southern Ohio and the bottleneck of West Virginia into Pennsylvania, always scanning the FM radio and talking about girls and basketball. Lee had a plan to ask out Megan McQuiddy when they got back and he told Joe about it and Joe told him that Megan McQuiddy had sucked Nathan Wheeler’s dick at that party with the bonfire and that Josh Heyman and one of his friends from Norwood walked in on them and she didn’t even stop. Lee told Joe that Josh Heyman was full of shit and he laughed.

“Man,” he said. “That’s the kind of girl you *should* be asking out.”

They sipped from the bottles and slept at a rest stop in the cabin of the truck that night, all wrapped up in sleeping bags. They only made it about four or five hours until the cold got to be too much and they scraped the frost off the windows and started driving again. They drove past grey, dead factory towns and grey, dead farm towns and once when Joe rolled the window down to light another clumsy cigarette, the toll ticket was sucked off the dashboard and out into the Pennsylvania air.

Two hours into New Jersey, Lee saw a hazy vision of the city from the road; the shadowy skyline jagged and stacked in rows, like shark’s teeth. Joe started to pull the truck off an exit for Jersey City.

“Where are we going?” Lee asked.

They parked the truck in a lot and took the train. Joe said it would save money, but looking back all those years later, Lee wondered if he was scared to drive in the city.

There was a brochure in the train station filled with listings for cheap hotels. Joe decided on one called the Sunset Hotel, on the upper edge of Hell's Kitchen. They navigated the subway to get there. There were open seats, but Joe leaned against the pole in his leather jacket, looking like one of the Ramones.

The Sunset Hotel was an exhausted building, pale green with a pink neon palm tree on the sign. It had one shared restroom on each floor and the blinds weren't open in any of the windows. They paid for three nights on the 5th floor. The elevator was out of service, and when they reached their door, the knob was jammed. When it finally opened, they entered a grey room, with smoke-smudged walls and a stained carpet and a single bed. Lee lifted the shade of the lone window to reveal another pallid building on the other side of an alley. An equally sad window looked directly across, close enough that if it were open, Lee could have had a conversation with the occupants without raising his voice. A dark, beautiful woman walked into view and disappeared again.

"It's not much," Joe said. "But we only need a bed to sleep."

They left their things in the Sunset Hotel and walked from Hell's Kitchen into Midtown through Times Square and down to the Empire State Building. The line for the observation deck was too long. They walked back up into Midtown again and saw the Christmas tree. They ate pizza and laughed and took a taxi back to the hotel after dark. There was a bar next door to the Sunset Hotel.

"Let's get a drink," Joe said.

But the bouncer laughed when he saw their ID's and Joe cursed at him before turning away. They went back up to the room and played cards and split the rest of the bottle of Evan Williams.

“I’m gonna live here, Five,” Joe said that night as they were falling asleep. “Get the band out here when school’s over. Really go for it.”

The next day they walked to the park and a museum and Joe sulked quietly. Later they found a bar that didn’t care about their ID’s and Joe beamed when they got their drinks. He tried to talk to everyone.

Joe left Lee and their beers in the smoking patio outside the bar and was gone for a long time. He came back with two pretty blonde girls. They had a fresh round of drinks and the shorthaired girl sat next to Lee. She was from Bloomington and she had been to Cincinnati before and now she lived here and was acting. Stage work mostly, though she’d been in a few commercials. She’d been in the city for a year and she was also a singer and a writer and Lee was a dumb kid, getting quite drunk. Soon, he was in love with her.

“I told them we’ve got some drugs back in the hotel room,” Joe whispered to Lee.

“Are you serious?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

Lee focused on the shorthaired girl and the cigarette in her fingers, the way it moved and the things she did with it. It was loving and intense and graceful. He had never been so drunk. Joe had wandered into the alley with the other girl, and since Lee was so drunk and so in love with her, he decided to tell her the truth. She listened to him about high school and basketball and Christmas with his mother. She blew out a final stream of smoke that drifted up and then gathered itself together. She dropped the butt and spun her boot heel on the remains.

Lee wanted to die a death like that, someday.

“And the week after Christmas is the playoffs,” he said. “Can I have a cigarette?”

“How old are you really?”

“Sixteen,” Lee said.

“Of course you are,” she laughed and lit one for him. “Wait here a minute.”

She walked back toward the bar, stopping to whisper something in her friend’s ear on the way.

When she returned she entered the alley like a floodlight, and handed Lee a beer.

She lit another. That cigarette. It was a goddamn dancer.

Lee looked over to Joe, saw him leaning hard against the building, alone now and smoking his own cigarette and staring off down 9th Avenue. Compared to her, Joe looked as charming as a sputtering exhaust pipe.

“So your friend is full of shit then,” she said. “About the blow.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re a nice kid,” she stood to go and placed another cigarette behind Lee’s ear. “For the walk back to your hotel. Good luck in the playoffs.”

Joe heard this and gave him a scornful look. As she walked past Joe she turned and winked and called out to Lee:

“Take care of your friend. He can’t handle his liquor.”

The boys walked away from the bar, stumbling and not speaking to one another. Joe stopped to piss in an empty alley and he saw a broken half of a cinder block next to a trashcan. He picked it up and walked back to the street and threw it through the windshield of a parked car. The glass exploded and an alarm started ringing and the boys

ran, drunk and fast, dodging cabs and ignoring crosswalks, all the way back to the Sunset Hotel. Lee thought about the girl at the bar as he ran and he lost the cigarette somewhere on West 54th. He focused on her even after they stopped, as Joe buckled over and vomited on the sidewalk beside him. Lee was heartbroken that he couldn't remember her name.

“We're leaving in the morning,” Joe said as he fumbled with the doorknob to their room.

“Because you broke that window?”

“Because I fucking feel like it.”

“We've got to stay another night. I already paid for it.”

“So what? I'm sick of this place.” He kicked the door hard.

“So we drove all the way out here for two days?”

“It's my truck,” Joe said. “And I'm leaving in the morning.”

“That's not fair.”

Joe shoved Lee back against the wall.

“What do you know?” he hissed. “Nothing.”

“We've barely seen the city,” Lee said.

“Who cares?”

“Why'd you break that window?”

Joe didn't answer.

“I don't want to go home yet,” Lee said.

“You're trying to have an adventure? Make something interesting to write about

in a shitty letter to your mom, is that it?"

Lee pushed past him and down the hallway.

"Hey Five," Joe called out behind him. "We gotta get home so you can spend Christmas at the prison again this year, right?"

Lee wanted a weapon, something hard to strike him with. But the hallway was empty so he tumbled out into the street. He sat in a coffee shop two blocks away until they closed and made him leave and he headed back to the Sunset Hotel. He sat in the sticky chair in the office lobby. The night clerk looked upset but he didn't say anything. Lee fell into a crooked sleep and when he woke up it was daylight and Joe was standing by the counter with both of their bags.

"Get up, Five," he said. "We're going home."

And they went home.

Lee and his father drove to Lexington on Christmas Day to visit his mother. She said she'd be out in the summer, but Lee didn't believe her and he didn't know that his father did either, even though the man cried and held her hand in both of his when he heard her say it. The playoff game was a week later, all the way up in Yellow Springs. They played the defending state champions and lost, but played them close, all the way to the end. Lee never once shot the ball, but he had eleven assists and three steals. Joe Schwartz scored eight points and got thirteen rebounds. On the bus ride back to their school, Lee sat in the seat behind Megan McQuiddy and another cheerleader and she turned around and talked to him the whole ride. The way she looked in that uniform, all leaned over and laughing got him hotter than he'd ever been. At one point he turned back

and saw Joe in the back row, looking toward them, not saying a word. Lee didn't talk to him much at all once the season ended.

Lee brought something with him to the cabin in Kentucky. Something for Joe, a memento.

"Remember this?" Lee tossed the old ID card in Joe's lap, trying to seem as cool as he did all those years ago. It slid off onto the floor of the deck.

"Robert Nunez," Joe read as he picked it up. The song was still playing, thumping distorted bass. "Yeah, I remember him. I worked with him at the machine shop."

"What?"

"I hated that place. Where'd you get this?"

"That's the fake ID you gave me before that trip to New York. You said you bought it from your friend at the college gym."

"I did?"

"You asshole."

Joe sat there, collecting memories. "That feels like a lifetime ago," he said.

Lee had wanted a moment when they'd be alone. He had thought about it on the drive to the cabin and he pictured them talking about old times and maybe wondering whatever happened to Megan McQuiddy, and at some point Lee would say something like, hey Joe, you remember that girl in the bar in New York?

Well, get this:

I was in Cleveland for a wedding, years ago, but still many years after the fact and I swear I saw her in a tiny television above the hotel bar. She was playing a mother, older

and more frustrated than her years, and in one scene she hid away from her battling family and wept on the back steps as she smoked a secret cigarette. That's how I knew it was her, Joe – the way that thing swayed back and forth between her lips and her hands, just like that night in New York. It was too graceful for the chaos. I swear, man, the wedding celebration was flying in different directions all around me, but I couldn't move.

That's how it was supposed to happen.

Lee wanted Joe Schwartz to remember. He wanted him to be stirred by that time in New York and to be both sorry and in love with the idea of the assholes they used to be, with the kids who weren't ever as cool as they thought they were. Lee wanted Joe to *understand* him, to understand the fact that he really left Cincinnati and really did go for it, at least for a while. And he wanted Joe to appreciate the goddamn poetry in the way he was frozen that night in Cleveland, haunted by the lovely ghost of a lousy actor.

"Christ," Lee said. "You *stole* it from the guy at your work."

"I don't remember doing that."

"I can't believe this. You made up some story and charged me fifty dollars for it."

"Really?"

"Yes," Lee cried out. "Really. You fucker."

"Don't talk to me like that."

"I'll talk however I want."

Joe stirred in his chair and cracked his knuckles and mumbled something.

"You're slurring, Joe," Lee said. "Speak up or go to bed, you fat drunk."

"*Slurring*. I'm not slurring – I'm speaking in *cursive*." Joe threw his head back and laughed. "You ever hear that joke?"

“You were a real asshole on that trip,” Lee said. “You know that?”

“Come on, man.” Joe shifted. His body became puffed up and tense. “We were kids.”

“And now you’re a fat adult with better taste in music. Still an asshole”

“Stop it,” Joe growled.

“And you’ve got a family and a *sales* job and you sing songs at church.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Fuck you.”

“Don’t you *dare* talk to me like that,” he growled again.

Lee took one last drag of his cigarette and flicked the rest towards Joe. “Fuck. You.” He said.

Joe Schwartz dodged the butt, regained some of his high-school agility: he sprang up, the chair collapsing loud behind him. Lee didn’t have a second to set his glass down before a demon fist came booming onto his skull from a bulky overhead angle. There was a hard pain with a flash of light and sound, followed by Lee and his drink both spilling down and all over, then almost up again, his glass flying through the air past Joe’s head and into the dark and then Lee flailing and kicking and biting like a small beaten dog at the arms of the his old friend; Joe bearing down, picking Lee up and pushing him across the porch and away from the light, over the railing and the shadows.

Lee hit the ground hard.

“Fuck me?” Joe panted. “Fuck *you*, man.”

He stumbled backward, his body suddenly drunk again, until he hit the porch rail. He slid down in a heap and started banging his head backward against the wood.

“You don’t know *anything*,” he said.

Lee had landed on his side in the flowerbed, a full foot lower than the porch. Mulch and petals were sticking to him and a knot was already forming above his eye. He looked up at the stars and Joe looked at something else and they both breathed heavy and loud.

“Fun times,” Joe said.

Two weeks before the cabin in Kentucky, Joe Schwartz had been working in the garage attached to his newly bought home, when he was surprised by a dead-eyed possum, zigzagging out of some unseen corner across the floor and foaming at the mouth. He fled and called animal control and watched from the kitchen window as two uniformed men went into the garage. They emerged less than a minute later. One man pulled off his gloves and scratched mindlessly at his belly, while the other carried a weighted sack, cavalier as could be, as if he’d just left the farmer’s market with a bag of groceries.

Later that night, Joe was stacking boxes in the garage when he heard a scratching sound from an uninspected cabinet at the back wall. He found five baby possums inside, six or eight inches long. Two of them were dead already and the three that were alive were also foaming and squirming and scratching. Joe said they had bloody teeth marks all over them and it was obvious the mother had gotten to them before she went after Joe in the garage.

But it was late by then and Joe couldn’t get ahold of animal control. He wanted to lock that cabinet and let nature take care of things the way that it does, but his wife

couldn't bear to have those babies choking and dying and clawing at each other inside a part of their new home and she told Joe that if he didn't handle it *this minute*, she'd do it herself. Joe couldn't bear that thought, so he took a broom and shovel and he maneuvered those infant creatures out of their cabinet onto the floor and got them inside a big canvas bag that had once been a free giveaway at a minor league baseball game and he tied it shut and he pounded on the little bumps inside with that shovel until they stopped hissing and crying.

Joe told Lee all of this right then, after he had punched him straight in the head and shoved him off the porch. He told the story as Lee was still lying there, looking at him through the pickets of the railing, like they were children and he'd been put in a make believe jail cell.

Joe cried as he told it, and Lee didn't know what to make of that.

"And there was blood seeping through the bag and it was leaking out on the garage floor," he said. "I didn't even think about it until later. I could've gotten infected, you know? How messed up is that?"

Lee said, "You can't get rabies that way."

"You really don't know anything."

Joe sprang up again, but this time he stomped into the house, hitting the lights and slamming the sliding door on his way.

Joe Schwartz: always a poseur and a fraud, never once seeing it in himself. Later on, Lee would realize that's about the saddest way for a man to live and when he would think of Joe, he would think of that ugly mass hunched over and weeping and banging his

head and telling that sob story, and he'd feel sorry for him.

But lying there that night, all busted up in the dark, Lee wanted to kill that son of a bitch.

"Last night," Joe Schwartz said the next morning. "I got carried away."

Lee was on the porch again. He hadn't slept and the others were inside, slowly waking and nursing their hangovers and gathering around an early afternoon baseball game on the television. Joe pulled at the chair beside him as if he was going to sit, but he didn't.

"I mean – my family. My kids. I just love them so much, you know?"

"No," Lee said. The skin under both his eyes had blackened during the night. "I really don't know."

Lee picked at some mulch still sticking to his jeans. He imagined Joe Schwartz was an awful father.

"I'd do anything for them," Joe said.

"That's good," Lee stood up and walked to the edge of the porch and leaned on the rail. "That's the way you're supposed to feel."

The sliding door opened and Frank came out in an undershirt and boxer shorts. He squinted in the sun like a newborn kitten and sipped at a red beer as he gave a thumbs-up to Lee and Joe.

"Hell of a weekend, boys," he said. "Thanks for sending me off right."

"Glad to be a part of it," Joe said.

"Jesus Christ," Frank looked at Lee's face. "What happened to you?"

“Drank too much,” Lee said. “Walked into something in the dark.”

“Goddamn,” Frank laughed and drank from his cup. “I guess I missed out on some fun.”

A loud cheer burst from inside the cabin as some player hit a homerun.

“Hell yeah,” Frank yelled.

“A hell of a weekend,” Joe said.

“We’re about to fry up some bacon and eggs,” Frank stretched and turned back to the door. “If you’re hungry.”

Lee and Joe were alone again.

“You didn’t have to say that,” Joe said.

“I know.”

“You should’ve told him the truth.”

“Why?”

“You doing all right, Five?”

“Don’t call me that,” Lee said. “I’m fine.”

“It looks bad.”

“It’s fine.”

They listened to the muffled sound of the game.

“You should think about settling down,” Joe said. “Have a kid, man. It changes you.”

Lee picked up a lighter that had fallen to the ground at some point the night before and stuck it in his pocket.

“I have a dog,” he said. He was out of cigarettes.

“I’m serious.”

“I’m doing fine.”

“Settle down,” Joe said again. “Find a good woman.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“And quit smoking.”

“Sure.”

“That stuff will kill you,” Joe Schwartz said. “It breaks your heart.”

Something About a Train

Marriage, she said, is a lot like that.

“Not ours,” Paul said.

“Everyone’s,” Louise said.

Paul had been talking about the place where they’d had lunch, how it was so busy but still seemed so *clean*. He talked about being a guest in some restaurants and in some people’s houses, how everything looks orderly and in place. But if you live there or work there, or even become a regular customer or visitor, the dust and disorder become apparent. Remember when they stayed at the Raymonds’ lake house? he’d asked. Within the week they could see the place falling apart around them. Paul said he wondered how dirty that restaurant really was.

“I don’t think our marriage is like that,” he said. “Why would you say that?”

It was the day before their anniversary. Five years. Louise took his right hand from the gearshift between them. She kissed the knuckle of his middle finger.

“Just a joke,” she said. There was a gas station ahead, and a weathered man with a large pack sat at the bench outside. “Is that him?”

“I think so,” Paul said. He turned into the lot. The man on the bench stood up and stretched. It was Sam, for sure. Paul parked the car beside him and got out. The two men embraced and Paul began to help him with his things. Sam’s large backpack barely fit in the trunk. He was skinny and toned and his extremities were an overcooked shade of tan. His shoes were destroyed and he wore an ugly straw hat with a purple wildflower stuck in the band. Wyatt barked at him from the backseat, but Sam climbed in and patted him on

the head and pulled him onto his lap. He leaned forward, his head between the front seats. He breathed hard and kept his face close to the car's AC vent.

"Sam!" Louise said. "So good to see you."

"Thank you for this," Sam said, and reached one long arm into the front of the car and around Louise's shoulders.

"I'm glad you made it," Paul said as he settled back into the driver's seat. "Glad you're safe."

"I hardly recognized you," Louise said.

"I look like shit, I'm sure."

"No," she said. "You look good. You've lost weight."

"You can stay as long as you need," Paul said.

"I'll be out of your hair soon," Sam said. He plucked the flower from his hatband and handed it to Louise. "Happy anniversary," he said. "Any big plans?"

Sam moved south years ago but had talked about returning for a long time. When he finally made up his mind, Paul asked if he needed any help moving. Sam said he wasn't bringing anything with him. Then the weather warmed, and Sam started walking. He walked from Salem, Virginia all the way to Cincinnati. Three-hundred-and-eighty-two miles. It took him eighteen days.

Louise thought: ain't that a way to come home?

According to Paul, Sam had planned to go the whole way on the river, riding a homemade raft. He had it mapped it out, with itineraries for each day and spots to camp

clearly marked. He'd call Paul and talk about it and Paul would talk to Louise after he hung up the phone. He said Sam sounded excited, but in a strange way.

But the New River is full of class four and five rapids, and Paul was afraid for him. He'd been worried about Sam for a while, thought he was going crazy. He was afraid the whole thing was some kind of death wish, that the phone calls were little pieces of a suicide note. One day, Paul told him as much, and Sam swore that wasn't the case. He vowed to continue the trip, but reluctantly promised to walk instead. He didn't seem as strangely excited anymore, but Paul felt relieved. Louise didn't believe he'd actually do it. She didn't think Paul did, either.

And now here he was, preparing to set up camp in their guest room.

They stopped at the grocery store on their way home. Paul and Sam stayed in the car with Wyatt with the A/C blasting. Louise bought several bottles of wine and a liter of vodka. She also bought a large bag of buckwheat flour and a small, entirely flat frying pan.

"What is that for?" Paul asked as they unpacked the paper bags in the kitchen.

"It's a big night for us," Louise said. "I thought I'd make crêpes, like when we were in France."

"Do you know how to make crêpes?"

"Of course," Louise said. She'd never made them. But she could find a recipe.

The truth is, Louise needed to do something special; she was bored and so was Paul, she thought. She'd planned months before to recreate their first anniversary. They went all out that year, got a sleeper car on an Amtrak, rode from Cincinnati to Chicago, transferred to the Empire Builder route, and rode for days to the Pacific Ocean. Louise

loved walking back and forth on the moving train, the tipsy lack of control, secretly looking over the shoulders of people living in their seats, writing shitty novels. She didn't know why it was, but trains made her feel clandestine, and she loved that, too. Above all, she loved seeing America move by in bursts of noise and static, just glimpses, like stations scanned on a radio.

She and Paul had an ongoing joke throughout that trip: how strange would it be to just get off the train and settle in some tiny town? Somewhere wild or simply odd, start anew. Portage, or maybe Lacrosse, Wisconsin. Rugby, North Dakota. Just abandon the trip before they even got to the Plains or the Mountains or anything that they were riding a train to see.

This is where we live now, they kept saying at every stop.

And what reasons does anyone have to live anywhere, anyway? Money? Love? They would ask each other: Could you do it? Would you quit this train if I asked you to? Would you live in Portage for love?

That's how those towns came to be in the first place, is what Paul told her. Lovers stopped moving and decided to create something.

Louise wanted all of that again, but it didn't happen this year. Paul couldn't get the time off work.

"Happy anniversary, babe," Paul said and he kissed her on the cheek. "We can do the train trip again next year, I promise."

"Sure," Louise said. "I can't believe Sam. Eighteen days. Can you imagine?"

"He's lost a lot of weight," Paul said.

“I walked my bike one mile to the shop the other day and I could barely stand it. I don’t know how he did it.”

“I imagine you fall into routine, like with anything,” Paul said. “The bike shop?”

“Yes, the bike shop. How does walking that much ever become a routine?”

“You never ride that bike.”

“Because it needed to go to the shop,” Louise said. “Is Sam still sleeping?”

“I think so,” Paul said. “Do you want a drink?”

“A glass of that red, please.”

“Since when do we drink vodka?”

“That’s for Renee,” Louise said.

“I didn’t know Renee was coming,” Paul said.

“I thought I’d invite her,” Louise said. “A little party for our anniversary. You like Renee, don’t you?”

“I do,” Paul said. He brought her a glass. He arranged the bottles on the counter. He went for something in the pantry, and came out with another bottle. It was older, with a simple black label. Gaja Nebbiolo. He wiped a thin film of dust from the glass and set it on the counter next to Louise.

It was their wedding wine, an inexplicably expensive gift from Sam, their best man, five years ago. No one knew where’d he gotten the money, and he’d given them a whole case, explained that they were to drink one bottle on their anniversary every year. It would be perfectly aged in twelve years, he said. If we make it that long, Louise joked. And now, seven years early, there was only one bottle left. There hadn’t been special

occasions, really. Several times they'd been thirsty and had run out of booze and were too drunk for a liquor run.

"The last one," Paul said.

"I know," Louise said. "Do you think we should save it?"

"Don't you think Sam would be upset that we've already gone through the whole case?"

"We don't have to *tell* him it's the last one."

"Let's see how the night goes," Paul said. "Are you trying to set up Sam and Renee?"

Louise shrugged and took a sip of wine.

As long as she'd known Sam, he'd never had a girlfriend. He'd barely dated at all. Louise thought a good woman would do wonders for him. The way she did for Paul, the way Paul did for her.

If they didn't have each other, they might be making plans to die on a river, too.

"He just got home," Paul said. "I don't think he wants a date tonight."

"He hasn't even seen a woman in three weeks," Louise said. "And Renee is a babe. He'll be like a sailor on shore leave."

"Let the guy catch his breath, Lou."

"But you like Renee, right?"

"Renee is great."

"And they'd be good together, don't you think?"

"I don't know," Paul said. "Sure, maybe."

"Then what's the problem?"

“It’s not the time.”

“It’s the perfect time,” Louise said. “They’ll both be drunk and horny.”

Paul ran the water in the kitchen sink, began to scrub the stray dishes left on the counter.

“Wouldn’t it be fun to have another couple around?” Louise said.

“Yes,” Paul said.

“And she’s bringing Buddy, too,” Louise said. “I think he’ll be really good for Wyatt.”

“Wyatt’s a good dog.”

“He is,” Louise said. “But he needs socialization. He’ll like Buddy.”

Wyatt was a big-hearted mutt, a bully mixed with some kind of hound, but he was not really a good dog. He was a little dumb and Louise surmised he been abused as a pup before being abandoned at the shelter. Paul adopted him on a whim and hadn’t told Louise about it. When she asked why he chose that particular dog, Paul said that he had a trustworthy face. Louise was mad he hadn’t talked to her about it, but she soon took to that mutt and he took to her, much more so than Paul. He curled up at her feet under the table in the evenings and ran to lick her face when the two of them returned home together. Louise secretly loved the way that Paul’s dog – and he always called him his dog – loved her more. She wondered if Paul was jealous. She hoped he was. She’d even managed to train him to do a few tricks. She’d call Paul into the room and show them off. Wyatt could sit and shake and speak. Recently, he’d learned to roll over and even to play dead.

But still, Wyatt didn’t trust strangers. And he did not play well with other dogs.

Paul set up the backyard with camp chairs and tiki torches. The grass hadn't been mowed in a couple weeks. Paul claimed he would've already taken care of it if he had known to expect company. Louise tried to be discrete and looked up a crepe recipe on her phone. For best results, the batter should be refrigerated overnight. She finished her wine and poured herself another glass and went ahead with the recipe anyway.

On their second anniversary, they rented a loft in San Malo. It was the height of summer when the sun wouldn't set on the Brittany Coast until after 11 p.m. They watched it dip into the sea, their heads drunk with expensive wine and his lying on her lap. He would hook a finger under her dress when no one was looking and pull it up, kiss the inner part of her thigh. An old man sat on the castle wall every evening and played *Für Elise* on the classical guitar. Everyday, they bought crepes from a tiny stand set up downtown.

The recipe was not going well. Louise hadn't bought eggs and there were only three in the crate in the fridge. She poured another glass of wine. The counter was covered with flour. Louise wished Sam would wake up. She wanted him to get presentable for Renee, but she also wanted to hear about his trip. What makes a man walk that far? Did he find what he was looking for? Outside, Paul primed the mower and yanked the chord over and over until the engine roared.

On their third anniversary, Paul was unemployed. They were living off of whatever Louise made with freelance design, trying to save money everywhere. They went camping at the Gorge. They cooked over the campfire and drank two bottles of their wedding wine. They made love during a thunderstorm. The rain soaked the inside of the

tent. They had planned to make breakfast the next morning, but Louise had forgotten to pack the coffee, even though she'd remembered the cups and kettle and camp stove.

Sam was still asleep, Paul was still mowing, and Louise was still struggling in the kitchen when Renee showed up. Her blonde hair fell halfway down a bright green sundress, the exact color of her eyes. She looked lovely and Louise hoped Sam at least had something decent to wear when he woke up. She had Buddy, a friendly golden retriever, on a leash. Wyatt skulked up to him, growled, snapped, and was scolded. Buddy didn't seem to mind. Soon they were sniffing each other's rear ends.

"Anything I can help with?" Renee asked when she saw the kitchen.

"No way," Louise said. "You're a guest."

"But it's your party. You shouldn't cook for your own anniversary."

Louise began to mix a vodka gimlet for Renee.

"I remember you talking about vacation plans," Renee said. "Something about a train?"

"Yeah. We'll do that next year."

By the fourth anniversary, Paul had found work managing accounts at a nursing home. They went to dinner. They spent money. They argued about the money spent. Then they argued more about the new house. Did they have sex? Sure, but Louise couldn't tell you the first thing about it and she doubted Paul could, either.

The crepes were a disaster. So Paul ordered LaRosa's instead. Louise hated the way they used provolone instead of mozzarella on their pizza, but Paul insisted they get it anyway.

"It's a local institution," he said. "And Sam hasn't been home in years."

Sam borrowed a nice plaid button down from Paul's closet. It fit him snug around the chest, looked better than it ever had on Paul. The four of them gathered on the patio, drank and battled mosquitos. With his hat off, Louise saw Sam had gone nearly bald. But a good bald. Like Bruce Willis, is what she would say when she got another moment alone with Renee.

"So Sam," Louise said to Renee. "Walked all the way home from Roanoke, Virginia. Almost four hundred miles. Just got in today."

"Why did you do that?" Renee was interested. Louise was pleased.

"I'd been wanting to come back," Sam said. "And it felt like a good thing to do. A good way to start over."

"Did you have any big epiphanies?" Renee asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I think I finally figured out what to do with my life."

Renee waited. Louise leaned in. This was a moment. Paul threw a ball that the dogs chased and scuffled over.

"I want to be a computer programmer."

"What?" Louise said.

"You know," Sam said. "Design software. Shit like that."

Renee sipped her drink. Louise tried to hide her disappointment, but she felt fucking heartbroken.

Sometimes, Louise thought that she loved backwards. She loved Paul and she loved some of the dumbest things about him. She loved the way he drank, the way they drank together. She loved the stupid way he looked and snored when he passed out on the

couch. But there were things about Paul, harmless, and even charming things, that she hated. She hated his unfaltering *loyalty* toward things. Sports teams that constantly let him down, jobs that he hated but pretended like he didn't. And those stories he told from work. The stories he was telling to Renee and Sam while they ate that shitty pizza. The story of the dementia patient who mistakes a lady in the nursing home for his wife, and the way the lady plays along, because she's lonely, too. The way they hold hands. If he goes on long enough with this story, he'll get the part about the family visiting and the awkward confrontation that occurred, but no, wait, it's on to another story. This one, oh yes, this one: the man, eighty-years-old and dying of cancer, decides he wants a tattoo for his wife, he wants it to read: Barbie, my one true love, and isn't that just lovely? But he doesn't tell the tattoo artist that he's on blood thinners as part of his medication, and he nearly dies, almost bleeds out right then and there on the table of the tattoo parlor. He doesn't die, of course, and it's all so sweet and romantic and Sam and Renee *awww* and smile and that's how it goes.

She hated the way his face looked and his mannerisms and the cadence of his voice when he took and told these stories from other lives. She hated the way he claimed them as his own.

"I feel bad for that tattoo artist," Louise interrupted. "That's a shitty thing to do to him, don't you think?"

Sam laughed and Paul ignored her and continued on. Louise had had enough. She scanned their yard, then the neighbors', looking for escape.

Their next-door neighbors, the Cook family, were an uptight and unfriendly bunch. They had an exquisite swimming pool filling up most of their backyard and they

had never invited Louise and Paul over. They barely said hello when they saw them outside. But it was the middle of the summer and they were gone for three weeks, vacationing somewhere on a Carolina island. Louise knew this because she had seen the neighbors on the other side picking up their mail and newspaper. Louise stood up and walked to the privacy fence separating their yards. Without a word she leapt up and awkwardly scaled the fence, slipping and laughing and falling on her ass on the other side.

“Lou,” Paul said. “What the hell are you doing?”

Louise stared at Paul as she peeled off her t-shirt and jeans. Then she turned and did a cannonball into the deep end.

“Come on in,” she said when she emerged. “The water’s fine.”

Sam was the first one up and over the fence. He removed his shirt to reveal the most extreme farmer’s tan Louise had ever seen. He left his jean shorts on and did a crashing front flip into the water. Renee carefully climbed the fence next. She pulled the straps from her dress off her shoulders and shimmied as it fell to the ground. She had on matching black-lace bra and panties; she’d known she was being set up. Her body was something else in the moonlight, and Louise was embarrassed by her own underwear. Purple cotton panties and a sky-blue, too small bra. Oh well. She had sped up the intimate process between these two, and she was proud of that. Renee entered the pool slowly, down the stairs.

“Come on, guys,” Paul said from the other yard. “We can’t be in there. What if the neighbors tell the Cooks?”

“Bring that bottle and get your ass in here,” Louise said.

Paul brought the bottle, but never got in.

Louise wanted to take off the rest of her clothes and feel the water unencumbered everywhere. She'd only been skinny-dipping once before, when she was seventeen, with a boyfriend named Andrew. He was tall and lean, played basketball, had curly black hair and blue eyes. That night, in some friend's pool at some friend's party, she was certain that she would love that beautiful boy forever. Maybe she could have. He enlisted in the Army out of high school, went to Iraq. He came home years ago, but Louise had never spoken to him again. Andrew. People remember people named Andrew, Louise thought.

Now Renee was telling a story. Something about a family in the town she grew up in in Iowa. They had a great name: the LaFort family. That's the kind of name that whole towns tell stories about. But in this a story where terrible things happened to all the children: one was killed in an accident in a field, one was locked up for something she didn't do, another threw himself off of the bridge into the Mississippi River. The youngest one moved to Alaska to do commercial fishing and doesn't ever call or write.

"You've just got to assume something terrible happened to him, too," Renee said. "How do you have children? How can you deal with all that heartache?"

Louise was the first out of the pool. She scaled the fence, cautious this time, and made her way to her own bathroom. She was feeling drunk and sick and seeing her soggy self in the mirror didn't help. Sam's giant backpack had been tossed in the corner. It was open, and a black and white composition notebook sat on top of a pile of dirty, badly folded clothes.

Louise opened it: these were the stories she'd been waiting for Sam to tell.

Sam had camped in the yards of churches. Here was a story about a commune of West Virginia gypsies that got him high, fed him, and swam all night in the river.

Another one: a woman stopped her car beside him, frantic about a black bear that had gotten into her house. He rode with her back to the place, went in and scared the animal away by banging her cast-iron skillets together. Sam was a good writer, Louise thought. The way he described how heavy those skillets were made her feel something that words written about weight shouldn't.

And now this: Sam was preparing to pitch his tent in a churchyard, when a tall pretty woman stopped her car and told him he could stay the night with her and her husband. The husband got home, was furious. Sam showed himself out. The woman came running behind him, and begged him with teary eyes to camp in their backyard. She went back inside and Sam heard something break as he began to set up, but the husband came out and told him he'd better leave. Sam wanted to stay, but how could he?

In the last entry, he's walking through the hometown of former Phillies first baseman John Kruk. That's all it says, and then there's nothing else. He walked another eight days after that.

A knock on the bathroom door. It was Paul.

"You all right, babe?"

"I'm fine," she said. "Heading back out now."

She stuffed Sam's journal back into the bag and opened the door to her husband. His grey eyes were cloudy and tired. Sam and Renee had returned to the patio, wrapped in towels. Sam's chair was pulled closer to Renee than it had been before the pool. Louise

was sure he would tell her stories soon. The dogs were at their feet, curled up all over each other.

“Thick as thieves,” Paul said when he returned. As he shifted past them, he tugged at Buddy’s ear.

See, there were times Louise loved him so much, she thought it might kill her.

Across the yard, a small rabbit sat in the grass. It must have come in through the hole in the fence. Wyatt’s ears pricked up and the hair on Buddy’s back bristled. There, in the primal light of the tiki torches, those two dogs devolved into other animals, slinking low to the ground, hunting slow and lithe, communicating with each other in an ancient and deadly language. Then they sprang; Buddy bolting at an angle toward the hole in the fence, preventing escape and corralling the rabbit toward the center of the yard and toward Wyatt, who was waiting, then bursting forward with a speed he had never seemed capable of before.

“Wyatt!” Louise yelled. “Stop it. Come here, Wyatt.”

Too late. They were different creatures now. Wyatt missed his initial charge and the rabbit tore off in frantic patterns. Yet Buddy was at every turn, always tightening the chase into smaller circles. They moved like a whirlpool.

Wyatt did not miss again.

Most people don’t realize that rabbits scream. What a terrible sound.

“Bad dog, Wyatt,” Louise said.

It was a bloody mess, worse than you’d think. Paul got a shovel from the garage. Sam held open a paper grocery bag as he scooped the gore from the lawn. Louise opened

the gate in the backyard and threw the pizza boxes into the alley dumpster. She took the glasses into the kitchen and, for the first time all night, looked at the clock. Two thirty-seven. It'd been their anniversary for hours. Who needs a drink, Louise thought, and she grabbed the bottle of Gaja from the counter and stabbed its top with a corkscrew. The last bottle was opened and breathing. Louise rinsed out a glass, but before she could pour, Renee crashed in from the patio.

“Are the dogs in here?” she said.

“They're not with me,” Louise said.

“Shit. Shit shit shit.”

“What is it?”

“The gate was open in the backyard,” Renee said. “I think they've gotten out.”

Oh, Jesus. Louise and Renee searched the house, calling their names. They yelled out the front door. They tried to find prints, talked about tracking them, as if that were even possible.

“They'll come home,” Paul said when the four of them were gathered again in the yard. “Let's calm down.”

“I'm going to find them,” Louise said.

“Me too,” Renee said.

“Should we split up?” Sam asked, but Louise was already off. She headed south on Montgomery. Sam and Renee walked together, west on Losantiville. Louise heard their voices moving away, calling the dogs' names, alternately, loud enough to wake sleeping neighbors. Their voices sounded good together, Louise thought. Maybe this would be the moment – a calamity in the middle of the night – that they would put away

inside themselves and later draw out and point to it. The moment. They would know that they could survive panic and crisis because they had been born in panic and crisis. They will thrive on it, Louise thought. But then, then they'll become one of those couples that seek it out. What if they drink too much all the time, do drugs? What if they're unfaithful? Oh, they will be and do those things; they will have to, she thought. Hopefully, they will survive them.

These thoughts weren't morbid to Louise. They were voyeuristic. Like imagining them having sex, thinking about the dirty things they say to each other. Other people thought that way, too. They had too. How could you live in this world, this city, this neighborhood, stacked all up against each other, without thinking like that?

The windows of every house and apartment were black. But there was so much noise! Junebugs and mosquitos were everywhere, thick as the humidity, and the buzz was loud. And now a freight train, full speed on the CSX line that crossed Montgomery a half mile south. What if Wyatt had gone that way? Louise looked at those black windows, wondered if any of their neighbors were looking back, seeing her walk alone down the street at three in the morning. The Youngs' house (those noseys fucks) here on the corner – they knew Louise and Paul well enough to know that it was their anniversary. What would they think if they were looking out? Look at Louise, drunk and walking the streets in the middle of the night. There must have been an argument, an awful fight. They never worked as a couple, anyway, they'd say to each other in the darkness. Mrs. Young would call Louise tomorrow, she was sure of it. Louise and Paul, they'd whisper in the dark, destined to end from the beginning.

And how would they end?

Would it surprise you, curious neighbor, to know that Louise had already thought about that, too? It wasn't an unhealthy thought, either. It's akin to thinking about suicide from time to time; people act like it's an evil thing but everyone does it. It didn't mean Louise didn't love him. But for all their love, and maybe because of it, they would have an unremarkable finish, she was sure. They'd have it out and cry and then be relieved. They would go out to one last dinner, probably get drunk. They would sing late-night karaoke, the two of them sharing a microphone, howling to a song that isn't meant to be a duet.

Maybe they'd have farewell sex. But not in the bed. They'd be on the loveseat or the living room floor, giving each other secret rug burns in secret places under the blue glow of the television screen. And she'd be sad when the marks faded a couple days later.

For months and years after, they would send cards on birthdays and kiss on the cheek when they saw each other at parties. On a living room mantle, or with a magnet on the refrigerator, they would both keep a wedding picture proudly displayed. He would take longer than her – that *loyalty* of his – but they would move on to other lovers.

Both of them would think: ain't that a way to go?

And, Louise believed, she'd let him take Wyatt. She really would, and she'd feel noble about it. But that would be the hardest part.

Poor Wyatt. Everything was dark. All the shops, the beauty parlors, even the bars. What if Wyatt was gone, gone for good? What if he'd been hit by a car? Louise stopped walking and sat on the sidewalk in front of a tattoo shop. She wanted to cry. She wanted Paul to come to her, to help her search, to share in whatever severe emotion was surely winding up to kick her in the gut, but she'd left her phone in the kitchen.

But a half-block down the street, outside the door of the Gaslight Café, the bartender had finished his shift and his cleaning and was locking up. He lit a cigarette and held a scrap of food toward a creature beside him on the sidewalk. The dog sat and offered his paw, then lowered himself to the ground and rolled over. The man laughed and the dog barked.

“Wyatt!” Louise sprung upright and down the block. Wyatt took the scrap, the remains of a leftover hamburger, chewed it, and watched Louise charging toward him.

“Nice dog,” the bartender said. “Yours?”

“Yes. We’ve been searching the neighborhood.”

“I called the number on the tags,” he said. “Left a message.”

“I was in such a hurry that I left my phone. Thank you so much.”

“He’s a cute pup.”

“I taught him those tricks,” Louise said. Why did she say that? She was embarrassed. She realized she didn’t bring his leash.

Louise picked Wyatt up and walked with him cradled him in her arms like he was a human baby. He weighed thirty-eight pounds. His legs dangled in every direction and his tongue lolled out the side of his goofball smile. After a block, her arms were getting tired.

“You and me, kid,” Louise said. She imagined walking with Wyatt, but the way Sam had walked, away from one life and into another. She’d carry him the whole way if she had to; if she could make it past the bike shop, the weariness would wear off and they’d never stop. Her and her pup. What adventures they’d have!

“Which way would we go?” she asked the dog. Her arms were aching and trembling now and she set Wyatt down. For a moment, she was afraid he would run off again, but she kept walking. Wyatt sat and looked at her cockeyed, then heeled up to her and matched her pace.

“West, I think. Don’t you?” she said. Yes, definitely west. Go on through America, past Portage and Lacrosse, stopping whenever they felt the pull to do so, always keeping notes on the tunnel of stories they’d go through, coming out on the other side different and rugged creatures.

“Good dog, Wyatt.”

A car turned the corner ahead, blasted them with high beams. It was Paul. He parked on the wrong side of the street and nearly fell as he got out.

“You found him!” he said.

“You shouldn’t be driving,” Louise said.

“I’m fine. I sobered up. Where was he?” He kissed Louise then knelt down and kissed the dog, too.

“He was outside the Gaslight, with the bartender.”

“Christ,” Paul said.

“I opened the last bottle,” Louise said. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about that now.”

“We have to drink it tonight,” she said. “It won’t keep.”

“We can think about that later. Let’s find Sam and Renee.”

Paul had lied about his sobriety, of course, and he drove slow and deliberate. There were no other cars, no other people. Mostly, the city was asleep.

But those junebugs and mosquitos were everywhere, losing their minds in thick clouds, swarming in frenzies around the light of the street lamps. And a few blocks away, hidden out of the light, Renee and Sam found Buddy and she took Sam's arm and they kissed for the first time, kissed hard, until Buddy nosed his way between them. And somewhere else, over on the Westside, it was Andrew's turn with the newborn baby and he was walking the floor, comforting the child, while his wife slept in the next room. Further west still, the Empire Builder rolled on through the night and a blacked out North Dakota, with only a couple in the cheap seats still awake and giving each other confidential handjobs under a fleece blanket. And if you went as west as could be, you'd find the youngest prodigal son of the LaFort family alive and awake for twenty-three hours straight, pulling salmon up out of the Bering Sea.

Back around in Cincinnati, Paul parked the car in front of the house and their small family made their way back inside and through the kitchen. They walked right past the final bottle of Gaja, wrenched open years before it would ever become the wine it was meant to be. They went into the bedroom and left it on the counter, breathing.

LIVING RIGHT

Oh Margaret, lost in the parking garage. She couldn't remember where she'd left the car, though I bet she was putting on. With her, I couldn't ever tell.

"I swear it was the second floor," she said, walking through the aisle of cars. She held her hand high above her head, waved it back and forth, pressing the remote lock for her new Lexus. It looked like she was trying to hail an invisible cab. I was following her.

She'd driven down to Cincinnati from Columbus, arrived an hour late. She cursed and blamed the traffic as she landed on a barstool beside me at Arnold's Downtown. She still looked great in a floral summer dress hanging right down her tall frame and that same platinum blonde hair, cut shorter than ever but refusing to show a single root. She had new knee-high vintage leather boots that she bragged about finding at some hole-in-the-wall secondhand store in Northside. But she looked older now too, as if moving to the Rust Belt had slowed her down, allowed her age to finally catch up.

"You're drinking gin and tonics now?" she scoffed, pointing at the soda water and lime in front of me. I didn't correct her. We had our dinner and were supposed to meet people for drinks in the Gaslight District. Already forty minutes late and we weren't on the right floor of the garage; we'd walked by this row more than once.

She stopped walking and pulled a pipe from her bag. She took a big hit, coughed, and complained about the quality of Ohio marijuana. I wondered what else she had in her bag.

"Next time I visit Brooklyn," she said. "I'm stocking up."

We kept on looking and she kept on pressing the remote, stopping to scold me for

being too quiet. We hadn't seen each other in over six months. And I was being quiet, but that's because I was waiting for something to explode.

See, I *know* that chaos is a trait of our existence together; she said that years ago and she was right about it. Back in the time when she was the most magnificent fuck-up I'd ever seen. You talk about high functioning, this girl was the embodiment of it. She could do it all. I saw her blow through weekends like a bottle rocket, and when I was coming to sometime around Monday evening, she was already coming back from Midtown with Chinese takeout, where she'd been working all day, impressing the bosses, getting promoted, looking fabulous. No one could hang like her and when I fell apart and got into trouble, she came to visit me in the hospital, between benders and board meetings, the only one in the city who came to see me. She snuck in a flask. And then that time when she slashed the bike tires of the bartender who kicked me out before last call; she never got caught and never felt bad because *fuck that guy*, she said.

She'd take anything, hit its highs the way you should, then wave off the lows, swatting them down like fruit flies. Everyone else went too far and quit, or went too far and couldn't come back. But Margaret? She was a career soldier – a lifer, as they say – always moving from one great war to another and not only surviving, but thriving. If fuck-ups like me had more gumption, we would build monuments to warriors like her.

I wondered if she only stuck around with dregs like me *because* she knew she was better. Margaret, my High Priestess. And I wondered if she knew I was wandering that garage sober. Maybe that's why she was busting my balls for being too quiet.

"I'm back together with Nathan," she said. "I didn't know if I should tell you or not."

“Yeah?” I asked. “And you’re happy?”

“I think so,” she said.

“Is he going to move?”

“Nathan will never leave New York.”

“So you’ll go back?”

“I don’t know.”

“Nathan, huh,” I said. “I don’t really remember him.”

She sighed but didn’t respond and kept pressing the remote for her car. I said:

“He’s not that fashion guy, is he?”

“No,” she said.

“The editor?”

“Stop it,” she said.

“Which one?”

“You know damn well.”

“I forget. Remind me.”

“He’s an artist,” she said.

“An *artist*. That’s vague.”

“Don’t be an ass.”

“Does he paint? Sculpt?”

“No.” A car beeped from a floor that wasn’t ours. Margaret paused and raised her hand like an old hunter that spotted a track in the woods. She pushed her little button in every direction, but no more beeps came.

“Shit,” she said. “It wasn’t mine.”

“Sketches, maybe? It’s got to be a visual art; you wouldn’t just say *artist* unless -”

“Jesus, Billy.”

“I want to hear you say it.”

“God, you are a child. Yes, he’s Nathan the *juggler*. Okay?”

“Okay,” I said.

“And he’s really fucking great at it. He does performances all over.”

“Like Renaissance Fairs? Does he wear a costume?”

“Please don’t be an ass.”

“I love the Renaissance Fair. I went every year as a kid.”

“Stop it. He also runs this space and puts on art shows and books bands. He does really well.”

She continued walking through the aisles, faster now. Her boot heels echoed loudly around the garage.

“And he bartends, too,” she said. “He makes more money than I do.”

Oh, I am *certain* she was lying about that. Margaret is an executive. That’s what brought her from New York to Ohio. She works for Victoria’s Secret, promoted now to the corporate office, designing the layouts of mannequins and displays. Every single one of the hundreds of stores across the country has the same layout, whatever she decides it should be from her desk in Columbus.

So she makes six figures and lives in a city that doesn’t cost half as much, and all I could think of in that garage was an ugly, juggling clown, scaring half the kids at a West Chester party, then coming home to find a check mailed from his girlfriend, states away.

She stopped again and turned to me.

“Shit, I didn’t offer you any,” she said, holding out the pipe.

“No thanks.”

We walked past a few more rows of cars.

“*This* is why I hate driving,” she said. “Don’t you miss the subway?”

“I like the control of having a car.”

“You never liked New York.”

“I did. I still do. But I was done there.”

“So you came back *here*. How many times now? And you’re happy about that?”

“Here is home,” I said. “For now.”

“You don’t stay anywhere very long, do you?”

“I’ve been in this garage forever.”

“I know I parked near an exit.”

“It’s not on this floor.”

“It is.”

It wasn’t. I knew it. Eventually, I thought, she’d realize it and we’d go up a floor and *beep beep* find the car. We’d both laugh about it, and she’d probably have a bottle of warm champagne in the trunk that she’d want to pass between us.

But the search resumed and she started talking about so and so back in Brooklyn, about their new band at some new club, as if I could give a shit at all. The timbre of the sound, her voice coming and going off the garage walls, was large.

Here’s the thing: New York was never right for me. I felt the great, stupid weight of it and it drove me mad. I’d sit in bars and stare at the melting ice of my over-priced whiskey like I was reading bones. I saw my future, somewhere in Brooklyn or Queens,

forced to defend my awful apartment and shitty service job and bad credit and a monthly gig hosting an open mic in South Slope to all my friends and family elsewhere. After some weeks, I started to accept that fate as fact and I even felt *comfortable* with it. See, that's what New York will do to you: allow you to justify a mediocre existence with a mailing address. And suddenly you belong to it, wholly, as much as Lou Reed or baseball in the 1950s, but with all of the ownership and none of the glamor.

Margaret never understood why I felt that way. And as long as I've known her, she's had a kind of fall-in-your-lap luck, the kind she ironically referred to as *living right*. I think she heard a sportscaster say it once. That luck is how a girl can swoop in and out of any scene, suck up whatever substance is there and disappear without any kind of consequence. And that luck is how a girl with an unfinished degree in topography becomes a higher-up in a national corporation. She's always met the right people at just the right times and because of that she talks about every night she ever spent in the city as if she's Zelda fucking Fitzgerald.

But let's say that it really goes down like this:

She's at some party in Greenpoint, and she's eaten an uncomfortable amount of mushrooms and hidden in someone's bedroom and she's watching internet videos of bighorn sheep fighting each other. She's found out there, alone in the dark, and she's asked to leave. This is the night you meet, and it's also the first time you're trying to get clean. You're thirty-three days deep and you're hating everything. You came out to this party only to keep yourself from being alone and sweating sober in your place and you're smoking a cigarette on the steps of the apartment as you watch her wander down and across the street. She sits cross-legged on the sidewalk in front of a Polish butcher shop.

You call out to her:

“You need to go somewhere?”

“Home.”

“I’ve got a car,” you say. “I can give you a ride.”

“I’ve seen you around,” she says. “But I don’t know you.”

“I can call you a car. Cabs won’t pass here this late.”

She hops up so quick it’s scary and she crosses the street back to you. The girl’s not wearing any shoes. Her eyes are giant and clear and her green dress is blowing back around her in the wind in a way that does not seem natural. That’s when one of the girls who lives in the apartment comes out and speaks loud and close to your face. She points at Margaret.

“What the fuck is her problem?” she says.

And you say, “I don’t know.”

“Did she come here with you or what?”

Margaret’s just stands there in the street, looking into the tiny space between the two of you on the stoop.

“She’s *fucked* up, man,” is what the other girl says to you, and then, “She’s going into people’s rooms, messing with their shit.”

You look at Margaret and she looks at you and she says again, “I’ve seen you around.” But this time she also says: “Take me home.”

So you drive her to Bushwick and she scans the radio and tells you about the mushrooms and the sheep on the mountaintops, existing in super slow motion, each hit shuddering everything. She’s coming down when you get to her apartment and she gets

out of the car and leans down and looks back in the window and she says:

“I can’t believe I got into a stranger’s car.”

“You’d seen me around.”

“Seriously, though. You could’ve been some creep.”

“I guess you’re lucky.”

“I must be living right.”

When you go home you think about being high and you don’t sleep.

And the next day when she finds your number from someone else and texts you about drinks all you can do is agree and on the way there, you asshole, you throw your 1-Month token onto the tracks of the subway.

She finally gave up on that floor of the garage, and I followed her to the stairs. She stopped halfway up the flight, looked out the window there. Outside, the neon from that new downtown casino illuminated the entire block in false daylight. Margaret lit the nub of a half-smoked cigarette and kept it in her mouth as she tugged and straightened the hem of her skirt.

“Quit acting weird,” she said. “If you invite me down, you’re not allowed to get all weird on me. It’s not fair.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know I was doing it.”

“What’s wrong with you, anyway?”

“Nothing,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“I shouldn’t have told you about Nathan.”

“I was just playing with you,” I said. “You can tell me anything you want.”

“I’d like to think that’s true. There’s nobody in Ohio I can really talk to. It’s fucking lonely.” She dropped her cigarette and ground it into the steps with the toe of her boot. We walked the rest of the flight and came out on the third floor. Everything looked exactly the same, everywhere.

“Okay,” I said. “What do you want to talk about? I’m listening.”

“I don’t know. Lately I’ve been thinking about all this shit. Marriage, kids, everything.”

“With Nathan?”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like him.”

“No shit.”

“The guy is a creep.”

She stopped again and turned to me and leaned on a stranger’s car. The orange light of the garage made her skin and platinum hair look the same color.

“How the hell would you know?”

“I’ve met him,” I said.

“You were in your own cloud back then. You couldn’t see anything.” That is true, and it hurts to hear it said.

“All my friends in New York, the ones who *really* know me,” she said. “They know we’re good together.”

Then they’re all creeps, too.

“Are you mad at me or something?” she asked.

“Why would I be mad?”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you about him.”

“I’m not mad, why would I be? I guess I’m mad we can’t find your car.”

Somewhere, a floor below us, a group of drunks were looking for their own car and laughing loudly. Their voices echoed up and bounced around.

And just ahead, a man fumbled with the keys to his Honda. He was quiet and bald and probably a little drunk, too, and when he got the door open he sank into the driver’s seat like he weighed a thousand pounds and couldn’t bear to stand anymore. The door was still open when he started his engine and the chorus of a song from last summer pops and filled up the garage. I stopped walking and Margaret kept on, kept waving that remote around. In the middle of all the sound, there was a high-pitched beep from a couple of rows over.

“Fuck me, *finally*,” she shouted. “I need a drink.”

I followed her to the car and she tossed the keys at me and asked me to drive to the bar. We went out and met up with other people and I didn’t blow it. At the end of the night, I drove her drunk ass home and she slept on the couch and left early the next morning and I knew that would be the last visit, the last time we saw each other for years, maybe forever.

But words like *last time* and *forever* can fuck with your head. I mean, how can that night, in that garage, be the end?

Let’s think about it like this:

Say you spend the evening with her and some pills and coke, and get a cab to drive from Bushwick all the way to Manhattan Beach Park. It’s the middle of the night in the middle of the summer and you’ve got a blanket and a cooler with beer and a liter of

bad whiskey and a driver who laughs when you sing loudly along with the slow jam R n' B songs on the cab radio. Margaret gives him an obscene tip as you climb out into the dark. You sneak onto the beach and lay out a blanket. You're worried about the cops, sure, but no one is around. I mean, *no one*. No police, no bums, no other late night assholes. No cars even pass by. Everything is still and quiet, except for the ocean. And right now, you are sure this moment in this spot on this beach is the stillest and quietest Brooklyn has ever been. And when you stand at the edge of the world and the black water, there's no city at all, no Lower Bay, nothing but the two of you. This is how you exist, happy and fucked up and pure, until you fall asleep on the blanket in the sand.

But you've got to wake up and now the summer sun is burning your skin and a skinny beach cop in bicycle shorts is hovering over you, saying, "You can't camp out. Did you sleep here all night?"

You lie and say, "No sir. We were up all night, but we didn't get here until after dawn."

"So you've been drinking?" is what he says but you were smart enough to return all the empty bottles to the cooler and close the lid.

"No sir," you say.

"Uh huh. And what about her?" he asks now, pointing at Margaret, curled up like a puppy on the blanket.

"She's just tired. I'll wake her up and we'll get out of here."

The cop nods, looks you both over and says, "Get her home safe."

He walks back to his bike, chained up near the boardwalk. And Margaret whispers to ask if he's gone. She tells you she still has a gram on her. She says, "Shit, Lee. We

must be living right.”

All around, fit people are running in the sand and swimming and families are grinning and spreading out beach towels. One young father looks right at you as he sets up a blue and white umbrella. It's a sad look and he turns his face back to the task at hand.

On the cab ride home, your brain hits against your skull and your skin aches and Margaret sits so close and puts her hand on your knee.

“We should've brought swimsuits,” she says. “To wake up and get right in.” And she lays her head on your shoulder.

She says that you'll remember next time.

So tell me now: will it tear you up when none of your clean memories ever burn at you like this one does?

When you're gone in three weeks, retreating back home, knowing there won't be a next time, will you believe it's a good thing? Because you know there's too much dirty shit in your blood. You know it weighs you *down*.

You know that the next time, you'll be swept away, hand in hand, from the city and into the sea.